

EPILOGUE

Re-Imagining Futures: 18 Notes

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1. In our current decade, we suffer from a loss of common orientation, a common world, a common planet so you will. We have to think again about the world, since we desperately need another system of coordinates, another distribution of metaphors and sensitivities, as well as novel fictions and imaginaries to address constituencies and configurations of the present and to restate speculations about directions in the future.

2. In a recent issue of PARSE Journal (Issue #7, *Speculation*, 2017), it has already been emphasized that speculative thinking and speculative activity seem to have gained the status of new topics in the current contemporary condition so distinctly marked by the void of certainty, the dominance of finance capital, and the re-emergence of utopianism in the absence of revolution. There is, however, a clear paradox in the concept of speculation, i.e. speculation represents both the incontrovertible, structuring principle of neoliberal capitalism and the imaginative forces that must be deployed against it. It is this paradox that the editorial of an eponymous edition of *Texte zur Kunst* (*Texte zur Kunst*, 93, *Spekulation*, 2014) has also pointed to: the future-oriented projections of speculation may be exercises in profit seeking or demonstrations of the calculability of the possible; but at the same time there may be idealistically alluring escapisms or refusals of limitations.

3. And of course there is also the long, sometimes somewhat uncomfortable, philosophical tradition maintaining that thought is the foundation of experience. In this mode of thinking, speculation acquires a special connotation: “looking far into a distance.” It was the philosopher Alfred Whitehead who brought speculation back to the original Latin meaning of the concept: a pragmatic function closely linked to the real. Speculators, then, are the ones who observe, watch, cultivate the signs of change in the situation, and open themselves up to what might be of importance in a specific situation. It is a function that would later be described by Gilles Deleuze as a reinvention of the principle of sufficient reason.

4. Another contemporary philosopher, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, relates the concept of speculation – also referred to by him as the “horizons of possibility” – in his thinking about “futurability” to how time was controlled and quantified during modernity. The power of the rational decision was based on the time required to process and reduce all available information. Yet, in the 21st century the rhythm, logic, and speed of information changed; information started to accelerate and with it emerged the political inability to determine, understand, and decide what is relevant today. Obviously, such an observation requires a new form of social organization. In *On Futurability*, Bifo states that notwithstanding the current role Silicon Valley plays in our lives, we must remain optimistic in a certain sense since “The unavoidable never happens, as the unpredictable always wins.” In spite of the current power that manifests itself as a machine for invisibilization – an epistemological machine organizing our life and knowledge, making it impossible to see what is inscribed in the present – it turns out that the same present and technology contain the possibility of liberation, i.e. emancipation of salary-consciousness and imagining a future society where time worked is no longer quantified by a salary.

5. In her recent series *VONDERVOTTEIMITISS* (2017–2019), Falke Pisano challenges the apparent objectivity of the philosophical principles underlying Western society. Through short stories from authors who are deeply embedded in the canon of Western literature, she questions self-explanatory concepts such as space, time, and language. For example, the story of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Devil in the Belfry* (1839), where a conscientious narrator, a man of science, reports how a society whose spatial order, ruled by standardized time

and organized exclusion of what eludes control, is disrupted when an outsider, without understanding the regime, sabotages the center of power by having the clock strike thirteen.

6. Pisano's work (see also her contribution to the previous issue of *MaHKUscript*) demonstrates that precisely here a potential is found for the as yet undisciplined field currently referred to as artistic research. We could describe artistic research as a speculative practice, seeing how artistic research still accommodates experimentation and how it gives room to develop an alternative form of imagination and knowing through an artistic practice. Then, consequently, the following question will arise: How could artistic research unfold and generate its own experimental ontologies while speculating about emerging futures and probing into them?

7. With that daring issues come to the fore. How to prevent experimental ontologies from becoming instrumentalized in terms of knowledge production? How to prevent the experimental sanctuary of artistic research from becoming entangled in the current – often speculative – dynamics of capital? And how to prevent that knowledge due to the perspective of cognitive capitalism can merely be understood as being aimed at the invention of new commodities? It is exactly this neoliberal interpretation of an instrumentalized concept of knowledge that is currently colonizing many academies.

8. It seems to be the case, says Joshua Simon in *Neomaterialism* (Berlin, 2013) that “all materials succumb to a commodity form as the only way to appear in the world.” (p. 12) It is an economic system that, in Simon's view, is determined by a general dematerialization (dissolution of golden standard, brand names, conceptual art) and a logic of debt: debt appropriates not only the present labor time of wage earners and the population in general, it also pre-empts non-chronological time: each person's future as well as the future of society as a whole. Taken together, these processes serve as a starting point for rethinking materialism. However, rather than rendering the concept of materialism obsolete, these developments force us to ask whether we can finally understand what materialism actually means as an intellectual sensibility.

9. Cristina Garrido's critical research has a strong correlation with the logic of financial markets: the valorization of unbridled dynamics of capital within the arts. With that it also emphasizes the schizophrenia of current capitalism: profit seeking versus escapisms and refusals. In the video work *Boothworks* (2017), Garrido explores the current logic of capitalism by mapping compositional and material choices. Through researching what exhibitions look like, the artist sketches the outlines of speculation and counter-speculation. Moreover, a new realm emerges colored by the logic of financial speculation: visual culture as the strategy with which globalism visualizes its agenda.



Exhibition view, *Re-Imagining Futures*, OnCurating, Zurich, 2019.

10. How can art (or artistic research) reclaim its own specific form of knowledge in this regard? It will have to be a form of knowing and knowledge that goes against the methodological flow of the current “know-how” culture mainly carried away by an unpredictable search generating space for potentialities and propensities from an against-method (“no how”) perspective. And with that there is also an intrinsic criticism on the exclusion systems of various territorial epistemologies: hegemonic discourses that require unsettling forms of knowledge, such as non-knowledge, undisciplined or unscripted knowledge, anarchistic epistemic impulses, posthuman epistemics, strategies of decolonizing knowledge and, if necessary, forms of epistemic disobedience.

11. Thinkers like Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway argue that it is therefore urgent to develop new stories: stories that are no longer anthropocentric, but stories in the form of propositional forces that give us a nuanced picture of the struggle between the possible and the probable. And this is in their view precisely the task of contemporary art: to create possibilities that can counteract a fatalism that comes with the conception of a probable reality where everything is calculable and thus consistently, unchangeably defined in advance. In the light of the reality of the current planetary crisis, such a passivity will, according to Stengers, ultimately lead to new forms of barbarism. Therefore, artistic research has to resist the probable by offering novel narrative propositions that rethink, rearrange, and redeploy the real. In this sense, such a topical understanding of speculation implies a redefining of what seeing can mean, of what seeing’s agency can be. It is a way of seeing where the future is not remote, but immanent in what is done now in order to bring change.

12. Tyler Coburn’s research is well understood from this perspective. Not only his text in this MaHKU-script issue about Richard Roe, but also the *Ergonomic Futures* project that he recently developed for e-flux is characterized by a speculative form of narration. In this project he asks himself how an ergonomic designer should relate to a future scenario of the suspension of everything: an environment in which our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone, i.e. the human as we know it fragments or even ceases to exist. *Ergonomic Futures* is a multi-part project that poses questions about contemporary “fitness” through the lens of speculative evolution.

13. These are questions resonating with what Donna Haraway describes as “Speculative Fabulation” in her essay *SF Speculative Fabulation and String Figures* (Documenta, 2012). Haraway typifies the power of such narrations as acts of fabrication which are able to have productive effects on the real. Speculative fabulation – later described as “storying” – makes the bet that the real can be transformed depending on how we tell it, taking into account the situation of its own production and diffusion, and resisting dualisms of true/false, real/fiction, or subjectivity/objectivity. “Speculative fabulation opens up what is yet-to-come in protean entangled times’ pasts, presents, and futures.” (Documenta Notes, 33).

14. The “archive of the future” developed by Natasha Tontey can be fully understood from that perspective of storying. For a research into topical forms of “future telling” she met with shamans, mediums, paranormals, and fortune tellers. During these meetings the question arose whether it is possible to undo the strings of the present that holds our future speculations. Using a pseudo science fiction narrative and taking inspiration from xenofeminism, Tontey developed the video work *Almanac* (2018) that maps the possibilities of alternative and speculative futures through a plausible cosmic solution, crossing the borderline between what is real and what is not.

15. The video work *Anubumin* (2017) by Zanny Begg and Oliver Ressler combines a speculative narration written for the film with conversations carried out with four whistleblowers in Australia. These whistleblowers, who worked as doctors and nurses at the refugee detention center on the island of Nauru, describe the institutionalized human rights violations. They uncover a truth the Australian government tries to cover through intimidating people into silence. Today a new void threatens the island: rising sea levels menace the coastal edge, which is the only area left for its inhabitants to live. The people who were the political and economic refugees of today may well become the climate refugees of the future. Working from such atmospheres, Begg and Ressler’s speculative research is urged by the debate on current predicaments in our so-called post-human era. Those predicaments involve the situation of the ecological disequilibrium, as well as the relational approach to forms of agency.

16. Such observations challenge artistic research to articulate idiosyncratic modes of representation and speculation addressing the present global environmental crisis while taking historical responsibilities into account and creating provoking interconnections between human and non-human actors and factors. By linking the two concepts of research and ecology – or rather, by placing these two concepts as two focal points in an ellipse – their contours and conditions could become decisive for the current situation and future direction of the artistic research discourse.

17. Ursula Biemann's research offers an excellent example of such an approach. It emphasizes that the speedy course of climate change into an unknown future forces us to fundamentally rethink the relationship between humans and the earth. For example, the video work *Subatlantic* (2015) shows, by juxtaposing the science of geology and climatology with human history, that the fully imaginary globe that has been constructed in the process fails to resonate with the mighty planetary grammar. Therefore, from a current post-human consciousness, it is extremely important to develop a mode of contemporary art that brings the Earth on stage: an unstable living environment that reconnects us to infinity large, untameable forces that animate extra-historical dimensions.

18. Conclusively, Biemann poses the question of how decentering the human figure will affect collecting and exhibiting practices. In answering that question, she relates a constructive suggestion to re-imagining futures: "What we can already say is that a common future that we share with everything else would be equally rooted in cultural and natural narratives; the collections of this common world, our heritage, would necessarily include at once cultural and natural history. Perhaps from there, we can envision a less divided future that can harbor a post-human way of being in the world." (*Late Subatlantic. Science Poetry in Times of Global Warming*, L'Internationale, 2015).

Note

As an extension of the *Whatever Speculation* project, the presentation *Re-Imagining Futures* took place at the OnCurating Project Space in Zürich (November 29–December 7, 2019). The project included works by Ursula Biemann, Tyler Coburn, Cristina Garrido, Falke Pisano, Oliver Ressler in collaboration with Zanny Begg, and Natasha Tontey.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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