SPECULATING ON ARTISTIC SPECULATION

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If you were able to go to the future and travel back and forth through time at ease, what would you tell the present?

It's a question that sounds naïve, but it is one that lies at the heart of the science fictional imagination. The purpose of such projection into the future is not always clear: sometimes there's a clear ideological motivation (think Star Trek), a bourgeois escapist desire (think Jules Verne), or a commentary on the present state of affairs (Wells, perhaps).

A question of the same ilk hides behind Lina Persson's current project, Tempus Nullius (literally, No-one's Time), which she has developed in her native Sweden and at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Over the last few years, Persson has repeatedly deployed tropes from science fiction (in her 20minutes-long film fanmo jimte from 2008, as well as in her ongoing Mountain Project, which consists of film and digital prints) to envision slightly tweaked ways of understanding reality. Where her fanmo jimte collapses the reality of a desert-ridden town in Alberta with futuristic narrative and new as well as found footage, her observations of the relation between people, mountains, architecture and the imagination foregrounds an environment in constant flux and clouded in a fictionalized shroud.

These two projects share an unusual approach to voiceover and a sensibility for landscape. If the voiceover of an omniscient narrator in film used to be a way of entering some kind of "indirect discourse of the people" (à la Pasolini) or a collective imagination, in Persson's films it stands at a remove from such general unconscious. In fanmo jimte, a female narrator never appears on camera and speaks in a synthetic language, which, though produced by man and meant to communicate with computers, cannot be understood by the regular human. Her words are translated into English subtitles. In the Mountain Project, Persson collects stories, scientific viewpoints and simple impressions to weave together an improbable tale abut the past present and future of a site. In this way, the mountain is a key element in a network of fantasy, natural phenomena and so extends beyond our rational

grasp.

Persson specializes in the depiction of landscape. Her focus on the environment upsets a straightforward view: her angles can be titled, light can wash over the field to blind us partly (this is what happens in another video work called Boulder Eclipse), and micro observation can suddenly segue into wide-angle shots. And there's also a pinch of playful magic, reminiscent of early trickster cinema: in Persson's pieces, matter can whither before our eyes, or parts of the landscape can suddenly turn into a space ship. Here, she visualizes geological theory as well as science fiction.

Over and over again, there's one word that comes to mind when I try to wrap my head around Persson's viewpoint: speculation.

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/'spekyə,lāt/ — invest in stocks, property or other ventures in the hope of gain but with the risk of loss. This kind of speculation has recently been heavily criticized and has become a main culprit in the demise of healthy national economies.

/'spekyə,lāt/ — form a theory or conjecture about a subject without firm evidence. We engage in this type of theorizing all the time—whether it's about changes in the weather, gas prices, or in plain old gossip.

As a transitive verb, /'spekyə,lāt/, means: "to assume to be true without conclusive evidence."

The word comes from the Latin verb *speculari*, "to spy out," which is related to the noun *specula*, watchtower. Both terms go back to a single action: *specere*, to view. Which leads us to a crucial question about the relation between eye and intellect that's key in understanding reality and in reading Persson's works: We may be able to see something, but does it mean we know it?

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Whether they have a 20/20 vision or not, bankers and traders speculate professionally. And so do scientists: a theory is the outcome of a gradual process that starts with observation, which prompts speculation, which in turn calls for experimentation to be finally concluded with proof and a definite theory. Facts and truth, in se, start with someone seeing a phenomenon and pondering its underlying law or cause.

What about artists? In increasing measure, art works are described as presenting specula-

tive propositions. This may be due to an unconscious transference of a term currently used in economics to the field of artistic thinking (i.e., forever gone are the days of a clear and concise conceptual sentence, which has been replaced by the possibility of a + and - outcome). It may also have to do with an exotic interest in conspiracy theory—in this sense, speculation equals a rationalist's indulgence in the irrationality of paranoia. No matter the cause, plausibility and potentiality currently hold more interest than effectiveness. Contrary to the scientist who entertains a speculative thought at the outset to then move to concrete experimentation and proof, the artist maintains this speculative view, and proceeds to craft hypotheses without the pressure of producing a single-standing truth. Asking questions (and how to ask them) matters more than finding a finite answer does. In this respect, scientific and artistic research processes are indeed polar opposites.

It is, however, more probable that this interest in speculative thinking within art practice relates to a rising attention for, and a need to define artistic research. On an institutional level, the term has certainly been validated-- consider, for example, the amount of M.A. or Ph.D.-granting programs that surfaced around the world over the last ten years. (Not insignificantly, Lina Persson herself is product of one such Master programs at Valand, Gothenburg.) Institutional politics aside, when we focus on the question of what artistic research produces—if not the "fact"—, then things become truly interesting. Could it entail that the art-work, as knowledge producing instance, probes the way in which we know things, rather than presenting an acceptable meaning or interpretation? And/or could it mean that art deals again with matters of ontological order?

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It is this second issue, ontology, that has also been at the order of the day for a group of recent philosophers who've named themselves "Speculative Realists"—Ray Brassier, Levi Bryant, Ian Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Steven Shaviro, to name a few. Though one could surely argue that a philosopher's main activity has always been conjecturing, Speculative Realists rail against what they consider an anti-realist trend in 20th-century continental thinking—which they observe anywhere, from Phenomenology to Deconstruction or Post-Structuralism. This group embraces the term "speculation" precisely because it proposes a way out of Kantian thought that has conditioned our way of talking about reality in terms of "things-in-themselves" and things "for-us." Though signaling the end of dogmatism and metaphysics, Kantian thought, so argue Speculative Realists, seals off the possibility of a reality beyond human thought. Against this default mode of understanding reality, Speculative Realism criticizes the immediate quasi-naturalized correlate between human thought and world; instead, it suggests that reality is not merely the correlate of human thought.

It is worthy to note that this movement surfaced only a few years back. According to Gra-

ham Harman, one of the main figures in the group, a speculative, i.e., non-correlationist, form of approaching reality is prompted by the urgency of our time: "In the face of looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world, it is not clear that this anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments […] All of them [Speculative Realists], in one way or another, have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally." [1]

In short, this group leaps into the beyond of critical or linguistic paradigms that were predominant in post-WWII theoretical discourse. In this context, "speculation" ultimately implies a concern with the absolute. It suggests that things exist outside of the way in which they appear to us and in which we know them. There is, in other words, an essential rift between seeing and being, and, consequently, between seeing and knowing. Instead of going down the path of visual studies or ideology critique, Speculative Realists return to ontology.

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It would be too absolute to say that present artistic research similarly deals with absolutes. The art field harbors (and will probably continue to do so) a strong distrust of absolute thinking. Lately, however, a slight lateral shift, echoes the one just described above: If a great part of late 20th-century production still responded to an urge to de-mystify and unveil hidden meanings, the speculative research-based work now shifts attention to our own relation with the world and probes other, more contingent, and less necessary paths. This shift does not emerge as response to orders from above, but rather emerges in individual practice. Consider, for instance, the work Mariana Castillo Deball, whose installations and videos tend to stage intermediary and confusing stages of knowledge and fact-production to open up static, factual objects. Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg, an Argentine duo, have developed a long-term, ever-growing archive that takes as starting point a field of meteorites. Through material accumulation, rather than minute interpretation, their work illustrates the human fascination with, and desire to completely understand, a prime ancestral, pre-human reality. Their persistent focus ultimately underscores the autonomy of the meteorites as mute entities that are not seizable by the truth of simple facts. Agency, set up by Belgian artist Kobe Matthys, also takes an accumulative archival approach, but of objects that have acquired a specific ability to impact their environment (hence, "agency") due to legal edicts. At large, the project speaks to the impossibility to pin down a necessary function or purpose to the day-to-day objects that surround us. It proposes a inter-connectedness on the level of being between things, humans, laws and other animated or non-animated entities.

Persson's current research project, Tempus Nullius, partly shown at the UConn CAG

[1] Harman, Graham "Introduction" The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman eds. Melbourne: re-press, 2011. p 3.

ponders our modes of dealing with the future as unclaimed territory. It also stems from environmental and ethical concerns that, according to Harman, prompted a turn in philosophy. And Persson's current proposition resembles some of the quasi science-fictional thought-experiments carried out by Speculative Realists, yet, in distinction from them, Tempus Nullius engages in thinking the about "the great outdoors" (a phrase cherished by Quentin Meillassoux and Levi Bryant) in order to concentrate on human activity. It is an exercise in time travel, on a scientific, pragmatic level—where UConn's theoretical physicist Ronald Mallet guides her through the mechanics of potential time-travel and the connection with parallel universes—as well as on a conceptual level—the final outcome of this project would stand for the piece of communication shared by the future (it would so reverse a regular pattern of film viewing which projects an eternal present into the future). Giving her film a distinct purpose, i.e., to be the message from the future, in which time-travel is a breeze, Persson is also caught in the so-called "grandfather paradox" of parallel universes—meaning that, if her work were to be understood, it may also cause a retro-effect in the present moment. We'd see Chris Marker's La Jetée set into motion. But apart from this potential paradox, this project specializes in doubling, not only of Persson's own position, but also that of the viewers, to exacerbate the impact of present human action on other potential human communities.

I'm keen to see further development of this research project. It is not that I am not fascinated by the insights about the relations between us and our future others, but I'm particularly called in by Persson's seemingly ingenious, though persistent way of approaching and attempting to work with natural scientists. Her drive to inform herself at the source signals contemporary modes of research (a more networked world, after all, allows for more immediate access to experts), and forces the experts to enter a more messy terrain. By asking the specialists: *If you were able to go to the future and travel back and forth through time at ease, what would you tell the present?* The project also invites the scientists to remain in a state of speculation instead of arriving at a truth-claim. Tempus Nullius, then, may potentially leave behind the zone of "matters of fact" and enter a zone of "matters of concern" that, according to Bruno Latour "does justice to what is given in experience."[2]

[2] Latour, Bruno "What is the Style of Matters of Concern?" Spinoza Lectures, Assen: Van Gorcum, 2008, p 50.