

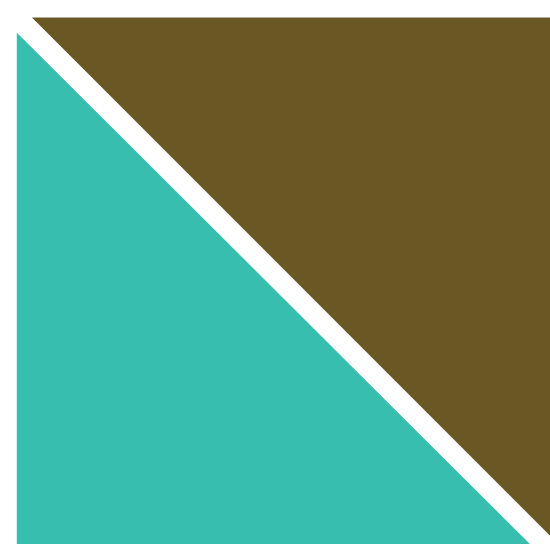
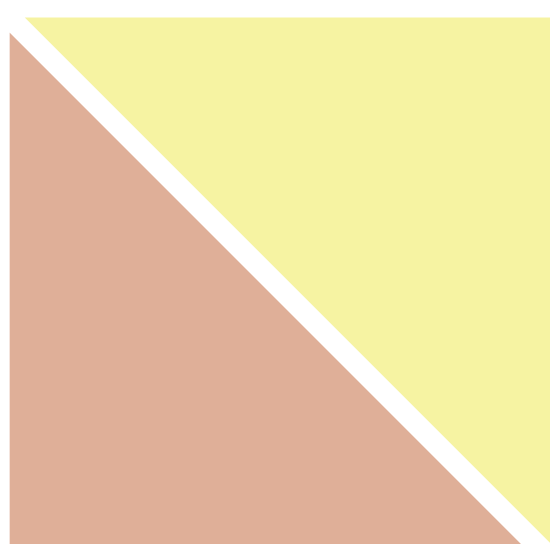
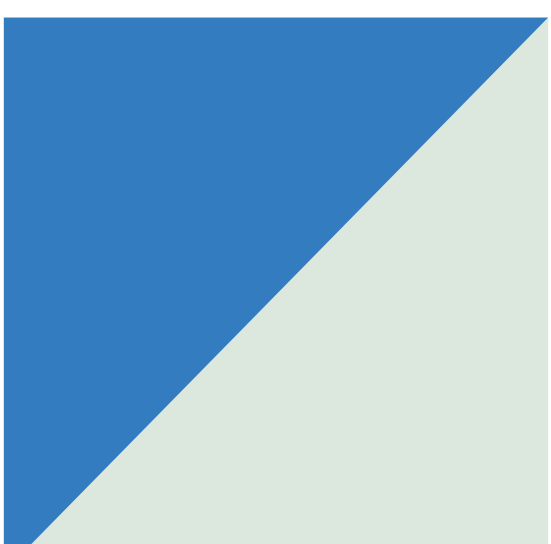
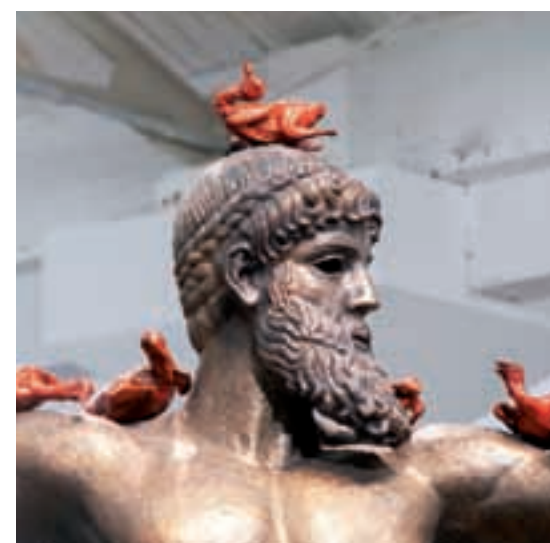
herbst

THEORIE ZUR PRAXIS





How to come to terms with "the end of time"? **Helena Vilalta** carefully examined the exhibitions of this year's steirischer herbst. And found traces of a new continuity, in times where the future already seems to lie behind us.





„To What End?“ (Vangelis Vlahos, „The Bridge“, 2015)

Picture a labyrinth of monumental spikes in the midst of a barren landscape. Made from stone and all leaning in slightly different directions, these megalithic-like structures seem to have emerged from the entrails of the earth, their eruption having scarred the very land upon which they stand. The site possesses an eerie atmosphere, akin to that which encircles ancestral places of worship whose meaning we have long failed to recognise. Except that this is not a cultural fossil from the past but one engineered to communicate present offenses to a distant future – a future beyond humanity. So Peter Galison and Robb Moss tell us in “Containment” (2015), a video installation commissioned for “Hall of Half-Life”, this year’s steirischer herbst exhibition, which looks at how the mind-boggling longevity of radioactive waste poses problems not only for scientific knowledge, but also for the human imagination. Professor Allison Macfarlane puts it simply: “The half-life of plutonium is 24,100 years. We consider something gone after ten half-lives – so 241,000 years.” That is, roughly, the life span of our own species thus far. One attempt to contain – or, rather, delay – this time bomb is the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a disposal facility in New Mexico designed to isolate toxic materials from the natural environment (amongst them, the 30,000 nuclear warheads and associated waste constituting “the legacy of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and ‘the free West’”, according to Roger Nelson, Chief Scientist at WIPP). Although the site wasn’t operative until 1999, the idea to build a national US repository for nuclear waste first emerged in the early 1970s, along with the realisation of the need to warn



„Spielräume“ (Cie. Willi Dorner, „Fitting“, 2012, Foto: Lisa Rastl)



„Es ist so wie es scheint“ (Anita Witek, „Die Reise der Fotografin“, 2007/2008)

future generations of this gargantuan biohazard. To this end, in 1990, a group of advisers, including scientists, linguists, anthropologists, writers, and artists, was tasked with designing a marking system that could last as long as the site: 10,000 years – a mere drop in the ocean considering the overall life span of the material deposited there but still a challenging timeframe for our imagination. It is perhaps not surprising that amongst those approached were astronomer Carl Sagan and artist Jon Lomberg, two of the masterminds behind the Golden Record sent on board the Voyager space probes in 1977, which was intended to represent humanity to extraterrestrial beings. After all, crafting a message for the future is not that dissimilar, at least hypothetically, from intending to communicate with aliens – at stake in both is our ethical relationship with what is fundamentally other. Reflecting on the NASA missive, artist Trevor Paglen has argued as much: “Because the figure of the alien is also someone we imagine or expect to encounter at a time that has not yet come, it is interwoven with our expectations and imaginations of the future itself. If this is the case, then the decision about whether or not to include grand messages or gifts on space probes, carries the symbolic significance of our own relationship to the

possibility of a future.” However, in light of humankind’s increasingly damaging impact upon the planet, the fact that this marking system should be intended for humans – as the brief, set by the US Department of Energy, clearly states – becomes ever more questionable. If in 1990 the future was undoubtedly human, today we are coming to terms with the possibility that our future as a species might not overlap with that of the world we inhabit. Indeed, as we see Cold War wounds reopen day after day in Europe and elsewhere, so too do old apocalyptic fears reignite, giving renewed relevance to Günter Anders’ post-Hiroshima dictum, “the absence of future has already begun”. The danger today doesn’t come from a specific technology or natural calamity, but rather humankind itself: as is well known. In 2000 scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer introduced the term “Anthropocene” to designate a new geological era marked by humankind’s geophysical impact upon the earth’s surface. To say that human time has collided with geological time amounts to arguing that humankind inflects its very conditions of existence – those sacrosanct a priori that Immanuel Kant envisaged as the basis of human experience: time and space. As philosopher Déborah Danowski

„What Remains. Strategies of Saving and Deleting“ (Fränk Zimmer, „information/storage.refresh“, 2010)



„Das ist nicht meine Geschichtel“ (Kiluanji Kia Henda, „The Merchant of Venice“, 2010)

and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have argued, the Anthropocene “doesn’t only represent a ‘crisis’ in time and space, but a fracture of time and space. [...] We are thus forced to acknowledge another continuity, a new continuity of the present and the non-modern past – a mythological continuity, or, in other terms, a cosmopolitical continuity.” The primordial atmosphere of the stone spikes designed to mark WIPP’s nuclear burial ground attests to this collapse of past, present and future. There are both pragmatic and metaphysical reasons for this: it is only logical that in devising signs that can stand the proof of time we model them upon the prehistoric sites that have captured the imagination of generations across millennia. Yet there seems to be a more instinctive impulse at work here. As the end of times looms large before us, we look back at the past as a prefiguration of the future to come – the genesis of the world, of humanity, and of the culture that has led us to accelerate socio-political and geological history. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro put it beautifully: “To think the future disjunction of world and inhabitant inevitably evokes the origin of its present, precarious conjunction. The end of the world projects backward a beginning of the world; the future fate of humankind transports us to its emergence.” This process of soul searching entails scientific and political, as well as mythological, introspection. In other words, the impending horizon of geological corruption and biological extinction pushes us to re-examine the cultural narratives that have shaped our uncertain present. Given what historian Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the mismatch between human aspirations and the natural processes triggered by these very ideals, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro suggest that one way to redress the balance between human



„AA Bronson’s Sacre du Printemps“ (AA Bronson, „Nature Morte“, 2013)

political imagination and its cosmological implications is to learn from those societies who have already faced the end of their world. For example, Amerindian societies, whose near extinction at the hands of European colonisers laid the ground for the industrial revolution and the attendant dependency on fossil fuels that formed the basis of the Anthropocene. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue that the idea of a world beyond humanity is extraneous to Amerindian cosmologies because of their anthropomorphism: since all beings and things in the world evolved from a proto-humanity preceding the cosmos, they preserve a proto-human soul; all things are human. That is, rocks, animals and plants perceive themselves as humans, and it is only to us that they present themselves as other. Or, in other words, their ontology is relational: they are not fixed entities but rather processes of becoming, whose appearance depends on the perspective of the onlooker.

“Hall of Half-Life” is imbued with a similarly animistic approach to the material remains of the past. From Geoffrey Farmer’s broom museum to Mikala Dwyer’s display of geological specimens through to Gerard Byrne’s intervention in the display systems of the Graz Museum, the works commissioned for the exhibition reflect on processes of looking at and framing things as dynamic holders of meaning, evoking art’s capacity to transform objects into pregnant forms. In this, they are driven by the material mysticism of someone like Roger Caillois, who saw nature as a vast hieroglyph waiting to be deciphered, describing the stones that he so liked to collect as “an irreversible cut made into the fabric of the universe. Like fossil imprints, this mark, this trace, is not only an effigy, but the thing itself stabilised by a miracle, which attests to itself and to the hidden laws of our shared formation where the whole of nature was borne along.” It is tempting

„Hall of Half-Life“ (Mikala Dwyer, „Garden of Half-Life“, 2014, Foto: Alejandra Canales)



„Heritage. Schaumbad, das Freie Atelierhaus, erbt ein Arme-Leute-Viertel“ (Foto: Martin Behr & Martin Osterider)

to see the artists in “Hall of Half-Life” as archaeologists of the future, trying to make sense of the sediments left behind by an extinct culture – asking themselves about the symbolism of brooms or the ritual use of museological exhibits. But then again, what Amerindian cosmology tells us is that we don’t need to project ourselves into the future or distant galaxies to envision such alterity: the other is within us, we just need to be attentive enough to the possibility of rustling leaves becoming birds, or brooms turning human. Still, for those of us not yet attuned to such perspectivism, the idea of time travel provides a useful proxy to think about our relationship to that which is other – and one that, as Anthropocene theory reminds us, could be as vital for the planet we inhabit as for humanity. Of course, Amerindian societies are not the only ones to have had to come to terms with the end of time. The trauma of loss pierced through homosexual communities in the wake of the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, shattering the idea of a future altogether while also altering these communities’ perceptions of history. For AA Bronson, as for so many of his generation, the epidemic had both societal and deeply personal implications: the passing of Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal in 1994, with whom he had lived and worked together as General Idea for over twenty-five years, literally burst open his affective and creative world, as well as the collective sense of identity that the group had been nurturing for so long. Much of AA Bronson’s work since has involved the creation of rituals

striving to reconstitute the affective chains of transmission fractured by the epidemic; that is, reconstituting the relationship between the past, the present and the future. Importantly, the mourning enabled by these rituals is both personal and generational in the sense that AA Bronson sees himself as a conductor – a shaman – facilitating the encounter between past and future queer communities. Talking about his performance “Invocation of the Queer Spirits”, he has said: “It’s entirely about being present, and present to the future and the past, and it’s about being in community with the other people who are there, and being in community with the dead as well as the living.”

Spirituality and collaboration – two concepts that the art system struggles to digest – coalesce in AA Bronson’s practice more generally. Invested in radical forms of pedagogy and communal living since he dropped out of architecture school in the late 1960s, AA Bronson has continued to work collaboratively after the dissolution of General Idea, but in a significantly different manner: rather than creating a new collective body, he has surrounded himself by a young generation

„Jörg Schlick“ (Jörg Schlick, „Studio Lascaux 972“, 2005)



„Hall of Half-Life“ (Peter Galison & Robb Moss, „Landscapes of Stopped Time“, 2015)



„Off the Records“ (Werner Reiterer, „Brille“, ca. 1999)

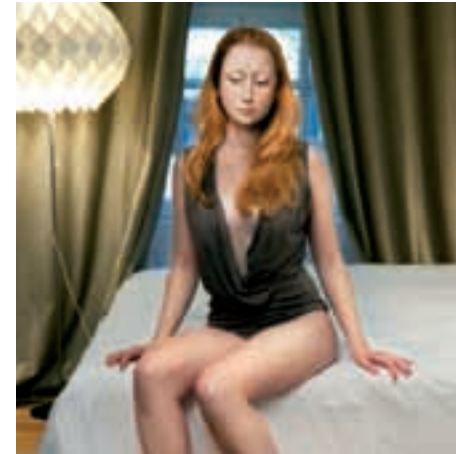
of queer artists, thinkers, performers and other practitioners, involving them in a Gesamtkunstwerk infused with pagan and syncretic rituals, in which the distinctions between the works or their authors become blurred. Only the figure of the Beuysian artist-as-shaman emerges against this communal backdrop, thus continuing General Idea’s ironic appropriation of self-branding as a means of building upon the avant-garde’s fusion of art and life. AA Bronson’s “Sacre du Printemps” at the Grazer Kunstverein presents an exhibition-cum-environment combining individual and collaborative works as well as friends’ contributions, with one added ingredient: since the project is conceived in tandem with the artist’s concurrent exhibition at the Salzburger Kunstverein, the troupe’s journey between institutions will extend the project – and its displacements and transgressions – beyond the exhibition space.

Tongue-in-cheek ideas of self-branding and syncretism are also at play in Xu Zhen’s exhibition “Corporate” at the Kunsthau Graz. The epitome of the artist-as-entrepreneur, Xu Zhen has incorporated himself not once but twice: in 2009 he launched the company Madeln, which in turn produced the Xu Zhen brand four years later. If many of the corporation’s “product lines” look just like the pastiche reproductions of global culture that you might have come to expect from export products – e.g. “art” – made in China, it is because Madeln knows how to meet its customers’ expectations, and exceedingly

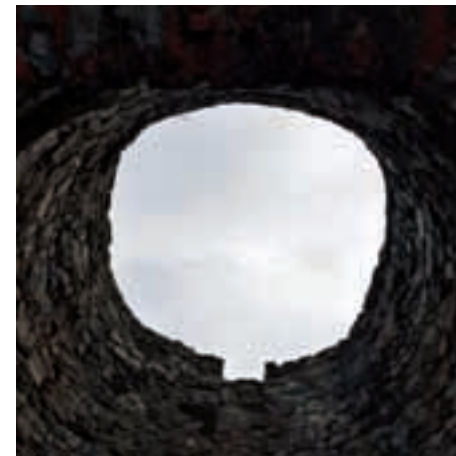
well at that. “Physique of Consciousness” (2011–ongoing) can be seen as the cynical counterpart to AA Bronson’s holistic healing rituals. Billed as “the first cultural fitness exercise”, it distils gestures and movements borrowed from spiritual and cultural rituals, dance and gymnastics from across the world into a handful of exercises ready to conquer the global art market with the perfect blend of physical, spiritual and, so we are told, cultural wellness. Such eclecticism acquires irreverent overtones in the sculptural series “European Thousand-Hand Classical Sculpture” (2014), which makes use of China’s reputable reproduction expertise to produce three sculptural groups in which classical European sculptures are lined up one after the other so that when seen frontally they appear to embody a Buddhist deity with multiple arms. In this way, Xu Zhen brings down all the cultural barriers that could – God forbid – slow down the free circulation of art as commerce. In fact, his brand of social critique is but a new twist on an old theme: by feeding the global art market what it desires, he holds a mirror to neoliberal society.

The road trip “Inventing Ritual: A Contemporary Art Pattern” puts the icing on the cake, courtesy of Madeln: a convoy bringing eight Chinese artists from Shanghai to Graz via Yekateringburg, Moscow and Warsaw. In each of the venues, they will present a one-hour “ritual” introducing the work of twenty contemporary artists based – or, rather, “made” – in China. Shamelessly presenting art as a national export, the project also underscores the performative matrix of Xu Zhen’s practice, which can be understood as the (re-) invention of spiritual and cultural rituals for our neoliberal present. As Monika Szewczyk has argued, “what makes Madeln interesting is that – rather than resisting capitalism overtly – its questioning of the heavenly realm, which might just undo

„Speech Acts. Vom Sprechen als politischem Handeln“ (Ricarda Denzer, „Place of Another Presence“)



„Reliqte, Reloaded“ (Dorothee Golz, „Maria mit den rotblonden Haaren“, 2010)



„Saint Jude’s Leftovers“ (Foto: Mikala Dwyer)

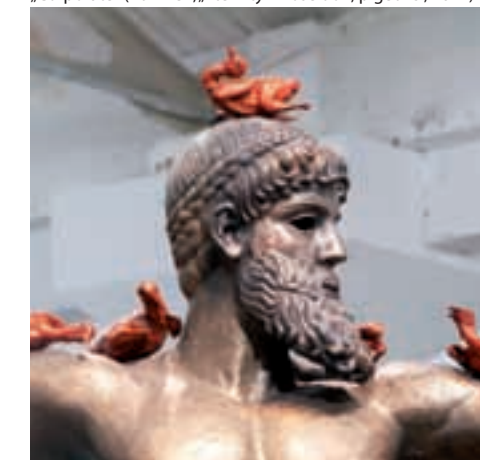
or otherwise transform capitalism’s soul-draining spirit, seems to come from inside the corporate frame.”

Xu Zhen’s parodic reproduction of corporate stratagems finds a local precedent in the chameleonic practice of the late Jörg Schlick, whose retrospective at the Künstlerhaus shows him deftly straddling a vast array of disciplines – from serial photography to collage, publishing, theatre, music and curation. A true catalyst of the Graz art scene throughout the 1980s and 90s, Schlick put collaboration – with other artists, musicians and playwrights – at the centre of his practice, thus contributing to expand the role of the artist in society beyond that of a mere producer of art objects. But it is the nihilist branding of Lord Jim Loge, the all-male drinking-club-cum-secret-society that he set up in the early 1980s together with Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen and Wolfgang Bauer, that stands out in light of artists’ renewed interest in forms of self-institutionalisation. The collective’s image was as full of contradictions as can be expected from such a grouping of artists: even though they defined themselves as a secret society, they were intent on making their logo – depicting a sun, two breasts and a hammer – as ubiquitous as that of Coca-Cola, while their motto (stamped on many of Schlick’s works) ironically subverted the fraternity principle, offering a bleak outlook

on humans’ capacity for empathy: “Keiner hilft Keinem” (“Nobody helps nobody”).

This caustic slogan resonates deeply – and tragically – in today’s Fortress Europe. While scientists preoccupy themselves with ideas of deep time and the environmental legacy that we will leave behind, the thousands of deaths that we are made to witness week in, week out in the Mediterranean, are a poignant reminder that the humanity infamously credited in the Anthropocene is not universal – that anthropos carries a Western passport. Thinking about our relation to the world to come must therefore necessarily be accompanied by a reflection upon present relationships of alterity and about our responsibilities towards the other. So <rotor>’s group exhibition “Das ist nicht meine Geschichte” reminds us, interrogating forms of received knowledge from multiple standpoints – from sexual politics to xenophobia. The artists in Camera Austria’s exhibition “To What End?”, in turn, have travelled not only in time but also across different cultural realities to question linear histories and territorial identities: mostly working on the historical legacies of countries that they don’t identify as their own, they map a post-national world in which the arrow of time eats its own tail. Mohamed Bourouissa’s appropriated snapshots of shoplifters, a common sight outside New York convenience stores purportedly meant to deter offenders, bring back images of the country’s worst episodes of racial segregation, suggesting that history is not a thing of the past. Takashi Arai’s uncanny daguerreotypes of the aftermath of the

„Corporate“ (Xu Zhen, „Eternity – Poseidon, pigeons“, 2014)



„An artist is an artist is an artist is a female artist“ (Maria Anwander, „Fountain (after Sherrie Levine)“, 2012, Foto: Gunnar Meier)

nuclear disaster in Fukushima, meanwhile, make use of an obsolete (and highly toxic) chemical process to make a recent event look as if it belonged to the past: their fuzzy texture and ghostly lighting is reminiscent of historical relics, as if warning us that the future might be behind us.

The temporal dislocation in Arai’s photographs is exemplary of the strategies of displacement employed by the artists in this year’s steirischer herbst to burst open notions of heritage. In revealing the existential anxiety of a society hastening to its own end and the crisis of identity that comes with knowing oneself to be vulnerable, they address what philosopher Isabelle Stengers has identified as the challenge of our time: “to reclaim the art of relations, of thinking with, whose destruction marks the Anthropocene”. In other words, the flip side of the uncertainty about our own future put forward by ecological discourse must be a renewed engagement in ethical and cosmopolitical thought – thinking and being with others, here and there, now and then.

Helena Vilalta is a London based writer and curator, and an editor of the journal “Afterall”.