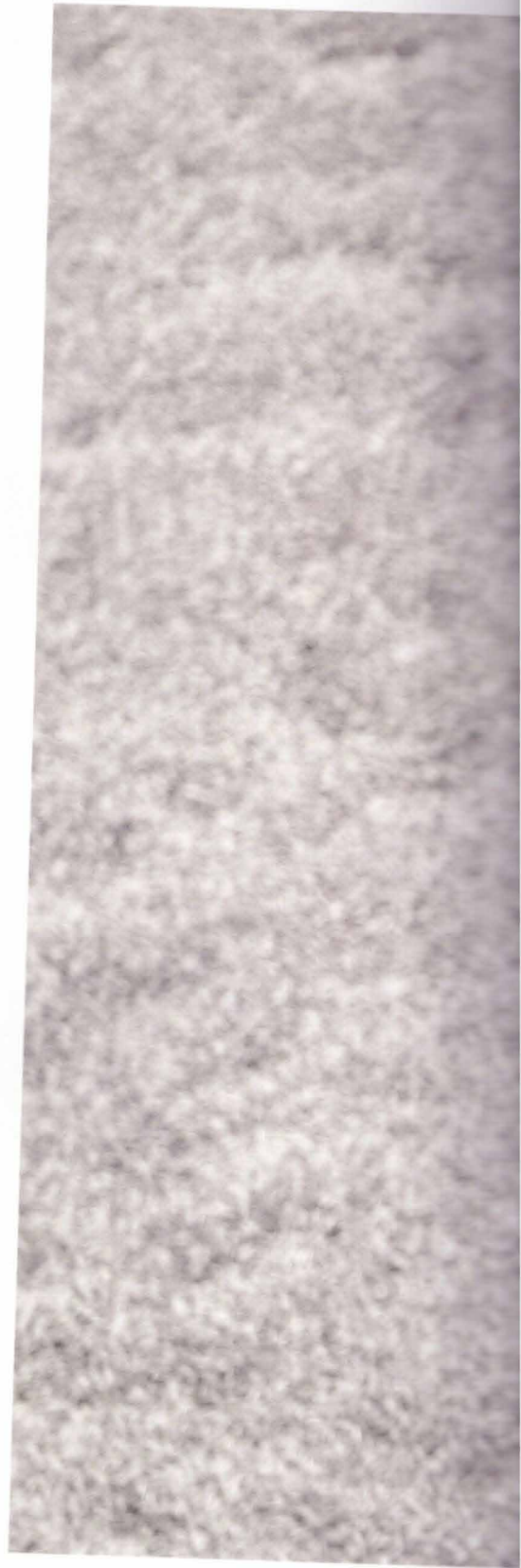


# Pre-dictions

ART AND THE FUTURE

*Gregory Burke*





'THE FUTURE WILL ONLY CONTAIN WHAT WE PUT INTO IT NOW.' So read Situationist graffiti in Paris, May 1968, when students of the Sorbonne and Nanterre came close to overthrowing the state. This event was one example of international social unrest and uprising that characterised the 1960s, including the civil rights and Vietnam War protests in North America as well as the activities of the Front de libération du Québec throughout the decade that led ultimately in 1970 to tanks rolling into Montreal and British corporations pulling out. References to such activism of the 1960s loom large in current art practices – so much so that critic Dieter Roelstraete has termed these practices that focus on remembering, forgetting and re-enactment as the 'historiographic turn in art'. In opposition to this turn Roelstraete calls for a reorientation, one that attempts to 'recover the future' in order to produce a theory of the present.<sup>1</sup> The question then is how to develop a practice within present conditions that can be affective in possible futures.

Clearly conditions have changed significantly from the dichotomous period of the 1960s when, despite social unrest, developed nations were experiencing the most optimistic period of the twentieth century. Levels of prosperity were rising and the gap between rich and poor was at historically low levels. The promise of things to come looked bright, no doubt influencing the theme of Montreal's 'Expo 67', 'Terre des Hommes/Man and His World', a title borrowed from the memoir of author and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which outlined dreams and hopes for the future. The future focus of 'Expo 67' was epitomised by the United States pavilion, the Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome, and its display of Apollo space technology that would take astronauts to the moon. Such future optimism contrasts starkly with the turbulence associated with the current globalised, post-9/11 era. Ideological conflict is on the rise and war continues or is threatened in the world's hotspots. In addition, conservative forces continue to deny the impact of industrialised society on the environment,

despite mounting scientific evidence of global warming and the associated rise in natural disasters. The global financial system is in an unprecedented state of crisis, at least since the 1930s, yet the massive growth in the wealth gap continues between the top 1 per cent and the rest of the world's population, which faces increasing levels of poverty and hardship. In North America the conservative right is mobilising, driven by what artist Paul Chan describes as: 'anti tax sentiments, elements of nationalism, and a vicious streak against a laundry list of undesirables. This movement only knows one way forward: back.'<sup>2</sup> In Europe, sovereign debt, produced largely through bailouts paid for with current and future tax dollars, threatens to bankrupt nations, leading to hefty funding cuts to social programs, including to the arts, seen most severely in the repressive cuts under way in the Netherlands. Such cuts make the artist even more dependent on market forces that increasingly position contemporary art as financial investment and as a luxury product.

In acknowledging the complicity of contemporary art with speculative economics Chan and Sven Lütticken argue that 'one should affirm and exacerbate art's problematic status, its essential undecidability, which holds the promise of a more productive politicisation of contemporary art ...'<sup>3</sup> In terms of such a promise one artistic strategy is to research and uncover past actions and motivations in order to understand their impact on the present and the future. New York-based artist Matthew Buckingham is one such artist engaged in a research-based practice. Frequently he focuses on a particular site to suggest a series of historical interconnections, which in turn allude to forces that continue to drive future outcomes.

The colonisation of North America and its relation to systematic and ongoing acts of dispossession is one area of his research. One work, *Northwest passage*, 2005, involves a photograph of a military submarine passing the Statue of Liberty

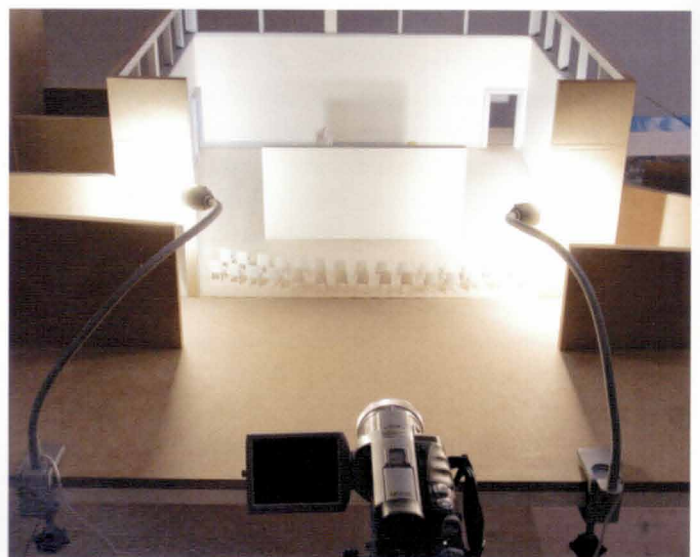
adjacent to a text referring to Henry Hudson, who in 1609 was paid by the Dutch East India Company to search for a trade route between Europe and Asia, a 'Northwest Passage', the desire for which was a major factor prompting European colonisation of North America. Buckingham notes that global warming may soon open the passage as a shipping lane and that North American financial partners are in fact currently betting on this outcome through investment in the region. By deliberating on the fact that the passage was first navigated by the military via submarine, Buckingham links the military industrial complex to the interests of capital. Here then we have a conundrum, for no matter how strident the call is to reduce carbon emissions in recognition of the catastrophic effects of the melting of polar ice, the forces of capital and state are colluding to invest in that very outcome.

The potential of a new trade route with Asia can also be linked to the substantial economic growth and increasing industrialisation taking place in China, its growing international trade and the resulting impact on the environment. The artist Ai Weiwei alluded to this in his massive installation *Sunflower seeds*, 2010, a field of 100 million handpainted porcelain seeds at London's Tate Modern. The work implicitly ponders the impact on the future of China's industrialisation, coupled to the new materialism of its large and growing population. In so doing it inherently draws attention to the problematic and conflicting drives towards individualism and collectivity that define present-day China. It casts an eye back to China's past, given that during the Cultural Revolution the followers of Mao were often pictured as sunflowers, and thus meditates on current and future possibilities for individual creativity and collective purpose in an era where a repressive regime is embracing the interests of global capital. If the work appears open-ended, thereby offering the possibility of hope, its reading can also be informed by Ai's own statements on China since his release from detention. These include observations

concerning the homeless millions of workers in Beijing whom he describes as 'Beijing's slaves', and concerning officials who do business with foreigners but 'deny us basic rights'.<sup>4</sup> While *Sunflower seeds* can be viewed as a silent protest and an act of passive resistance it can't be separated from Ai's decision to remain in China and agitate for change at the cost of personal freedom.

China's current pursuit of market economics is one indication that the global reach of capitalism in its advanced state transcends ideological boundaries. Given that capitalism is principally driven by profit, a number of artists are currently pursuing practices that eschew the status of art simply as commodity. Leading proponents of such practices are Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle, the initiators of web platform and art project *e-flux*. *Timebank* is a project they began in 2010, which has established an alternative economy and banking system that allows cultural workers to exchange labour in equal increments of time, utilising time dollars as a currency.<sup>5</sup> Profit is not an option and time is exchanged on an egalitarian and non-hierarchical basis. The focus on time itself also runs counter to the capitalist model, for while the ethos of capitalism is to bet on future outcomes it is ultimately geared towards the ownership of property or the accumulation of wealth as an end point and eschews the reality that the ownership of property is ultimately transient. In contrast, the system underpinning the *Timebank* model embraces transience. The exchange that is enacted is between people and is temporal rather than being focused on property and ownership. It is essentially performative in that an action performed now can be exchanged for an action performed on your behalf in the future. This creates social exchange as a form of a social system as opposed to what can be argued as the anti-social system promoted by capitalism.

There is, however, an increasing disconnect between the current globalised and digitised world of meta-finance and the means of production that produces goods needed in the real world. An



opposite top, from left:

Goldin+Senneby, *Money will be like dross*, 2012, performance at Drottningholm Palace Theatre, Stockholm, with Pamela Carter (playwright), CargoCultist (systems architect), Kunstgiesserei (material research), Maria Lindal (musician), Malin Nilsson (magician), Eva Rexed, Joel Spira and Jakob Tamm (actors). Produced for Crystal, Stockholm.

bottom, from left:

Goldin+Senneby, *The discreet charm*, 2011, performance at Göteborg Biennial, with Pamela Carter (playwright), Ismail Ertürk (senior lecturer in banking), Anna Heymowska (set designer), Hamadi Khemiri (actor). Photograph Dorota Lukianska.

example is the current use of algorithm-based trading which is increasingly driving global markets. As curator Kim Einarsson says, this model 'has an agency of its own. It contributes to the production of its own reality ...'.<sup>6</sup> Swedish artists Goldin+Senneby explore this interconnection between real and virtual or fictional realms in relation to meta-finance. They specifically link this relationship to the growing immaterialisation of contemporary society, the virtualisation of labour and hidden transactions that have increasingly become part of the global network economy. They are interested in how the virtual world of global finance performs a sleight of hand to fictionalise the boundaries between public and private interests in order to make them disappear, and in this sense they position the world of meta-finance as a form of storytelling.

Goldin+Senneby describe their ongoing project *The Nordenskiöld model* as an experiment in theatrical finance that explores complex relations between financial modelling, speculation and reality. The project is named after August Nordenskiöld, employed in 1780 to produce gold by alchemical means to bolster state coffers. Nordenskiöld's covert aim, though, was to produce enough gold to make it, and thereby money, worthless. *The Nordenskiöld model* is articulated by Goldin+Senneby as a series of freestanding public rehearsals developed in collaboration with British playwright Pamela Carter and a set of informants/actors, including a systems architect, a hedge fund manager, a senior lecturer in banking and a magician. The latest instance of this production, titled *Money will be like dross*, was set to be performed at the Frieze Art Fair New York in May 2012. In association with the performance the artists would be selling manuals and licences for the replication of August Nordenskiöld's alchemical furnace. Each buyer would receive a manual with the documentation needed to produce the furnace and a contract that stated that the artists would sign all replicas

produced for the rest of their lifetimes. The edition of the manual and licence would be numbered, but unlimited. However, for each edition sold, the price would go up. There is an old adage that the value of anything is what the market will pay. There is also the conventional wisdom that the rarity of an object will increase its value. In this case each successive buyer would pay more to decrease the rarity of the edition. There was then an inbuilt tipping point in the work where buyers would pay increasing amounts of money for its own destruction.

Capitalism is intrinsically rooted in future projection and manipulation and the impulse to speculate or bet on a future outcome. It is, though, increasingly apparent that left unimpeded the capitalist impulse will deliver an end game and that fact is tempering our anticipation of what is to come. As a result, anxiety, and at best hope, have replaced optimism and desire in the discourses surrounding possible futures. For artists one thing is clear – the radicalism of early modernist forebears is not easily repeated, with Ai Weiwei being the closest example in this essay. Perhaps the way forward for contemporary art to impact the future is to empower the unpredictable, or that which is not already written, while highlighting the irrationality of the increasingly hyper-rational system of global capitalism.

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- 1 Dieter Roelstraete, 'After the historiographic turn: Current findings', [e-flux.com/journal/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings](http://e-flux.com/journal/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings).
- 2 Paul Chan, 'Progress as regression', [e-flux.com/journal/progress-as-regression](http://e-flux.com/journal/progress-as-regression).
- 3 Paul Chan and Sven Lütticken, 'Idiot wind: An introduction', [e-flux.com/journal/idiot-wind-an-introduction](http://e-flux.com/journal/idiot-wind-an-introduction).
- 4 Quoted in *Ai Weiwei attacks China over justice and human rights*, [guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/29/ai-weiwei-attacks-chinese-government](http://guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/29/ai-weiwei-attacks-chinese-government).
- 5 [e-flux.com/timebank](http://e-flux.com/timebank).
- 6 Kim Einarsson, *The Nordenskiöld model*, [goldinsenneby.com/gsf?p=184](http://goldinsenneby.com/gsf?p=184).