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A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

An Introduction to Facing Forward: Art & Theory From a Future Perspective

It is as if the invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now.

Giorgio Agamben, *What is the Contemporary?*, 2009.

The future is there... looking back at us. Trying to make sense of the fiction we will have become.

William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 2003.

I

Expectations and anticipations of the future are part of our everyday lives. Contemporary visual culture is inundated with a kaleidoscope of futuristic utopias and dystopias in which the longing for a seamless interface between the virtual and the real, as well as the desire for release from the constrictions of time and space, are recurrent themes. Based on speculative predictions and creative scientific arguments, a pervasive visual rhetoric of acceleration and progression, as well as damnation and destruction, shapes our sense of the future.

The project Facing Forward started with a collaboration between five institutions: the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, the De Appel arts centre, W139, the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, and the art magazine *Metropolis M*. Having previously organized the lecture series and publications *Right About Now: Art & Theory in the 1990s* (2005/2006) and *Now is the Time: Art & Theory in the 21st Century* (2008/2009), the organizing committee decided to take the final step in this timeline and turn its attention to the far horizon. Informed by a shared interest in the role that history, speculation, and utopianism play in the field of contemporary art and design (as well as the larger context of global, socio-economic, and political developments), a selection of seven themes emerged from the conversations of the initial organizers. These eventually shaped the seven lecture and discussion events — collected in this volume of essays — publicized under the banner *Facing Forward: Art & Theory From a Future Perspective*. A great number of internationally renowned speakers were invited to reflect on the proposed themes during often sold-out events, which were presented at the Oude Lutherse

Kerk in Amsterdam in 2011/2012. Yet, however compelling our desire as organizers to go beyond the framework of contemporary events and the current interest — well-nigh obsession — with history, it is obviously an illusion to think that we can escape the past by means of a turn towards the future. As Walter Benjamin described it, progress is an angel positioned with its back to the future and blown forward by the wind of history. Nevertheless, our aim is to turn Benjamin's angel around to face forward. We do this not with the goal of ignoring the present and the past. On the contrary: the idea is to face forward in order to change the present and confront our relationship with the past.

Contemporary art in the beginning of the twenty-first century has remained largely aloof from this growing fascination with futurity. One could even claim that it has been excessively fixated on, and oriented towards, the past. Archiving, nostalgia, heritage, commemoration, memory, re-enactment, reconstruction, and documentation have been popular themes and methods in the contemporary art world. At the start of this new millennium, artists, curators, and theorists have frequently adopted a retrospective view in which they set out like archeologists to excavate, preserve, and interpret the past. Theorist and curator Dieter Roelstraete has described this trend as “the historiographic turn”.¹ However, taking refuge in history carries the risk of a certain blindness. Looking back — as opposed to a focused, sustained examination of the contemporary moment and its afterlife — can obscure the view of both the present and the future, making it more difficult to be open to the creative/critical potential of the unknown and the unexpected. And yet, such openness is precisely the orientation that is needed in these turbulent times of financial crisis, technological reinvention, political uprisings, and much more.

The book *Facing Forward: Art & Theory From a Future Perspective*, springing from the eponymous lecture series, counters the retrospective approach by shifting our attention towards art and theory on the horizon of the future. In particular, the book draws attention to a number of important social and artistic questions that are inextricably bound up in the hybrid “discourse of the future”. What will art and art theory bring us in the years and decades to come? How can they change the ways in which we experience and think about the future? What roles do technology, globalization, urban development, science, and politics play in our cultural engagements with futurity? What does it mean (and how does it work) to look forward, to speculate, to extrapolate? Is it possible to develop visions of the future outside and beyond the tired paradigms of utopia and dystopia?

In this publication, renowned international art professionals such as Hans Belting, James Elkins, Amelia Jones, Rem Koolhaas, Manuel Delanda, Iwona Blazwick, and Hito Steyerl, together with a new generation of art historians, practitioners, and critics, engage with these questions while opening new routes to a world beyond the present. The seven themes that their speculations and analyses address cover a wide spectrum: from broad, socio-cultural themes to more art-related issues, as well as more philosophical and methodological inquiries. In the epilogue, the book’s project and topic as a whole are subjected to critical reflection.

II

A future without elements of the past and/or the present is perhaps most accurately demonstrated in the theme *Future Tech*, the first section in this book. The theme’s point of departure is the view that, in modern society, two ideas vie

for priority: a strong belief in technological progress and an established suspicion about the consequences of technology for society and the condition of humanity. If science and technology continue to develop as rapidly as they have in the past fifty years, what will the relationship between people and machines be in the future? Will the post-human condition — described, among others, by Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles — become reality, or will the cultural consequences of technological development stagnate in the next few decades? The future mainly appears to lie in the blurring between the artificial and the real. From genetics to augmented reality, the “natural” world is increasingly combined with a created world. How will the continued interrelationship of these combined realities influence our collective condition? And what role will they play in the development of art? In their respective essays, Amber Case and Manuel Delanda depart from such questions in two distinctive directions. Where Case takes the perspective of a ‘cyborg anthropologist’ to look at the way in which computers and mobile technology are profoundly intertwined with our lives, Delanda explores the artistic, or better, architectural value of genetic algorithms.

The city has always been an inspiring tableau for future projections. As a location for socio-political, cultural, and artistic production, the city is a disputed place, constantly being tested by local conditions and global and transnational circumstances. The second theme of this book, *Future City*, considers the influence that the steady acceleration of globalization will have on the shape and image of the future city as well as on rural space. Will the transnational flow of people, work, and images redefine the concept of “urban”? And can we imagine a metropolis beyond the global city? Renowned architect Rem Koolhaas and writer China Miéville try to imagine the city of the future — beyond

and within the urban landscape. Almost all scenarios of the future center on the omnipresence of the image. The fact that we will perhaps live — or are already living — in a culture overrun by images is an assumption that is portrayed in contemporary popular culture as an endless series of screen landscapes transmitting a flow of images that inundates defenseless viewers. In the section *Future Image*, art historian James Elkins and artist and writer Jalal Toufic question whether or not the image will indeed become so ubiquitous, or whether perhaps verbal culture based on experience will gain more ground. And how will art be influenced by these developments? The recent and contemporary practice of art has placed the image in perspective by both showing the strength of the image and embracing production methods of art that are based more on text and processes. A major question is posed: what is the future of the image in the visual arts?

Like *Future Image*, the fourth section on the theme of *Future Museum* considers questions closely related to the visual arts. The institutional critique of the 1960s and early 1970s (and its re-emergence in the 1980s) raised questions that made the future of the museum as institution increasingly uncertain. Where will art belong in the future? Will it still have a place in the museum? And where and to whom will the museum belong? In the first essay, art historian and curator Hans Belting questions this sense of “belonging”: is the future museum a place that is truly global and public, so that we can no longer talk in terms of belonging? Furthermore, the institutions themselves are dealing with their own questions. Can museums exist beyond their architecture and organization? If the four walls of the “white cube” are broken down and museums begin to function extra muros, what will the new theory of the art institution be? What institutional, futuristic concepts do we need to deal

with these sorts of changes? In her analysis of the operations of the modern and contemporary art museum at large, curator Iwona Blazwick imagines the museum of the future to be organized in an entirely differently way.

The theme *Future Freedom* was initially informed by the seemingly drastic changes that marked the years 2011 and 2012. The revolutions in the Arab world were claimed to be a struggle for future democracy, rhetorically inflected as a typical Western ideal. However, the question has now arisen whether a struggle for freedom actually embraces democracy as the ultimate aim. Like all political ideologies, democracy is charged with specific power structures. And more importantly, revolution does not necessarily lead to a different kind of society. Furthermore, with the emergence of right-wing political parties in Europe and the concomitant crisis in the Eurozone, concepts such as freedom, power, and democracy have been re-appropriated and become the subject of intense discussion in many Western democracies. To imagine the future of freedom necessarily requires looking at the present situation. What place does the concept of freedom have in our contemporary world? Is freedom and its supposed counterpart — democracy — possible for everyone or achievable by only a select few? Or does the power of democracy or democratic power stand in the way of freedom? And what does this mean for the free or liberal arts, which are under such enormous pressure in the current political climate? Artists Paul Chan and Hito Steyerl address these questions by exploring specific examples in the arts.

The paradox in the theme *Future History* points towards the complex relationships between past, present, and future, and is specifically related to the still-prevailing trend in contemporary art of the artist as archeologist, as Roelstraete

calls it. Does this recurring interest in history indicate an inability to look to the future? Should we — and can we — jettison the concept of “history”? Another question that presents itself is whether this sort of attempt to sideline history does not essentially imply a return to the postmodern thinking of Francis Fukuyama and Arthur C. Danto. At the end of the 20th century, they claimed that we were living in a post-historic age. This was allegedly a time in which only contemporary matters and the future were important. In a way, it was the end of the line in which history no longer existed. Is this conceptual model still relevant to our time, even now that Fukuyama has retracted his claim that history is ‘over’ in a recent essay?² Or can we focus on the future in a different way? Art historians Amelia Jones and David Summers take these questions as a point of departure to reflect on different notions and instances of temporality in the arts.

As many of the evenings in the lecture series made evident, the practice of speculation is by no means an easy one. How are we able to look at the future when the present is so uncertain and unstable? And if we do fix our gaze on the horizon, what and how do we see — is it utopia or dystopia, a purely speculative view or a mere extrapolation of current conditions? Ultimately, can the future be a productive model for visualizing contemporary power structures, global shifts, and changing relations? For the epilogue section *Future Future*, the editors invited a larger number of authors to write short reflections on this topic. In this way the theme is given a broad treatment, and the section will serve as a think tank for the pressing question of this book: how should we look forward?

III

In the model of both the lecture series and this book, there is a comparison to be made with Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, in which explorer Marco Polo always longs for what is in front of him precisely because this causes the present and the past to change shape: "Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had. The foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign unpossessed places." Calvino links the present, the future, and the past. He looks forward to find answers to the past and present. In these interwoven periods of time, we are like time travelers, going back to the future to get a grasp of our own present and the history that informs it.

In this book, such admixtures of time serve as a testament to the impact of "the historiographic turn" and the legacy of its seminal predecessors, yet they also add a crucial element to the equation that has too often been missing: art and theory from a future perspective that will alter and diversify the here and now.

It is therefore important to outline in more detail what we mean here by a "future perspective" and to explain the ways in which that conceptualization/formulation informs both the title and the project of this book. First, we must stress that neither the editors nor the authors share a fixed, singular understanding of what constitutes a "future perspective". Such a narrow or stable understanding is not only impossible but also undesirable. Given the rich diversity of the authors' backgrounds and the variety of themes they address, it is both necessary and welcome that each of the book's contributors develops his or her own way of approaching art and theory from a future perspective and

that each approach is developed in relation to a particular set of intellectual, disciplinary, and aesthetic concerns.

Thus, with the phrase “future perspective”, the book as a whole refers to a full, creative range of approaches to writing about art and theory in/and/of the future. These approaches include both critical and imaginative attempts to look ahead to the future, to reflect back from the future, to think through the future, to reside in the future, and even to confront the condition of being after the future. Further, exactly what constitutes “the future” itself remains in flux too, and necessarily so. Is the future a moment in time or a place in history? Is it an attitude, an orientation, or an affect? Or is it a construction of form and style? As the following essays reveal, the future is all these and more. As a result, *Facing Forward* hovers between sci-fi depictions of brave new worlds and heterogeneous stories in which histories collide and are re-arranged in their encounters with the future.

Hendrik Folkerts, Christoph Lindner,
and Margriet Schavemaker

1
Roelstraete, Dieter, “After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings,”
in: *e-flux journal*, journal 6, 05/2009.

2
Fukuyama, Francis, “The Future of History,” in: *Foreign Affairs* 91 (1),
Jan-Feb 2012.