Dissident

Futures
Artists

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FOREWORD

We are in the midst of seismic change. So much of what we are able to do today was intangible or unimaginable, and certainly unnamed, not so long ago. It often feels as if scientific and technological progress occurs in the time it takes to ride the escalator from the ground floor to the top. Yet, in some corners of our society, we seem to stand still—even fall backward.

As we coin verbs to describe prevailing new actions—words like “to google” and “to tweet”—we remain unable to resolve long-standing inequities that permeate our communities and evade meaningful, inclusive progress. Much of human activity involves anticipation of what is to come, and, in that ability to imagine, wonder, and await, we are empowered and readied. Yet so many of us are not invited to participate in and influence this collective imagining, this shared sense of what might be.

As YBCA approaches its 21st birthday, we reflect on the organization’s founding vision and explore the role of an arts and community center in the 21st century. We believe that this organization exists to gather people of all kinds around art, ideas, and issues; to help us connect more deeply to ourselves and to each other; and to inspire a sense of something larger, the possibility of something better, not for some but for all.

The artists in Dissident Futures apply future studies, and anticipatory and intuitive inquiry, to illuminate multiple possibilities for what might be that range: from our most hopeful to our most feared, from gentle forward movement to conspicuous, abrupt, and sometimes unfathomable upheaval. These artists evoke new paradigms, some wild and some inevitable. They invite us to explore new worlds and new possibilities outside of and beyond today.

Just as events unfold in a flow of time from past to present to future, myths, truths, possibilities, probabilities, and transformation are born of collective exploration, ideation, and action. At YBCA, we aim to be the place where people, art, ideas, and possibilities converge. With this exhibition, we ask: Who are we? Who can we be? Where are we? Where are we going? What does the future hold?

Deborah Cullinan
Executive Director
Science, Art, and Magic: Signposts to the Future

DAVID PESCOVITZ

"The artist is a visionary about life. Only he can create disorder and still get away with it. Only he can use technology to its fullest capacity. The artists have to use technology because technology is becoming inseparable from our lives."

— EAT cofounder and Bell Labs engineer Billy Klüver

The single most important law of futures studies is that there are no facts about the future. Only fictions. At Institute for the Future (IFTF), the Silicon Valley nonprofit think tank where I'm a researcher, our work is about studying tomorrow's fictions—infomed by today's facts—to make better decisions in the present. We do that by seeking out what we call signals—global events, scientific breakthroughs, technology trends, expert opinions—that on their own may cause you to raise your eyebrows in surprise but when observed as a complex ecology can
reveal directions of major change. A signal is a signpost pointing toward the future.

Signals can be found buried in academic technical journals or bubbling up from the DIY subcultures of the maker movement. I find many provocative and prescient signals by hanging around two very distinct but equally inspiring kinds of people—scientists, from gene jockeys and astronomers to roboticists and nanoengineers, and artists, from painters and performance artists to musicians and writers. Recognizing the patterns and synthesizing the signals into a plausible, internally consistent story about the future is a strange brew of science, art, and magic.

Art and science may seem like strange bedfellows, unbridled creativity at odds with logic and reason. Yet many artists and scientists run on the same fuel: passion, curiosity, and a sense of wonder about the world. Artists and scientists conjure up ideas through vision, intuition, and study, and use myriad techniques to manifest those ideas in the physical world. Indeed, the words “technique” and “technology” come from technè, an ancient Greek term for “art.” Sometimes, the technology is not only the medium but the message, too.

Katie Paterson collaborates with technologists to create her own wondrous, poetic, and Romantic installations using the latest developments in materials science. Her 2010 work Inside this desert lies the tiniest grain of sand employed the tools of nanotechnology to carve a 0.00005-mm grain of sand (approximately 1/1200 the diameter of a human hair) that was then dropped into the Sahara.

In the 17th century, the telescope and microscope raised epistemological questions of doubt for Rene Descartes. Paterson's work shows how our sense of scale will be radically tweaked by future technology, enabling us to interact with our physical world from the very bottom up. Art can shift our perception, changing the way we see reality, and hinting at how reality itself may be changing. The technologies, the science behind the work of the EAT axis, Paterson, and many other tech-artists are startling by their very nature, but when used in the context of a creative act, they became magical.

The science fiction author and futurist Arthur C. Clarke famously said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” To which the science fiction author Gregory Benford later added, “Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.”

Of course, many phenomena that were once considered magic are now firmly grounded in science and harnessed through technology. An obvious example is flight, explored by the quintessential artist/engineer Leonardo da Vinci four centuries before the Wright Brothers took to the skies at Kitty Hawk. Disease is another. The causes of many illnesses are now evident. Turns out, they aren't caused by demonic possession. Most of them, anyway. Even psychokinesis is now in the realm of reason through brain-machine interfaces that enable paralyzed individuals to move robot arms
Jewish mysticism scholar Ehud Benor, a professor in Dartmouth College's Department of Religion.

And art tries to make science real before it is.

To me, art about the future invokes the notion of sympathetic magic, an occult practice possibly dating back to the Paleolithic period, where adepts attempt to produce physical results by interacting with a corresponding object that represents the desired effect. These artworks are akin to what we at IFTF call artifacts from the future, a methodology developed by my colleague Jason Tester. Artifacts from the future are physical mock-ups of imaginary products, objects, and services that express how new technology may someday impact our lives. These "design fictions" are meant to bring abstract ideas and complex forecasts into the physical realm. They are near-future fantasies you can hear, see, and touch. They make the future tangible and serve as tools of provocation.

Paul Laffoley is one such agent provocateur who designs dispatches from an imaginary future. His architectural paintings and diagrams graft ancient occultism, eccentric engineering, particle physics, and high weirdness with obsessively detailed building plans for a surreal alternative future. Laffoley's Das Urplantze Haus (1984) outlines plans for genetically engineered seeds that grow into shelters as a solution to the housing shortage. He created this work decades before today's practitioners of synthetic biology invented methods to snap together genes, proteins, and cells like Tinkertoys to create organisms that don't exist in nature.

Art can be magic itself, sparking us to become change agents. Creating and experiencing art is an opportunity for social inquiry. Artists often use their work to raise questions, criticize, or provoke us to consider alternatives and possibilities. They may not be positive. They are frequently unfathomable.

Tomorrow's possibilities may be so different from today's realities that finding consonance between the present and the future is frequently impossible. We all must get comfortable being uncomfortable. The
artists whose work is featured in this exhibition and catalogue can help us do that, as they are masters at making us uncomfortable about the future.

Dan Mills's US Future States Atlas (2003–7) combines cartography with cultural criticism and wry political commentary about the United States' foreign policy and where it could lead. The artworks are simultaneously the medium and the message, serving as evidence that a map doesn't necessarily represent objective information but is frequently rooted in the biases, the ideology, of its creators. Interestingly, maps are one of the primary tools that IFTF uses to communicate our research. IFTF's maps, as they have evolved under the direction of my colleague Jean Hagan, are another methodology for us, a way to explore terrain that can't be charted because it doesn't yet exist. They are designed to help the reader hold the complexity of our forecasts in his or her mind and provide waypoints on the way to the future, all the while revealing intersections, patterns, edges, and gaps in the narrative. Well-designed maps are art, a form of communication, a way of storytelling.

The experimental geographer and author Trevor Paglen is a storyteller who uses fine art to reveal the uncomfortable truths, "ghost" existences, and shadow histories of the places that we inhabit. His combination of science, psychology, narrative, and aesthetics forces us to reconsider our deep past and even deeper futures. His latest project, The Last Pictures (2012), culminated in an archival silicon disc containing 100 pictures, a time capsule representing contemporary civilization. The disc is now circling high above us on the Echostar XVI satellite, where it will remain in orbit for billions of years, until the sun expands into a red giant and incinerates the Earth.

Of course by then we won't have to think about the future because we'll be history.

Save any wild-card catastrophes between now and the end of (our) time, the future is largely up to us. As the computing pioneer Alan Kay said, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." We can begin by listening to what artists have to say about the magic, myths, and realities that will shape tomorrow.
Dan Mills
Nemispheres from the Quest series, 2012
Courtesy the artist and
Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago
Connie Samaras
*Dome and Tunnels*
from the *V.A.L.I.S.* series, 2005
Courtesy the artist
Lynn Hershman Leeson

*Infinity Engine*, 2013–14

Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Image courtesy Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and John Foster Cartwright
emerged from a history of colonization through the American Revolution.

US Future States Atlas is a satirical response to United States foreign policy. At the time he began this series in 2003, the U.S. was at war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq had not yet taken place. In this work, Mills asks, via colorfully patterned maps of real and imaginary countries, what the world might look like if the U.S. carried out its military capacities to their logical conclusion. He found that by exaggerating U.S. foreign policy, it was possible to justify taking over just about any country.

Each map’s addition is visually mapped or layered with collaged elements, watercolor, or acrylic, and presented together with a vast text outlining the location’s economy and resources, and the rationale for its takeover. The specific state or region under examination is indicated in the title. A map of Iraq becomes USArabia (2003), Singapore becomes USSingapore (2006), and Antarctica becomes USArctica (2005). Mills eventually renamed the U.S. “the United States Empire,” and this name change is reflected in Liberty and USNegev (2004–6) and US West Africa and Namibia Minerale (2005). In The Islands (2006), Mills creates a map of a state made up of six islands or island groups located in the South Pacific, citing “many strategic locations and fishing rights control” as motives for takeover and statehood.

Drawing a vast amount of information from the CIA Factbook, Mills imbues his conceptual abstractions with factual credibility. He describes the project as “a grand narrative atlas of global imperialism” and reminds the viewer of the arbitrary nature of national boundaries, considering their frequencies in military aggression.

The four works in this exhibition from the Quest series span upon the themes established in the US Future States Atlas. In this project, Mills paints directly on schoolhouse maps so that the addition of paint is an effectively an erosion of information. In Hemispheres, Erasure (Cold), and Erasure (Warm) (all 2012), border demarcations, labels, dates, natural and human-made landmarks, and place names based on histories of conquest and imperialism are systematically painted over in a variety of colors, turning the original text into a colorful aesthetic abstraction.

The four works from the Quest series, Paca Landoy (2012), is written in Esperanto, a constructed international language; it was developed as an easy-to-learn, politically neutral language that could transcend national and foster international understanding. “Paca Landoy” translates from Esperanto as “Pacific Countries.” Here Mills takes the critiques of geographic borders expressed in Singapore and The Islands one step further, and essentially hybridizes them. Unlike the other works, Dan from Quest Series leaves no trace of text from the original map, here he uses paint to block out only isolated letters into boundaries, thereby visually and conceptually altering the original names, labels, and border demarcations. Since this work includes a geographic location consisting of disparate languages, nationalities, and cultures, the Esperanto title furthers its critique of imperial power’s reliance on the political expediency of national borders.

Dan Mills was born in 1956 in Waterloo, New York, and he is currently based in Lewiston, Maine, where he is the Director of the Bates College Museum of Art and a lecturer in humanities at the college. 

Mills exhibits extensively, with recent solo shows at Chicago Culture Center (2012), Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago (2012), and The Art Institute of Chicago (2012). He has an MFA from Northern Illinois University (1981) and a BFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology (1978). Mills is represented by American Psycho Gallery, which he co-founded in 1985, and Modern Art Gallery, Santa Monica (2009). In addition to numerous group exhibitions throughout the United States, Mills exhibited at the US Future States Atlas (Perceval Press) in 2009, and his work was included in Katharine Harmon’s The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

The Otolith Group

The Otoloth Group, based in London, was founded by Kodwo Ehsun and Anjalika Sagar in 2001. The group’s practice spans filmmaking, events, publications, and exhibitions, all of which are informed by research-based activities. Much of its work speculates on possible futures through investigations of the relationship between scientific maps of production, advancement, and utopia. Its logo—a zero with three parallel lines worn down—is inspired in part by a famous scene from Godard’s film Le gai savoir (The Joy of Learning, 1969), in which it symbolizes both a future world reduced to zero. That film’s analysis of images and sounds exemplifies the genre of the essay film, which also prioritizes thought and ideas, often making abstract concepts visible through an unfolding of images representative of different