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Post-Contemporary

Armen Avanessian
and Suhail Malik, eds
The Speculative Time Complex
—Armen Avanessian
and Suhail Malik

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Armen Avanessian

The basic thesis of post-contemporary is that time is changing. We are not just living in a new time or accelerated time, but time itself—the direction of time—has changed. We no longer have a linear time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future. It’s rather the other way around: the future happens before the present, time arrives from the future. If people have the impression that time is out of joint, or that time doesn’t make sense anymore, or it isn’t as it used to be, then the reason is, I think, that they have—or we all have—problems getting used to living in such a speculative time or within a speculative temporality.

Suhail Malik

Yes, and the main reason for the speculative reorganization of time is the complexity and scale of social organization today. If the leading conditions of complex societies are systems, infrastructures and networks rather than individual human agents, human experience loses its primacy, as do the semantics and politics based on it. Correspondingly, the present as the primary category of human experience—in its biological sentience at least—which has been the basis for both the understanding of time and of what time is (or, at least, what it is presumed to be), also loses its priority in favor of what we could call a time-complex.¹ One theoretical ramification of the deprioritization of the present we can mention straightaway, but will need to return to later, is that it is no longer necessary to explain the movement of the past and the future on the
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basis of the present. We are instead in a situation where human experience is only a part of—or even subordinated to—more complex formations constructed historically and with a view to what can be obtained in the future. The past and the future are equally important in the organization of the system and this overshadows the present as the leading configuration of time.

Complex societies—which means more-than-human societies at scales of sociotechnical organization that surpass phenomenological determination—are those in which the past, the present, and the future enter into an economy where maybe none of these modes is primary, or where the future replaces the present as the lead structuring aspect of time. This is not absolutely new, of course: for a long time political economy and social processes have been practically dealing with the subordination of the human to the social and technical organization of complex societies. Equally, under the heading of Speculative Realism, philosophy too has recently been trying to reset the notion of speculation as the task of finding more-than-human forms of knowledge by establishing the conditions within conceptual thought of knowledge of what is beyond human experience. That project is certainly attached to the conditions of the time-complex but is also distinct to it—
AA
And to some concrete examples of the speculative time-complex that we know from everyday experience or from daily news. These are phenomena that usually start with the prefix “pre-”, like preemptive strikes, preemptive policing, the preemptive personality—

SM
Could you outline these phenomena?

AA
What has been called preemptive personality or personalization is how you get a certain package or information about what you might want that you haven’t explicitly asked for from a commercial service.² We know a version of this from Amazon: its algorithmic procedures give us recommendations for books associated with one’s actual choices but the preemptive personality is one step ahead: you get a product that you actually want. The company’s algorithms know your desires; they know your needs even before you become aware of them yourself. It doesn’t make sense to say in advance that “I’ll send it back” because it is likely that it will be something you will need. I don’t think that all this is necessarily bad, but we do have to learn how to deal with it in a productive or more pro-active manner.

Another thing, often criticized, is the politics of preemptive strikes, which is also a new phenomenon of the 21st century. Brian Massumi and others have written about the kind of recursive truth they produce: you bomb somewhere and then afterwards you will find the enemy you expected.³ You produce a situation that was initially a speculation. The logic here is recursive and, to reiterate, the strike is not made in order to avoid something, a deterrence before the enemy strikes. It’s also very different to the twentieth century logic of the balance of threats or prevention. Rather, what happens in the present is based on a preemption of the future, and of course this is also linked to what has been called a tendency towards premediation in the media.

Another everyday example of this new speculative temporality discussed a lot nowadays


is preemptive policing. You have it in science fiction, notably with the “PreCrime” and precog
detection of Philip K. Dick’s Minority Report (and
the Spielberg film based on it). Versions of this
are adopted more and more in policing today.
This has to be distinguished from other current
surveillance strategies; for example, CCTV is more
of an older idea of watching what people are doing
or documenting what they have done, to reinforce
exclusion mechanisms. The question today, if one
puts it in chronological terms, seems to be more
along the lines: what kind of policing is needed to
apprehend people even before they do something,
with what they will do—as if the future-position
promises more power, which creates a future-
paranoia? This is less a surveillance directed to
the exclusion of people than one that deals with
people inside the social space, with the value
they produce. How can they be observed and how
to extract value from their activities? There is of
course a hugely important biopolitical factor in
this regulation of the population, especially with
regards to medicine and insurance.

SM
Along with “pre-”, what’s advanced by the time-
complex is also a condition of the “post”, the
current ubiquity of which characterizes where we
are at now, and which is maybe added to with the
contention of the post-contemporary. Everything
now seems to be “post-” something else, which
indexes that our understanding of what is
happening now has some relation to but is also
disconnected to historically given conditions.....
While the “pre-” indexes a kind of anticipatory
The speculative future is acting within the present, indicating that future isn’t the primary category but is understood to be organized by the past. The “post-” marks how what’s happening now is in relationship to what has happened but is no longer. We are the future of something else. The “post-” is also a mark of the deprioritization of the present.

If we are post-contemporary, or post-postmodern, post-internet, or post-whatever—if we are now post-everything—it is because historically-given semantics don’t quite work anymore. So, in a way, the present itself is a speculative relationship to a past that we have already exceeded. If the speculative is a name for the relationship to the future, the “post-” is a way in which we recognize the present itself to be speculative in relationship to the past. We are in a future that has surpassed the conditions and terms of the past.

Combined, the present is not just the realization of the speculative future (the “pre-”) but also a future of the past that we are already exceeding. As many contributors to this issue propose, we don’t quite have the bearings or the stability or the conventions that the past offers to us (the “post-”).

That’s the important thing, that the change of the present, the shaping of the present is not necessarily determined by the past. The present can no longer primarily be deduced from the past nor is it an act of a pure decisionism, but it’s shaped by the future. For me, that’s the key problem and the key indication that the logic of the contemporary with its fixation on the present—you called it the human fixation on experience—that this presentism has difficulties or even completely fails in dealing with the logic of being constituted by the future.

I think that’s partly the reason for all the critical reasoning and questioning of contemporaneity in recent years that happened in parallel to the so-called speculative turn. Unfortunately, speculation is often discussed as just a logical or philosophical issue but not in its unique time aspect. But obviously we are also still looking for the right philosophical or speculative concepts for this post-contemporary (or past-contemporary) condition or time-complex.
SM
Yes, as much as we are each indebted in different ways to speculative realism, and shared the move away from the poststructuralist or late-twentieth century models of philosophy that we both come from, nonetheless speculative realism has mostly argued for an intra-philosophical or conceptual notion of speculation, which is to think of the outside of thought and the experience of thought. The interest of the post-contemporary is to understand and operationalize the present from outside of itself. I don’t know at this point if that is also outside of thought. But, in any case, the time-complex can be thought, with “speculation” taken primarily as a time-historical speculation, like futurity, rather than an exteriority to experience or an exteriority of thought. This brings us much closer to current business and technical operations rather than the conceptual demands of speculative realism.

Operationalizing the Speculative Time-Complex

SM
One instructive manifestation of the operationalized speculative time complex is derivatives. Of course, derivatives are now key to speculative finance, and they are “speculative” in that they use the unknown future price of an asset and the risks involved therein to draw profits against a present price. As Elena Esposito clearly shows, with derivatives the uncertainties of the future are used to construct prices in the present and this scrambles the standard time structure of past-present-future. The derivative is a clear example of how profits are not extracted on the basis of production or from fixed capital like equipment, plant and construction, all of which depend upon the history of investment, nor from variable capital like labor or wages. These belong to traditional industrial models of accumulation, in which a factory is built, workers are employed and paid, materials are used at a certain price, a product made or grown, then sold at a higher price than the costs, and profits made. All of which means that the profits are accrued from production that has happened in the past and subsequently exchanged on the market. The exchange of the product is the completion of a sequence that must have already happened. With the derivative model, on the other hand, a price in the future which is yet to happen is anticipated, and it is this future eventuality which is unknown that is operationalized to extract profits—on the basis, to reiterate, of a future that is unknown and unactualized.
Derivatives are, in Natalia Zuluaga’s phrase, a specific kind of future-mining, an extraction from the future in the present, but this mining of the future in the present changes what the present is: the present isn’t the one that you started with. The very construction of a speculatively constituted present—the “pre”—actively puts the present into a past that it also is, the “post-”. There’s one version of this configuration that you and others have described through pre-emptive policing, pre-emptive strikes, pre-emptive personality and so on, which are also anticipated through big data, and the use of algorithms through consumer information. But it also differs from the logic of preemption where, taking the example of a preemptive strike, you eliminate a possible enemy in order to prevent what might have happened—but which also may not. It’s rather that your act— price setting in the case of derivatives, but the construction is generalizable—is itself modified because you take this very proximate future into account as a condition of the act that should then be made. The future is acting now to transform the present even before the present has happened. As Esposito argues, it is not only the linear schematic of time that is scrambled, but also the very openness of the present to the future.

But aren’t these conditions what you and Anke Henning were also dealing with in your Speculative Poetics project, be it more in relation to formal literary and linguistic analysis?4

4 See [http://www.spekulative-poetik.de/programmatik-der-reihe/english.html]
Anke and I wanted to problematize certain initial assumptions, such as the very easy and oversimplified tension between speculative realism and poststructuralism. You and I also sought to rework that opposition with the essays collected in *Genealogies of Speculation*, which looks to vindicate a speculative dimension in the philosophy of the last decades. But, in particular, Anke and I explored how a prehistory of the current speculative philosophy took up the idea of speculative temporality.

One of the things you and Anke do in *Present Tense*, which is really important to emphasize here, is to introduce grammar structures within language as a kind of time-complex. Language for you seems to be a cognitive, plastic and manipulable medium of the time-complex.

Language has one unique and key feature in this regard: a tense system. The tense system is really important to our understanding and construction of time, even more fundamental than the experience of time because it structures that experience—though not in a relativist sense. Most continental philosophies of language or
time actually don’t deal with what is specific to this system because they don’t really focus on the grammar. It’s a problem with phenomenology as well as with a lot of deconstructivist and post-structuralist philosophies. What is more instructive than those traditions has been analytic philosophy and non-Saussurean linguistics. For example, John McTaggart and Gustave Guillaume think a lot about sentences like “every past was a future” and “every future will be a past.” These basic structural paradoxes—or apparent structural paradoxes—can be tackled via an analysis of grammar. There are some important technical issues here that I had better not go into—

SM
Yes, maybe later. The core point seems to be that formulations like “every past was a future” and “every future will be a past”—

AA
And so on: every present as well—

SM
That’s what I was going to say: what’s very relevant about those two formulations, in particular to the identification of the speculative time-complex we are here calling the post-contemporary, is that they articulate a time structuring in which the present drops out. So determinations of time can be established that don’t require the present as their basis. The tense structure of language allows for that, formulating the non-necessity of the present as a structuring condition of the tense structure.

AA
And what struck me as necessary for speculative realism or any kind of speculative philosophy was a better understanding of what I would call a speculative and materialist temporality. For Anke and me, this meant understanding time on the basis of the grammatical structures of language—language understood as something material—and to develop not a time-philosophy but rather a tense-philosophy.

SM
At the same time, you make the criticism that speculative realism, as we mainly have it, doesn’t
take ordinary or literary language seriously enough because it consigns it to correlationism—meaning, effectively, the dimension of human experience that never leaves itself.

AA
Yes, but that’s their self-misunderstanding.

SM
And why did you call it speculative poetics?

AA
Because our work also implies a polemic against aesthetics and the general focus on aisthesis [perception] in modern philosophy; and, to return to your earlier point, also against the primacy of experience.

SM
By “constructive,” do you mean that tense can be operationalized in order to structure time differently? The sentences formulating that the past was the future and eclipsing the present are not just descriptive. They also construct time relations within language, especially through narrative. Does the same operationalization of tense happen outside of human languages, for example through the derivative structures we mentioned?

AA
The point is rather that “experience” of time and the construction of something like chronological time are only effects of grammar, not a representation of the direction of time or of what
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hallucinogenic, haunting, urging, hyperstitious, horrific, as David Roden shows in his contribution to this issue. In short, one feels time’s power coming from the future. In the most radical case this speculative feeling makes you change your life. Becoming on a par with the future you have speculated initiates a metanoia. But this goes very far.... The temporal phenomenon we were interested in is how all the aesthetic understanding of literature doesn’t understand that the present tense produces asynchrony.

SM
Asynchrony?

AA
That the present is not fully experienceable but is split in itself, and that tense structures can actively operationalize this splitting. It is laden with innumerable past-presents. It presents actual phenomena as post-X phenomena and it desynchronizes time.

Left and Right
Contemporaneity

SM
This comes back to what we were saying earlier: that the future itself becomes part of the present. This could be taken as an extension of the present without a future radically distinct from it. And it often is, with the leftist-critical claim of the loss of futurity under the capitalism of complex societies. It is the fundamental limitation of contemporary leftism that Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have identified, and which they look to countermand with their specific determination of what, in their contribution to this issue, they identify to be “a better future,” which provides an active horizon to direct the politics of the present.

AA
I think we have a slight disagreement on the current state of neoliberalism, which you define as a state-business nexus directed to the concentration of capital and power, which requires and consolidates increasingly autocratic elites. I tend to think that we are already going past this stage. For me and others, neoliberalism is a move toward something one can call financial neofeudalism, in which key columns or foundations of the political economy of
capitalism—like a safe nation-state, a governed population and a market regulating itself, or other basic economic assumptions like economic recovery or growth leading to more jobs or higher profits leading to greater competition instead of monopolies or oligopolies etc.—have started to disappear, and we are now in a fundamental financial and social crisis, with increasing depth of inequality.

But instead of debating whether we are at a new financial feudalism or just another stage in capitalism, let’s instead focus here on the basic hypothesis we are jointly proposing: given the social, technological, and political transformations since the 1960s and 70s that we’ve already mentioned, and which are also embodied in contemporary art and in literature with the emergence and consolidation of the present tense novel in the period since, we live in a new, speculative time structure. There have been basically two responses to this transformation. On the one side, there is a right-wing or reactionary countermanding, looking toward the past as a kind of counter-balance against the negative aspects that everyone observes and feels: the frustrations, disadvantages and mistakes of neoliberal financial neofeudalism. The other standard response to the speculative time structure is the left or critical one, which is also the prevalent one in contemporary art. The focus here is not the past as a place of semantic security but instead on the present as a site or condition of resistance against the change to a speculative time.

Yet, for all the contentions between left-critical and right-reactionary responses to the emergence of the neoliberal mobilization of the speculative time-complex, both are just playing in different ways into the hands of this new formation of neoliberal capitalism, or financial feudalism. It’s perhaps more obvious with the right-wing reactionary tendencies, which in no way disrupt but rather reinforce power structures that enabled the new social, economic, political formation. However, with left-critical reactions too, there is a kind of suffocation, to the extent that most people have the feeling of not being able to gain traction in the present, to change something, and to have something like a future worthy of its name. Contemporary art is both a symptom and surrogate of that futurelessness, with its constant celebration of experience: aesthetic experience, criticality, presentness and so on.
That is an instructive formulation of typical left and right reactions, and typical defensive moves around the emergence of the speculative time-complex with the loss of bearings that it institutes in relationship to both the past and the future. Though there are many ways of understanding or setting up a relationship to the speculative time-complex, what the right does is to simplify it, to reduce it as a complex, and to recenter it on the present as the dominant moment on the basis of tradition. The right has always done this in modernity: if modernity is a paradigm in which the new happens in the now, what has characterized the right is a defense against the emergence of the new as the basis for actions, social organizations, aesthetics, meaning and so on. The authority of past conditions is invoked as a stabilization mechanism for modernization. To be clear: the right is not necessarily against modernization but stabilizes its disruptive effects by calling on what are then necessarily conservative or reactive historical formations. And faced with operationalized speculative time-complex of neoliberal capitalism, the right can in a way carry on doing what it has always done without necessarily recognizing that what it is reacting against is no longer the modern but a new condition.

The Rightism of neoliberalism makes sense on this basis: even though I disagree with the adequacy of the phrase “financial neofeudalism” to describe what is happening in capitalism now, it nonetheless serves to capture the increasing autocracy that goes along with the neoliberal
restructuring. The political question then is how that autocratic, post-democratic kind of power is to be legitimized. The right is very useful just here because what they endorse, essentially, is the authority of a recognized historical or elite formation that stabilizes semantics—and perhaps only semantics—in the newly established conditions.

AA
And the left-critical abreaction?

SM
In a way, leftism makes the problem of “the contemporary” more evident because the left in its progressive forms has been attached to modernism. The now in which the new takes place is the fetish for change for the progressive left, exemplified by its revolutionary ideals and clichés.

The left’s abreaction to the speculative time-complex is to retrench the present as the venue or the site for thinking about and confronting the reconstitution of social and time organization, and semantic reorganization too. Instead of seeing the future as condition of the present, the present is instead taken to extend out indefinitely and cancel out the radically different future (the revolution, notably).

But the speculative present as we are identifying it is, by contrast to this leftist melancholy, the entrenchment of the future and the past which folds into the present, in a way that certainly deprioritizes it and maybe even makes it drop out—as in the phrases demonstrating tense structures we discussed earlier. The past was the future, and the future will be the past.

AA
There is no critical interruption from the present in this speculative present.

SM
No, it’s constructed by the uncertainties of the future and the absence of the past.

AA
That’s why the left-critical thinking of the event or the emptiness or openness of the present—of contemporaneity—is still vestigially modernist. And, as Laboria Cuboniks remark in their contribution from several different angles, it’s not adequate to the tasks and conditions of the twenty-first century.
What the left sees in the speculative complexification of time is an extension of the present rather than its thinning out by the forcing of the future or the disestablishment of the past. Historical, futural, anticipatory relationships are maintained with emphatic insistence on the presentness of a chunk, aesthetics or experience. This is insistence on “the contemporary.” It is still premised on the present as the primary tense. And what happens with the emphasis on contemporaneity is a determination of the present as indefinitely extended. The contemporary is a time form that saturates both the past and the future, a metastable condition.

A leftism still attached to modernism won’t have traction on the speculative present, even if that leftism is more attentive to the time-complex than the right because it’s not trying to restore a past (though its revolutionary wing does seem largely interested in restoring a historical semantics, while its social-democratic wing now maintains an interest in failed market solutions). Even if it’s accepted that the left is more open to modernity than the right (which is questionable outside of the left’s self-reinforcing phantasm), it holds that the present extends into both the past and into the future, which supposedly destroys the future as a future. And, as Esposito remarks in her contribution to this issue, it doesn’t see that what it is actually involved with is the future now. That today is tomorrow, as you put it in an-other occasion.
The whole idea of what in German is called Zeitgenossenschaft—the contemporary, more literally, “comrade of time”—is problematic because it far too often signifies the wish to change the present completely with an insistence on the present. The contemporaneity of Zeitgenossenschaft indicates the idea of having traction in the present by getting closer to it, and that is no longer adequate to the task. It is simply the wrong way to think. What is needed instead is neither Gegenwartsgenossenschaft—comradeship of the present, nor Vergangenheitsgenossenschaft—comradeship of the past, but rather a Zeitgenossenschaft from the future (die Zukunft), a kind of Zukunftsgenossenschaft. We need to become comrades with and of the future and approach the present from that direction.

An Aesthetics of Everything: Contemporary Art Contra Futurity

SM
Under the guise of the contemporary the modernist left has a kind of melancholia for a future that it cancels to preserve its received premise: the present. The past and the future are taken as modifications of the present. The advantage for left-criticality is that the contemporary can then accommodate, dissipilate, colonize all of time in its own terms. This is really evident in contemporary art, which becomes a kind of last word in art. It cancels even its own futurity if not the future in general for the sake of its own critical accomplishments, which are of course capture-mechanisms demonstrating contemporary art’s accomplishment.

AA
Contemporary art is a good example also because it has not been just a victim of the recent economic and political reordering of neoliberalism, but has really helped build the matrix of that reorganization by implementing its logic on all levels from a left-critical angle. Specifically, it has stressed the dominance of the present or the past as condition for action, and also, as we said before, individuated experience as the main benefit of that reorganization. It takes
the lead in a general aestheticization at all levels: personal/individual creativity, originality etc.; environment and cities as spaces of creativity and “disruptive” entrepreneurialism; the conflation of production and consumption with the prosumer, whose “natural” habitat is, precisely, the smart city itself turned into a kind-of continual biennial event. All of this goes back to the fetishization of presentness and of the aesthetic experience of everyday life at the expense of its reconstruction, which would be the task of poiesis or a poetics.

SM
Via the continued enrichment of experience through an aesthetic encounter, contemporary art also draws attention to specifics and particulars at the cost of systemic understanding. Victoria Ivanova draws attention to this operational logic in her contribution to this issue, linking it to the human rights regime as a kind-of counterpart in global ordering that constructs the relation between universality and particulars after the so-called “end of history.”

Let’s be clear that this is not a condition of stasis: contemporary art is integrated into neoliberalism’s enrichment of experience for its elite beneficiaries, and those thereabouts, in a way that promotes change and revision. This is part of the complexity of the speculative present of neoliberal capitalist development: it looks like a personal good, an enrichment of experiment by aestheticization, by promoting change while maintaining a certain stability—
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contemporary art, operating via each artwork and its social norms. And to that extent it is a minor but paradigmatic model for a neoliberal sociality, as Ivanova remarks.

The way in which contemporary art becomes a plaything for big power in neoliberalism, despite many of art’s critical content claims against that model of domination, this convergence makes coherent sense on this basis. But what needs to be emphasized here is that rather than just remaining at the level of the conflation of varieties of anarcho-leftism in contemporary art’s critical claims with the rightist interests of increasingly concentrated capital and power, the two can be seen to have common interests in flattening out or simplifying the speculative time complex, as reactive detemporalizations of the speculative present.

What is necessary against these and other such reactions is to have strategies and praxes—and that means theories—to gain traction in the speculative present. And that is what both right-wing conservative strategies and left-critical or aesthetic approaches are utterly incapable of doing. As we’ve said, both are combined in contemporary art which is then also incapable of doing anything but consolidating this condition, no matter what it claims to do, what it pretends to do, or what its content claims are. “We should not be afraid of establishing meaning.”

We agree that we have to think and act within a post-contemporary speculative time-complex. But now the question is: how to differ from
the capitalist or financial-feudalistic version of it? How does a speculative theory introduce a difference into the speculative present from its exploitative formation by neoliberalism, however else we might characterize that form of domination? What would be a speculative politics capable of accelerating the time-complex, in the sense of introducing a difference to it?

SM
That is the fundamental political question, for sure. One further theoretical point might help us understand the difficulties here. Namely, why is our wish to get past contemporaneity not just Jacques Derrida’s criticism of the metaphysics of presence? For Derrida, presence is the primary category of western metaphysics, circumscribing not just the main philosophical doctrines in the Western tradition but also correlative prevailing social, political and language formations. And Derrida proposes that the present held to be adequate to itself needs to be dismantled and reconstituted. For him, the task is to deconstruct presence—ontologically, in time, space, and so on. We are contending that that contemporaneity is no less an extended social historical present, presentification. So, in a way, aren’t we just doing Derrida again, even though he is a key figure in the critical lineage that needs to be surpassed?

AA
It’s not the worst thing to be repeating Derrida to some extent. But with his deconstruction, it’s a necessarily ongoing process of the ideology or effect of presentness establishing itself and also being deconstructed: Metaphysics needs to be deconstructed and it deconstructs itself all the time, so it’s an unending procedure. Unfortunately, this goes down all too well with a tedious modernist aesthetic of the negative, not so far away from the fetishes of Frankfurt School, of the non-identical, or of a “différance” that plays with the opposition between meaning or content, traditionally the bad thing, and subtraction, which is the good thing, as are emptiness and non-readability. And think that’s a very modernist, twentieth century logic, and also the logic of the contemporary. Contrary to all such attempts, the reworking of the speculative present must admit that meaning is always there anyway, and the constant procedure of changing and subtracting it endorsed by Derrida and the lineage of critique he belongs to is not necessarily something positive.
So, with deconstruction and most other strands of last century’s aesthetic philosophy, whatever its other merits are, you end up in an aesthetics that is an ongoing celebration of the gesture of interruption, of emptying out, and so on (just think of some of Badiou’s tedious disciples). But with the speculative time-complex we are no longer in that logic of interruption. I don’t have a problem with an ontology of time, as long as it gives us another possibility of understanding time than via the present.

SM
You are right to say Derrida ends up in an aesthetics. But it is also an ethics, with its emphasis of an always singular and irreconcilable experience of vulnerability. He rails against established meaning.

SM
Certainly. I don’t know if my additional observation is compatible with your response, but it’s that the construction of the speculative time-complex is the societal—meaning mainly technical and economic—operation of the deconstruction of presence. That is, the way that semantics or instrumental operations are occasioned in time-complex societies is precisely the deconstruction of presence and meaning in the way that Derrida affirmed. We are then no longer in a metaphysics of presence because of the speculative time-complex. Derrida speaks to this somewhat in his discussion of teletechnologies and the displacements of space, locality, and ontology that are involved. But the politically difficult and mostly evaded point in these discussions is that the sought-after deconstruction of time, meaning and so on are actually taking place though processes of capitalization. The “they” of the state-business nexus effectuated the deconstruction, and they did it better than Derrida. In this light, what “the contemporary” enforces is the retrenchment of presence against its deconstruction by the speculative time-complex. Contemporaneity here includes all the procedures...
of interruption, subtraction, delay and non-identity you mention, as well as many others including semantic deconstruction.

Grammar of the Speculative Present

SM
To return to your question: in contrast to the sorry complex of right and left reactions to the speculative present that is contemporaneity in art and elsewhere, what is needed is a way to engage with the time-complex that is not just about drawing profits and exacerbating exploitation on this revised basis, as neoliberalism has so successfully done. That capitalized formation of the time-complex is a kind of limited and restricted organization of the speculative present; one that for all of its complexity reverts to presentification because the profits have to be accumulated now as per the short-termism of neoliberal capitalism.

AA
The problem is that one has to admit that the social, technological, political and economic formation of neoliberalism has an advantage because it acts within the speculative temporality, in part as it has established institutions functioning in accordance with this speculative logic. But the neoliberal formation also reduces the speculative dimension of the time-complex because it repudiates the openness or contingency of the future as well as the present.

SM
No, I disagree. I think the problem precisely is that it opens up more societal and semantic contingency. That is what Ulrich Beck and others involved in the notion of “risk societies” diagnosed in the 1990s on other terms. What they call risk is the acknowledgement in the present of how the speculative time-complex opens up the future as the condition for a societal order (more accurately, a quasi-order).

The Speculative Time Complex

Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik

alternative actualizations of the speculative or asynchronous present; are there different readings of it? In her contribution, Aihwa Ong highlights some of these constructions in her anthropology of what she calls “cosmopolitan science.” She outlines how the universalisms and abstractions intrinsic to scientific entrepreneurialism support and are supported in Asia by specific historical-culture formations of meaning, scrambling any simple opposition between local and universals, or between past (culture) and future (entrepreneurial technoscience). With speculative poetics, to take another example, the issue is how do we understand the future in an open way and not just as a kind of indicative future.

SM
What do you mean by “indicative”?

AA
There are three modes in grammar: the imperative (“Go!”), the indicative (“She goes.”), and the conjunctive (“I could go.”). In language philosophy—but also politically—it’s important

SM
So the task of the post-contemporary against contemporaneity is to change time?

AA
The post-contemporary works within the speculative present. It understands it, it practices it, and it shapes our temporality. Are there

No, no. The contemporary is a constant production of innovations and differences, but it doesn’t introduce a difference to the recursive movement of time. The German allows for distinction between Beschleunigung, which is acceleration as a speeding up, and Akzeleration. The latter really means something like, in the old days, when a clock was too fast. A deviation ahead—not a circular movement, but a recursive one. Akzeleration introduced a kind of difference to the functionality of the clock. And it’s this difference that the neoliberal or neofeudal economic system hardly allows for, because it produces an automatized future. While the kind of criticism typical of the contemporary (left) art is not wrong, it doesn’t see the possibilities of speculative time and reduces it to the present. It just sees the capitalist effects of it. Contemporary critical art mostly produces different—essentially, decorative—objects or meanings that maintain the reduced form of the speculative time-complex. And I am arguing not on the level of just semantic meaning, but really on the level of the materiality of language and the materiality of time, which are not separable.

SM
The now in which the new takes place

The Speculative Time Complex

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No, no. The contemporary is a constant production of innovations and differences, but it doesn’t introduce a difference to the recursive movement of time. The German allows for distinction between Beschleunigung, which is acceleration as a speeding up, and Akzeleration. The latter really means something like, in the old days, when a clock was too fast. A deviation ahead—not a circular movement, but a recursive one. Akzeleration introduced a kind of difference to the functionality of the clock. And it’s this difference that the neoliberal or neofeudal economic system hardly allows for, because it produces an automatized future. While the kind of criticism typical of the contemporary (left) art is not wrong, it doesn’t see the possibilities of speculative time and reduces it to the present. It just sees the capitalist effects of it. Contemporary critical art mostly produces different—essentially, decorative—objects or meanings that maintain the reduced form of the speculative time-complex. And I am arguing not on the level of just semantic meaning, but really on the level of the materiality of language and the materiality of time, which are not separable.
to understand that all tenses are modal. The past and the present have to be understood in a modal way—primarily as indicative. But the future tense and the conjunctive mode are pretty close in that they both deploy the grammar of possibility. It is this contingency that is reduced by the logic of the contemporary logic and is often misunderstood by the closure of speculative time to the present (“I will have gone”). But, if I may get a bit more into the technical analysis, the conjunctive is constructed before you are actually going, so whether you are using the conjunctive mode or the future tense in the present you are not yet going. Maybe that’s too technical for here, but the main point is that mode is how a future tense is transformed into a present tense and subsequently into a past tense.

**SM**

Is the conjunctive the form of contemporaneity? What it sets up is a sense that actions could have happened, but did not happen: “they would or could go,” but they didn’t. And this is a sense where the subject of the sentence is left with a potentiality, which is unrealized.

That makes sense of the celebration of “potentiality” everywhere across the critical left today, and also, again, the limitation of the speculative time-complex to the domination by the present. Claims in contemporary art and contemporaneity are emphatically limited only to setting up options with potentials, without actually doing anything or mobilizing the speculative present to construct a future. The future is only and just a set of potentials that must never be
actualized for fear of instrumentalization and, paradoxically and self-destructively, realizing in any present a future radically distinct from the present.

AA
The reduction of the time-complex to contemporaneity does not understand the future to be contingent but the only possible future present that becomes real; in grammatical terms, the future or the present here are understood only via the indicative. But the present is not just an “is,” just as tenses don’t represent time. We have to get rid of an a-modal understanding of time.

SM
The contemporary is a-modal?

AA
Yes, and what is needed instead for a thinking and praxis adequate to the speculative temporality we live in—a Zukunftsgenossenschaft as I called it earlier—are means for transforming a future tense into a present tense. That’s why for me grammar is a way of understanding speculative time in its openness, instead of subjecting it exclusively to the indicative mode. A future happens in the present only if a conjunctive is successfully realized, which happens by way of an imperative. In between “I could go” (present tense conjunctive) and “I go” (future tense indicative) is the hidden command “Go!” (imperative).

For me, it’s exactly this grammatically organized difference that opens up not just a different future and the possibility to do and

act differently in the present instead of being subjected to an automatized future, whether it’s by preemptive policing or derivatives. More generally, we have to understand that language changes meaning and time—and on a material and ontological level, not just on a linguistic or conceptual level. These complexes can be tackled via grammatical analyses.

SM
OK, but as nearly all the contributions to this issue demonstrate, we also need to generalize the construction of the time-complex beyond language and its grammar. The conditions we are talking about are made of the broad infrastructures and systemics of the speculative present in large-scale integrated societies. Esposito identifies a scrambling of the timeline against its received and modernist logics
that suggests a new openness to the future, which is to the advantage of a relatively new kind of capital accumulation but can be mobilized otherwise. Ivanova makes the case for how a new global juridico-political quasi-order is constructed via unstable restagings of the relations between particulars and universals, while Srnicek and Williams look to the systemic techno-social advance of robotics and automation to transform the fundament of the capitalist rendering of human activity. Benjamin Bratton extends these possibilities under the rubric of “Speculative Design” to more specific scenarios and, simultaneously, along longer time-lines; Ong also takes up the jurisdictional and operational issues in the specific case of the fabrication of a scientific enterprise that makes sense in ethno-cultural terms in Asia, transforming the practical manifestations of where and how identity formation takes place. Laboria Cuboniks wrestle with the legacies of feminism given just such futural and technoscientific reorganization of bodies, identities, and concepts of selfhood; and Roden scrambles body, affect, language in light of a “Disconnection Thesis” according to which the kinds of intelligence inaugurated by Artificial General Intelligence completely change the space of coding at any and every order.

In general, and similarly to the insufficiency of experience as a basis for apprehending the speculative present, the constructions of (presumably only some) human languages is only part of this integrated complex but not wide enough as a mechanism to meet the broad material and semiotic condition.

We need more than a language theory, for sure, but in any case we need what I call a “poetic understanding” which, for me, is informed by language theory instead of an aesthetic one.

My divergence is that, first, even taking poetics as a name for production in general, it still seems to me to be too tied into the structures and affordances of more or less ordinary human language and their ordering. That’s of course a fundamental condition of the systemic, social, technological, economic structuring and mediation necessary for large-scale organization. So, while poetics as you present it gives us as human linguistic actors a way of reordering the speculative time-complex in other formats than the kind of repressive mechanisms
of contemporaneity and what you identify as the indicative, it’s also necessary that the restructuring are operationalized also in non-linguistic terms. We have to open up the time-complex in its infrastructures that are more structured in terms other than those of human languages. This is what Bratton’s proposal of Speculative Design in this issue puts forward in concrete ways and with specific situations and time-lines, not least with his identification of “The Stack,” which rearranges sovereign power according to the material and infrastructural conditions of computation that is interconnected at a planetary scale. Even more generally, however, we need a grammar adequate to the expansive infrastructure of the time-complex in its widest formation.

Revised transcript of a conversation held in Berlin, 29 January 2016.
Speculative Design (SD) understands itself as a progressive alternative perspective to mainstream Design culture (and as an alternative to other alternatives as well).¹ It knows that “Design” is not some magical way of thinking (involving stick-up notes, big pens, and colored beanbags) that just makes things better by “building trust,” “understanding the customer” or “getting a seat at the table,” or similar. Design is also the means by which pathological relationships to material culture are made more efficient and more delightful, and we are worse for it. Some may even conclude that the job of Design in the 21st century is to undo (much of) the Design of 20th. But may also be to re-claim and re-launch other frustrated Modern impulses that were dry-docked by century’s end, not only designing things—widgets, withdrawn objects, manifest subjectivities, formal forms, etc.—but also designing the relations between them: systems, supply-chains, encounters, obligations, accounting protocols, signal-niche-population dynamics, and so on.

¹ The following is edited version of remarks delivered on February 10, 2016 at “Alternative Modernities: The Past, Present, and Future of Speculative Design” symposium, held at the University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, to mark the launch of the Speculative Design undergraduate major in the Department of Visual Arts. They proceeded the keynote address by Fiona Raby.
Speculation is not ephemeral or disengaged. The prevalence and proliferation of models of risk patterns, ideal options, and plotted-outcomes underscores that speculation is not a supplemental or marginal process. It is less airy-fairy than nuts and bolts: whether for commodities and equities futures, automated A/B testing, enterprise reinsurance or weather forecasting, the global economy functions by speculative models of the near or long-term future.² But if so, does this disqualify the speculative from the figuring of fundamental alternatives? It does not. Instead of concluding that the future (and futurism per se) is lost, we should commandeer modeling infrastructures for better and more vibrant purposes. For this, speculative models are rotated from one purpose to another: less to predict what is most likely to happen (deriving value from advance simulation of given outcomes) than to search the space of actual possibility (even and especially beyond what any of us would otherwise conceive.)³ That is, predictive models are adaptive because they need to be descriptive, but for speculation, models are prescriptive because they need to become normative. Between them we track different uses for contingency, imminence, simulation, navigation, resistance, governmentality, universality, neutrality, etc.⁴ That is where Design becomes designation.⁵

² A/B testing is a common technique in, for example, web advertising in which two creative options for an ad both go live and actual user engagement with each is carefully measured. That data is used to make changes in one or both ads so as to optimize its performance in relation to established goals. In this, a traditional role of creative expertise to intuit the single best version is subordinated to an automated scanning and testing of variables. What proves to be the most important variable may be something that was never considered by the Design team in advance, but which should alter their mental models of the user’s mental models henceforth.

³ This rotation from decoration to designation tracks with some points (but not others) from Bruno Latour’s address “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)” Networks of Design, meeting of the Design History Society. Falmouth, Cornwall, 3rd September 2008.

⁴ In these regards, the connotations of the “speculative” to which I’m speaking parallels some claims made on behalf of hyperstition—the movement of the fictional and the potential to the real and the actual. In the particular context of Design, that metamorphosis is not only toward the actual but also toward a normative, embedded material governance.
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Benjamin H. Bratton

Futurism, Scale

For obvious reasons it is commonly presumed that there must be an overlap between SD and the more general pursuit of Design Futures, or prototypes from the worlds of tomorrow. Sometimes there are clear alignments, especially for SD projects that address “the future” explicitly as critical subject matter. As I put it elsewhere, in our culture speaking about “the future” is a way of saying things about the present—critical, utopian, projective, pragmatic and/or simply unspeakable things—but too often it is an alibi for saying nothing at all.

Given this, we may expect a more intellectually and politically rigorous SD to resist—or even eliminate—futurity as a key concept or site condition. Some might insist that it focus instead on the most immediate at-hand frames of spatial and temporal reference, and to deal with coming conditions largely through the hard or soft survivalist aesthetics that ensue. “There is no time, and there is only this place” may be the rationale for this emergency interventionism. Others lament that facts on the ground are out-of-sync with fragmented social history. They hint that until recent times sociological “cognitive maps,” on the one hand, and systemic historical unfolding, on the other, may have been in conflict but at least their common ground felt solid. For this perspective, the answer to the malaise of network culture is to re-glue the scale and tempo of global forces back to the dialectic parameters of social and psychological history.

I argue that these are both insufficient responses, and that any detected derangement of familiar spatial and temporal scales is not only not pathological, but may be a precondition for any properly calibrated Design imaginary. Design, as we know, can adhere to small, medium, large or extra-large spatial scales (a single object, a large architecture, an urbanism or a transcontinental system). It can also be trained on very short- or very long-term durations (now, later, much later, afterwards) suited to instantaneous user response, the next launch cycle, the lifecycle of a city, or a geologic trace). We may presume that large scales and long durations are natural matches, but there is no reason to hold fast to

5 “The Moderns” are largely unnamed collective villain in Bruno Latour, An Inquiry Into the Modes of Existence: an Anthropology of the Moderns (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Based on his descriptions, they may include a cohort as diverse as Joseph Conrad, Jack Ma, Herbie Hancock, and Denis Diderot. On the problematic “future,” see also both Lee Edelman’s psychoanalytic qualifications of futurism and heteronormative natalism.

6 See my “We Need to Talk About TED” The Guardian, December 30, 2015.
this. Very small-scale spatial projects with very long duration ramifications are as likely as very large-scale spatial projects with instantaneous durations, and so we can imagine a combinatory matrix of spatial and temporal scales for design analysis and intervention. It is not here and now versus there and then.

In such a matrix, each temporal scale has its own version of “the future” and some are more interesting to SD than others. There is a social future, with an attendant duration measured in fashion cycles or communal memory of place; a technical future, with its cycles of product SKU turnover and mechanic evolution; a historical future, with trans-generational undulations of friend and enemy, capture and memorialization; and a geologic future, with ripples and rhythms than span far longer than the genomic coherency of any apex species.⁷ Any affective sense of order by which each of these futural forms may be felt to be in special harmony (geologic future in sync with social future, historical future in sync with technological future, etc.) is surely not an organic state but a broken solipsistic illusion. In other words, it takes a special kind of anthropocentric naïveté to fully entertain the idea that making all design “human scale” would be a long-term solution to anything but the most pedestrian problems.⁸ The futures that are probably most worth designing are those that exceed human phenomenology’s intuitive scales of anatomically-embedded spatial navigation and the temporalities of organism life span.

It is important to mobilize SD on behalf of conditions that are not-yet-existing here and now, and for that we must further shed local social history’s mooring privilege. That shift does not take leave of the concrete materiality of Design, quite the contrary. It is only possible by returning our attention to one point of origin for modern Design: the actual matter of Materialism.

⁷ Product SKU (stock keeping unit) is defined as “a distinct type of item for sale, within a store’s catalog, such as a product or service, and all attributes associated with the item type that distinguish it from other item types. For a product, these attributes could include, but are not limited to, manufacturer, description, material, size, color, packaging, and warranty terms. When a business takes an inventory, it counts the quantity it has of each SKU.” In this case, we see the SKU as the addressing mechanism that marks the pace of evolution for one product version to the next: as one “species” of iPhone or dishwashing detergent or throw pillow gives way to its descendent, its SKU is retired and another takes its place. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock_keeping_unit].
On Speculative Design

Benjamin H. Bratton

Matter, Materialism

The contemporary project of Design (inclusive of SD) is situated by new materials and material forms. The emergence of “modern” Design was concurrent with the emergence of the materials, processes and technologies of mass production and distribution: plastics, metals, molding, modeling, printing, stamping, shipping, replicating, stacking, etc. For the Design of what Reyner Banham called “the first machine age,” industrial materials allowed for the inexpensive distribution of standardized designs to a mass society: new matter provided for a new Materialism. Chemistry as much as economics (probably not so divisible at the end of the day) would drive the anthropology of this era’s tangible culture. The periodic table of the elements, innovated by Mendeleev and others, would provide an alphabet for the composition of substance and conjugation of form. In turn, as techniques became schools of thought and designed forms became fixed at certain levels of implementation (type and image, shelter, apparatus, transportation, etc.), modern Design (and Design education) would coalesce around corresponding expertise in graphic design, industrial design, interaction design, architectural design and so on.⁹

¹ The common sense that my point would challenge is nicely demonstrated by the following quote: “Artificial intelligence has that name for a reason—it isn’t natural, it isn’t human. As Nicholas Carr argues so gracefully and convincingly in this important, insightful book, it is time for people to regain the art of thinking. It is time to invent a world where machines are subservient to the needs and wishes of humanity.” —Donald Norman, author of Things that Make Us Smart and Design of Everyday Things, director of the University of California San Diego Design Lab

⁹ There was a time, not so long ago, when one could go to a Design school and identify which students are in which program by the equipment they carried around or sat next to. In proximity to Adobe and Autodesk’s standard application suites, it may be strange to consider that illustration students, film students, automotive design students, fashion students and architecture students all quite recently learned very different tools from one another. Expertise in designing for a certain scale of material form was tied much more closely to expertise with a particular set of equipment, not just a particular situated techniques for their application.
Today we confront another gamut of materials that is potentially just as transformative. From biotechnology to the internet of things to artificial intelligence and robotics to networked additive manufacturing and replication, this material palette provides for the recomposition of the world at scales previously unthinkable, turning living tissue into a plastic medium and imbuing inorganic machines and landscapes with new sorts of practical intelligence. The social and ecologic project for SD is not only to master an articulation of these new registers of matter, but also conceive a (real) new Materialism\(^{10}\) that would ratify the organization of society in the image of their still largely-unmapped potentials.

For Design practice, these material systems are of interest to the extent that they allow for the remaking of that world at a more granular level, and for Design theory to the extent that they disenchant and demystify something about our world and our species within that world. As each of these also now occupies some spot on the curve of various hype cycles, from wondertech to everyday appliance, the incantation of their names supposedly signifies futuristic thinking — even when it actually does not. The flowering of their potential for Promethean demystification and refashioning is not automatic; it must be designated. Still, it should go without saying that a conjoined technological populism and biochemical futurism is not unprogressive (and for future Wes Andersons, these emerging technologies will thematize a pastoral gizmo authentique yet-to-come).

The longer-term development of SD and related initiatives (not just at UC San Diego where I teach, but anywhere) should formulate its professional, theoretical and pedagogic expertise with this contemporary material palette by putting it in contact with other critical experiments and active geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts. At the same time, the translation of new materials into a new program for social and ecological organization may also direct the sometimes overly self-referential Arts and Humanities toward new outward-facing feats of abstraction, rationality, and imagination.

\(^{10}\) Without being too programmatic, we can still clearly differentiate the disenchanted matter-centric materialism that I describe here from the mystical tropes of much of what is recognized as New Materialism.

Toward that we should not presume that the initial applications of any of these technologies are those that will define the ultimate range of functions, and indeed, as discussed below, it is the work of SD to probe the contours of that range:

• HAILI (Human Artificial Intelligence Interaction design) may illuminate unexpected forms of empathy, intelligence and identity, and not just in the image of human vanity. How will we midwife robotics and synthetic embodiment as they speciate and incorporate with existing animal bodies?
• Ubiquitous computation links algorithmic calculation from molecular to landscape scale and seeds communication between objects at, below or above a normal human scale of encounter. Urban and continental computational assemblages may flow into our lines of sight, sound and touch or we may be unable to perceive them without sensory augmentation. How do their new maps become new territories, and vice versa?

• Synthetic biology, especially its DIY variants, suggests plots for organic building-blocks re-cast as general purpose programing tools, thus giving biotechnology its overdue garageband phase. Will biology become more computational before computation becomes more biological?

• Epidermal sensors and nanobioelectronics combine and weave natural sensation and machine sensing so thoroughly that we can’t tell which is which, and hint at skin-based media and designable sensations: toward a molecular gastro-tactility.¹¹


• High-resolution scanning and sensing allows us to perceive properties of physical matter at a scale and precision otherwise inconceivable, making some kinds of metaphysical arguments about objects and ontology instantly moot. How would a textile culture predicated on telescoping and microscoping physical aesthetics affect all of the above—from epidermal media, to synthetic biology, to robotics, to what we used to call merely “industrial design”?

• Additive manufacturing, digital fabrication, 4D printing, etc. are then only the most apparent ways in which algorithms re-inaugurate the composability of matter for Design. As it scales to truly global networked fabrication, Design may engage a wholesale remapping of supply-chains,


• More at-hand (literally): with more humans having access to a cell phone than to toilets, how for the foreseeable future will the human hand evolve in relation to the modular affordances of that smart slab/remote control/homing device/cloud obscura/cloud tether?
and with them the planetary-scale social relations of material culture more generally.

These make possible (and demand) reformulations of the media and institutions (and spatial and temporal conventions) of how we design, designate and enforce decisions. The quality and scope of political sovereignty is put into play, newly drawn jurisdictional borders are activated, and the polyphony of gender and/or sexual biotechnologies give wider range to the “expression of emotion in man(sic) and animals.” The sluggish churn of autochthonous traditions may be forced to increase pace; modular platforms of everyday urbanism are made more extensible (at least as rational as those of the International Space Station). We index the geologic cannibalism of life-as-we-know-it, from plankton blooms to peak oil, and leverage it toward post-Natural food infrastructures.

Finally —hopefully— the cognitive crises of globalization(s) (fundamentalisms, nativisms, financial idealisms, etc.) may be folded back on themselves such that something more worthy of the name “civilization” might emerge. And so on.

All that is (deep breath... exhale) not the job of any one program or project or discipline or Design Theory, but together these examples align the contexts in which Speculative Design projects project themselves into the foreseeable future. They identify some of the basic media for Art and Design for the next decade, and in order to find out what they are good for, we need hundreds (thousands) of graduates testing what the new materials can teach us.¹³ The problems are already present, which should underscore why SD—versus a mode of Design that would optimize the status quo, or forms of Critical Design that talk themselves out of making enforceable normative claims—is the most feasible way out and way forward. Again, the ultimate value of the new material palette is not (only) in the things we can make with it, but in how it allows/forces us to re-adjudicate fundamental questions about who we are, what we are, where we are, when we are: how we are.

The Project, The Model

The work of Design takes shape in the formulation of the project, a unique rhetorical platform, and through the model, which may describe, idealize or activate the claims of a project. What may give

¹³ This is the challenge and opportunity of the Speculative Design program at the industrial scale of a public research university such as University of California, San Diego. In the formulation of a design practice around an expertise in the Modern and/or new material palettes, I counsel students that it is not a matter of choosing one versus the other, but rather to “pick 3 and prosper” (interaction design, synthetic biology, and robotics, for example).
SD some special traction is how it constructs the deliberate (and deliberative) ambivalent provisionality between the model and the project. There are more than a few ways it can do this, and I outline some below.

A project is, as the word suggests, a projection of a potential intervention into a situation defined by a certain spatial and temporal range. The project draws on a model of the situation (such as an analytical simulation) and may also result in a model of proposed intervention (such as an architect’s model of the built form). Exactly how a model serves as a descriptive or prescriptive simulation may already determine how the project will frame the spatial or temporal terms of its eventual intervention. That is, the project will argue that its breadth of intervention corresponds in some precise way to the breadth of that in which it intervenes.

We may have descriptive models, such as diagrams that summarize complex events and relations into synthetic images, foregrounding the most relevant patterns, we hope. Or instead of those retroactive models, we may instead have realtime simulations of those events and processes that provide an indexical dashboard of their status. Or we may have instrumental diagrams that not only model those events and relations, but which when manipulated by a designer or user, also directly affect them. Graphical user interfaces are an example of this sort of model. Indeed, the history of Design is not only one in which new technologies allow for new forms to be made, but one in which new technologies allow for new kinds of models about what a project can possibly project. These include algorithmic means for automating live models of patterns we could not otherwise deduce.

The modern era of Design innovated models not only for understanding systems but also for understanding the users of those systems. From the ancestral Vitruvian Man to Henry Dreyfuss’s Joe and Josephine, millions of use-case personas have stood in for larger consumer publics in the standardized specification of design solutions. Beyond ergonomic requirements, Cognitive Science-influenced Design research reconstructs the mental models with which users understand and interact with complex designed systems. Among the epistemological and methodological complexities of Design models is how easily one kind of model (descriptive, diagrammatic, diagnostic, normative) can be transposed into the purposes of another (projective, instrumental, managerial, aspirational). This is no less true for data-driven Economic models than it is for concept-driven Speculative models, though the latter may have a more resilient tolerance for the ambiguities that those shifts introduce.¹⁴

In relation to such complexities of Design models (and of our models of those models), the agency of the project within SD, and especially within SD education, deserves careful attention, and so the remainder of my remarks will hopefully provide some useful points for further debate.

1. The Prototype and the Prefigurative: Bruce Sterling’s working definition of “Design Fiction” as “the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change” remains
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serviceable for SD, but is also (true to his point) an incomplete assignment. What comes after the suspension, and what homology is there between the prototype and the change? It may be that the less certain the link the better the insight. The impetus to provoke disenchantment of the commonsensical is well-advised. But at the same time, we should be cautious that Design in this vein does not lapse into the merely “prefigurative,” whereby its purpose is to offer-up fetishistic idealizations of some community-to-come, and for which the purification of means pre-occupies and delays the enforcement of its ends. Different SD practices have diverse relations to “the real,” and to enchantment or disenchantment as strategies, but across the spectrum there is an allegiance to keeping the correspondence between the prototype and the outcome, the cause and effect, an open and winding path—not a straight line.

2. Prometheus is Late for an Appointment with the Killer Apes: The material palette/ emerging prefigurative means continuously do not “work,” then their very emptiness takes an independent importance (and hence the predictable shifts from politics to political art to performative/relational gesture). As the failures pile up, failure itself becomes both political-aesthetic imperative, as it may be perhaps for some mobilizations of the “Anti-Social Turn” in Queer Theory. See Judith Halberstam (now Jack Halberstam), The Queer Art of Failure (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). That is, at one end of the prefigurative spectrum, idealized symbolic gestures are rigorously policed in the name their presumed eventual utility. Their failure is
thought to be caused by contaminated means. At the other end, gestural means are to be cultivated because of their recognized and celebrated uselessness, in the service perhaps of identity- or position-making or unmaking. Hopefully my point about means-end relationships in creative practices is precisely calibrated. There are clearly many dependencies between Speculative Design and the conceptual apparatus of Queer social and anti-social technologies, for example, that are proven, possible, available and essential. I see no viable SD that is not guided by them.

These technologies cited above are “emerging” faster than are our theoretical and conceptual frameworks can orient them and be oriented by them. While such anomie is probably par for the course, our challenges are not just with nanotechnology and financialized migration flows. It is also with simple things like sugar, for example, and how our hunter-gatherer propensity for glucose, sucrose and fructose paired with sentimental neo-Creationist ideas about food, have built the chemical supply-chain of global cuisine as a diabetes megastructure. A cup of demystification beats a pound of remediation.

Our current thinking is what makes these technologies possible and is what prevents them from fully reaching their capacities for meaningful innovation. Accordingly, maximizing institutional investment in engineering capacity while minimizing investment in the conceptual and critical capacity that would sustain implementation is an irrational policy. Universities take heed: the efficient, illuminated path is to balance means and vision. Sustained and diverse investment in conceptually-courageous, culturally-informed, norm-making Design, Art and Humanities is necessary to realize the social value of investments in emerging technology. That said, it is also true that sometimes romantic and reactionary posturing (and general technical ignorance) in some such discourses/departments (present company excluded of course!) makes correction more difficult than it should be.

3. Discovery over Optimization: As said, for Design practice emerging technologies allow for the remaking of the world at a more granular level, and, for Design theory they may demystify and disclose something about our world and our species (and others) within it. That is, our contemplation and configuration of possible uses not only provides new means to do what
we already understand must be done, but may also de-authorize secular superstitions about who should do what with whom. That can mean different things to different people, and so much the better.

4. Stem Cell as Pharmakon: Any sufficiently powerful/ efficacious technology is simultaneously both good and bad (not or: and). So, pick your metaphor, Greek or germline. Emerging technologies are Pharmakoi: they are remedies and poisons. Any plan for them, or commentary on them, that evangelizes their positive or negative potential without articulating the inverse is incomplete and/or dishonest. Or if you like, emerging technologies are like stem cells; they could become this or they could become that, and which it will be is undecided but still decidable. Again, it is unwise to announce that their early manifestations (good or bad) represent their essential character and potential. We simply don’t know what they are good for yet, and so the search space of possibilities must be kept open for as long as possible (see above on balanced investment in means and conceptualization).

5. Art/Design Can do Things that Science Can’t and/or is Not Allowed to Do: Even in the same research institution, sometimes the research that an Artist or Designer conducts may be essentially the same as what a Scientist may attempt, but one experiment can happen and the other cannot. The disciplinary permissions are different, and so the arbitrage of leeway is a space for ideation and discovery.¹⁸

¹⁸ That is, the seam between Art and Design is one that not only re-operationalizes “who matters” and “what speaks” (Ranciere) or how the fleeting contemporary “event” is put in place (Groys) but also what matters, what is matter, when is this and what does it want from us?

Examples from the 1990’s heyday Bio-Art are plentiful, but also consider the 2002 re-staging of Milgram’s Obedience to Authority Experiment by Rod Dickinson in Glasgow’s CCA Gallery, and the likelihood that any Human Test Subjects research review committee would approve new follow-on studies by the Psychology faculty. Recently, I heard Jacob Applebaum discussing the Autonomy Cube, a collaboration with Trevor Paglen, and its installation in various Art galleries and museums, where this Tor meta-object, anonymizing invisible data packets in our immediate midst, drew the scorn of local security officials who were helpless to interfere. Outside the gallery, the device may have been confiscated or otherwise intercepted, but inside the gallery—where mimesis takes precedence—the sculpture is granted a kind of asylum and immunity from prosecution. Karolina Sobecka builds cloud-making and -tracking machines, collaborating informally and unofficially with climate researchers at Scripps Institute of Oceanography here at U.C. San Diego. There are now both hard and soft moratoria on experimental geoengineering research by scientists, but her projects are possible if conducted as “only” Art.
SD is a zone where the tactical exceptions to norms can be granted and where, thereby, new norms are prototyped with some impunity.

6. The Best Worst/ Worst Best Thing You Can Think Of: For students, particularly younger and inexperienced students, the conventions of mainstream Design culture are sometimes an obstacle to the formulation of original research and a provocative project. Unworkable pitches for TechCrunch (“It’s Tinder meets AirBnB for Oculus Rift”) or an idealistic non-profit (“biofuel-powered hackathons for mindfulness”) are the default idioms.

I counsel students that their projects should span two balances. For the first, we are uncertain whether the project is “real” (did it happen, is it really being proposed to happen, are these prototypes functional, are those images composites, etc.?) It may be known to us, the viewers/respondents/users of the work, that this uncertainty is deliberate and that our interpretation depends on thinking it through. Ideally, if as we examine the work more carefully we are even less sure how “real” the work is (even less sure of the designer’s own intentions), then it is possible that instructive fault-lines between common sense and emergent reason are at work.¹⁹

¹⁹ This would differentiate the prototypical methods of Speculative Design (as here defined) from the “hoaxes” of, for example, The Yes Men, and the tendency to degrade into hidden camera dick jokes.

The second balance to be pursued is not ontological, but ethical and programmatic. If we are startled by the strength of the design proposal, and are sure that should this project be realized it would have dramatic significance, but are also unsure whether doing so would be the best thing or the worst thing in the world (and more unsure the more we consider the project), then it is likely that there are original and serious insights be gleaned from the research. Ambiguity, abstraction and ambivalence are signals of successful Design Research, and the best SD projects position us between pro and con interpretations: is this ethical and/or unethical, is this remedy or poison? If we already know it would be one or the other, then the project may not suggest an interesting direction for ongoing experimentation. We know the outcome in advance.

This is not to say that Design practice as a whole should not solve clear problems in clever ways (we are thankful for usable tools and interfaces that match doxic mental models and for the effects of scale that they provide), but the SD research program has a specific interest and allegiance to ambiguity, not just as a means but as an end in and of itself.

7. 10,000 Year Site Conditions: Among my favorite well-known SD briefs was one written by the United States Department of Energy’s Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management’s Yucca Mountain Project (YMP). Proposals were solicited for a signage system that would warn-off curious future excavations from accidentally unearthing radioactive nuclear waste to be buried
there in the desert. “Engineers, archaeologists, anthropologists, and linguists [were convened] to design effective warning structures capable of lasting 10,000 years … Using archaeological sites as ‘historical analogues.’”

The brief is interesting for how it simultaneously demands both open speculation as to who/what would be reading the proposed semiotics and for how strongly the answers must be tethered to the very real dangers. The temporal scale of the proposed intervention (over 130 average human generations) is what commands super-speculative hyper-utilitarianism. It invites proposals that are genuinely uncanny because they are absolutely functional. The imaginative is thus enabled by the imperative; it is what allows the creative agent to step outside his/herself.

I believe that we would be better served by similar briefs for other design problems. If we were to use 10,000 years to situate the successful design of other important domains (multigenerational housing, sovereign geographies, gender hacks, human-artificial intelligence interaction, transnational urbanism, egalitarian synthetic biology, or interspecies communication, etc.), I am confident that the design solutions (for us to grow into over time) would be both more imaginative and more functional than those prepared for yearly, decadal or average human organism lifespan durations.

Thus considering our interest in developing pedagogies that impart a more accurate understanding of where and when we are—based, one hopes, on geological time and astrophysical place—a pedagogy of “long circuits” would not just be one in which the speed of information technology is slowed to the pace of phenomenal contemplation (per Bernard Stiegler) but rather one in which technical contemplation-composition is extended to the actual duration of its chemical and ecological reverberations.

To conclude: What is called “human-centered design” (sometimes interchangeable with “user-centered design”) is not only not the solution, it is quite often the problem. Insofar they both de-center and de-privilege the human within their scenarios, there are points of alignment between the impulses of SD (as I’ve described it) and some of the formulas of Speculative Realism (but not others). The interest, to be clear, is not to eliminate (or to claim to eliminate) human
sentience, sapience and affect from these rich dramas, but to conceptualize the world and to compose with it according to models that locate human specificity in a more deliberately dispassionate position. The designable transformation of our position then becomes more accessible.²³

That is, one lesson we should take from the Anthropocene predicament is that Anthropocentrism— that the world is notionally here for us—finds justification in forms of Humanism for which the human experience of human experience (of the world or of just itself) offers more profound truths than a materialism for which we are but one (albeit lovely) genre of sentient matter.

Recently, I spoke with a colleague in the Art world involved in an ongoing collaborative project on ‘theorizing the Anthropocene’ and was a bit alarmed by how much the inverse conclusion was taken for granted. In short, he repeated to me the thesis, as if obvious, that the root causes of this ethical-ecological malaise are opaque, mystical planetary hyperobjects and withdrawn, conspiratorial hyperprocesses, and therefore the work of political Art and Design is to re-render these sprawling systems at a phenomenologically-intuitive human scale.²⁴ The imperative, he said, is not only so that people can understand them in regular terms but so that their abominably inhuman scope can be reformed: we can “heal” the Anthropocene predicament by de-scaling its unnatural complexities back to a graspable, proximate organic norm.

This approach is, I argue, symmetrically opposite of what is to be done. With briefs like the Yucca Mountain signage in mind, we appreciate that if SD can help to outline uncannily practical paths out of the Anthropocene, it is not because vast, impersonal temporal and spatial scales of global systems are brought to heel and drawn down to intuitive neurological and emotional comfort-zones. To think and design in other ways and at other scales is not only theoretically more defensible; it is now a practical necessity.


²⁴ The figure of “the Anthropocene” has also invited familiar misapprehensions, including facile condemnations of “the scientific materialist worldview” as a postlacerian algorithm of domination. It has sometimes given cause to cryptic superstition with new totems (i.e. decontextualized pictures of Andamanese islanders juxtaposed with piles of lithium mining waste, etc.). Certainly Philosophy’s touch-points with Art are also not immune to similar mystifications. See for example, Timothy Morton, “Charisma and Causality: What if art were a kind of magic?” [http://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/].
The weaving of long circuits should head in the opposite direction: Design scaled to the scope of the real, not reality downsamped toward the digestible.

—Laboria Cuboniks in Conversation with Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik
Laboria Cuboniks (b. 2014) is a polymorphous xenofeminist collective comprised of 6 women across 5 countries, working in collaboration online to redefine a feminism adequate to the twenty-first century. They published *Xenofeminism, A Politics for Alienation* online in the spring of 2015 and are currently working on a book that will elaborate on this text.¹

¹ Laboria Cuboniks, [http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/].

Cuboniks also advances an affirmation of abstraction as an epistopolitical necessity for twenty-first century claims on equality. Espousing reason and vigorous anti-naturalism, she seeks to dismantle gender implicitly. Cuboniks is a multitaloned, tetra-headed creature uncomfortably navigating the fields of art, design, architecture, archeology, philosophy, techno-feminism, sexuality studies, digital music, translation, writing and regular experiments with the use of evolutionary algorithms in offensive cybersecurity.

Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik
The initial formulation of your political program was made in the form of a manifesto, a genre that proposes a transformative relation between the present as it has been historically constructed and, on the other hand, a future spelt out in that manifesto and (in your case) endorsed by it. Why was a manifesto form required to articulate your demands?
LC-HH
What the manifesto form offered was a prompt to formulate xenofeminism (XF) with concision; to distill the key foci of our shared endeavor in as condensed and powerful a way as possible. As a form, the manifesto also encourages a libidinized and affective engagement with theoretical and political projects—it is a form that wants you to say, “I want.”

LC-PR
Beyond the affective affordances endemic to the manifesto form, it is particularly useful in instigating viral uptake via online readership. Paragraphs are short and can be easily tweeted/shared. This formal quality was equally in mind when finding a way to coalesce our six, often divergent, voices.

AA-SM
The XF manifesto emphasizes and endorses several “minor” practices (in the positive DeleuzoGuattarian sense) as present resources to support the speculative construction you envisage. Why does the manifesto mainly limit itself to these contemporary minor praxes for its models of xenofeminist platforms, several of which could be readily identified as progressively libertarian tactics?

LC-LF
A politics that limits itself to lofty goals without trying to at least sketch out some local tactics is just utopianism, and one that sticks with local tactics alone is directionless. What you’re pointing to here seems to be the gap between our counter-hegemonic goals, as we state them there, and our preliminary, tactical suggestions, which seem to lean towards low-level or small-scale preparations. Of course there’s a gap! But what we’re really interested in is finding ways to bridge this gap—the zone of “mesopolitics,” as we put it in the manifesto.

If our preliminary sketches seem libertarian, maybe this is because there’s not much in the manifesto that’s oriented towards petitioning the state, as it currently exists, to be the middleman, to be the agent that somehow lifts us up out of our current state and carries us on its shoulders to utopia. That said, the question regarding the role of the state is still one where you can find a good bit of divergence and tension within LC. I don’t think any of us are so incautiously optimistic as to put all of our eggs in that basket. We would rather experiment with, and develop, new forms of collectivization, and in this regard we might have something in common with some versions of libertarianism and anarchism, to the extent that they go beyond an often callous individualism and try to construct alternatives to the nation-state.

The nation-state is not going to be what carries us out of capitalism, white suprematism and patriarchy. It can still be pressured and coaxed into making life marginally better for us all, but it tends to be so only insofar as it’s acting reactively—in response to forms of organization that strike off without it. (On a small scale: it was the existence of black-market and underground avenues to gender transition that pushed the medical establishment away from the old, sexist
There is divergence within the group, as LF said. The self-medication of hormone therapies is but one example, as is our tolerance (or lack of) for libertarian tendencies. I think the focus of XF work should not be on availability of healthcare on the black market. That can be a stopgap in desperate situations, but to speak of it as anything other than that is, I would say, a mistake. In many cases it helps cement poor healthcare options for already marginalized populations rather than working towards the systemic change necessary to better serve those populations. I don’t want healthcare choices to be relegated to second-class DIY techniques when it comes to something so potentially life-altering. What I think XF should be working towards and espousing is a universal healthcare system that is free at the point of need in which things like safe transition and abortion, and other care that is currently restricted in some areas, would be available. I do concede that stopgaps may be needed in the interim in far too many cases. The Women on Waves initiative is an example of one of these needed stopgaps. What needs to be made clear and explicit, however, is that these interim-solutions are not to be understood as our solution for the long game (where should we be in 20, 100 or even 200 years).

What distinctly futural pressures on

contemporaneity does XF make? Could you amplify your advocacy of gender abolitionism in this regard? And what concept of the future do you subscribe to as an active ingredient for realizing your program?

All strategy is “futural.” There’s no way for it not to be. If there’s anything that makes us particularly “futuristic,” I suppose it comes down to two things: (1) we don’t think that any age of history offers a model of feminism that we should uncritically imitate (and this includes the present—we don’t think the most urgent issue is to conserve what now exists), and (2) scale. Without losing focus on the world at our disposal, we think that feminist, anticolonial, and anticlass politics needs to think in terms of decades and centuries, rather than just in terms of relatively immediate gains. What kind of world, or worlds, do we want to see exist in 2116, for example? In 2226? What can we do over the next several decades to set those worlds in motion?

If politics today tends to be anti-futuristic, it’s because it has such a dangerously strong bias in its time preference—it places the present, and the immediate future, above all else. Politics today is very smash-and-grab in nature, and this can be said of both the reigning parliamentary democracies (whose horizons are rarely more than an electoral term or two away) and protest politics (whose horizons rarely stretch beyond the event of the protest itself—a tendency that Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams dissect in “Inventing the Future”).²
LC-PR
One of such futural pressures would be a remodeling of time itself—a model of time that undoes a linear sequencing. This is crucial for two key reasons: a) it can disentangle and differentiate us from Modernity’s “progressivism;” and b) it can help us understand and operationalize contemporary causation, since one cannot really strategize change without having some indication of how causality functions. In addition to your notion of the speculative time-complex, Diann Bauer’s art-based research on time, and Elena Esposito’s reworking of time-binding in view of future risks, Marc Couroux’s work on time-modeling in hyperstition, what he calls chronoportation, is also instructive here. For Couroux, the bringing into reality of the future is akin to a mobilization of weak signals immanent in our given reality.³

AA-SM
What dissatisfactions/limitations with historical determinations of feminism does the concept of the future that you mobilize allow you to bypass, and how?

LC-DB
If you are asking after our concept of the future rather than our “ideas for” or “visions of” the future, that depends on how we understand time and the ability to have agency with regard to this thing called “the future.” This is a question of particular interest to me but I’m not sure that is the thing that allows us to bypass the dissatisfactions you mention. Yes, it might help construct the vision of the future and how to get there, but I think the question may be the wrong way around in that it is precisely the dissatisfactions and limitations of historical feminism that have made developing the very concept of “the future” as a feminist project so necessary.

What are these limitations and dissatisfactions? One is certainly that we still have to talk about gender! The future we advocate is a post-gender one. I don’t want to be relegated to conversations about the body because of the body I’m in. XF is a concept that should function as a means to do away with its own need to exist.

But, given the long term nature of the project, and the distance of the future in question, we need to start thinking of what to start doing in the meantime. XF aims in part to expand what can be conceived of as a feminist practice, broadening the limits of what feminist discourse is and the breadth of where it can function, and be accepted as a norm.


The reason working in a wide range of fields needs to be a feminism and not just seen as getting on with other things, comes from the recognition that power relations across most fields are by no means equal. Opportunities, authority, access are all weighted by gender and we recognize that if the discourse about gender inequality is present only in fields that specifically affect women disproportionately (fields that in many cases are already marginalized for that reason), it means that the idea of feminism itself is thus ghettoized. It needs to be broadened—not sequestered as a discourse.

This would liberate feminists to take on all spheres that are necessary for the construction of the post-contemporary without having to justify that intervention by referencing a historically and geographically specific form of feminist thought and practice.

**AA-SM**
Is the speculative construction of the present towards a programmatically organized future a modernist task?

**LC-DB**
Yes, it probably is to some extent. But XF differs from modernism in that we are not arguing for a single overarching program. As mentioned earlier, we recognize the ability of the future (or ideas/projections of it) to contribute to how we act in the now to reform what that future might become in fact rather than as a projection.

Our origins are probably rooted in modernism but we have the benefit of hindsight, the capacity to analyze it and revise it, taking what seems useful and leaving what has been destructive. (This is not to say that we necessarily have it all correct now: analysis and revision as ongoing processes is something that XF very much avows). XF proposes that the shift from the “knowing that” a problem exists to “knowing how” to deal with it will have to happen across a myriad of disciplines, corroding any systems that are entrenched in patriarchy in a myriad of ways.

I take the distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how” from Gilbert Ryle via Keller Easterling’s book Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space, where she describes “knowing how” as dispositional, meaning that it is not a master plan or a grand narrative but, as Easterling says, an assessment of “how organization deals with variables over time.”

Individual actions in and of themselves will not be sufficient to deal with the problems we face but if a disposition can be developed and manipulated, then that can redress the balance, making things that we would endorse more likely, and things we would not less likely.

This may be a more effective way of operating politically, though it is a long game, which brings us back to questions of temporality. This is why the “knowing that” is equally as important as the “knowing how.” If we are to shape the disposition of things, one must have an understanding of their ontology, so that informed commitments

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can be made over time. It is through the dynamics of “knowing that” that we understand what is and define what ought to be.

Change cannot be adopted from an overarching program; actions will have to be context-specific and heuristic. XF is an example of this. It is at the moment primarily a discursive and/or artistic practice; this is where our primary interventions lie, with the ambition that this work will have effects on what thought and feminist practice shape up to be, and in turn how people act in the world. If, at the very least, XF is a catalyst that contributes to fields beyond itself, instigating shifts or, as Buckminster Fuller would have it, acting as a trim-tab, than that itself would be something.

**AA-SM**

How do you locate postmodernity—in particular, in what sense is xenofeminism distinct to the identity politics typical of contemporary critique’s postmodern configuration? How is XF a decisive intervention in such formations of contemporary politics?

**LC-PR**

The nexus between postmodernism and particularism has led us to an awareness of positions often excluded or marginalized from given historical narratives, yet the end-logic of such an approach is deeply problematic for us insofar as it seems to highlight the recognition of difference as a victory unto itself. Meanwhile a hegemon throttles along, perhaps more “tolerant,” but structurally unchanged.

When attempting to think a scalable politics at a counterhegemonic proportion, we need to find ways of constructing new “we’s”—in part, deploying some of postmodernity’s strengths, but putting more emphasis on engineering a “glue” between identities, without subsuming difference into a uniform template. It seems helpful to me in this regard to think of postmodernism’s focus on particularisms and/or difference (as an end-game) via Gilles Châtelet’s question: “Can one extract a part from the whole without leaving scars?”⁵ We can accordingly frame postmodernism’s weakness as what I would call a geometric omission—where, in putting all the emphasis on the “parts,” you presume that you can properly describe something as if it is separate from field conditions. The geometrical corrector lies in a capacity for conceptualizing the field, allowing us to address things more realistically, in their local to global relations—a global that is not simply “there” or given, but must be engineered. This move allows us to begin figuring the possibility for a non-absolute universal—a construction that binds solidarities without squashing particular differences.

**AA-SM**

Which other speculative formations—or

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Strategies for Future We’s

Laboria Cuboniks in conversation

constructions of the post-contemporary—do you see as having merit? What of their formative mobilization of the future—and of the configuration of the present by the future—is particularly instructive for you?

LC-DB

As mentioned earlier, the “speculative time-complex” (STC) and hyperstition are each alluring and interesting for us. However, I have many reservations regarding hyperstition in particular because, as I see it, it mystifies the labor of thinking, rationality and construction of a future. That is, hyperstition often remains in a quasi-theological realm rather than providing an understanding of the reality of time slipping “out of joint.”

By contrast, one only has to look to the sciences for many rational determinations of very odd and counterintuitive operations of time, how it exists—or doesn’t—outside of human experience.⁶ But for all of the paradoxes to be found when looking at the reality of time in depth, there is also the substantial prejudice that the human experience of time exerts on our understanding of it, which limits the extent to which we (as finite biological systems) can comprehend time, as a unit of measure, as abstraction, or even as infinite looping structure with Lovecraftian creatures lurking just outside of perception. My hunch is that the development of the posthuman may enable jumps in understanding of time both as a unit of measure in the universe and as experienced by our hybrid progeny.

The risk of hyperstition is that it is merely another distraction from understanding the very real paradoxes and counter-experiential paradoxes in the nature of time. It is in any case a distraction from the possibilities of human agency to change what the future is by design. Furthermore, to return to the evidence physics presents about the reality of time, there can be no retrocausality coming from a real future into a now. There may be statements about the future that can have real effects in the now even if they refer to nothing presently real. In derivatives markets, for example, the agreement to buy or sell an asset in the future at a certain price (thereby determining a future price of the thing itself) affects how that thing is in fact traded today.⁷

Though this statement about the projected future has a reality because of the agreements made in the present (by people or algorithms), this (hyperstitional?) transformation is not retrocausality. It is rather power, authority, and

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⁶ Lee Smolin in his book Time Reborn (New York: Penguin, 2013) goes through the history of twentieth century physics, laying out the arguments for the disappearance of time. He arrives back to the conclusion that the directionality of time is real with real consequences both for fundamental physics, for humans socio-politically and for Julian Barbour, who through the Wheeler-DeWitt equation concludes that time (and motion) are illusions, part of a static universe.

⁷ Esposito, The Future of Futures.
infrastructures saying something will be so, which in turn has effects on how things play out in time.

AA-SM
Given that your claims and proposals extend well beyond the art field and also require commitments with futurities extending well beyond the time spans and practicable reach of the typically changing vagaries of contemporary art’s discursive fashions, how do you foresee the interest from art in your work being accelerated beyond its currently limited format?

LC-PR
Of course it’s highly unlikely that contemporary art will “change the world” in the concrete sense of rewriting economic policy, figuring out a solution against water contamination, rising seas, the refugee crisis, and so on. And there are many things to despise about the contemporary art world’s “novelty cannibalism” and the inconsistency between the claims it makes qua its actual functioning in the world, but it is also equally fashionable to make such complaints as a kind of “radical confession” of complicity whilst doing nothing about it. One finds similar problems within the academic world as well—especially in politically-oriented theory where one often has the impression that scholars are more concerned with their status and being “right” than actually seeing the world change.

That said, rather than once again evoking the impotence of art, as an artist, I would rather try to think through the ramifications of these diagnoses and the ways in which thinking new forms of universalism, or an art-form fit for the age of complexity, ought to shape the demands we put on art—how it ought to function, and how those demands reformulate how we understand the artist to operate. Putting this emphasis on art’s functionality (which is itself a step away from the postmodern celebration of irrationality and non-function as a vector of emancipation from instrumentalized use-value) moves in the direction of what I would call a “nontrivial” art: an art the seeks to work in the service of these scalar concepts, and desires to be instrumentalized by them.
What is at Stake in the Future?
—Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek
Every ‘future’ inscribes a demand upon the present. This is so whether at the level of human imagination, or within the sphere of political or aesthetic action necessary to reach towards their realization. Futures make explicit the implicit contents of our own times, crystallizing trajectories, tendencies, projects, theories and contingencies. Moreover, futures map the absent within the present, the presents which could never come into actuality, the wreckage of dreams past and desires vanquished. Futures are speculative, libidinal, suggestive and, perhaps, ultimately unattainable.

In our work to date, and in particular ‘The Accelerationist Manifesto’ and Inventing the Future, we have positioned a particular orientation towards the futural as a key condition of possibility for a revivified left politics. Only under conditioning from some concept of the future can a programmatic, systematic, and ultimately hegemonic new political tendency be born. The manifesto-form is, in some sense, the embodiment of this futural orientation. It brings with it a particular mode of address: it declares, it declaims, it demands, and all in relation to some incipient future that it hopes to will into existence. The form is, in some senses, generative of its contents. The seeming impossibility of certainty in today’s political world, and in particular on the political left, renders the manifesto a slightly curious mode of address: just who would stand as prophets and pronounce the new world just beyond reach? Yet to do so is a (painful) necessity not because of the certainty of this or any other future, but because of the certainty of
the persistence of the neoliberal alternative in the absence of attempts to move beyond the reactive and into the register of the prospective. More simply: we must begin to imagine alternatives to the present, however gauche, or risk the permanence of the trajectories of today.

In this context, the programmatic demands which we set out in *Inventing the Future*—demands for full automation, universal basic income, a reduction in the working week, and the wholesale destruction of the work ethic—take on a double role. On the one hand, they can function as a heuristic fiction (what elsewhere is described as a ‘hyperstition’). In this sense, their relative truth value (or feasibility) is less relevant than their ability to break down existing prejudices, shibboleths and received wisdoms amongst the various silos and tranches of the political left. In posing these demands, a future orientation might emerge which, even were it not to fully realize these demands, would functionally transform the horizons of leftist politics. On the other hand, we have chosen to present these particular demands and the future they entail, a post-work world, because we think it both eminently feasible and decidedly coherent. It is feasible precisely because of the way it anticipates and bootstraps beyond existing material tendencies: towards the automation, taskification, and precarity of work, and against a context of the increasing generation of surplus populations, and the seeming inability of neoliberal societies to generate the innovation and profitability for which they are allegedly promoted. The problem of automation and taskification of labor, for example, is now widely noted and expected to utterly transform the world of work in both advanced and developing economies over the next two decades. The demands are also coherent, in the sense that each relates to how a tendency, whether present (as in automation) or past (as in demands for shortening the working week) can lock in and re-inforce the other. Make progress on one of these demands and the others will become more possible. In this sense, the future we point towards is a navigational concept—enabling the construction of a feasible and coherent future in a time of transformation and uncertainty.

Such a navigational notion of a future is necessary if we are to move beyond the limitations of the political left of today. We lack the space to elaborate the full range of dissatisfactions with the range of leftist forces that took shape from the 1980s to the 2000s. What we can certainly point towards, however, are the consequences of the left’s abandonment and evacuation of the territory of the future. First, this is at the level of plans, programs, and prospects. Here the left (or lefts) have relinquished the imaginative-libidinal terrain of the future. This can be identified across an entire range of different left-political phenomena, from the collapse of European social democratic parties, to the over-valorization of critique in political academia, and in the widespread reactivity on the part of radical left campaigns and activists, always keener to prevent and protect against neoliberal incursions rather than propose and propound some viable alternatives. Second, however, is the more realist sense that the left’s capacity to determine (or influence) the course of
the future has also declined. In practical terms, the prospects since the 1990s of a left capable of altering the direction of travel of large social, political, economic, and technical systems have been drastically reduced. In this sense, ‘the future’ has been abandoned by the left not just because it lacks the desire to design it, but also because of its declining hegemony, its relative weakness in the balance of forces. These two sides are reciprocally linked to one another. Just as the decline in hegemonic power emaciates the imagination, so too does the desertion of the optics of the future limit in advance the prospects of practical political activity.

Concurrent with these political development, the elaboration of speculative future narratives, and indeed, on some accounts, the future itself, was purported to have been banished with the advent of postmodernity. As Lyotard’s epochal definition puts it, we have grown suspicious of the metanarrative, and in its wake historical teleology and even grand-scaled meaning-making have collapsed into an impossible to summarize plurality of fractured, partially overlapping micro-events. There is of course some truth to these claims, yet as we argue, Lyotard moves too quickly to dismiss the mass belief in ‘the future’ and the big picture trajectory. What has disappeared is faith in the future in the more depressing sense of a better future, while looming dystopian perspectives, of a future of hyper-neoliberalization, rising surplus populations, and environmental catastrophe have become all-too ubiquitous. Key political signifiers such as ‘modernization,’ for example, have become almost entirely subsumed within a neoliberal framework. The modernization of an industry, workplace, or pursuit, today indicates privatization, contracting out, rising precarity and declining wages.

The task of elaborating futures, both within the sphere of ideas and the domain of action, might be deemed on such a basis a classically modernist one. This is a frame which we partially endorse. Modernism’s emphasis on the future, on the possibility of human accomplishments to determine a better future, is certainly not to be abandoned. Yet we must admit to seeking a more complex relationship between the future and politics than the teleological fairy tales of Hegelian Marxism. History has demonstrated that we are as likely to see reversals, swerves, and collapses, as a constructive building towards universal human flourishing. So too is the world more plural, less unitary, and ultimately more complex than certain modernist strands of thought would present it. As such, while we believe that the recovery of certain dimensions of the historical modernist project are essential facets of creating a new leftism, it simultaneously requires us to reach towards something like Fernando Zalamea’s transmodernism: a synthetic universalism, dynamic, plural, and revisable, yet capable of moments of partial universalization. Within such a perspective, the future or futures can operate as partial binding agents—motivating transitions, translations, and transplantations, creating momentary fixes and coherent trajectories within a broader flux. From another perspective futures here operate as complexly hegemonic operators—investing and
re-engineering pre-existing fields of ideology and organization.

The book, *Inventing the Future*, should be understood in this way. It is an attempt to knit together a series of partial perspectives into a more universal and hegemonic project, an attempt to make a reasoned argument for why a post-work world is both necessary and possible at this moment, and an effort to show how this intersects across a range of different existing movements. To achieve this, the book functions differently from the affective mobilization involved in the manifesto-form, but it is no less directly political. It is ultimately a call for a post-work politics to be built by all those who feel convinced by its proposals. As such, the book has self-consciously moved away from the fashionable term ‘accelerationism’ and is an attempt to build a more long-standing political project. While ‘accelerationism’ has been an inspirational, albeit often misunderstood, term to many, our interest is in much grander projects than the latest biennale.
Once a poster image for the great promise of universal accountability, the human rights system is now perhaps most infamous for its institutional failures. And yet, its most intriguing shortcomings are to be found in the ways it has failed to cohere with our times as a mediation regime rather than simply as a defunct juridico-institutional project. That is, human rights have lost their traction as a means of framing the world. International criminal law is no longer heralded as a triumph for humanity; politicians aren’t so quick to flash the human rights card when condemning violent acts of organized agents that aren’t part of their club; mainstream media rarely resort to framing concerns of universal significance in terms of human rights; traditional humanitarian aid work is now spoken in the language of data mining and smart interfaces. With complex interconnectivity increasingly becoming the lead image of universal dynamism, static and

Fractured Mediations
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highly normative anthropocentric reductions like Human Rights feel embarrassingly anachronistic. By the same token, a pedantic emphasis on juridical procedures comes at the expense of responding to changing environmental conditions, making the gap between code and reality ever wider.

The global contemporary art project, by contrast, has been growing from strength to strength in terms of its global reach, its market size⁴ and its embeddedness into the socio-institutional fabric of the transnational cosmopolitan community.⁵

I’d like to put forward the argument that there exist important, and under-acknowledged, confluences between human rights and contemporary art as regimes of mediation, and that since the advent of neoliberalism’s global hegemony, contemporary art had effectively taken over from human rights (HR) the function of mediating the liberal subject and cosmopolitan globality. At the surface,
this is evident in the notion of a timeless contemporary (or the forever now) manifest in contemporary art and so central to “the end of history” moment of the 1990s.⁷ As a regime of mediation, contemporary art (CA) proposes a perpetual semantic reorganization of the present via the subject’s immediate experience in a gesture to open up a multitude of symbolic futures that never deliver in actuality, thus de facto allowing for the re-entrenchment of existing power configurations. The splitting of the value of (critical) reflection from infrastructural ecology serves to ring-fence transformation into a closed-loop realm of experience and fancy.⁸

In turn, this shortchanges the act of enabling transformations for the consumption of symbolic potentialities—through sentimentality, lament and mystification—thereby taking us further and further away from understanding how to strategically operationalize actuality for concrete aims.


⁹ In contrast to, for example, Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art (London: Verso, 2013).

¹⁰ One of the main motivations for articulating this argument is to frame CA as a system of mediation that is imbricated in a larger project of global ordering rather than seeing it as a genre of art.⁹ In this sense, tracing the transition from HR to CA offers an opportunity to highlight some crucial defining confluences between the two systems at the level of their originating ontologies and universal ambitions. The “transition” vicariously tells the story of conflicting liberal agendas complementing each other and competing for primacy: legalistic liberalism (or legalism) may have provided the necessary institutional-aspirational backdrop to the expansion of the global market, yet neoliberalism (or market liberalism) ultimately proved itself as a much stronger contender for lead status due to its relentless flexibility and relative immunity to internal contradictions.¹⁰

International Law: Between Imperialism and Emancipation

Historically, the European colonial project inaugurated international law as an ambitious universal undertaking that attempted to guide global expansion on the terms of the invaders in a systematic and “orderly” fashion.¹¹ Within

¹¹ International Law: Between Imperialism and Emancipation
the power circle of European states, international law reinforced the Westphalian agenda of national sovereignty and the desire to keep war as the mechanism of last resort for conflict resolution.¹² That international law was born out of imperialism and functioned as a tool of deterterritorialization has always haunted its status as an inherently biased form of global governance.

The HR discourse emerged in the late-nineteenth century with the understanding that national sovereignty may function as a deterrent of (European) inter-state war but it does not prevent the eruption of violence that may spill out from within the state as a result of internal politics. The experiences of Fascism and Soviet Communism in the 1930s and the Second World War served to weaken significantly the primacy of sovereignty in international law for its leading Western proponents.¹³ These powers instead used international law as a channel for instituting the international human rights regime, which saw the emergence of a new legal stakeholder: the universal human subject. The system of national ratification of international multilateral treaties and the possibility of instituting transnational bodies to monitor compliance through these legal instruments came straight out of existing international law precedent. However, the reach of the human rights treaties into the internal affairs of nation-states together with the legal leveling of the human subject on a par with the nation-state marked a radical departure from the earlier image of the world as a “community” of nation-states governed by the principle of non-intervention into individual domestic affairs.

The de jure inauguration of the universal human subject as a global abstract unit on a par with the state was a major milestone in the history of liberalism, and a key juncture


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at which the legalistic tradition meets the market-driven one.¹⁴ In this sense, contemporary art regime’s ability to position a universal subject is to a large extent indebted to the legacy of the HR regime’s juridico-institutional legitimation of individual agency.

Unsurprisingly, the attempts to make the international HR system work have been an upward struggle, thwarted by powerful states for the reason of breaching their national interest (notably, the United States) and weaker states for the reason of colonial meddling in their state-building (for example, states that decolonized in the 1950s, 60s and 70s). To that extent, while the institution of the HR regime became the pinnacle of legalism’s achievements, its system was too rigid to reconcile its imperial history, its top-down power dynamics packaged with liberal policies aimed at deregulating national markets, and its proclaimed politico-ethical values—none of which have been able to keep pace with changing environmental conditions.¹⁵


¹⁵ For one of the most incisive take-downs of the de-historicizing tendencies of human rights, see Mahmood Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).


Breaking the Mold

For the HR regime, the pivotal relationship that needs to be managed is the one between the state apparatus and the subject. The former is presumed to exert oppressive force in an established menu of violations (for example, denying the right to live, free speech, religious affiliation, right to assembly, and so on), while the subject is on the other hand presumed to be a vulnerable human suffering the brunt of Leviathan’s hand. The additional proviso of equating “the vulnerable human” with a legal subject in order to make the claims actionable means that the state that might be the oppressor needs to recognize the vulnerable human as a legal subject. This obviously poses a catch-22 that was accurately characterized by Hannah Arendt in relation to the figure of the “refugee”: in order for the oppressed to benefit from human rights, the oppressor must acknowledge them as human.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the post-structuralist line of attack on the problem of equating the subject with specific legal categories is that it unleashes a violence of overdetermination that is in itself a
form of oppression to be resisted.¹⁷

In contrast to the forever faltering purism of the legal liberal tradition, market-driven liberalism is happy to change its protagonists, antagonists, allies and—most importantly—its ethico-political principles however the situation demands. All so long as the baseline economic policies are in place. This paradigm on the one hand reverses the logic of legalistically-minded globalism, allowing for greater differentiation at the level of local governance and societal organization (including state oppression) and emphasizing the freedom of individual/culturally specific identifications, affiliations and belief systems unrestrained by deterministic top-down norms. On the other hand, market-driven liberalism nevertheless requires an ethico-juridical grounding for individual primacy and the concomitant private ownership claim that emerges from it. Their merger is pitched as the guarantor of outward heterogeneity that allows societies to reap the benefits of inclusion into the global system.

The contemporary art regime, understood as the totality of the field’s institutional ecology—importantly including “the market”—shares a lot of foundational principles with human rights in terms of siting the subject as the key unit of the modern global order. Their shared matrix—Kant’s moral subject—leads both to valorize individuation and problematize the individual’s relationship to the outside world, albeit approaching these questions from different perspectives.¹⁸

On the latter front, the CA regime provides a much more open-ended solution. As the ambiguity of the phrase implies, the subject may be understood both as the subject-matter of art and the subject that is somehow brought into view through the contemporary art paradigm. Without rehearsing arguments that have been made by others on this matter, the subject posited by CA’s institutional ecology is the cognitive-phenomenological subject who in their experience of art, co-constructs meaning and decides on its mode of operation in the world. The subject’s agency in structuring the world thus comes to the symbolic fore, while an emphasis on the unique stature of the one conjuring meaning allows for difference to become the defining characteristic of subjection.¹⁹
At the same time, the infinite mutability of CA’s subject-matter reflects the ever-changing dynamics of the world at play. As I have argued elsewhere, CA’s ontological liberalism—that is, its lack of substantive criteria deflected by an emphasis on subjective contingencies—means that the operating status of being art is in practice delegated to CA’s insertion into a specific socio-institutional ecology.²⁰

Content-wise, CA tends to be either preoccupied with its internal historical configurations or delves into other fields ("reality at large"), semantically reorganizing their premises along with its own, and funneling the newly constructed semantic constellations into artworks.²¹ Both approaches owe a fair share of their legitimacy to the fact that post-structuralism and critical theory have played a major role in shaping CA’s language(s). At the core of the post-structuralist move is the turn towards deconstruction as a means of unpicking the suppressed premises that reveal obfuscated (power) dynamics. From this perspective, CA’s mediation of “reality at large” is ontologically rooted in deconstruction as a basic operation that may be supplemented by additional elements such as critique or mimetic enactment.

Similarly, with regard to HR and codes of law, Jacques Derrida echoes concerns voiced earlier in this text around top-down norms that can never fully capture the nuance and complexity of a given subject or situation. In “Force of Law,” Derrida urges to resist formally equating law with justice.²² Acknowledging the pragmatic need for law, Derrida argues that in contrast to law’s calculating operations, justice is an aporetic experience that can only be rendered visible in the process and project of deconstruction. Derrida’s distinction between the concretizing tractability of law and the tumultuous fluidity of justice qua deconstruction resonates much more closely with CA than HR insofar as the former mediation regime opposes a stable system of referents and encourages an approach in which justice is seen as a perpetual process rather than a stable code. In a similar vein, the CA regime proves itself more capable of (semantically) dealing with difference, while its constant questioning of itself renders it capable of (semantically) responding to emerging conditions. Issues that burst the HR regime at its

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²⁰ Ivanova, “Art’s Values: A Detenge, a Grand Plie.”
²¹ Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art (London: Verso, 2013).
seams—such as the displaced centrality of the human figure, non-individual identities, machine intelligence, the environment, dispersed power/oppression—make the CA regime thrive in its place as a mechanism of mediation that reasserts its contemporaneity by digesting novelty.

From Subject to System

CA’s agility in attending to contextual particularities is integrated with (and partially dependent on) an underlying presumption of a shared globality. This globality manifests itself in positing art as a universal abstraction that is locally-constituted and which addresses globally-distributed phenomenological subjects. Frequently interpreted as either an ideal companion of neoliberal de- and re-territorialization, or (for that very reason) an ideal tool for contending with neoliberalism, CA is most often either dismissed as a purely neoliberal project or prescribed with the Promethean task of eclipsing neoliberalism (and capitalism) altogether.

The two responses may appear to be on the opposite sides of the spectrum, yet they both seem to emerge from an idealized understanding of art’s agency and misplaced expectations as far as the prowess of mediating systems is concerned. Just as it isn’t particularly surprising that the HR regime attempted to establish a stable universal subject alongside existing political and economic agendas, some of which were predatory and some benevolent, there is nothing controversial in the fact that the CA regime’s vision of a nuanced and locally differentiated subject in a world that is itself subject to persistent reformation is embroiled in a larger politico-economic landscape. In effect, it’s the very purpose of regimes of mediation to be deployed for a variety of ends. Consequently, the ethico-political question of holding them accountable for instituting orders that we find unsatisfactory is different to the question of whether a particular mediation regime rises to the challenges of its times. This means that instead of expecting any solution to arise from art (or its demise), it may be more pertinent to ask: does this regime have the structural capacity to function as a system for mediating future-oriented concerns? How does it stand up to the challenges facing us today?

While these challenges might not be so different from the myriad of issues that CA is already contending with at the level of its content (for example, environmental disaster and its “negative externalities,” new synthetic life forms, increasingly intelligent machines, disenfranchised populations, and so on), the outstanding question is: what does this mediation achieve? It is certainly the case that artistic and curatorial investigations are providing inroads into these various issues from perspectives that diverge from and question those with actual jurisdictional control (such as financiers, politicians, tech-preneurs, leading scientists, etc.). There is certainly merit in these inquiries and they are also largely supported by the CA’s institutional network.
(curators, museums, galleries, collectors, etc.). The internal consensus of the CA field is perhaps not too dissimilar from that of the UN (or the human rights professional field), which sees the human rights system valuable as it is (despite its ever increasing limitations).

However, just as the UN’s internal consensus has not been a guarantee of the regime’s relevance for mediating contemporary issues, there is a possibility that the CA regime may be facing a similar plight. The fact that CA’s ontological liberalism also extends to its epistemology—that is, in its method of structuring, synthesizing and organizing knowledge—tends to reproduce confounding open-endedness, while implicitly reproducing existing infrastructural realities. The former might have been an adequate strategy for mediating overdetermined meaning, but if one of the key questions emerging today is how to reconstitute meaning in order to forge a pathway out of the present, mediation must respond to the demands of a strategically-minded acumen, which is hard to achieve without a systemic and scalable epistemological foundation. By extension, CA’s phenomenological dimension stands in the way of dealing with abstraction and non-anthropocentric conceptions of space and time that are so crucial for thinking on a scale demanded by a reality, in which the impact of individual agency is negligible. Of course, one of the questions is whether the transition proposed here could happen within the CA regime, and whether such a regime would still be called contemporary art.

There is also the much larger question of the need to surpass the liberal framework altogether. While this goal may be both desirable and realistic in the long haul, there is also a pragmatic need to work with the socio-material structures available to us today and to be capable of mobilizing liberalism’s affordances. Just as the HR regime hasn’t been completely wiped out from the face of the Earth but continues to be deployed as a political tool by a variety of actors despite the fact that a more fluid configuration for mediating subjecthood and reality had become dominant, a similar approach should stand for CA’s ecological complex vis-a-vis the future. So, while a new globally dominant mediation regime is in the process of formation, having perhaps already surpassed the human as its unit of departure,²³ it is worth preempting the structural terms that are to be demanded from it in relation to its capacity to mediate systemic complexity, a non-correlationist epistemology, and non-phenomenological subjecthood. By the same token, the residual values of humanism and emancipation that are evidently present in the HR regime and have been duly transformed by the CA regime might still provide a useful basis for developing these guiding values further in a world where the question “who deserves to live and how?” is as relevant as ever, albeit on somewhat different terms.

²³ See Benjamin Bratton’s contribution to this volume, “On Speculative Design.”
The Construction of Unpredictability
—Elena Esposito
Modern society defines itself in relation to time—explicitly in German, where the expression for modernity is *Neuzeit*, literally meaning “new time.” Modernity is the time of the new, of the search for and the construction of a future about which—as Reinhart Koselleck shows—we only know that it will be different from the present and the past; and this is all that the past can teach us.¹

The continuity between the past and the future of traditional societies, implicit in the idea of “historia magistra vitae”—and indirectly in the assumption of an ultimate general order ruling the (past, present and future) universe—is now broken. Knowing the past continues to be useful to prepare for the future, but in the sense of discontinuity, not continuity. The future will be new, hence unknowable today, and the order of time—if it can still be called an order—becomes much more articulated and complex.

Modern time is characterized by this tension towards the future, towards design and planning—exemplified primarily by the logic of capitalism—which can be seen as a programmatic sacrifice of the present to the future. The profit of the capitalist is not—like the wealth of the rentier—the result of a position consolidated in the past, which is maintained, reproduced or consumed.²

The wealth of the capitalist comes from a

dynamic process of production and circulation of goods, addressed primarily to the construction of the future. Profit is of course necessary, even more necessary than ever before, in order to define the social (and according to Weber also moral) position of the entrepreneur, but the reference is no longer the past nor is it the present. In the classical model of capitalism, wealth is not enjoyed spending money for personal pleasure, nor for the care of one’s own image in conspicuous consumption. The capitalist does not live opulently, he has strong moral rectitude and works a lot. The goal is the continuous development of the firm, therefore profit must be achieved in order to be immediately reinvested to produce more future profits, which will in turn be reinvested. The meaning of the present is related to the future it promises to produce.

If this is the temporal frame of modernity, associated in our project with the idea of post-contemporary perspective? And how do the transformations of capitalism affect the sense of modernity and contemporaneity?

The starting point can be the realization that a different attitude with respect to time is emerging today, symbolized primarily by the transition from pure capitalist logic to financial logic. The core of financial economy, as we know, is not production but credit, and credit implements a very different relationship with the future. It is no longer the present that is sacrificed for the future, but the future that is used in the present.

This is what finance does and, before it, what credit was doing for hundreds of years—at least since it was no longer condemned as sin and abomination—precisely because of its use of time. Working with credit is to exploit in the present the openness of the future: the one who borrows money commits their future in ensuring the return, but can already in the present enjoy the wealth they
The Construction of Unpredictability

Elena Esposito

expect to earn. Tomorrow, I will have to pay the loan installments but today I get the money, and if I make judicious use of it, I can get profits that will enable me to repay the debt and have other revenues. I constrain my future today in order to build a better future, which would not have occurred if I didn’t act on it, unfolding the circularity of the open future, which here reveals its virtuous side.

Finance starts from this but multiplies and stresses the present use of the future with loans, securities, bonds, and then with the increasingly intransparent tools of structured finance, which use elaborate models to push reflectivity to hyperbolic levels. The use of the future is itself sold and bought, and then sold again in practices like securitizations. The future is built and bound in more and more complex ways, which make more and more wealth available to operators, generating the astonishing figures that circulate in the “virtual” financial markets of our society—an exasperated and progressively uncontrolled action on the future.

But is this already a post-contemporary attitude? One could rather think about a certain hyper-contemporaneity, the development of and emphasis on the orientation toward the future as already implicit in modern semantics. In the financial models’ projection of scenarios, the present incorporates the future—its own future, built with its own actions and its own expectations. It is basically the same attitude that can be observed in the artistic avant-garde, even if purified from its critical intent: the perspective of the one who places themselves “further ahead”

But is the logic of finance really the underlying logic of the society we live in? Or can the label of post-contemporary be used to denote an even different temporal attitude, the traces of which can already be glimpsed?

Our society, as Ulrich Beck said thirty years ago, is no longer (or not primarily) a capitalist society but a risk society, and risk assumes a more contingent and indeterminate relationship with the future. ⁵ The future of risk is a present to come that depends on today’s expectations and choices—not because it confirms them, but because it deviates from them. ⁶ This is the difference between the logic of risk and the projection of scenarios in finance: the awareness that even if we plan the future—and the more we plan it—when the future comes about, it will be different from what we expected, remaining fundamentally unpredictable. Compared to the “defuturized” future of the avant-gardes and planning, the future of risk society is open because it is continuously re-opened as a consequence of our attempts to predict it. ⁷ It is not the “present future” (the horizon of future that we can imagine


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today on the basis of available information or statistical models) but the “future present” (a present that does not yet exist but will become real later, in part as a result of today’s actions and decisions). No one can locate themselves in the future present, “ahead” of today and of its constraints, because the future present does not yet exist and remains unpredictable. It is the future in the past of which there is today’s present with our present future and all our attempts to anticipate it.

This circularity is the blind spot of finance and its logic, as shown by the crisis triggered by structured finance: financial models can predict all possible future courses of the markets, except the future of finance led by models—which is the only future that later actually comes about.⁷

A post-contemporary attitude (and maybe a post-contemporary art) could reflect this condition: a second-order openness of a future that is more and more unknowable the more one tries to anticipate it and succeeds in influencing it—placing oneself ahead of it (as the avant-gardes), or using it in the present (as finance). The post-contemporary condition could be the one of a present facing the openness of a future that is unknowable and indeterminate not because it is independent from us, from our actions and our expectations, but precisely because it is constructed by the (contemporary) present and would not come about without our intervention. If we did nothing and expected nothing, the future would be different—even if it will not happen as we expect it today.

Not by chance today’s art in its most innovative forms almost always presents some elements of performativity—using this circularity as an asset and not as a problem. In installations and performances, or even in the space management of museums like (paradigmatically) the DIA in Beacon⁹, the artwork is produced each time in a new way, in every interaction with the viewer. The artistic effect is always different and radically unpredictable—but not because it is free from constraints. Quite the opposite is true: the effect could not be produced without the constraints imposed by the configuration of experience and by the artistic space. The present imposes on the future a form that it does not control and cannot predict. It only predicts surprise—a prediction that is confirmed in each new unpredictable present.


Situating Global Forms: An Anthropology of Cosmopolitan Science
—Aihwa Ong
in conversation with Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik
Your anthropological research pays close attention to specific emerging and inventive configurations of globally-constituted modernization, particularly in East Asia and its diaspora. Throughout this work you identity many ways in which ‘things that used to be fused together—identity, entitlement, territoriality, and nationality—are being taken apart and realigned in innovative relationships and spaces by neoliberal technologies and sovereign exceptions.¹

Furthermore, this re-assemblage not only takes place in the social, technical, economic and cultural dimensions to which you draw attention, but also requires a continual reordering of critical-theoretical and political schematics too.²

Any appeal to a simple or self-consistent agent of modernization—such as “borderless capital,” the “nation-state,” “transnational humanitarianism,” or even “history” as a unified and coherent

¹ Aihwa Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 27.


Quotes in the next paragraph are from this source.
narrative—is now untenable. Each is but an idealized misrepresentation of complex knots of more tangible forces and influences. On the one hand, you criticize the conventional response of postcolonial approaches to the rigidity of universalist thinking and the binary structures of East-West divisions—for example, emphasis on the irreducible particularity of local customs and worldviews or on letting the subaltern speak—because such approaches “unwittingly reinscribe the binarism of a global North and South and view new spaces of global encounter subsumed within a hegemonic world system”. On the other hand, you also reject one of the current mainstays of current political theory, that we are now in a condition of “postsovereign multilateral governance across the world.”

Instead of either the universalism of European modernism or the resistant localism characteristic of post-colonialism, you instead advocate an approach attentive to ‘complex transnational dynamics.’ What are the key features of such an approach?

Aihwa Ong

Following Max Weber, I consider the modern/universal as rational forms and modes of reasoning that originally emerged in Western Europe. “Global forms” (modern knowledges, technologies, institutions, and practices) are “universalizable,” or capable of being disembedded and re-embedded in a variety of politico-cultural environments, thus enmeshing the world in forms of thinking, action and organization that are independent of inherited “culture.” In heterogenous contexts, situated politics and ethics (“culture”) mediate and repurpose global forms in order to address their problems in context. Contingent interrelationships among technology, politics and culture, I have argued, crystalize particular milieus for solving anthropological problems, or issues of life, living, and sustainability that are central to what it means to be modern.

AA-SM

What sense of “the global” is at work for you if it is neither that of a “hegemonic world system” nor a conglomeration of localisms?

AO

With Stephen J. Collier, I propose a “global assemblage” concept for framing particular globalized milieus emerging out of complex mediations between global forms and situated political and ethical forces.³ The global condition is indexed by global forms becoming entangled with existing political and ethical institutions and values. My approach explores the constitution of global milieus that are at once “global” and “particular”.

What are the benefits of rejecting post-colonialism as the account of rapidly modernizing Asian economies—both for those states and also for how they are historicised within and outside of the region? Do you think that the current configurations of East Asian modernization present viable alternative models to the small-state/large-corporation composition of modernization typical in the West since the 1990s?

My approach circumvents the epoch-marking approach (e.g. postcolonialism) because a simple temporal frame does not capture empirical variations among globalized environments being constituted by lateral flows in Asia and elsewhere. Conventional categories—capitalism, modernization, the state, post-coloniality—are generic frameworks that need to be unpacked by the analyst so that she can track how related aspects of such phenomena are complexly mediated in particular contexts of investigation. In other words, the space of inquiry should analyze the disparate elements that come together to constitute a milieu and the situated forms of intervention and problem-solving therein. Through the lens of assemblage, the analyst identifies how global forms assimilate themselves into a particular environment by interacting with political infrastructures and ethical regimes that modify conditions for solving “global” problems.

The point is not to come up with models of modernization but to grasp how, in each context, actual strategies of governing deploy a specific combination of technologies of power, material forms, and institutional structures, or a “topology of power.” Instead of relying on a stable or unified notion of “the state,” my approach investigates the dynamic interactions between disparate institutions and actors that create conditions of possibility for solving problems of governing, growth, and security. For instance, by studying the situated deployment of strategies, I illuminate the (re-)combination of rational and interpretive practices that shapes an emerging space of problem-solving. My focus is on how governing strategies—variously informed by logics of “neoliberalism,” ethico-religious legitimation, political authoritarianism, and so on—target problems of life and living, and seek to resolve them within situated circumstances created by encounters with global forces.

The concept of “assemblage” configures a space of inquiry that brings analytical and reflexive precision to our investigation of novel contexts of change. By identifying the specific interaction of disparate variables—global and situated—in a particular site, we account for the crystallization of conditions of possibility within which reflexive practices are exercised. The goal is to investigate how a particular correlation of technologies, institutions, and material resources
constitutes a space of intervention that is simultaneously global and distinctive.

Biocapitalist Nationalism

AA-SM
Your most recent work examines the state-led regional promotion of biotechnologies, particularly genomics. Contrary to precepts of received critical theory that denounce such developments—typically, as an extension of instrumental rationality into the dimension of human biological life and its ethical destruction, or as the extension of the control of organic life by neoliberal markets against statist biopower—you show that biotech initiatives in East Asia strategically mix state-led political-developmental development, ethnoregionalism, technoscience, and a number of affects including ethnonational pride.⁵ What are the consequences of this intertwining of science and local-national factors?


In Fungible Life: Experiment in the Asian City of Life, I argue that if we understand Euro-American cosmopolitan science as regulated science, one should not assume in advance that biomedical science in other places is merely a debased form.⁶ Rather, my work illuminates how, in order to become universal, cosmopolitan science must remediate situated elements so that it can attend to an array of “global” scientific problems. What is “global” and what is “situated” is destabilized in a process of scientific remediation across the planet. In order to be universalizable, cosmopolitan science depends on this constant effort to be particular, to remediate situated elements.

I deploy the lens of “global assemblage” to frame the situated constitution of biomedical science in Biopolis, a biomedical hub in Singapore, in contrast to BGI Genomics in South China. As a global site for international scientists to access “Asian” bodies and health data, Biopolis is a case study of the particularization of cosmopolitan science. Shaped by the double helix of science and passion, the research milieu generates novel connections between anxiety and hope, and genetic fortunes and fungible values in a tropics brimming with the threat of emerging diseases.

The book covers how new-risk genomics deploys the ethnic heuristic for mapping genetic variants, disease risks, and biomarkers. A genomic origami is created by differentiating

between Chinese, Indian, and Malay DNA. Singapore’s ethnic-stratified databases, which come to “represent” majority populations in Asia, are thereby made fungible. An outpost of cosmopolitan science, Biopolis is contrasted with BGI Genomics: the China-based institute is both a global biotech company and a center for rendering the nation as a cosmos of ethnic pools of genetic resources for meeting the effects of ageing and migrating populations. These modalities of biomedical entrepreneurialism emerging in Asia raise questions about the future direction of cosmopolitan science.

Overall, the study explores kinds of uncertainty that are not so easily calculated: the assembling of scientific talents; the role of bioethics in protecting research subjects and in making a biomedical platform; the nature of virtue in the globalization of science; and intra-Asian rivalry in stem cell research. It also considers preparations for inter-Asian collaborations and for dealing with infectious diseases in the future.

Time Knots

AA-SM

The aggregate formations of biosovereign capitalism you identify would seem to index an admixture of times and temporal modalities of operatively cogent pasts (say, precolonial and colonial), presents (globalised state-entrepreneurialism and citizenship), and futures (biotechnically reconstructed sovereignty). How  


While I agree that contemporaneity is always a mix of multiple temporalities, I avoid the use of temporal complexes as a simple boundary-marker between European and “post-colonial” geographies. My goal is not to typify given geographies of temporalities and politics; rather, my approach investigates how on-going projects are inescapably conditioned and enabled by playing with different time horizons. Historical legacies and cultural norms are not immutable or stable across a political space or in the minds and hands of actors, but taken up in multiple ways as diverse actors seek to shape the “near future” or the immediate horizon that falls within the realm of calculability.
This implies that in our self-fashioning of an immediate future, there is an unknown or unknowable temporality beyond the near future. Niklas Luhmann argues that technological autopoeitic systems deal with incoming risks, but always in an “ecology of ignorance.”

In Fungible Life, I investigate different science practices that enrol the selective past and anticipatory future in order to shape the present. I explore how in many projects of growth and sustainability, for instance, the invoking of “Asia” in multiple registers is part of the dynamic work of (re-)making new conditions of possibility for combating problems of biosecurity in diverse contingent time-space configurations.

Interventions into the human are experiments, and uncertainty is the inevitable condition. I approach problem-solving activities as experimental situations, and scientists no less than other experts are involved in designing the future. In my studies of biomedical research in Asia, I show that experiments necessarily engage different time registers. For instance, in preparations for emerging pandemics, scientists deal with different temporalities, from the mutability of viruses (SARS, avian flu virus, etc.) to the temporalities of nonhuman-to-human transmission, to itineraries of travel and the timing of environmental vectors. Researchers working with Asian genomics also put different temporalities into play. Stories about the ancient past gleaned from genetic data help to configure present research collaborations in anticipation of biological threats in the near future. Here, there is a projection of a new imaginary of a unified Asian past-present and potentially collective present-future in science. Like scientists engaged in other projects, geneticists mobilize myths of a shared past in order to nourish a shared scientific future, but the uncertainty remains.

Letters from the Ocean Terminus
—David Roden
Pavement rushing at us, lit by headlights. Beyond, darkness.

SARAH (V.O.)
The future, always so clear to me, has become like a black highway at night. We were in uncharted territory now... making up history as we went along.¹


³ Crash, 122.

“tapping our own psychopathologies” in Ballard’s prescient phrase.²

Zero modernity is this meta-violence. Death and sex crash indifferently. Wound markers on the bodies of mannequins: “complex geometric shapes in carmine and violet.”³ As if the desires we nervously call our own were ever dissociable from the furtive inclinations of the machines we hopefully call our own.

In Ligotti’s “The Red Tower” an empty factory overlooking a wasteland engenders monsters and hideous novelties. Its industry is contrary to
finality, or operates according to schedules we never discern.

I picture us wandering among its evaporated machines and deep service clefts. Having mistaken ourselves for its controllers we discover the putrescent, vital things shambling from the birth graves on its lower levels.⁴ We recall that we are another line of grotesquely functionless items with which the Tower disturbs the quietude of Being. Exits are invoked which allow us an ironic or purely theatrical redress: art, activism, protest, spirituality. Thus we are deanxietized.

Attributing such providential genius to the Factory is redundant, however. It monsters for nothing. It does not need to manage us. Maybe this myth is apt given that the futural impulse has to be attributed to the inhuman, blooming across night and void. Paradoxically, Terminator time is the anti-machine. It effloresces contentless in our headlamps. The no-future future (The nuclear war with which Skynet would expunge us is subsequently rescheduled, reflecting later franchise output. In Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003) the balloon goes up in 2003. Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles (2008) puts it sometime in 2011.)

Another war scrags the quotidian world. A survivor in the tunnels below Chaillot dreams of the curiously magnetic face of a young woman and an unexplained murder.⁵


⁵ La Jetée, film (Chris Marker, 1962).


⁷ Metzinger, Being No One, 161.

⁸ Metzinger, Being No One, 336.

Her face displaces him to that moment on the Pier, fractionating present.

Time travel comes naturally to him, like a neurosis.

He saves us by obtaining help from a future. But its reality, far from being a cause for hope, confirms our fatalism. For, at the end, he must always go back. He is, of course, the one getting killed on the pier. His blissful sojourn in the past formed his yearning to die with her (while he dreams the child who dreams him).

A series of calcified stiffness. Despite the nice wet dream of the past, nothing has changed. Everything and everyone is shot and laid out in Marker’s somnolent photographs. The highway flickering in an abandoned cinema. Your body has nothing to say. It has its own melancholy, from which we are both excluded. We have passions we neither recall nor understand. We misconstrue our motives. Their immediacy is born of neglect, a matter of eking scarce computational resources.⁶

This pocket of time-space is one way out, but not the only one.⁷ Others—living dust, Skynet, perhaps you—might grow selfless (nemocentric).⁸
As it is, we can barely imagine what we are, let alone what we might get to do. Yet our complacency is unassailable. We know. We know (I hear your acrid laughter, later). Perhaps the future is no longer our problem.

Medusa

You imagined us fossils. Every word, everyone, arranged in the sand by the dark waters of Ocean Terminus.

Everybody shot: you, me, the man and woman on the Pier. The sun a red abscess on the water. Need they make any sense to those who wait there - your unthinkable children?

We conceive intelligence as the ability to optimize over a range of environments. This implies a space of possible intelligences ordered according to environmental flexibility.\(^9\) We are somewhere there.


Our ability to realise goals in complex environments is significant.

You laughed, also, at the phrase “Artificial General Intelligence”.

For others on the line we are as flexible as Ashley Madison sexbots. You said you wrote the algorithm with their help or tacit approval; called it “Red Tower” after TL. Then you boxed it in an abandoned goldmine beneath the Tundra and waited to die.

We correspond amicably. You wrote me that you have begun experimenting with your body. You imagine yourself under the silt of the terminal ocean, from where you condescend to dream of us.

It begins with scraps of networks mediating simple sensors and effectors; body variants instance in vast numbers. Those surviving spiraling selection pressures scramble gametes through mutation/meiosis, or baroque code splicing.

You hand the means of production to the monsters who auto-gestate planets; hatch metrics weighting complexity and functional autonomy of their vile offspring; and so on, and so on. A massively parallel search through Daliesque fitness landscapes.

You do not know what it is for. Red Tower just searches searches, you tell me. That’s life.

DT

The Disconnection Thesis (DT) states that technically constituted agents become posthuman where they learn to function outside the assemblages (poetry, munitions, languages, cities, air-carrier groups, functional biota) we have built and upon which we reciprocally depend.

We cannot envisage how this occurs. DT codifies current levels of ignorance. No rules tell us who or what to talk to.

Disconnection potent. An emergent phenomenon cannot be predicted from its initial conditions short of running a simulation
with relevantly similar properties.¹⁰ A genuinely predictor of a DT entity—such as prospective AI or AI+—would be apt to generate the same kinds of differences and intensities: at least this judgement cannot be made without running it in vivo. It seems that the epistemological distinction between disconnection and its simulacra evaporates in perfect Baudrillardian equivalence.


Metanoia

I think you had always rejected life intellectually. I detected a kind of pleasure in that. Even if you denied it, I felt you shiver with inverted carnality. “This is already a kind of space travel.” Anomalies were truer than skin. And you were that with an insistence that could be mistaken for depression by those who did not know you better. You became a vehicle of abstraction. But for what? When asked, you afforded me one of your distempered smiles. “There is equally no death,” you then told me, and with sadness.

When, on one occasion, I asked you to explain this speculative apoptosis, you referred me to the machine. “It is easy to invest the puppet with a kind of desire. We do it to ourselves after all.”

You had an extended community of seditious self-hackers. You exploited them and, in turn, they loved you for it. I remember your Russian, cagily defensive about the impact of local agonists and transcranial implants. He came through with the sub-dermals though. I think of

We adopt the logic of pre-emption; coupling in anomalous environments. Our natural concern with those you refer to euphemistically as “our successors” can only be explored irresponsibly. There is no translation for “A mountain walked or stumbled.”¹¹

For the time being, the cracks in subjectivity can only grow. Philosophy is a benign histamine response, a dermographism allowing us to shimmer helplessly in the dark. Engineering and waiting are suavely parasitic on the future. At least Art acknowledges the tenuousness of its relationships. Thus, Haraway retorts, Cthulhu seems a better avatar of geologic contagion than anything anthropoid.¹²

The cephalopod occupies this duality, a multiplicity of seemingly incongruous features—tentacles and multiple “arms” with suckers, a razor-sharp “beak,” a complex nervous system, rows of intestinal “teeth,”¹³ and a formless “head”—whose coherence falls apart once one tries to make sense of the whole creature.
the tele-presences enfilading your skin and those others ventriloquizing in your larynx and trachea. You hoped to become something you could not yet see and mined the future for the not-you’s. Acousmatic dreams. You spoke from behind masks, screens, or paradoxical crossing points. In a voice like birds you propose a science without an object. Of those things we now believe resemble nothing, participate in nothing.

Like the Red Tower algorithm, Neil Cassidy, the antagonist of Neuropath co-opts us into a form of guerrilla cognition (though we might not recognise it as such).


of another, stranding him in a gnosis of faceless puppets.

Pleasure and pain, personhood, spirituality: manipulable parameters whose operational contingency only escalates...

Neuropath leaves the reader unable to attribute him motivations or very much by way of character. The Cassidy Thing has used the same neurotechnologies to subtract his illusions of selfhood and empathic communion with others:

“What you folk-psychologists call anxiety, fear; all that bullshit…”

Like Ledger’s Joker, he is off-screen the duration, a beta version of a “hyperplastic”—an agent that can manipulate itself at an arbitrary grain.

The H-plast exists beyond the “space of reasons” in which the soft-core religions hope to paper over Lovecraft’s vistas. The irreducibility of the mental to the physical merely confirms its long run dispensability—as became embarrassingly evident when overkill ecologies of the post-mortals hit.

Reason and meaning are off its agenda:

They’re little more than memories to me now. But I’ve also shut down some of the more deceptive circuits as well. I now know, for instance, that I will utterly nothing. I’m no longer fooled into thinking that ‘I’ do anything at all.

They don’t slice informational pie in Crash Space

Of course, later iterations would avoid Cassidy Thing’s jejune disclaimers.

Your first moments of post-life somehow knot into an acid storm of phosphenes shearing up from miasmas of insentient computation. Hulks of long dormant machines around you

-coiled like burnt snakes against white glare.

-The air pixelates and hums.
Red Tower halting state. All bets off as divaricating agencies rip into the substrate of the real.

Cthulhoid Prometheus

Prometheanism rejects eco/identity politics and embraces the disequilibrium induced by modernity and radical Enlightenment. Against those who would retain nature as an unbidden “gift” outside the sphere of production, it enjoins the wholesale “reengineering of ourselves and our world on a more rational basis.”¹⁸

But what is the limit of planetary or cosmic engineering? Since Prometheanism rejects the given of purposes and identities there are no constraints on reordering nature. A wholly compliant nature approaches H-plasticity and thus terminates compliance. This is a Cthulhoid invocation to dark negentropic matter flows.

Underneath, you are pink, soft meal. Acid ammonia strips away raw meat. A lateral starfish mouth opens. Cassidy disassembles, phasing to some soulless matter hell . . .

The Politics of Advanced Noncompliance

It might seem that plastic or performance arts are hampered (as fiction is not) by the conspicuous absence of posthumans. How do they address this empty concept?

This question gets things ass backwards, interestingly. The concept of disconnection is a response to self-augmentive disruption and dispersive change. Thinking H-plasticity forces us to be honest about our relation to the outer dark. Its results are salutary but not substantive. A cloud of black wings hung above the desert. Potnia Theron, Medusa. Mistress of animals, of all beyond the furling interstices of the wetland; the iridescent skin where a god might interrupt.

What lies behind your painted yellow mask? You hinted at it once: “Finitude need to be recoded, reformatted, infinitely. A political necessity of a wholly new kind.” Now you had the means to equivocate sex-death with speculative engineering.¹⁹

If our relation to late futurity is without rule, genre or institution does not confine it. The point of aesthetics is not to conceptualize extreme modernity but to exacerbate and thus interpret it.

Your formative crime was to question the sovereignty of the present. “Money” you told your sponsors, “is just a derivative for transcendence.” To this end, you were among the first to have their bodies destructively scanned for vector upload. It was another lure, of course. I don’t think those who followed you into Matter Hell understood that they would henceforth be injuries running in hardened sepulchres.


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The disconnection of the post-mortal elite couldn’t but exacerbate the eco-Jihads. The air fills with dark scuzzy beats, semi-automated gunships decked in the living heads of our enemies. Inevitably, your troops raid heaven. Smart matter n-bots above hot coronal storms. The Oesophagus riddles the core with degenerate matter trails, actualising hypermentation in stacked continua. Elsewhere, True Communism blisses us out of entropic hypermodernity for a brief tourist season.

Landmarks. Inchoate non-lieux digest former cities—Ballard’s immense, hungry ghosts. Where are we now?

The question effaced in extensive liminality. Swarm City: a mycogoth-arterial, like buttresses of some drive-through R’lyeh. Nomads inscribe luminous flows and eddies, implement distance optima over legacy time-code. Idems secrete data junk in thick sensations. Termite galaxies in the night. They pedestrianize like drunks at a fetish party. But there is no recollection of a destination. They broadcast fleet emoticons, ardent neuralese caresses; move on.

A woman’s voice intones in gravelly North American. Centrelines unfurl into the blue whorl of headlights. I up the gain: The clip superposes on a monochromed World-0 (which para-visuals renders peripherally). It loops in my visual feed: an aquamarine vulva.

The future, always so clear to me....

But the effects of change route out from the complexity and efficacy of disseminative infrastructure, multistable tech-spoor, not exchange relations or Dark Lord habitus. There may be other flushes out of the zero modern (Disconnection is an exit of sorts, naturally). But the end of the end is in view, in a matrix of possibilities we no longer hope to master.

You are inside me, turning excess organs to smoke. Everything outlives itself at Ocean Terminus. You sit in a maze of bleeding stone, viscerally robed. A mask of overlapping leather plates over your face. Your cloaca parting, warm and perfect.

I am within you, then. Then, the mountain stumbles somewhere; a huge sound rolls off our silence. We cannot name it.
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