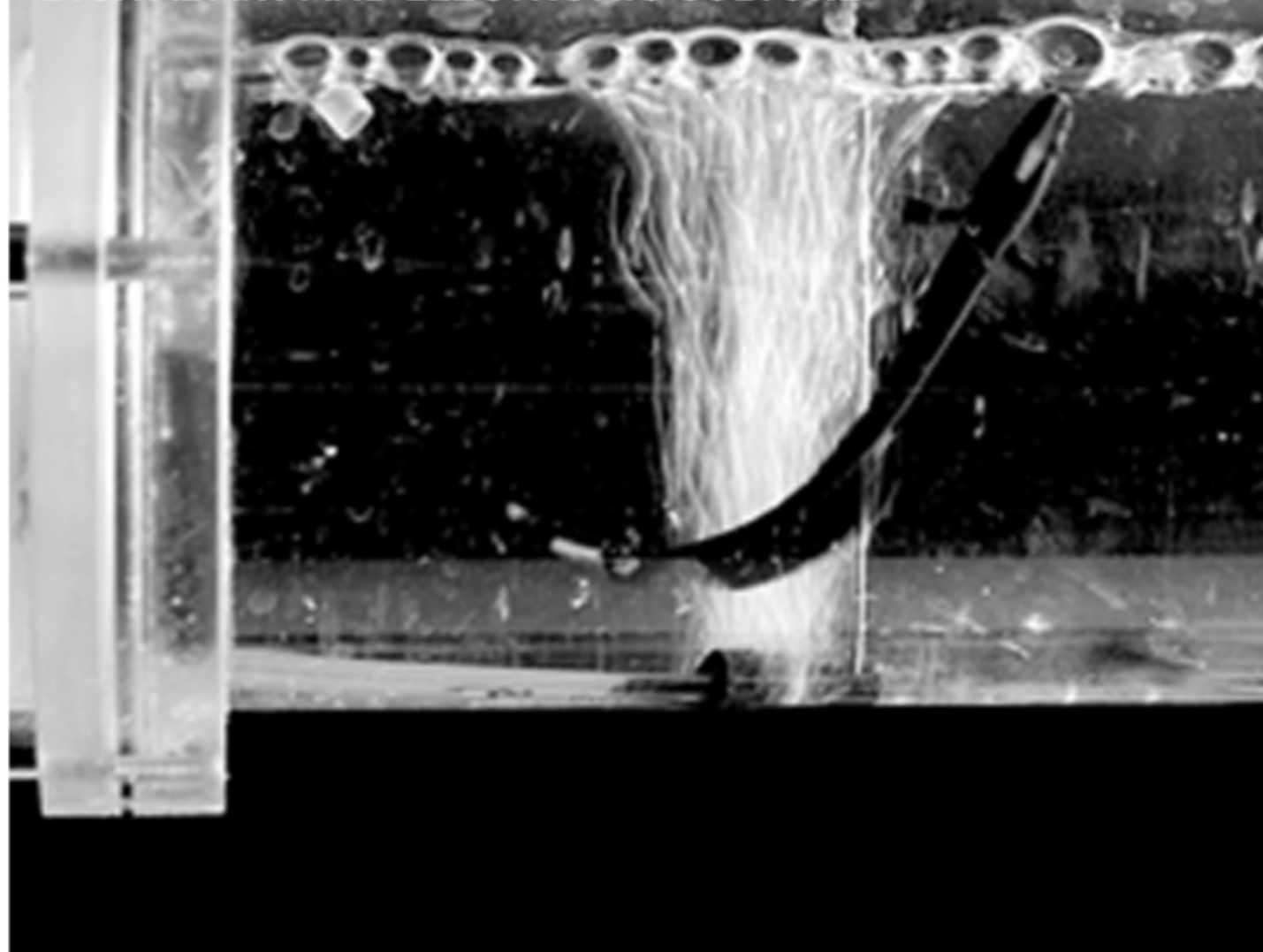


68

OCTOBER 2011

DIGIMAG

DIGITAL ART AND ELECTRONIC CULTURE



MARK AMERIKA / LINDSAY HOWARD

ALEX POSADA / DEMOCRACIA COLLECTIVE

FREDERIK DE WILDE / ISEA 2011



The “speculative” Exhibition. May Fiction Redefine Reality?

Mattia Casalegno



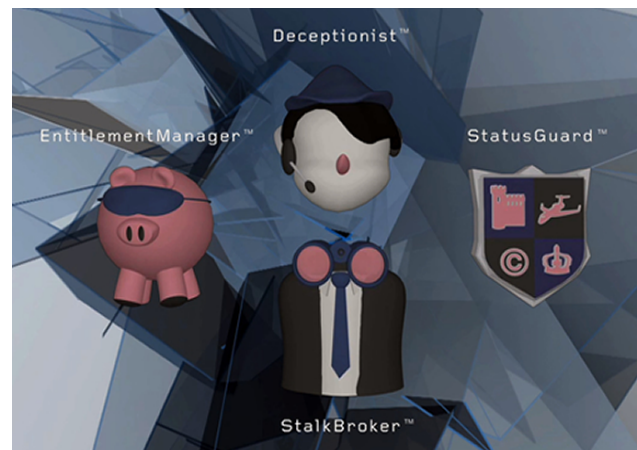
Michael Kontopoulos - Water Rites (2011)

“Speculative”, a collective exhibition organized at **LACE – Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions** – on display from last June 16th to August 28th, finely resonate with the uncertain and psychotic times we are living in, shaken by financial breakdowns, massive firings, and environmental disasters.

While the so-called “establishment” (the one percent of people gaining huge earnings from financial speculations) is trying to hush protesters occupying tens of American squares with the help of condescending mainstream networks (see the **“Occupy Wall Street” movement spreading all over the world** – <https://occupywallst.org/>), artists, researchers, and designers are wondering about the present and

looking for future scenarios.

Zach Blas and **Christopher O’Leary**, curators of the exhibition, have put together a team of artists and designers – the most part students from **UCLA’s Department of Design Media Arts** – who use strategies and aesthetics borrowed from science fiction, speculative design, and situational practices in order to underline the disorders of contemporary era and try to define alternative exit strategies.



Casey alt - Vaidlogix Tm(2007)

That’s what the statement for the exhibition catalogue runs: “Nowadays, we see this world as an unliveable place on the edge of a total reconfiguration. From the world

economic crisis to the growing forms of hate and control, until the wasting of the heart, new frontiers and cages scare the world as well as the field of information technology and biology. The commercialization of life, culture, body and heart is the same all over the world. Notwithstanding this, we believe that inside such un-liveability lies the potential to act and programme new worlds and lives.”

“Actually, we are watching new kind of protests emerging everywhere, from the call to arms of militant groups like **The Invisible Committee** (authors of *The Coming Insurrection*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Coming_Insurrection) to the student protests, to the insurrections of the Arabic spring, and the activism of **WikiLeaks** and **Anonymous**.

“Speculative” is a unifying force joining the work on display and calling up the potential of political, cultural, sexual, technological, biological, economic, and ecological world we all want.”

Almost all the works are world premiere, or produced in the last two or three years, and they are characterized by different techniques, styles, and perspectives. Among the most “situational” works for style and language, the work by **Casey Alt** (who’s used to investigate the way computer interfaces transmit power and culture) pivots around a caustic

criticism of commercial design intended as strategy to engineer a social control.

In his project ***Slightly Sociopathic Software*** (2007), **Casey Alt** uses the aesthetic feature of detournement to underline the (psycho) social and schizophrenic aberrations emerging from the lethal blending of corporative ethics and amoral use of social networks. The author makes up a fictitious brand, **VacilLogix**, whose mission is, in his words, “to encourage sociopathy, one of the main driving forces of human evolution.”

The mission of **VacilLogix** runs: “the best way to make a profit is contributing to deep cultural problems with innovative solutions, after all, it is not so hard to understand that our world is facing huge cultural problems. Anyway, we see such challenges as terrific chances to profit. Our confidence in the project is based on the conviction that sociopathy has ever existed since social network came along.” The main products of **VacilLogix** are softwares “taking advantage of social networks’ power in order to get around social rules.” The company produces four, killer applications (**Deceptionist™**, **EmotionManager™**, **StalkBroker™**, **StatusGuard™** and) “giving to people the sociopathic attitude leading to success”.



Pinar Yoldas - Supermamml tm, Neolabium tm and other species of excess (2011)

Claudia Salamanca's piece, *Material Evidence*

(<http://www.laclaud.com/?p=116>) is similar in intent less "situational" in the approach. Claudia, a Colombian artist currently working on her research doctorate at the Rhetoric Department at the Berkley University, investigate notions of death and body in relations to politics and power structures. In *Material Evidence*, she employs a video-document of the Colombian Government's Technical Investigation Team showing a standard identification procedure of a policeman. Her revision proposes the introduction of a disturbing element, a sort of "black hole", moving in the video frame.

The inquiry on the relationships between man and environment, is central to the work of **Pinar Yoldas**, a Turkish artist graduated at the **UCLA** in 2009. Her project *SuperMamml™*, *NeoLabium™* and other species of excess (2011) - <http://pinaryoldas.info> is a series of *specimen* in small

chemical-lab-like transparent vases, whose forms and physiologies are inspired by possible reproductive mutations of Mother Nature.

A real "biogenetical excursion on the future of desire, sexuality, and intimacy": that's how **Pinar Yoldas** describes her own project, comprised of three "creatures": *SuperMamml™*, a conglomerate of mammary glands spreading in radial symmetry, *MegaMale™*, a linear adaptation of forms inspired to male organs, and *NeoLabium™*, levels of labia arranged in exponential way, with the potential to grow endlessly.

These three works follow the series *Fabula (2009)* -

<http://pinaryoldas.info/Fabula/>, a series of mutant pseudo-creatures in glass containers presented along with various drawings and photos. **Pinar Yoldas'** inspiration for this project came from the infamous "Great Pacific Garbage Patch", the "islands" of submerged trash wandering in the Oceans: she designed fictional mutant organisms that could live in such artificial habitats, questioning the notions of artificiality and natural habitat. "Willingly underlining the differences between male and female, microbe and human, organic and synthetic, *Fabula* emphasizes the awareness of our own body in connection with the issues of sexuality and mortality."



Zach Blas - Queer Technologies (2008)

In a similar way **Zach Blas** works revolve around issues of physicality and sexuality, but with a quite different aesthetic and approach. He's interested in the dynamics occurring between new media, politics, and queer studies. His project *Queer Technologies* -

<http://www.queertechnologies.info/>

is a series of applications, devices, and technological solutions aimed to the queer activism, a sort of "highly fictional" criticism to the current communication technologies and the hetero-normative, capitalistic, and militarized attitudes that such technologies have on us. Zach proposes four "products" of *Queer Technologies*:

Facial Weaponization Suite & Fag Face Masks is a set of devices aimed to the counterfeiting of biometrical surveillance including ad example a series of masks that "anonymize" the users.

In Blas words, "today the existence

itself is a kind of control. Not existing is the only effective strategy to escape control. The *Facial Weaponization Suite* makes our faces invisible. Not existing means to be absolutely deprived of any representable identity that could be intelligible because it is not coded in any algorithm. Being not existing dissolves your identity in the fog, and fog makes riots possible."

Gay Bombs

is a sort of techno-pamphlet and manifesto of queer activism: "a mutant body, a multitude, a terroristic queer disposition utilizing the new sensibilities of technological queer being."

TransCoder

, instead, is a "Programming Pack of queer anti-language", a fictitious programming language "oriented to the transcoding between cultural and computational levels". Such fictitious SDK, inspired to the fifth principle of **Manovich's** new media, flirts with the languages of information technology and semiology, offering "libraries inspired by queer theories as an attempt to untie the links of ontology and epistemology of dominant technologies. At the same time, it breaks the flux between heteronormative cultures, coding, and visual interfaces."



Micha Cardenas and Elle Memrand - Technosexual (2009)

TransCoder was used by **Micha Cardenas** (also member of Digicult's network of authors and part of the **Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0**) to add "poetic content" to the ***Transborder Immigrant Tool***, a project of "civil disobedience" focussed on supporting illegal immigrants in passing the Mexico/USA border. *Transborder Immigrant Tool* offers them a number of low-cost GPS technologies:

<http://bang.calit2.net/xborderblog/> .

This project was much criticized by the media and groups of conservatives claiming that the authors were supporting illegal immigration. Even the University of California San Diego (the authors were members of the university as researchers and artists) opened an investigation on the possible illegal use of public money, but the case was dismissed.

This project was not on display at the exhibition but **Micha Cardenas**, along

with **Elle Mehramand** (artist, researcher and **Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0** member) showed the project ***virus.circus.laboratory* (2011)** – <http://transreal.org/>, an installation comprised of devices, interfaces, and tools used in past performances in which the two artists have employed biometrical data, wearable electronics, several haptic interfaces and *teledildonics*.

The work realized by **Xárene Eskandar** explores the relationships between architecture, body, --environment, and society. Eskandar, researcher, designer, and media artist with a background in the fields of fashion, interior design, and live media, is interested in the symbiotic relationships between technology and human beings as an "attempt to create meeting points between dimensions and ecologies considered utopian" (<http://cargocollective.com/xarene>).

The work displayed, ***Architectural Organ I / Skin* (2011)**, is an evolution of her previous creation ***Tentative Architectures* (2009)**, a series of dresses that can function as "built spaces". Inspired by the idea of folding by **Deleuze** and techniques of origami, such "personal architectures" get into contact with the body as landscape, and, at the same time, act as interface between body and environment.



Xarene Eskandar - Architectural organ I / Skin

In the exhibition catalogue, **Xárene** states: “Folding is hiding, unfolding is revealing. One fold holds inside these two actions (hiding and revealing) in the unique dimension of the folding line. A fold means a number of potentials waiting to be realized. Then, one fold, a Deleuzian being-becoming, the line-plan-as-form, exists in the field of immanence, full of possibilities. Desire is the key to exist in such sense. Folding is the act of inclusion-exclusion, containing what’s inside and what’s outside, this and that. One desires to fold and unfold, or, in other words, to look for potentials.”

Xárene sees in the folding-unfolding dynamics a potential for new relationships between human beings and their technology and environment, “while, a century ago the scientific society made the man more efficient, to his detriment, in profiting, now the nets make new relationships with nature available, the production of knowledge for

knowledge’s sake is more efficient.”

Inspired in a similar fashion by the relationships between humans and the environment, the project by **Michael Kontopoulos, *Water Rites***

(2011) -

<http://www.mkontopoulos.com/?p=847> - is a commentary on the use and

abuse of water resources on our planet. Comprising a two-channel video and a series of sculptural props, the piece offers a quite open-ended plot where we witness an archaic-futurist “water ceremony” between a couple.

Kontopoulos, artist and teacher based in Los Angeles, often uses elements of fiction in his works, and for *Water Rites* he was inspired by **Robert Heinlein’s** novel “Stranger in a Strange Land” (1961), in which a child was abandoned on Mars and raised by the Martians. When he went back to the earth he had to familiarize with the human uses and customs, included the their consumerist relationship with water. On the arid Mars the exchange of water between two individuals is a ceremony full of ritual gestures that create indissoluble ties between the two who become “water brothers”.



Jeff Cain - El Camino Real (2011)

The project presented by **Jeff Cain, El Camino Real (2011)** is another work inspired by similar themes. The author proposed a supposed botanic expedition inspired by the importation of an invasive mustard plant introduced during the 17th century in California by the Spanish conquistador Gaspar de Portola. Such importation signed “El Camino Real”, a 966 km route from San Diego in Southern California to Sonoma. Jeff Cain is an artist and designer working with sculpture, video, sound, photography, and performance. His work place, **Shed Research Institute**, is an organization for independent research, projects of public art, and site-specific projects <http://www.shedresearch.net>.

Similarly to Cain, **Christopher O’Leary** moves with easiness within the languages of video, photography, and installations: inspired by the aesthetics of science fiction, cartoon strips and North American media history, he explores social phenomena

and narrative pop subcultures like those linked by the idea of “super hero.” In the work he displays, ***Blocking the Exits* (2011)** –

<http://cargocollective.com/chrisoleary/#1475475/Blocking-the-Exits-2011>>,

he creates a narrative based on an apocalyptic world where four characters incarnate the pillars of civilization, on the verge of disintegration – water, food, energy, and communication.

Blocking the Exits is video produced with morphing techniques reinterpreting sci-fi atmospheres of the ‘70s as well as contemporary post production. With its futuristic and cartoon-like settings, offers to the spectator an hallucinating sensation of uncertainty and anxious precarity.



Christopher O’Leary - Blocking the Exits (2011)

A sensation – which somehow spans all the projects in the exhibition – not different to what many of us feel in our every-days, while we try to give

meaning to complex, adverse, and basically unfair dynamics of our times. Social, economic, ecological crisis, crisis of political representation, and of access to resources. Real problems requiring real solutions.

And while art is better suited at arising issues, on the contrary, design

shouldn't give up delineating operational strategies dealing with reality: in some cases the language of fiction can be a double-edged weapon, but still one worth using.

<http://www.welcometolace.org/exhibitions/view/speculative/>