

Viruses as Phenomena of De Facto Destabilization and Potential Subversion

Siegfried Zielinski

Preface

The most important precondition for a rhetoric to succeed is that one should speak on only those topics in which one is competent. And one should do this in such a way that what comes across is one's own conviction in what one is saying. I learned these two basic principles over a breakfast conversation with Walter Jens, the first professor of rhetoric at a German university, in 1990 when he was still president of the Academy of Arts in Berlin. He offered them as well-meaning advice, after noticing how nervous and uncertain I was as a young intellectual in advance of a panel discussion I was to lead later that evening, with Bazon Brock, Vilém Flusser, and Robert Jungk (back then, the Technical University of Berlin still had a designated faculty position for a professor of Futurology, which Jungk filled with a radically critical and ecological spirit). The advice left a deep impression on me. For it is precisely these two weak spots in the system – in this case, the publishing system – that the pandemic of 2020/21 has laid mercilessly bare as it goes on. The published discourse of the past weeks and months has proliferated to the point of insufferability, with the facile and self-satisfied speech of self-appointed experts on complicated matters of medicine and biology, on complex system-connections in virology and epidemiology, on overheated economies, incomprehensible global relationships, and

their eruptive shifts and changes. For this reason, I'd like to emphasize at the start: I am a media thinker and am speaking in this lecture¹ as a subject who tries to reflect critically and creatively on techno-based media and communications relationships. And so, if you'll allow me to begin with a marginal, medial and maybe even surprising point of entry.

I am presently working with musician, composer and sound researcher FM Einheit, original percussionist and beating heart of the industrial avant-garde band Einstürzende Neubauten, on an internet platform that began as an artists' initiative in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Saint Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, is that peculiar city where the first ever patent was issued for electronic color television over one hundred years ago and where, a few years after that, the tele-electronically controlled musical instrument, the theremin, was invented. The first broadcast by Radio DON – or Radio Free Modulations, as I call the project – was devoted to the medium itself and its potentialities; it aired on May 1, 2020. The second broadcast, which went online a week later, is focused entirely on the virus as phenomenon. The hour-long program concluded with a song, for which I wrote the following lyrics and FM Einheit the accompanying music and noise:²

After the Pandemic...

*After the pandemic
We need stronger cars
To be able to escape faster
We need safer cars
To protect us from the other
We need mobile fortresses
Strongholds on wheels
Fast tanks would be ideal
We need more, more and more*

1 The text was presented in a somewhat shorter version on April 30, 2020 in the online colloquium *Designforschung*, with Gesche Joost of the Design Research Lab at the Berlin University of the Arts.

2 All the broadcasts are accessible on conductor Teodor Currentzis's platform MusicAeterna, the above-mentioned second broadcast at the following address: <https://musicaeterna.world/en/?id=369>.

After the pandemic
We need higher fences
To protect our properties
Alphaville on all continents
We need to accelerate our communications
In order to increase the online delirium
We need more virtual commodities
We need more virtual sex
And we need more, more and more

After the pandemic
We need bigger football stadiums
We need bigger concert halls
We need bigger and faster aeroplanes
We need bigger and faster ocean liners
We need flying and floating castles
We need to heat up the planet until it is glowing
All we need is more, more and more
From everything, for everybody

After the pandemic
After we had slept so much and so long
We could also wake up
Interfere into the saturated system of correlated realities
Recognize the other as our possible neighbor
Meet the others with dignity
Take care for an unconditioned dialogue and
Dance the unconditioned WE
We need more, more and more (of this)

The text of my brief lecture consists of seven fragmentary reflections and thought provocations. And so that you don't sink into bitter melancholy once I finish, I will present you at the end with some constructive consequences in connection with these seven fragments, some projections I have derived from my reflections – primarily concerned with teaching and research in the fields of art and design, of creative making and thinking, which to my mind must comprise an indissoluble pair if they are to be realized with any level of sophistication.

Reflections and thought provocations – Seven fragments

1.

Viruses are the spawn of an atmosphere too dense and overheated. Viruses can never be autonomous, let alone *free*. Viruses lead wholly dependent existences; they exist only in relation to other living individuals. They need bodies or biological systems that are, in principle and in their healthy form, larger, more powerful and richer than they are themselves. These bodies/systems function for the virus like hosts. If it is even possible to speak of freedom in this context, that freedom would belong to the host, not the guest. The hosts have, in theory, the choice whether or not to allow the infectious guest inside. The viruses have no choice.

William S. Burroughs – who regrettably never won the Nobel Prize for literature, although he was at least as deserving as Bob Dylan – composed his magnificent and completely delirious protocol of an intellectual junkie, *Naked Lunch* (1959), like a report on a planet-enveloping virus. About its basic parasitic function, he wrote: "It is thought that the virus is a degeneration from more complex life-form. It may at one time have been capable of independent life. ... It can exhibit living qualities only in a host, by using the life of another – the renunciation of life itself, a *falling* towards inorganic, inflexible machine, towards dead matter" (Burroughs 2001, 113).

2.

The virus drives toward destruction. That is its determinacy. It lives unto death, one might say, in a play on a phrase from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: It lives for the sake of organizing the death of its host, which necessarily implicates it in its own death (the death of the virus itself). The virus strives to prolong this process as long as possible in order to safeguard its spread. Viruses need hosts, but hosts have zero need for viruses. This sort of parasite is always potentially lethal for them. Especially when the living systems in question freely idle in *circular full closure* in anticipation of their expected death.

The opposition of organic and mechanical that Burroughs opens up is constitutive for the novel *Naked Lunch*, as it is for other early texts by this eminent member of the Beat Generation. What's remarkable here is the word choice, which we will encounter again and again

with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their critique of the technical: the *in-* or *anorganic*, which they borrowed from Antonin Artaud's anorganic body, the "body without organs" (*corpus sans organes*³), and the *machinic*, which determines their idea of the Other that confronts the human.

Burroughs expresses, trenchantly and rather splendidly, the internal correlation between a death-oriented *Dasein* and the extremely organized and disciplined parts of the social by analogizing addiction with the all-pervading destructive activity of cancer, which he then in turn compares with bureaucracy: "The end result of complete cellular representation [of a body – S.Z.] is cancer. Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer. ... Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms. ... Bureaucracy is wrong as a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction ... Bureaus die when the structure of the state collapses. They are as helpless and unfit for independent existence as a displaced tapeworm, or a virus that has killed the host" (Burroughs 2001, 112–3).

(I have always therefore, among other reasons, urged the scaling of arts universities such that they make do with a minimum of administration. Getting the best students, the best professors one can find from all over the world to perform a particular task and allowing them to work in a round-the-clock operation results in a minimum of bureaucracy. They will form a self-organizing system, in the best case much like a temporary cooperative.)

3.

The most important effect that viruses organize prior to death is, according to French media philosopher Jean Baudrillard, *destabilization*. This is why – once they've overcome their initial lethargy – the bureaus get called so forcefully to action, to put preventative measures in place. For in the various preliminary stages of the virus's destructive activity prior to death *subversion* and *insurrection* (uprising, revolt) are taking place. Both are bound up with one another: The increasingly extremely densely woven systems and networks of whirring, circulating energies, accelerations, en masse virtual encounters and productivity mania that we have ourselves created drive incessantly toward

3 Artaud first used the term in 1947 in his radio drama *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*.

their own – at least provisional – *destabilization*. That is the condition for their survival. And when survival is assured, then the systems may oscillate back into a normal state.

"Communication itself is a viral process," writes Baudrillard, "in the sense that every element in the communication is equalized and a simple network emerges where the same communicates interactively with the same. For me this means that wherever politics itself is immersed in the world of communication, it will arrive at the same fate of destabilization, it will become destabilized ... Viruses, virality, etc., would be the revenge, the objectual revenge on all humans, against the entire human undertaking of ruling and *overruling the world*" (Baudrillard 1988, 249).

4.

The enormous destructive potential of viral phenomena can be transformed into constructive energies if they are understood in time as necessary interventions in saturated systems. (Provided one still believes the future is possible.) An important *modus operandi* for such a transformation, in both artistic and scientific processes, is the experiment. The experiment necessarily precedes the test. Ideally, the experiment is realized as a *generator of surprise*, a term coined by biologist Mahlon Hoagland (1921–2009) to describe experimental processes. A generator of surprise will provoke a deviation, at least momentarily, in a system otherwise reliably established to move in a specific direction. This deviation is the condition for every sort of change. In pre-Socratic natural philosophy, the term *clinamen* was used to describe this. In his renowned poem *De rerum naturae*, Lucretius describes the sensational procedures as follows:

When particles are borne by their own weight / on a downward
path straight through empty space, / at undetermined times and
random places, / they swerve a little—not much, just enough / so
you can say they have changed direction. / Unless they had this
habit of swerving, / all of them would fall through deep empty
space / like drops of rain—among first elements / no impacts or
collisions would be made, / so nature never would have made a
thing. (Lucretius 2010, II, lines 302ff.)

The phenomenon of unforeseeable deviation is comparable with the sudden change in rhythm, either walking or dancing, that the Marx Brothers cultivated on stage and Chaplin – or Fred Astaire, in a very disciplined way – honed to perfection on the screen. An analogue in contemporary music performance would be something like breakbeat, with its quick, unexpected breaks in only just established symmetries that provoke sudden changes in movement in the bodies on the dancefloor – a leap from an organic to a machinic, or at least machine-organized, state, for example.

One of the most convincing and at the same time difficult body-economies was composed around 1970 by painter and philosophical writer Pierre Klossowski under the title *La monnaie vivante* (*Living Currency*). Michel Foucault described the text as “the greatest work of our epoch.” It involves a way of thinking the body that is already conscious of its reification and commodification and attempts, from this point outward, to rethink the barter economy: the body as the site of production. Klossowski dedicates particular attention to the experiment that he himself radically practiced, both as writer and visual artist:

As its basic underlying principle, industry presumes that every human phenomenon, like every natural phenomenon, can be treated as an *exploitable material*. ... However, even the fabrication of useful goods has periods of intermittent sterility, especially since the accelerated pace of manufacturing must constantly find ways to prevent inefficiency in its production processes. And the only solution to the problem of inefficiency is waste. Trial and error, which is the condition of efficiency, necessarily leads to wasteful errors. (Klossowski 2017, 50, 49)

In his 1970 manifesto *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs explicitly takes Wilson Smith’s scientific study *Mechanisms of Virus Infection* (1963) – which remains a worthwhile read, almost 60 years later – as his starting point, when he projects knowledge of virology onto the medial: “a virus IS a very small unit of word and image” (Burroughs 2005, 7). In a wealth of drastic examples, Burroughs shows how the concept of a viral word-image unit can be introduced into the assemblage of existing mass-medial communications as an irritating experience. He begins with the simple cut-up tape-recording experiments,

which he developed with Brion Gysin as an aesthetic tactic of subversion, then moves on to the cut-up method with language and scrambling techniques, and finally proposes the organization of a sex-tape festival: "100,000 people bring their scrambled sex tapes, and video tapes as well, to scramble in together. Projected on vast screens, muttering out over the crowd, sometimes it slows down, so that you see a few seconds, then scrambled again, then slow down, scramble. Soon it will scramble them all naked. The cops and the National Guard are stripping down. LET'S GET OURSELVES SOME CIVVIES. Now a thing like that could be messy, but those who survive it recover from the madness" (Burroughs 2005, 23–24).

At the end of his manifesto, Burroughs describes the "categorical THE" of our established language as a "virus mechanism." The "EITHER/OR" that is practiced as a norm is another "virus formula" that always only allows for one alternative: "you OR the virus. EITHER/OR. This is in point of fact the conflict formula which is seen to be the archetypical virus mechanism" (Burroughs 2005, 35). Through critical reflection on an encrusted semantics, Burroughs ultimately develops the concept of a language yet to be created that will not only eradicate the virus mechanisms but make their formulations impossible in the new language: "This language will be a tonal language like Chinese, it will also have a hieroglyphic script as pictorial as possible without being cumbersome or difficult to write. This language will give one the option of silence" (ibid.).

5.

"Social distancing" is a stupid term deriving from the same deceptive semantic vicinity that gave us "social networks." What the concept aspires to, in the context of the pandemic, is in fact the opposite of what the term designates on a superficial level. "Social distancing" demands a maximal degree of social approach, in the sense of a solidarity that is so inflated as to be emptied of meaning, while at the same time a maximal suspension of physical contact.

Therein exactly resides the definition and function of the *telematic*. For at least two centuries already, we have been working "remotely," since the first technical artifacts and concrete systems were invented for the remote connection of those who could not be

present together in the same place.⁴ In our practice with these cultural techniques, we are well advanced. Hundreds of millions of people in the 20th century have been intensively trained in distancing from other bodies, from that which is non-identical with ourselves – whether through pandemics, world wars, economic crises, missions to outer space or above all the increasing commodification of communication. Tele-communication is the constant praxis in our interactions with representatives, with avatars, with dematerialized, de-eroticized, at bottom *statistical* bodies (units based in statistical information and calculations).

What we are now meant to learn is a bizarre balancing act. At the zenith of our alienation from the body of the Other, at which point even nature itself turns against the physical identity of the human being, we are meant to practice social nearness with one another from an appropriate distance – but nearness is no longer a sensory experience; it is instead the abnegation of physical contact. (And this is thinkable only in those few places on the planet where sufficient physical distance between people is possible. With money, one may buy distance. While poverty compels nearness.⁵) Thus, absolute proximity will henceforth be a component of an advanced culture of substitution and simulacrum. The so-called “social graph,” which digitally and administratively governs the relationships in a system like Facebook, is meant to become generalized as life experience.

Interestingly, at the zenith of the disembodiment of reality, a counter tendency is asserting itself in the research on artificial extelligence. In robotics in particular, the concepts of an embodied intelligence (EI) are growing in significance.⁶ Here, strictly rule-based systems work closely together with the irregularities and diverse productive potentials of matter.

4 In the deep-time dimension, this genesis of telematic techniques can be thought of even more broadly – as far back as two millennia. Cf. e.g., my essay “War & Media” in Zielinski 2019.

5 “poverty and proximity
belong to the same
semantical neighborhood”
is the refrain of a song, I wrote for episode #14 of the MusicAeterna series; it has the thematical focus of *touch*. https://musicaeterna.org/en/media/fm_14_touch/.

6 Cf. for instance Ralf Der and Nihat Ay's projects at the Max Planck Institute for Mathematics in Leipzig, represented in summary form in Albus 2009.

A hopefully temporary, but for the moment sensible *vade-mecum* in this situation could be the installation of a continuous and thoroughly livable split, comparable to the suggestion with which I concluded my book [...*After the Media*] just about ten years ago:



Fig. 1 On their shoulders the misers whose religion is Mammon carrying the universe. After the stock market crash of 1720 in France, England and the Netherlands, investors who had lost money called the stock dealers in illusions “wind traders.” In this book “traders of wind” is also used to refer to *laterna magica* projectionists. In: *Het groote tafereel de dwaasheid. Vertoonende de opkomst, voortgang en ondergang der Actie, Bubbels en Windnegotie, in Vrankryk, Engeland, en de Nederlanden, gepllegt in den Jaare 1720*, Konst-Plaaten, comedien en Gedigten. Amsterdam: Zoote en Wyze, “Atlas Keuelspe.”

To avoid an existence that is too caught up within time and is therefore paranoid, and to avoid being too little within time and therefore thinking one is at home on the rings of Saturn in melancholy and bitterness, it is helpful as a principle to cultivate the conscious split. We organize, learn, debate, and amuse ourselves in technological networks. We enthuse, think, enjoy, believe, and trust in autonomous, separate situations, each on his/her own and sometimes with other individuals. This amounts to a balancing act: in a single lifetime we have to learn to exist online and be *offline*. If we don't succeed in this, we shall become mere appendages of the world that we have created, merely its technical functions. We should not allow cybernetics, the science of optimal control and predictability of complex events, this triumph. (Zielinski 2013, 261)

6.

And here we are back where we started. According to Baudrillard, over-integrated systems necessarily bring about their own demise. Viruses are means of initiating such a process and, once initiated, accelerating it. This is the apocalyptic – thus at root theological – thinking. Exactly like the idea of a nature that now suddenly strikes back, only after the aging planet has finally clearly perceived what we have wrought upon it.

Nature has, since we have begun to think it, i.e., to live consciously within it, no autonomous and therefore no divine existence. It develops in reciprocal interaction with its inhabitants, its temporary guests – as do the inhabitants in reciprocal interaction with their planetary host, the earth. Nor has culture, since its inception, ever had a “symbolic immunity,” as Baudrillard claims in his reflections on the virus. As a fragile system, culture was and is – if we prefer not to think of it as a sclerotic conservatorium – always assailable, and what's more: It is precisely this assailability that makes it malleable in the first place. Humans and nature exist – as do humans and machines – in a non-trivial relationship of mutual interdependencies. That means that they reciprocally destroy one another but are likewise able to reciprocally learn and profit from one another.

7.

Telematics means a mode of communication in which the message is removed from the body of the messenger.⁷ Not only do messages independent of the body of the messenger travel much faster through the telematic networks. They also become *ubiquitous*, are everywhere at once. In this way they establish a phenomenon of the *rational* that resides outside the body, which can therefore be deemed an artificial extelligence. In the system of artificial extelligences, viruses rank among the tactics, perhaps even the guarantors of effectuation. The minute we leave the highly secured non-terrain of the virtual and enter into the atmosphere of the rumbling, oscillating, uncontrollable real, the intelligent entity exposes itself. That is not only its greatest risk. It is also its greatest fortune. "The mouth comes into being with the scream," wrote Heiner Müller in his *Nachtstück*.⁸

As the medial producers that we are, we belong among the "traders of the winds." We deal in illusions, in that which one can neither lay hands on nor rely on. The very least that ought to be demanded of us (and that we should demand of ourselves) is that we plumb the etymological depths of the meaning of this malapropism and then take very seriously the fact that the Latin verb *illudere* does not only mean to fib, to fool, to make a beautiful semblance. It also means to take a risk, to put something at stake. That's the privilege and the obligation of those whose creative activities are officially classed at the start of 2020 as non-system relevant.

In his published postscript to a 1988 lecture at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz (Austria), the teleological thinker Baudrillard surprised us right at the end, with a twist he put in parentheses:

(But the recent appearance of electronic viruses does present us with a noteworthy exception: one might say that herein is revealed the machine's *schadenfreude* to generate or increase perverse effects and to annihilate its own functionality by way of its own operations. That's an ironic and interesting twist. It could be that the artificial intelligence parodies itself with this latest viral pathology and in this way develops a kind of real intelligence.) (Baudrillard 1989, 131)

7 Cf. in depth Zielinski 1990.

8 Here cited from Karl-Heinz Barck's magnificent text "Artaud" (Barck 1996, 10).

The most awful of all possible conditions – to which we now must collectively return – is normality. At the moment, this is being extolled as a return to Paradise Lost. The playwright Heiner Müller told the story, briefly and impressively, like this: “I had a dream. It was a nightmare. I woke up and everything was back in order.”⁹ – Order is a sign of lack. We need the abundance that embraces disorder. Only out of abundance will art, poetry and design, as wasteful praxes, develop to the highest level.

New faculties: The arts and the thinking & making to be designed/created

Now, what can interventionist thinking and doing mean in those spheres in which we are active as *subjectiles*?¹⁰ How do we deal experimentally with our realities, which have become hybrids of nature and technics, of the biological and the technological? What sort of consequences might we draw for the microuniverses for which we are responsible and inside of which we think and act – namely, academies, colleges and universities of art and design?

In light of the present confusions, once again in our history two poles peel away, two modes of potentially constructive intervention. The obvious one is a cybernetically based pragmatism, like that represented in pandemic debates by, among others, Benjamin H. Bratton (2020). This pragmatism trusts in the logic of applied social sciences, which by this point are undergirded worldwide by advanced information technology, sophisticated statistical procedures and probability calculations. It pursues the *sense of reality* and the hope that even the last remainders of the real might be mastered by what amounts basically to technical reason. The tension-filled alternative is grounded albeit unbridled speculation. This is bound above all to the *sense of possibility* and permits itself the freedom and thus the luxury to think and forge horizons.

My trust in statistics and purpose-driven data administration is limited. Thinking, designing, aesthetic doing should never become

9 Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee IV: Kentauren* (1986), here cited from FM Einheit's acoustic experiment “Resistance” on the MusicAeterna platform: https://musicaeterna.org/en/media/fm_5_resistance/.

10 This neologism, formed of the words subject and tactile, was invented by Antonin Artaud; Jacques Derrida wrote an extensive commentary on it in his essay “Forçenerle subjectile,” in Thévenin and Derrida 1986.

domesticated. The constant effort to make a move into the open, to travel into the unknown is what allows us, like an ethnologist, to see the alien inside our own and to let unfold the “continuity between matter and the power of imagination.” “Matter and dreams forge paths that are not the same but that correspond.”¹¹ As a materiologist, I proceed, with the Arabic polymath and philosopher Avicenna, from the assumption that form is the *fiery truth* of matter. What is possible as material sensation is by no means exhausted by what has already become of it. And this is what yields the possibility and nourishes the freedom to go on dreaming forward.¹²

On the horizon, an *imagined academy* is taking shape, not unlike Italo Calvino’s imagined cities, in which there are an enormous variety of disciplines that cannot be established because they resist institutionalization and that will remain un-chaired because one does not sit them out. They are not only too complex for these things, but too fractious. Rather, the fields we are dealing with are energy fields, motivation fields, irritation fields and their associated faculties – in the best sense of the word: as indissoluble units of *poiesis* and intuition, of making and theory. They have the character of temporary *transversal cuts*,¹³ of *diagonal praxes* that are in a position to mediate between the arts and sciences.

DIGNITY is the most important faculty, the elaboration of which we will have to re-learn and to re-teach. At the University of Glasgow in Scotland, one of Europe’s oldest academic professorial chairs is dedicated to this. What’s at stake in this sort of faculty – beyond the Christian-influenced ethics of the age-old position itself – is the elaboration of an all-encompassing respect as a life principle. They practice – in thinking and doing – the appreciation of the Other, which entails not only other ways of thinking, other genders, other cultures, but also the Others of nature and technics.

This sort of intellectual as well as artistic activity, which is conscious of the reciprocal interplay between the different agencies of

11 I am following and quoting here from Roger Caillois’s essay on the octopus (Caillois 1973).

12 This forward-dreaming is a rhetorical figure from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, whose re-reading of Avicenna I am referencing above (Bloch 2018).

13 Cf. Caillois 1964. It’s here that Caillois develops the demand “to give diagonal sciences a chance.”



Fig. 2 Grandville, J.-J., Joseph Mery, Raban, and Emmanuel Brice. 1849. *Les Étoiles: Dernière Férie*. Par J.-J. Grandville. Texte par Mery. *Astronomie des dames*, par le Comte Foelix. Paris: G. de Gonet.

nature and technics, necessitates a faculty of the ATMOSPHERIC, of which we, as inhabitants of Earth, are a constituent part. The atmosphere is our host. We need it to exist (persist), while, existentially speaking, it does not need us. We have acquired a more than potentially viral character for the atmosphere.

Unpredictable and unexpected events require that we cultivate extraordinary expertise in EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES. In West Berlin in the late 1980s, Kurt Jotter founded the activist group FDGÖ (Foto, Design, Grafik, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit – or: photo, design, graphics, public outreach); performing as the Bureau for Unusual Measures, the group made art interventions in public space. This collective got by just fine absent the power-seeking vanities of the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (ZPS).¹⁴ Their key zone of intervention was urban communications, particularly under the conditions of telematic relations that were then establishing themselves (*Relation-Chips*, 1984). Comparable groups emerged time and again throughout the 20th century, from the Stray Dogs in pre-war St. Petersburg to Gruppe SPUR and the Situationists. We are always in need of groups like these when it comes to intervening in saturated relations and irritating comfortable harmonies.

Under conditions of highly networked communication relations and the increasing technification of our ways of living, extraordinary measures like these might be articulated in a faculty that we could call – with international activists like Julian Oliver, Danja Vasiliev, and Gordan Savičić – CRITICAL ENGINEERING. Under such rubric, we understand an equally constructive and critical, theoretical and practical activity that follows from interventionist thinking and that is commensurable with elaborated, networked machines. This then puts us in a position to reinterpret, or to occupy in strange ways, artifacts as well as the concrete technical systems in which they are bound. It would be a logical continuation of a faculty for PATAPHYSICS.

A faculty like this is closely connected with techno- and poetological work on NON-CENSORABLE, or better: HARD-TO-CENSOR SYSTEMS, which represents one of the greatest challenges to art and design in the coming decade. On the occasion of our international conference “Potential Spaces” in February 2017, Chinese media theorist Gao Shiming of the China Academy of Art surprised everyone

14 <https://politicalbeauty.de/>.

with the first draft of his “Hacking Media/Art Manifesto,” which was also intended as a position statement for his future activities as Dean in Hangzhou. In it, he pleaded the case for a “Neo Media/Art” that needs to orientate itself to and adopt those information technologies through which mechanisms of dominance under advanced capitalism are realized as data politics and data control. It is only through the critical application of these technologies against their own mechanisms of surveillance and control, according to Gao (2019, 50), that the latter can be effectively exposed: “Neo Media/Art has to make the media in our hand the most incisive and controversial content, thereby resisting against the new technologies of control and seduction.”¹⁵

We also need to pay special attention to the training of future CHAOS-PILOTS and KAIROS-POETS. If, under the banner of expanded possibilities for intervention at the interface of media-humans and media-machines, it so happens that creativity has become a foundational social competence and the traditional model of the artist is exhausted in the art itself – even as it advances to become a guiding model for social activity in general – then it seems advisable at least to work toward supplementary identities. The competencies that artists and intellectuals urgently need for the future can be understood (especially after the pandemic of 2020) as tactical figures that do not let themselves get transposed or deployed as strategies: *chaos-pilots* and *kairos-poets* – figures who are in a position not just to handle unpredictabilities but who can also organize them while still refusing to administrate them, figures who can seize the fortuitous moment (on film, on the web, on stage, in the gallery, in the auditorium, in the museum) and give it a charge. Without a tendency toward complexity and without a tendency toward time – the two are inextricably bound – neither advanced thinking nor advanced aesthetic practice are even imaginable.

Just like we need artists and designers who are in a position to intervene in those temporal structures that undercut our perception on the micro-scale (as in high-frequency trading), we also need thinkers and poets who can overflow our time-space perceptions on the macro-scale (as in astrophysics). I call this faculty PALEOFUTURISM. It would be ideally suited to explore and develop the spaces of

15 In the same conference publication, there is also an early and more detailed description of my proposed new faculties.

possibility of past and future presents and to generate from these the sorts of surprises in the relationship between media-humans and media-machines that are essential to our lives.

I am likewise calling for a re-start of pataphysical projects as an elaborated CULTURA EXPERIMENTALIS. In Critical Engineering we already find a counter-proposal to the culture of testing and system-optimization. Doubtless the uncompromising nurturing of a culture of experiment ought to rank among the core faculties in academies of art and design.

And if in the end we are to take seriously the challenge of a non-territorial orientation, we will be unable to avoid putting back into the foreground of our anticipatory attention those skills that comprise the KNOWLEDGE OF THE WINDS AND NAVIGATION. This faculty used to be decisive, back when relationships of exchange – whether of knowledge, goods or cultural experiences – were still principally generated through watercraft. And it will again become an essential component of our future knowledge. From a pacific or oceanic perspective, this state-of-affairs might be liable to a completely new interpretation of a “move into the open” (Dietmar Kamper). The courage and techniques needed to navigate across great distances in apparently unbounded and definitively ungovernable space are clearly distinguishable from those required to negotiate within the proximity of territorial neighborhoods.

At no point should we cease to PROJECT ALTERNATIVE WORLDS; nor should we quit working to realize a borderless HOSPITALITY – as an essential component of an *unconditioned university* in the Derridean sense, in the sense of an unconditioned dialogue in which WE are the space of possibility.

Almost limitless modes and media are available to us in the arts, in design and in thought, in which faculties like these could operate effectively. It is up to us, whether and how resolutely and under what connections we decide to use them.

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