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# FUTURE LIGHT

Maria Lind, Vanessa Joan Müller, Martina Kandeler-Fritsch (eds.)

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# INTRODUCTION

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# Future Light

How come some features of the old Enlightenment have crept back and are now being revisited in art, activism, and theory? After just about a century of problematizing, questioning and opposing the very legacies of the old Enlightenment. With an ever more economized, fragmented, privatized, and surveilled existence where, for instance, taxpayers are forced to compensate for the risks of finance speculation and the gap between the rich and the poor is rapidly increasing, it seems enticing to return to some fundamental notions and phenomena inherited from the struggle for universal emancipation. Among them are the light of reason and rationality, the individual subject, and the public sphere.

The revisited notions appear to point to a wish to explore vision from its very basics—as if to try to see anew and take visibility to the task, to radical transformations of desire and to challenges to ownership and property relations as we know them. And to do so while not losing sight of the future, exploring an approach to the future beyond algorithmic forecasting, one which is modest and light rather than grand and dominant, in the midst of plenty of parallax views, in light of the abundant hyper-contradictions of our time. Art has after all this capacity to function as part seismograph and part sniffer dog, detecting things not yet seen, gelled and shaped in other parts of society, creating new imaginaries. Whether utopian or dystopian, or an unclear mix of the two.

These basic notions in radically mutated forms appear to indicate a future affected by an emerging movement toward a new enlightenment, conscious of the violent heritage of the old one, in whose name atrocities have been committed over the centuries. It is post-enlightenment, not as in "radical rupture" but as in "working through" some of its characteristics. This time it is acknowledging the tensions and contradictions of the enlightenment baggage, trying not to give up on the future while being embedded in the current condition of "retrotopia" where the past in general and "commemorialism" in particular loom large. Thus, three strands of thought and action have crystallized within the framework of "Future Light": non-penetrating light, the individual subject as reworked by the

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politics of queer-feminism and its polymorph desires, and the public sphere reconceived through and as commons and commoning.

Each strand is taking shape in a different institutional and spatial setting, accompanied by this reader and the mini-symposium "Politics of Shine", and partly prepared in a closed workshop in October 2013 as well a series of public MAK Nite Labs at the MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art in Vienna. At the MAK, the group exhibition "Escaping Transparency" embraces the fact that within contemporary art, instead of the penetrating light that gives clarity and transparency, there is plenty of reflected and refracted light that creates opacity, abstraction, and shadows. It is light that goes on and off, that does not serve as a searchlight and yet is able to nurture new beginnings. Besides conditioning human visual perception, its new forms—for example the low-power requiring LED light—is having other literal effects on the look and taste of plants as well as the physical and medical conditions of humans and animals. Furthermore, the future remains a point of orientation in many of the artworks. All this is being played out in the group exhibition involving existing paintings, videos, sculptures, and drawings by seventeen artists and making up an installation without walls but with plenty of natural light. The artists are Pablo Accinelli, Dough Ashford, Claire Barclay, Rana Begum, Elena Damiani, Shezad Dawood, Annika Eriksson, Mathias Faldbakken, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Ane Hjort Guttu, Tom Holert, Philippe Parreno, Amalia Pica, Yelena Popova, Walid Raad, Bik Van der Pol, and Haegue Yang.

Since a while, theory and practice in the name of LGBT and queerness reshape notions of the individual, subjectivity, and desire. If traditional notions of gender rely on heteronormative patriarchal formations of desire, then this linchpin is now being challenged in ways hitherto unseen, affected by among other things hormonal drugs. Under the rubric of "Loving Repeating", Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz are presenting three film-based works at Kunsthalle Wien. The installations convey filmed performances where the tensions and teasing between the individual and the collective carry a high degree of theatricality. While curtains and fumes create opacity, glitter and wigs indicate glamour. The characters who feature in these dramas are consciously multi-sided, defying normality, including the law and economy. Neither being entirely historical nor present, they project ahead in a truly anachronistic manner, to new enjoyments in the making.

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Today many artistic and other projects challenge the established discourse on the public sphere by reviving the notions of "the commons" and "commoning," This often happens in response to failures of capitalism and the increasing withdrawal of the welfare state. With "The Report", STEALTH unlimited together with Stefan Gruber revisit the history of Vienna's self-organized urban movements in order to imagine an alternative future. "The Report" tells the fictional story of the resetting of some crucial moments in a century of opposing positions, including the "wild" Settlement movement around 1920, the "soft urban renewal" of the 1970s and the 2014 debates around the squat Pizzeria Anarchia. The startling content of the report is set to be leaked in a future only four years ahead, in 2019. The narrative has unfolded through a series of dialogues with contemporary proponents on the urban scene which took place in Vienna in the spring of 2015 and will be presented in printed form in September 2015.

In a new film, Marysia Lewandowska is exploring the commons as experienced through the kindergarten as an early testing ground for sharing, belonging, privacy and withdrawal. The project was triggered by the work and life of the Viennese architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897–2000), in which many of the contradictions of the twentieth century are played out, and involves the voice of Di Zhang, a young architect in Beijing for whom "the communism of commerce" is a lodestar. Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri are arranging an "unworkshop" around the politics of food and food production, which have been central concerns for the artists in their long-standing work on commons and commoning. The design, research and art studio Metahaven, who have developed the notion of "black transparency," have co-conceptualized and designed this e-reader and the printed handout which connects the various parts of the overall project "Future Light".

There is a wide-spread belief today that light will do away with ignorance, power abuse and inequality. This trust in light is not unlike how "enlightening" operated during the Old Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shedding light on dark corners getting rid of unawareness, mysticism and other unruly phenomena. In both cases it is a penetrating light which creates transparency and visibility. Today it is put in practice as the light of surveillance, communication and speculation. Transparency has even taken a few steps further nowadays, coming to be seen as

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a guarantor of many things, for example accountability and trust, and in extension for the free market and the stability of the capitalist system itself. In her text, the scholar Clare Birchall calls this "the contemporary transparency assemblage." She argues that today transparency, through "the fervour for light", has even become a pan-ideological democratic value which no one can afford to question. Thus, at the same time as "being transparent" remains important in any democratic context—we have the right to know a lot of things—it has taken on some characteristics of a dogma.

Birchall identifies three main areas where the contemporary "fervour for light" and transparency flourish. Within corporate organization strategy and branding "voluntary transparency" is considered a sign of forward thinking and better than enforced transparency. Although it can be experienced as a disciplining tool its ultimate purpose is to boost commerce and productivity, while relying on criteria for market success which are in and of themselves not always transparent. Fiscal transparency is often presented as a universal value, a prerequisite for free market economy and necessary for its stability. Open government relies on transparency too but simultaneously also on covert surveillance. Finally transparency also makes data streams available to broad strata of the population, creating "data subjects."

But as "data subjects," the tendency is that citizens are reduced to flat data, insignificant apart from when they break algorithms. At the same time as "data subjects" are given agency to monitor government, they become "data objects." Rather than violation of privacy being the main problem today, which is often presumed in public discourse, Birchall argues that it is the fact that in this new understanding of citizenship the citizen is not primarily taken to be a political agent but an entity whose actions create algorithms for data analysis. Forms of potential emancipation are in other words reconfigured as control in ways which resemble Gilles Deleuze's discussion of the control society.

In the midst of this, Birchall calls for a "radical transparency," wanting to apropriate the notion of transparency from business rhetoric. This would imply to move beyond how revelation typically functions in the public sphere today, i. e. the political system and the dominant ideology are not affected much by disclosures but instead they are strengthened. To avoid merely "telling secrets" it is necessary then

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to politicize issues and events which subsequently become subject to public debate and intervention. Tactical opacity is useful in this context: according to Birchall, the more or less secret societies and groups Acephale and Tiqqun are interesting examples of such tactical opacity. To conclude, "radical transparency" does not mean more transparency but reconsidering it beyond the Enlightenment, in a society of commons rather than control.

For writer and theoretician Boris Buden, today the enlightenment offers an interesting alternative to the current dominance of "culture" and "culturefication" of more or less everything in society. Referring to the philosopher Moses Mendelsohn and his distinction between enlightenment and culture, preceding Immanuel Kant's famous article "What is Enlightenment?" in the same journal with a few months, the former is desired and the latter not needed. Whereas enlightenment is here taken to be a universal concept, the theoretical side of *Bildung* as in formation and self-formation, culture equals the practical aspects of *Bildung*. Enlightenment is important for all humans regardless of social or economic differences, culture cannot be applied equally to everyone but depends on class, profession etc. Hence, culture equals the existing social order—it is conformist—and yet its meaning is unclear, and enlightenment became a parallel concept which stands for vagueness and opacity. Is the enlightenment a star which died a long time ago, still casting its light on us? In the end, culture won the battle and became a thriving and well-operating force. Buden claims that it is felt in both the global and local cultural turn of politics in the form of for example identity politics. However, in order to become so successful culture needed to occupy the temporality of history—it became a meta-historical and meta-epochal concept. The past and the future were separated with the enlightenment, which meant that a new space of experience was created, an autonomous force able to transform reality, which happened through time. But as we know historical events need their cultural legitimation, like when historical revisionists state that Nazi Fascism and Communism are equally criminal, and that the philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment and the anti-Czarist intelligentia prepared the ground for terror. In this cultural view, radical change becomes a disease which causes disorder in the modern world. Consequently the legacy of the revolutionary tradition of 1789 and the Enlightenment too, should be done away with, like traumas. The past has been made into a "pathetic monodrama" which is performed while changing various historical costumes in

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accordance with every possible occasion. History then becomes the same as identitarian struggles where the enlightenment turns into a "minority struggling for recognition."

In short, history has become anti-historical and counter-revolutionary, a place where nothing really happens. The principle of inertia is reigning there so that like in nature the purpose becomes to preserve the present state, states Buden. Mendelsohn argued that humans as humans need enlightenment and not culture, because of its universal claims. Not only has culture's principle of inertia come to govern our lives today, it has also triggered post-historical time, having naively swallowed all historical experience through cultural heritage. Culture has become the chief curator managing archives and memories from the past, while providing for an "inertia of a perpetual present," a sign of the immaturity of our time. This is not unlike the immaturity which Kant spoke about, making us avoid taking responsibility and blame: we are indecisive cowards anxiously retreating from the new, as precisely the new and not dressed up in the costume of the past.

Philosopher Reza Negarestani's manifesto-like contribution is also bringing back legacies of the old Enlightenment. It is a response to what he sees as a growing anti-humanism, with his notion of "inhumanism" standing for an extended practical elaboration of humanism, committed to the enlightenment humanism and a belief in human significance, in contrast to for example object-based onthologies. Inhumanism is the activation of a revisionary program of reason against humanity's self-portrait as we know it. The human is here understood as a "constructible hypothesis," a basis for a methodological collaboration which Negarestani feels is necessary to break out of the current deadlock of our planet. This points to universality as a concept and a challenge to the economy of false choices which he states that we are facing today.

Inhumanism means complex elaborations on what it means to be human, based on "commitment", i. e. being human in a pragmatic sense, where meaning comes out of use. Description and prescription must go together here, for and by the human, simultaneously a revisionary and constructive position in relation to humanism, a reassessment and construction through spaces of reason. It is an interventive attitude, against more consumerist approaches to norms, which Negarestani calls "critical reflexes." Such critique

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without a constructive vector is unfortunately dominating many discourses today, making the importance of "functional autonomy" in this context even more pressing, as a way of getting away from the prevalent "automation of reason."

Far from a critical reflex, artist Natascha Sadr Haghighian's complex essay delves into backlit devices such as computers, tablets and mobile phones which have approximately the same color temperature as partially overcast daylight. This particular kind of light is so far more anonymous than red and green which have a given place in the Western symbolic order. Furthermore, this particular blue light speaks directly to our melatonin levels, affecting the body's internal clock. In her text on the history and locus of blue light, we are taken on a journey from the refugee strike which started in 2012 against Germany's deportations and permanent residency policy and traffic lights and their control going online, to the lapis lazuli-blue of renaissance painting and the EU-flag. Somewhere in between Margaret Thatcher's famous blue dress makes an appearance.

Attempting to take apart her own visual system and at the same time create a contact zone with the blue light itself—by among other things scraping off the polarizing filters of her computer screen—Sadr Haghighian discusses different techniques of refraction, or "bent looking," as an analytical tool and means of protection. Mirrors can be useful here, as well as tears and looking over your shoulder. The tension between the physical flatness of most devices and the impression of eternal depth of data embedded in the blue light within them, beyond the depth of the glass stack in the display, is brought up. The simultaneity of conflicting and irreducible things, for example the continuous state of exception which does not count mobility as a human right—results in multiplied and scattered views—parallax dimensions which help us account for depths but also generate nausea. But what happens when viewing happens from positions further apart than our eyes?

Commoning and being common as a general condition is seen trough the lens of the emergence and use of common land in Britain in artist Céline Condorelli's text. The commons are physical locations but also sites of social and political struggles and revolutionary ideas, opposing the right to private property while embracing questions of how to share resources and live together.

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It is a form of self-organized and highly democratic governance of a piece of land or other resources which are owned by one person or a group over which others have certain rights of use. As such, the phenomenon has inspired social movements in Latin America, Asia and Southern Africa.

The legal status of the commons relies on rights of use, of being used "in common" for the subsistence of "commoners"—people without land, and it is present already in Roman law. In England it was introduced in the thirteenth century and played an important role until enclosures by the landowners became frequent in the sixteenth century. Such enclosures effectively made the resources of the commoners exclusively private, which turned land in to a commodity. This new order of land was represented through for example maps and postcards. Second-hand postcards from 1900–1920 showing British Commons, notably without commoners, help Condorelli display how these pieces of land have gone from landscapes of work to parks, obscuring a powerful legacy of commonality. In this way, how land is used and exchanged becomes a dispositive of how meaning and value is produced.

Four letters from artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz to friends, collaborators and others bring out the importance of opacity, desire and anachronisms in the duo's highly performative work. Fellow artist Sharon Hayes' deliberate "confusion of temporality" as a way of breaking the progression of time as it is used in mainstream culture has been an inspiration for them, just as Elizabeth Freeman's "temporal drag." The latter emphasizes embodiment and works against normative biographies. The bodies of the performers in temporal drag create visible connections to bodies, images and objects from other times, mixing utopia, nostalgia and critique. The desire at play is not based on lack, and drag as a method appears as both friendly and aggressive. Expectations, evidence, stereotypes and violent histories feature here but "outside belonging"—it is more about disidentification than identification.

The letter addressed to Ginger Brooks Takashi, an artist who is frequently performing in Boudry's and Lorenz's videos, places the backstage in the foreground. Here they speak about rehearsing for a future performance, and the lure of being neither on stage nor in the audience. It is not unlike the heterotopias of Michel Foucault, places apart, breaking with traditional time as well.

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Masks, toxins and gender piracy as exemplified by philosopher and queer theoretician Paul B. Preciado are discussed: masks create opacity and are often used for unclear purposes. Similarly, toxic substances are not only bad as they also have the ability to cure and em power you. In the work of Boudry and Lorenz this is embodied through among other things curtains. An important point here is that opacity is not the same as invisibility—it simply denies straightforward understanding.

Collaboration is indeed a fruitful space for exploring desire according to Hadley Howes, the artist to whom author Lisa Robertson's new poem "An Awning" is dedicated. Stoppages and slippages in desire feature frequently in the poem where a soft shelter and protection against the direct rays of the sun is created. If light is the actualization of transparency, as Aristotle claimed and Robertson quoted, then light as a queen is not given free range in "An Awning." What happens to the light-dependent production of hormones under the awning? The difference between an idea and a thought might be that the former comes and goes like a guest whereas the latter remains until death. Then the difference between thinking and the perennial lily is slighter than Robertson first imagined.

Love as affective commons is explored in writer and editor Brian Kuan Wood's article "Is It Love?". As states, unions and parties are no longer providing support structures, near and dear ones have taken their place. More than ever, love is there to help out when structures fall apart, from childbirth to friendship, as a phantom of work. Not surprisingly, women take most of the responsibility for this affective commons. One of many contradictions is that when we are in love there is endless supply and demand, but love's fullness and bounty rely on endless loss and precarity, on mutual debt where depletion is a frequent fellow traveler. We live a hyper-paradox says Kuan Wood: structural relations get personalized and personal relations are getting structured. Love is both the problem and the solution to the kind of super-committed and hyperactive application of the self that many people know today—it goes beyond exploitation. There is no doubting, that biopolitics have accelerated, along the way stimulating pre-capitalist forms of exchange like neighborhood currencies and skills exchange. Suddenly, and somewhat surprisingly, symbolic capital can help you pay the rent. Thus, love is the newest member of the family of inflation and bloat, not an elevated romantic phenomenon but rather the generator of "economization of empathy."

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As value in an economic sense is becoming more and more complicated, the question is how to create and sustain meaning in the first place, semantically and etymologically: "love is a promise converted to a curse converted back to a promise."

Intimate relations are at the heart of Paul B. Preciado's text, which starts when a friend dies. Preciado cross-dresses in to the deceased comrade and begins her series of rendez-vous with Testogel, synthetic testosterone, as if to bring the friend back to life. The purpose of taking the hormone is not to become a man but to test chemically induced sensations, a ritual moving far beyond established categories of sex, gender and objects. The encounters with Testogel involve the cutting of hair, shaving, making mustaches from the just cut hair, donning dildos, looking into mirrors and recording the whole procedure for online sharing. At the heart of this performance, beautifully described in great detail, lies a desire for transformation. Even a metamorphosis of life in contemporary society.

Preciado then takes the reader on a "somatopolitical" journey of the world economy, where a new type of government of the living has emerged in the period after WWII, through the forceful interaction between advanced capitalism, global media and biotechnology. S/he labels this new type of government "the pharmacopornographic regime". The emergence of terms such as "transsexualism" (1954) and "gender" (1957), changes in economic and governmental regulations of pornography and prostitution in the Western world and the development of synthetic molecules for commercial use paved the way for this "sex-gender industrial complex." "The Pill" and Playboy are early and widely disseminated components of this material-discursive apparatus of bodily production which includes feedback loops. Viagra and Prozac are more recent examples.

All to say that today psychotropic techniques and biomolecular and multimedia protocols affect subjectivity in hitherto unseen ways. Not only is this affecting millions of individuals in their most intimate lives, according to Preciado in the pharmacopornographic regime sexuality and its semiotechnical derivations are the main resource of post-fordist capitalism. It is a new model of production: the control, production and intensification of narco-sexual effects. If work is the central concept in classical economy, then "potentia gaudendi," or orgasmic force, is the equivalent in the pharmacopornographic regime. *Potentia gaudendi* is the strength of a body's excitation, its

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own extension in space and time. It is an event, relation, practice and evolutionary process, it is essentially impermanent and malleable. *Potentia gaudendi* depends on "techno-bodies," half fetuses and half zombies, individual bodies as extensions of global communication technologies, oscillating between excitation and frustration. It is the planetary management of "naked technolife" through virtual audiovisual connections.

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