

WCTU

# A MATTER OF SENSE

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FROM WHAT COMES TO US TO WHAT COMES FROM US

Translated by  
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It is not the least quality of a crisis to force one to reconsider the conditions of existence, to incite one to examine the disrupted course of events and to point out that change is possible.

*Ce qui vient* (*What comes*) derives from a reflection on the gap that the financial storm opened in autumn 2008, and from the renewed “promises” it enabled one to nurture again. Not so much the promise of a better future for all—finally made possible by the defeat of a short-term profit-based logic and its replacement by equal social redistribution—as the promise of the obscene consequences of our passivity and of our schizophrenic lives: though we are revolted by the methods used by tycoons, we are made to accept the system because of its seeming eternity and its great complexity... More formidable than the previous ones, the crisis has laid bare the absurdity and irrationality of what has become an autarkic mode of functioning, and it has enabled us to foresee a possible change of paradigm.

People working in the field of culture, artists, intellectuals and researchers, are now faced with the problem of their responsibility and their role in taking up—in their specific way and with their own tools—the main questions for the future. It could well be that the first question is the following: “what does thinking the future mean today?”

The modernist period, with its progress-oriented ideology, followed by a short postmodernist phase—as a stuttering and dejected mirror-image of the latter—seems to have exhausted itself. In spring 2008, a slogan chosen by artists Chapuis & Touyard for the show *Valeurs croisées*<sup>1</sup> announced: “Due to general indifference, tomorrow is cancelled.” It endeavoured to close the period of modernity upon the emptiness of a world dismissed by the financial errors of a few. Four months later, the downfall of the top multinationals of finance questioned such indifference. Something was gripped in the beautiful celebration of skyrocketing growth, in the “fast forward” movement that Peter Sloterdijk calls the *kinetic utopia*<sup>2</sup> of modernity, i.e. Man’s temptation both to use the world and to put it in motion according to his needs, as well

1. See the following catalogue: *Valeurs croisées*, les presses du réel, 2009, p. 302-305. *Valeurs croisées* was the 2008 edition of *Les Ateliers de Rennes - Biennale d'art contemporain*, whose curator is the author of this present text.

2. Peter Sloterdijk defines modernist *kinetic utopia* thus: “The projective character of this new era comes from the grand hypothesis that it will soon be possible to make the world change so that the only thing moving will be the one we will have reasonably decided to keep alive through our own activities”, in *La Mobilisation infinie*, Points, Christian Bourgois Editeur, 2000, p. 23.



Mauro Cerqueira  
*A festa do fim do mundo*, 2008  
 Video  
 5 min. 21 sec.

as to relate nature to his projects. This utopia now appears as disastrous, for in his invention of History, Man has forgotten one of life's vital dimensions: the movement and chaos inherent to anything. Because he has tried to conform the world to his vision, he has created movements, which breed others. These movements are beyond his power and reduce him to a new type of powerlessness and passivity. One can have an insight into this situation when one is in a traffic jam or when one unwillingly swallows food whose noxiousness is unquestionable. "History and fate challenge each other in unforeseen contentions,"<sup>3</sup> agency and passivity are interrelated, and one of the symptoms of such dialectic discomfort seems to be the becoming-insurance of the world: rather than, like the pre-moderns, accept this situation as intractable or, like the moderns, try to modify the real, we have come to adopt an ambivalent active-passive position, which consists in protecting ourselves from all risks, including those out of human reach, like climate-related ones. Incidentally, the former are subjected to a particular form of speculation by Swedish artists Goldin+Senneby in *The Temperature of Speculation*, their new project for Rennes.

In the early 21st century, Sloterdijk's kinetic utopia sees its calamitous completion in the current financial and ecological disturbances. The highly valued notions of progress, development, and growth are deeply challenged yet, curiously enough, they are still frequently used in speeches dealing with economic policy.<sup>4</sup>

While the modernist creed consisted in inventing the History of humankind within the frame of a tamed and disposable nature, Man nowadays finds it hard to come up with a new project taking into account his shrunk and exhausted environment, which turns out to have become hostile as a result of his activities and his "footprint." What direction will he take in order to have his quest for the perpetuation of the species parallel the modern ideal of a lighter life? Everywhere, everything is disorienting and we don't know how to renew or replace the now outworn paradigms inherited from the Enlightenment. And yet, should we, like Mauro Cerqueira, celebrate the end of the world? It is true that the thought of the world's finitude is made more and more conspicuous, and it is equally true that the erasing of the future,<sup>5</sup> i.e. the disintegration of all encouraging perspectives for tomorrow, entails the emergence of a wealth of theories about utopia, about the "re-enchantment" of the world, about greener valleys or, at the other end of the spectrum, about apocalyptic visions. However, has the complexity of our relation to the future, its principles and its intrinsic movement really been examined?

3. *Id.*, p. 28.

4. It should be noted, though, that one nowadays speaks of scientific or technological breakthroughs rather than of progress.

5. See Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'Effacement de l'avenir*, Paris, Débats-Galilée, 2000.

6. Jacques Derrida, "Penser ce qui vient", in *Derrida pour les temps à venir*, edited by René Major, Paris, Stock, L'autre pensée, 2007, p. 17-62.

### What comes

With this short phrase, coined by Jacques Derrida,<sup>6</sup> a gap opens which is both frightening and yet guarantees a maximum opening to all possibilities. To what does this phrase refer? What comes? What type of otherness or what part of ourselves? Does this come to us? Does this come *from us*? Or else, *with us*? The unknown in *what comes*, in what is not already there, is precisely what frightens us, what urges us to anticipate, predict, and protect us from the onslaughts of the unexpected and keep us unharmed whenever possible; this is precisely what grants us our freedom to decide. Thus, the phrase "what comes" incites one to think of the phrase itself and,



Reynald Drouhin  
*Cité*, 2008  
Burnt wood sculpture  
79 x 79 x 79 cm

so doing, to unfold its different forms: “what comes to us,” “what becomes/what comes again,” “what comes up,” “what comes from us.” These different forms—tackled successively in the four opuscules of this edition—are not so much the expression of themes as interconnected sentences expressing the same experience of time to come, which binds together anticipation and action as well as event and flux.

*What comes to us* takes the future as a question which we try to find the means to answer. We try to delineate its contours so as to reduce its uncertainty. We want to anticipate it so as to be better prepared, we devise strategies so that our results match our objectives in the best way possible. Such is auditing: its linguistic aspects are analysed by Frédéric Dumond in *le p.l.an.* (p. 26). The promises we make to ourselves are reassuring, they open new vistas similar to the toned-down ones Francesco Finizio confines in the theme park he improvised on a waste ground (*Promise Park*, p. 18).

*What becomes/what comes again* explores the continuous flow of becoming, be it a linear progression from one state to another, or an eternal present. In the first sense of the phrase, “positive” forms of evolution are dealt with critically. For instance, the dehumanising effects of progress haunt Reynald Drouhin’s burnt down digital city (*Cité*, 2008-10). Similarly, Egyptian artist Basim Magdy derides the notion of progress hinting at its Promethean dimension.

Another form of linear becoming can be found in the concept of development born under Truman’s post-war world. In his 1949 State of the Union address, Truman separated the world into two camps: the developed countries and the underdeveloped countries. An ideology which transpires in the works of African artists such as Kan-Si or artists of African origin like Mati Diop, who deconstructs the fantasy of such ideology.

One can also be met with urban mutation, which Société réaliste catches a glimpse of by drilling the names of the current inhabitants of Rennes into the floor of the Jacobins convent—a building due to be renovated soon. This piece functions as a sort of collective vanity.

These transformational strategies create a before and an after, indexed to a principle of improvement. They produce a timeline over which events are evenly distributed, containing the seed of the world’s hypothetical perfection that one typically sees as happening in the future. Contrary to this teleological perspective, another dimension of becoming is to be experienced in the present, as if gushing out from a spring. It is akin to walking aimlessly, which Stefanie Bühler invites us to do with her countryside path (*Feldweg*, 2003). Or else, this present could be seen as a loop, or a series of eternally returning circles, which is not too far from one of these “coming again” experienced in Michel de Broin’s endless staircase (*Revolution*, 2010).

*What comes up* gathers different forms of events in a temporal flux, such as the black-out Benoît-Marie Moriceau anticipates by making a cheap bunker available for anyone in a public garden, or the one, which has just



Renata Poljak  
*La Crise, 2009*  
Video loop  
12 min.  
Sound by Annika Grill

happened, whose still active remnants haunt the hidden spaces of the convent; like chance, which Davide Balula's vortex machine tries to do away with by a complete dilution of the dots on dice (*La Dilution des coïncidences*, 2007); it is also like the crisis against which Renata Poljak opposes the outmoded strength of popular superstitions (*The Crisis*, 2009); ultimately, it is to be found in the catastrophe that Dafna Maimon's film *Disaster* (2007) stretches into unbounded duration as if it never allowed renewal. These ruptures in the continuum of existence stand as the fascinating and vertiginous evidence of the possibility of the impossible, both because they bear in themselves the promise of more invention, of more creation and of the emergence of something unprecedented, as well as because of the well-known idea that the worst is inconceivable and yet to be feared.

*What comes from us*, finally, questions our ability to act and decide, our ability to build the future with reference to justice. The following artistic propositions explore the modes whereby one resists forms of economic, political and social alienation fabricated by our Western civilisation and endeavour to grant the question of shared decision-making pride of place in our thinking. They reconfigure relations between the social sphere to take on established categories, as most of the projects in Thomas Hirschhorn's "presence and production"<sup>7</sup> intend to—in Rennes he presents his *Théâtre précaire*. These propositions put into motion our "mind's strength"—thinking, feelings, will-power—thanks to Bureau d'études' *Générateur animique*, whose peculiar mechanism stimulates self-production. They induce one to experience rest as a way to cohere the parts of the self, otherwise shattered into bits by our hyperactive contemporary lives: such as in Catherine Contour's "beaches" whose experiments in time and space are conducive to repositioning.

Why a collective subject, why does this "us" of the logical loop bind what comes to us to what comes from us? Such is the subject of *oikonomia*, from the Greek *oikos* ("house") and *nomos* ("law, care"), i.e. the multiple inhabitants of the world, a house whose care must be reinvented.

This is a disoriented "we" and yet it has never been more conscious of what it is made of, i.e. its plurality and the interdependence of its different parts.

This "we" whose currently increasing lack of substance is evoked by Djamel Kokene when he re-instils in the present the Tennis Court Oath—a collective and revolutionary act that founded the ideal of justice and equality for all. It is also resorted to when he makes it possible for equal and shared speech via the construction of a Tajmat, a space derived from Kabyle traditions enabling democratic talk.

Thus, originally, economy is the art of living together. How is it possible to reinstate this art today when the dominant economic format—world capitalism—has consistently veered away from it: the general development of Western lifestyles it offers will certainly lead to hastening the destruction of the earth's ecosystems and, ultimately, threatens the very existence of the human race. The notion of responsibility insistently and gradually haunts each and every act perpetrated on this planet, the "butterfly effect" links each human being to their kin and to other forms of life. Progress as the promise to improve

7. Thomas Hirschhorn's "presence and production" projects are based on his own participation in the installation he sets up until the end of the exhibition. This is a concrete and personal act of commitment in the social, political and urban context.



Christoph Keller  
*Deux cieux*, 2007  
Video, sound, 60 min.  
© Adagp, Paris 2010

the various aspects of human existence no longer glows on the horizon and yet human nature implacably leads to desire what's best and to hope for better justice.

But how can man at the same time undertake such a project and be less autistic and conquering towards his environment, how can he accept to be linked, “tied” to what is not himself (other human beings, fauna, flora, the earth, the cosmos, etc.) without devising an altogether new conception of progress? Isn't Bruno Latour leading us on a possible path when he invites us to consider progress and attachment?<sup>8</sup> Attachment to what's there, to a species, to a place, to things that have already happened, without lapsing into traditionalism and the opposition to change: an attachment made in the present. It's all about thinking of what is already there to “spell it out” through the invention of new relationships, rather than wishing to free oneself from the past and avoid difficulty. One should reflect genuinely on life's artificial becoming, a problem well under way, so as not to leave its dangers unattended—for instance, the human brain could become a mere “spare part in our factory of perfection” (Basim Magdy, *The Future of Your Head*, 2008)—as well as its potential.

Questioning the idea of progress doesn't boil down to banning innovation, it rather supposes a demanding relation to its meaning and to the values it is grounded on. Innovation results from the need to bring solutions to problems emerging constantly with every new breakthrough, which implies transgressing the limits of what's known so as to have a more comprehensive mastery of the laws of life. If the world wasn't finite, this process could be infinite.

It is crucial then to understand the logics underpinning contemporary processes of innovation and to confront them to the question of the meaning of the world, of the meaning of human existence, which should be the sole driving force of the economy.

Is it possible to gain from archaic Breton shamanism—the subject of Christoph Keller's film *Deux cieux*, 2007—and view it as a source of hints for the possible relations with nature (energy, power), and as an alternative conception of spirituality helping us in our quest for the meaning of our existence?

Aren't certain supposedly rational types of knowledge largely irrational, such as economic sciences and their speculative forms? It may be that what seems “archaic” doesn't belong to the past, but sits beside us and is entangled in modernity, it is to be tapped into for the improvement of our relation to the world today and tomorrow. This is why Bruno Latour discards the symbol of the arrow as a modernist antique, and instead compares time to a spaghetti dish, with coexisting and intertwining temporal dynamic circumvolutions. One understands, therefore, that the complexity of the world undermines any project aiming at freezing the contours of the future. The fundamental unexpectedness of *what comes* calls for humility.

8. See Bruno Latour's lecture “La notion de futur aujourd’hui” given on 20 Oct 2008 in a one-day conference titled “Has the future a future?” organised by the Bibliothèque Publique d'Information at the Pompidou Centre, Paris. Available on <http://archives-sonores.bpi.fr/>

And yet, the current political and economic power structures devise tomorrow's methods of control able to contain the forces of chaos, thus more or less consciously imposing on the world-to-come the concrete expression of their domination strategies.

"Cancelling the future is the biggest risk, it is the ultimate evil that threatens us."<sup>9</sup> This would amount to indexing our trajectories on "machinic" programmes whose horror science fiction depicts. Moreover, these are not unlikely futures, but the false promises of the present and the possible becoming of our lives. Because before cyborgs are made to think and speak, "machinic" programmes are operated through extremely powerful computers to model our lives according to the needs of those in power and to calculate the already-known or the emergent risks (listed by Julien Prévieux in a new piece) meant to promote the by-products of the financial industry. Nowadays, the world of insurance, reinsurance and actuaries is a new clergy, deciding on the price to pay for our salvation. You can buy everything, even that which is deprived of value: fear, desire, disaster and poverty.

"Machinic" programmes also fill management and marketing manuals, replete with models teaching how to manipulate collaborators (storytelling) and consumers alike. They are used by trend agencies which, following industrial and commercial logics, decide three years in advance on the aesthetics of our environment to come. Peter Drucker, the father of Anglo-Saxon management once stated: "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Relegating economic planning to the museum of Soviet antiques ("when do we need more tractors?"), using scenarios ("what if?"), British artist and critic Liam Gillick says, is "a defining characteristic that is common in post-modern societies. It is crucial to the risk-taking and delicate balance sought by those who wish to exploit resources and people yet it is also the tool of those who wish to propose change"<sup>10</sup> so as "to maintain the level of mobility and reinvention required to provide the dynamic aura of so-called free-market economies." However you take it, it always consists in large-scale manipulation and in developing means of control, from bureaucracies which implement their ideology, to capitalist tycoons who compensate their risk-taking by complex financial schemes and build empires on the invention of new myths.

In 1993, some time after the fall of the Berlin wall, a poster in the foyer of Berlin's Volksbühne stated: "Gebt mir ein Leitbild." Give me an icon, a guiding-image, a direction I might follow. Give me something to believe in.

We have the fall of the communist system on the one hand, and on the other hand the impossibility of finding meaning in capitalism and its quest for the quantification, absorption and transformation of everything into profit... And yet, thinking the future definitely represents for each and everyone a continuous attempt to look for meaning, in other words a direction induced by their desire to preserve themselves and avoid the repetition of past woes (their *conatus*).

9. Jacques Derrida, *Foi et savoir*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p. 72.

10. Liam Gillick, "Should the future help the past?" ([http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/readingroom/Gillick\\_Prevision.pdf](http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/readingroom/Gillick_Prevision.pdf)).



Denicolai & Provoost  
*Youtube Was a Video*, 2008  
Milled wood panel, glued  
and lacquered letters  
98,4 x 175 cm  
Courtesy aliceday, Brussels

In the 1950s, the anthropology of the future emerged together with prospective, born out of the disaster of the war and the need not to be taken by surprise anymore. An attitude and ability—rather than a science—enabling one to foresee what would happen if men didn't change the way things go. Rather than predicting the techniques of the future in the wake of those of the present time, as futurologists do now without distancing themselves from their meaning, prospective—as it was thought out by Gaston Berger, its main founder—concentrates on what human needs should be satisfied in the present without lapsing into easy futurism.

The aim of action remains the heart of the matter, the attitude of the “prospectivist” implies a “conversion of one's look” which must “restrict time to the present only (...) and analyse it both as the consequence of the past and the index of the future, as a transformational and ephemeral point. (...)

The future depends above all on what's there in the present and on what possibilities the present offers to men of action. It is not what comes after the present, but what differs from it.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, “tomorrow is a hidden strength”<sup>12</sup> pervaded with a real that hasn't yet happened.

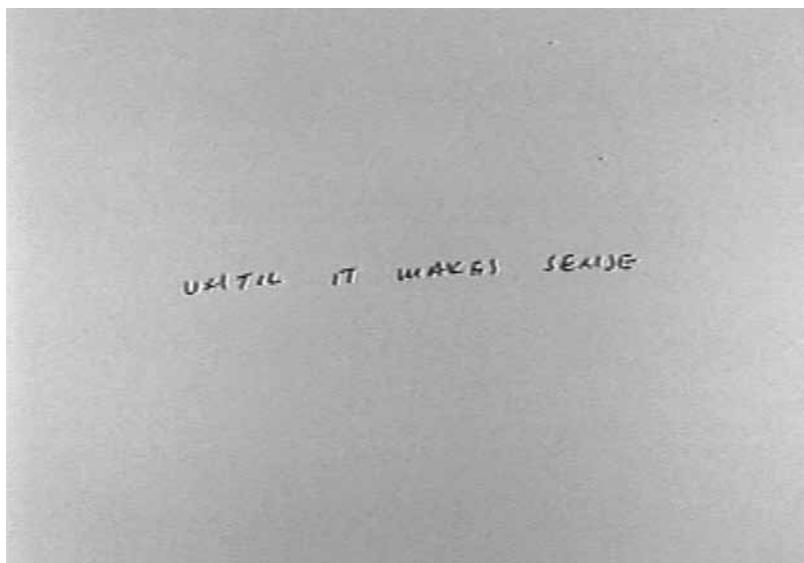
Denicolai and Provoost's piece, *Youtube Was a Video* unlocks the present in such a way. It summons the former as the past of a hypothetical future which the viewer must apprehend as if it were his present. He/she is thus confronted with an unalterable and inevitable story—frozen, by definition—which turns out to be developing so that the viewer can actually change it. This piece accepts as possible all scenarios leading to the loss or disappearance of what is defined: the system of shared video content online. Will it disappear? Will it be banned? What will it be replaced with? How will we make sure that it lasts? Such a prospective and open vision of the present also characterises.

Yona Friedman's *Museum of the 21st Century*, whose contours go against the usual rules of museums. While museums, the temples of conservation with their fixed architectural envelope, condition the type, the form and the size of the elements gathered between their walls, Friedman's museum of the future is in a state of perpetual becoming, endlessly transforming according to what it is given temporarily, disregarding established codes. It can accommodate objects from daily life or anything else, and one can give it a particular meaning for posterity, i.e. for the public of the future, which could take it as the means to understand better where they come from. In fact, it is a type of “archaeology of the future,” which helps us give a meaning to a future we don't yet know, in a moment in which we can already and still act upon it.

11. Philippe Durance, “La Prospective de Gaston Berger”, in *De la prospective. Textes fondamentaux de la prospective française, 1955-1966*, Coll. Mémoire, Editions L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 21.

12. Paul Valéry, “La Politique de l'esprit”, in *Variété III*, 1936.

With these examples in mind, one understands that the absolute evil which Derrida refers to is the temptation to model, control and script everything into a completed “machinic” programme which would mean the end of all future. This is exactly the “becoming-mattress” of Man that Bogdan Ghiu



Mario García Torres  
*Until It Makes Sense*, 2004  
Black and white video, silence  
60 sec.  
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

describes (p. 20), i.e. man's inclusion into a mattress which cancels the feeling of otherness. Confronted with such perfect emptiness, he says, "only art will continue to make things appear, only art will enable us to feel anything." From sense to senses. Isn't art—that noisy, ill-timed and gratuitous "mishmash" which Hinrich Sachs and Dominique Noah refer to (p. 36)—that which opens the doors of the unexpected and the unprecedented? The involvement of imagination enables one to freely encounter the unknown: becoming other, doing something else, feeling other sensations. Art's unpredictability proves more crucial than ever, for as philosopher Frédéric Neyrat says (p. 30), one must oppose an imagination allowing the "future [to emerge] as an unlikely creation" which "opens the present for itself alone."

Important philosophers today propose an ethic of the present allowing one not to enter into the future reluctantly, as Paul Valéry said, not to ascribe a reassuring ideal to it, so as to move into it opening entirely to it. Thus Jacques Derrida speaks of "messianicity," which is not about expecting the messiah, but is the existence of an unknown Other who keeps on coming. This is probably what Alain Badiou tries to get at with his philosophy of the event, as "a process from which something new emerges". Something comes and allows truth to be revealed. This is also what Jean-Luc Nancy investigates in the absence of meaning in the world: "There is something, and *this only* makes sense."<sup>13</sup> Sloterdijk does the same when he wishes us to move away from a final goal, to come back to an origin, a "coming-into-the-world", conscious as we are that we could very well not (yet) be here. One could then build on the convergence of these diverse conceptions and make the hypothesis of the future as the advent of meaning, whose perpetual acceptance of *what comes* would constitute the conditions for justice.

13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Sens du monde*, Paris, Galilée, p. 19.