

Mystic Hyperstitions in the Heart of Empire

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Joey Cannizzaro, *Shame Ensemble*, Performance Documentation, 2016.

"I'm not the same person I was before I went to the moon. Several people have explained to me that nobody else on Earth is either. Someone told me once that I have begun to heal the great wound inflicted on the human soul by Galileo when he let slip the Earth was not the center of the Universe."

-Astronaut Captain Kamp in Samuel R. Delany's *Dahlgren*

Our fantasy of moon colonization is the ethical conquistador's dry wet dream: a land mass to dominate without the hassle of queasy extermination campaigns. Think of it as an inversion of our deep cultural paranoia about alien invasion; our festering colonial guilt has ballooned into the fear that a race of people from some landmass we didn't know exists, a warped-looking people with different colored skin, will arrive on planet Earth and, due to their superior military technology, be able to kill or enslave us and everyone we love. The moon fantasy, on the other hand, keeps us in the position of dominance, if only because there is nobody (no human body anyway) around to conquer.

Elon Musk and other contemporary techno-utopians— always posturing and publicizing the humanitarian undertones of their various development projects— are clamoring to privatize space travel, searching out new horizons for capital that are not tied to this demurely exhaustible

Earth. In the 1960s, the US and Soviet governments' motivations for moon exploration may have been competitive and bellicose, but the idea of the thing animated the futurist imaginary of that decade— an imaginary that persists into the 21st century as we realize (and endlessly reinvent) Jetsonian commodities while our political system plows inertly towards the corporatized and monopolistic neo-feudalism of *Dune*.

There is of course the notion that we never made it to the moon at all, that Stanley Kubrick directed the moon landing, that it's one of our government's most enchanting fabrications. With the government's innumerable insertions of whole-cloth fiction into the public narrative (consider the Air Force gas-lighting Paul Bennewitz and so many others into believing in UFOs in order to discredit them before they could inform the public of the existence of stealth bombers) it becomes an almost absurd task to try and discern which of their stories are real and which are instrumental lies.

Outside the dichotomy of truth and lie, there is the category of the hyperstitial: "a kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth."¹ This notion is central to the theory of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams who, in their #ACCELERATE MANIFESTO, theatrically assert that "today's politics is beset by an inability to generate the new ideas and modes of organisation necessary to transform our societies to confront and resolve the coming annihilations. While crisis gathers force and speed, politics withers and retreats. In this paralysis of the political imaginary, the future has been cancelled." While they identify the roots of our soft apocalypse with the Right, they're equally critical of the Left, unable to dream up a future that doesn't look backwards to Keynesian economics and Fordian labor. The hyperstitial is not necessarily a lie or the cynical promise of a campaigning politician; it can be a real organizing tool, an imaginary that unites people and mends divisions in working for a common aim, without stomping out antagonism between it's adherents or reducing them to a harmonious totality. "Hyperstitials operate by catalyzing dispersed sentiment into a historical force that brings the future into existence."²

Though elements of Srnicek and Williams's program may seem utopian (while other parts seem too easy for the Right to co-opt) at the dawn of Trump's aggregate neoliberal-fascism, their argument that the Left desperately needs to reclaim the future is more urgent than ever. Despite the ubiquity of words like "radical" in press releases the art world over, it's impossible for the creative community to dodge accountability for this lack of imaginative futures. It feels almost as if *imagining any future* has been deemed uncritical at best and dangerous at worst. Srnicek and Williams believe, for one thing, that due to the dominance of neoliberal discourse (which positions all members of society as isolated, selfish competitors), we have a (reasonable) fear that the word "progress" itself amounts to capitalist expansion and market-driven colonialism.

Thankfully, discourse is inevitably elastic, and the terms that define progress— "forward motion" towards a "destination"— are inherently relative. That is to say, forward motion implies some particular person or group moving away from something and towards something else, but the person need not be the white, straight, Euro-American male and the destination need not be a land of greater profit. If we reorient the subject towards the Afro-pessimist position put forward by Frank B. Wilkerson III and Jared Sexton— that all attempts to unify around humanitarian reforms are antithetical, and in fact hostile, to blackness— then progress would mean "trying to

¹ Srnicek and Williams, "#Accelerate Manifesto", CriticalLegalThinking.com, 2014.

² Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, Verso Books, 2015, 75.

destroy the world.”³ Echoing this logic, if the subject is Johanna Hedva’s *Sick Woman*, we could progress towards universal disability, “because, once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other’s tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies, and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much-needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt.”⁴ To refuse to consider the possibility, and in fact the inevitability, of change only maintains the neoliberal status quo; I say this to remind you that there will be a future and your anxiety to imagine it may be its own worst case scenario. We need to start dreaming— now— of futures that are more free, more just, and more fucking exciting than this one. Futures that don’t take neoliberal definitions and fantasies as their foundation.

The future I would like to see is one that is divorced from the individualism that has made us so lonely and so vulnerable to exploitation. In a recent interview about the rise of Trump, Adam Curtis brilliantly articulates the hypocritical position we find ourselves in as artists at this historical moment:

I sometimes wonder whether the very idea of self-expression might be the rigid conformity of our age. It might be preventing us from seeing really radical and different ideas that are sitting out on the margins—different ideas about what real freedom is, that have little to do with our present day fetishization of the self. The problem with today’s art is that far from revealing those new ideas to us, it may be actually stopping us from seeing them. This might be quite a difficult one to get over, but I think this is really important: however radical your message is as an artist, you are doing it through self-expression—the central dominant ideology of modern capitalism. And by doing that, you’re actually far from questioning the monster and pulling the monster down. You’re feeding the monster. Because the more people come to believe that self-expression is the end of everything, is the ultimate goal, the more the modern system of power becomes stronger, not weaker.

How can we deal with this unresolved contradiction: the countercultural impulses that eviscerated midcentury conformity ultimately led to a categorical embrace of self-expression as a form of ersatz freedom. The precise kind of unabashed self-branding and virtuosic mediation that Trump cynically leveraged to gain power reaps similar rewards for artists; in fact, we’re essentially required to hone these skills in order for our work to be considered a solvent commodity, in order for us to make enough money to live. Whether those impulses are themselves capitalistic or they were coopted and repurposed for the ends of those in power is difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to discern.

So.

How can we make art that is anti-conformist without promoting the values of individualism and its attendant isolation?

It’s my desire— and the desire of so many artists, activists, critics, curators, teachers, theorists, and others— to do work that is genuinely anti-capitalist, and escaping the feedback loop of self

³ Wilderson, “We Are Trying to Destroy the World”, Ill Will Editions, 2014.

⁴ Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory”, Mask Magazine, 2016.

expression may be a prerequisite inroad towards this end. Artists in this show were asked to respond to this central contradiction, to grapple with the role artists have played as missionaries for the cult of the individual. Many of these works address our cultural common sense around lone subjectivity and attempt to expand, reposition, or compromise the individuated self. Others deal with the (seemingly rigid) structural and organizational barriers to creating alternatives to the present art mainstream. There's a tension between the dystopian and utopian here, attempts to dream futures that account for, rather than erase, past traumas and injustices.

Of course, the task of envisioning a way out of this paradox is not an easy one. The thin line separating mysticism from incorporation can be a serious conceptual barrier for artists and writers attempting to destabilize individuality. Mysticism, defined generally, is “a state of experience that attenuates or blurs and interweaves and undoes— or in a word disassociates— the boundary between the self and the other, the world, God, nothingness, grace, love.”⁵ It is something much beyond empathy, altruism, or solidarity; it's the practice of ecstatically shedding one's vessel and pouring into something greater. Incorporation is the legal framework for instantiating this notion into civil and political life. Literally, a corporation (from *corp*, body) agglomerates the constituent subjects who represent an organization into a single, unified, acting legal being, with all of the rights afforded to a citizen. This relationship is certainly not lost on those in the corporate sphere who recognize and exploit the exponential power this collectivized framework makes available. (If you think the corporate world is ignorant of this analogy pick up one of the many New Age-inspired titles such as *The Corporate Mystic: A Guidebook for Visionaries with Their Feet on the Ground*.) Of course, there is something nightmarish about a corporate Legion, capable of all manner of nauseating violence and oppression due to the lack of direct accountability which incorporation facilitates. Furthermore, the droll, bureaucratic reality of life as a dispensable corporate unit whose needs are subjugated to those of the transcendent system of which one is part seems a far cry from any image of ecstatic liberation; in fact, it fits neatly within the neoliberal status quo under which we're coerced into prioritizing the health of the sacred market despite all reason or instinct to the contrary. But it's worth considering that incorporation— like futurism— may be polluted with the dominant ideology of our moment, that mystic merging should not be left to the oligarchy simply because its been so effectively instrumentalized for their abhorrent purposes. Though this comparison may be unsettling, the political potential of mysticism is too apparent to ignore in a historical moment in which our specificity as individual citizens is so regularly weaponized against us. We need a new, inspiring mystic hyperstition, that breaks with (and breaks apart) the right wing myth of the nation without reverting to the anachronisms of religious servility or indulging the present free market theology.

Stirring our dreams into plausible hyperstitions is a small but indispensable step towards dismembering the CEOs in our heads. If, as Arundhati Roy says, Occupy Wall Street produced “a new imagination⁶,” introduced “a new political language into the heart of empire,” and re-introduced “the right to dream into a system that tried to turn everyone into zombies,” then what are we doing with this right to dream? If we're willing to attempt it, we can imagine a society that does not collapse with capitalism, and art that doesn't act as a lifeline for the withering leviathan.

⁵ Johanna Hedva, “My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically”, *Sickwomantheory.tumblr.com*, 2016, 45:20.

⁶ Mark Nowak & Vijay Prashad, “The Essentials of Socialist Writing”, *Jacobin Magazine*, 2016.