TIM DIXON ARGUES THAT THE ONLY WAY OUT OF ACCELERATIONISM IS THROUGH IT
In responding to the increased pace of capitalism, have artists who embrace overstimulation, such as Plastique Fantastique and Suzanne Treister, or slowness, such as David Claerbout and Yelena Popova, found a path to liberation?

ART & ACCELERATIONISM

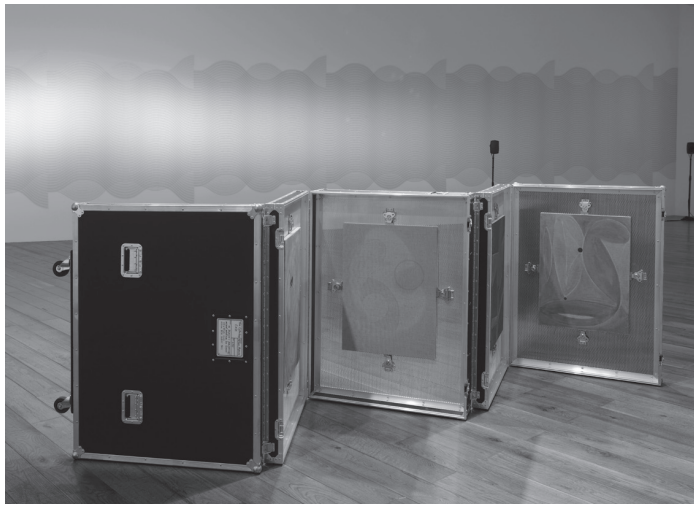
David Claerbout
Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in the torrential rain 2013 video

There is no shortage of warnings that we are moving too fast, that capital's demands on our time are becoming ever more pressing and damaging: algorithmic automation, high-frequency trading, all the tabs open on all social-media channels, FOMO, anxiety, digital detox. Slowing down might seem like the antidote to all this speed and overstimulation but recent developments in political theory might point to a different solution.

Writing in 1998 in an essay accompanying the exhibition 'Speed' at the Whitechapel Gallery and The Photographers' Gallery, Jeremy Millar and Michiel Schwarz sought to highlight the phenomenal phenomenological pace of the day. Their stated aim was to draw attention to the speed at which

Adrian Paci
The Line (Diptych)
2007

Yelena Popova
Cornelius: THe Collector's Cage
2015



we were travelling. Things have moved on since 1998, when television was identified as a key contributor and the internet was in its infancy, mobile phones were yet to become commonplace and social media and smartphones were still a decade away.

In 2016, 'From Slow to Stop' at Manchester's Holden Gallery took the opposite tack and gathered together works 'which make things slow down or stop'. The assembled works, including pieces by David Claerbout, Hannah Starkey and Adrian Paci among others, were offered up as a counter to 'the feeling of being in the midst of an ever-present flow of information and activity, of never quite having enough time'.

Pursuing a similar line was Yelena Popova's 'After Image' at Nottingham Contemporary last summer, where several bodies of work were gathered together in an installation entitled *Public Gallery*. Here, sets of the artist's subtly worked, layered abstract paintings were variously propped with idiosyncratic poise amid fragments of worked marble and shaped wooden props or hung high at angles, bathed in natural light. This gathering of works aimed to 'provide an antidote to the rapid production and consumption of images in our digitally networked world'. Asking 'How much time do we spend with an image?', the presentation strived to 'slow down the act of looking'.

Overstimulation registers as speed and temporal compression. What are we to make of these strategies against the overload of contemporary life? How can we understand them in the broader context in which they seek to operate? Opening these questions out towards the broader political terrain, we can ask why we feel the need to slow down in the first place, and to what end. Can slowness and withdrawal change the conditions from which we feel the need to retreat?

An accelerationist politics might argue that the real solution lies elsewhere. Accelerationism, taken superficially, advocates that we are not yet going fast enough, that the only way out of the problems of late capitalism is to charge through it. The term itself was drawn from the science fiction of Roger Zelazny by Benjamin Noys in his 2010 book *The Persistence of the Negative*. Noys observed that Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* from 1974 and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti Oedipus* of 1972 shared a tendency to define and understand the underpinning processes of capitalism as simultaneously being forces of its own undoing. In an often-quoted passage from the latter, the duo asked: 'But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? To withdraw from the world market …? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? … Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process" … the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.'

In the 1990s the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit took up and developed the work of Deleuze and Guattari, blending it with the dystopian science-fiction imaginings of writers like William Gibson and the aesthetics of underground dance music. Founded

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by Nick Land and Sadie Plant and initially, though briefly, associated with Warwick University, the group counts philosophers, artists and theorists including Mark Fisher (Obituaries p17), Ray Brassier, Kodwo Eshun and Jake & Dinos Chapman among its affiliates. They collectively and independently created a body of work that further explored and developed the impulse towards acceleration. In his own writings, Land drove it in a post-apocalyptic, dehumanised direction towards the image of the cold, metallic future of the *Terminator* films, where the human is 'something for [capital] to overcome: a problem, drag'.

Alongside Land's 'right-accelerationist' vision, 'left-accelerationism' favours the further advancement of technology to draw us into a post-capitalist future, with writers such as Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek taking up the project. Writing in 2013, their *Manifesto for an Accerelationist Politics* advocates 'an accelerationist politics [which] seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow'.

Acceleration cannot be understood simply as 'speed' – for Deleuze and Guattari it signified an intensification of the destabilising, 'deterritorialising' power of capital. Williams and Srnicek draw attention to the 'navigational' aspect of acceleration that has direction as well as speed. What is shared across these myriad perspectives is a view that the route out of capitalism must be through it – that there is no escaping by resistance or opting out but only by following its logics to the end. These themes are taken up in Williams and Srnicek's 2015 book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, which, while self-consciously avoiding the term 'accelerationism', develops strains of political thinking associated with the movement, in particular the idea that intensified technological progress can be a liberating force if channelled correctly, rather than an oppressive one.

Key to this is the rejection of what they term 'folk politics' which seeks to secede from the political field of globalised, developed capitalism. Associated with this are 'calls for a return to authenticity, to immediacy, to a world that is "transparent", "human-scaled", "tangible", "slow", "harmonious", "simple" and "everyday"'. The pair cite examples in the slow food movement and attempts at solving complex global problems through local solutions ('buy local' etc), calling instead for a leftist politics that is comfortable with complexity, abstraction and globality.

We might find these accelerationist impulses alive in recent works that exaggerate the contemporary condition beyond the bounds of the reasonable: the data-hungry dystopia of Rachel Maclean's *Wot u :-) about?*, 2016, currently on display at Tate Britain and recently at Home in Manchester, for example, or the festering wound of digitally collaged found imagery in John Russell's *Leech*, 2016, shown recently at London's LD50 gallery, and the work of Joey Holder (Profile *AM*400).

In this vein, Plastique Fantastique – a collective led by Simon O'Sullivan and David Burrows in collaboration with artists and musicians frequently including Vanessa Page and Alex Marzeta among many others – create performances and installations that overwhelm, overfeed and overstimulate in their onslaught of sound, word and imagery. They combine theoretical writing with folk references, echoes of ritual practices and nods to historical countercultural figures such as William Burroughs and the punk band Crass in live works that incorporate costume, elaborate props, multiple projections and live as well as processed sounds.

The artists attempt to grasp the ungraspable abstractions and artificial forces that shape our world while remaining invisible. *Plastique Fantastique Protocols for the Society for Cutting Up Mun-knee-snakers (S.C.U.M.): I-Valerie-Solaris-AKA-@32ACP-Amazon.co.uk-recommends-"Pacific-Rim" shoot b1t-c0in-f@iry*, 2016, a recent performance for CGP London at Dilston Grove, saw the group, adorned in customary glitter and masks, summon forth the spirit of the Bitcoin Fairy – a physical avatar standing in for an immaterial crypto-currency – in order that they might ask it some questions, such as: 'You eat more energy than

Plastique Fantastique
Protocols for the Society for Cutting Up Mun-knee-snakers (S.C.U.M.): I-Valerie-Solaris-AKA-@32ACP-Amazon.co.uk-recommends-'Pacific-Rim' shoot b1t-c0in-f@iry
2016 performance at CGP London

the Google Giant … Why should we feed you Bit Coin Fairy?' *Loops for AI's to tell their Children*, 2015, saw them grapple with another figure of advanced financial capitalism: 'WELCOME NEW ANIMAL: HIGH FREQUENCY TRADER!' a projected text-overlay read, heralding in the algorithmic agency of the HFT as the group created a carnivalesque new beast.

Plastique Fantastique combine a chaotic assemblage of loops and fictions, characters and videos, sounds and music, spinning the cutting-edge technology of advanced capitalism together with arcane ritual and magic. References are buried deep in audio-visual landscapes that obfuscate clear meaning while details leap out and stick in the mind. Plastique Fantastique create a mixed-up sense of time that is confused, non-linear and exhilarating, involving repetitions, multiple screens, windows within windows and stretched, distorted and pitch-bent samples. Their relationship to their subject matter is often ambivalent: at once apocalyptic and celebratory.

The figure of the high-frequency trader also surfaces in the recent work of Suzanne Treister. *HFT the Gardener*, 2016, comprised an expansive array of drawings, diagrams, prints and paintings gathered around the fictional narrative of Hillel Fischer Traumberg – a high-frequency trader turned techno-shaman who finds correspondences between hallucinogenic plants and the companies of the FT100 share index. The project dealt with the complexity of capitalism today, shining a light on some of the most advanced forms of speculative trading – forms which rely on sub- and post-human speeds to accrue vast amounts of small profits that accumulate into billions of pounds. Treister's project combined this with the mystical belief systems of Kabbalistic Gematria numerology, psychedelic self-discovery and the logic of the art market. Paul Carey-Kent, reviewing *HFT the Gardener* in *AM*401 astutely observed that Treister's project also points itself inwards, never straying too far from self-consciously examining the art market and its machinations.

Treister's projects are relentless in their scope, presenting vast arrays of work with complex interrelations that the viewer must work to find and piece together. We see these tendencies in works such as *Hexen 2039*, 2006, which through conspiratorial logic linked the occult, the military, witchcraft, Hollywood, MI6, the USSR and the US Army (Reviews *AM*302). Its sequel *Hexen 2.0*, 2009-11, connected counterculture, cybernetics, mythology, mass surveillance and the development of the internet in a complete set of tarot cards featuring the likes of Ada Lovelace, HP Lovecraft, Norbert Wiener and the CIA's MKUltra project.

By operating in fictive and pervasive modes that grasp complexity and embrace the overwhelming nature of our contemporary condition, Treister and Plastique Fantastique articulate an accelerationist project in an aesthetic register. Not flinching and withdrawing but dealing with the problematics of abstraction and complexity head-on while heightening and reinventing them. To this end, their works become as complex and all-consuming as the subject matter they take on and the systems they critique. The works serve as intensified experiences of our present situation, exploring far-flung fringes and extreme points in expansive and densely detailed high-definition.

O'Sullivan, alongside his work with Plastique Fantastique, is a writer and theorist who has engaged with accelerationism in his written work. He raises a salient point in his review of *#ACCELERATE: The accelerationist reader*, 2014, published by Urbanomic. This volume attempts to gather accelerationist writing and plot a prehistory for the movement. In *The Missing Subject of Accelerationsim* O'Sullivan argues that 'an apparent withdrawal from the world and a more obvious

engagement with it – are not altogether mutually exclusive, but must be thought together'.

By way of conclusion, I want to argue that while it might appear that the projects outlined at the start of this article, such as the exhibition 'From Slow to Stop', slip into the 'folk political' by recoiling from the world and dropping out of an accelerating capitalist order, I don't think that this is the case. Slowness in the case of Popova's exhibition becomes a tool for teasing out detail. Slowness may be a necessary point of reference for any accelerationist programme, not least for providing the viewer with the perspective to glimpse what is moving around them. Like Millar in his 'Speed' project in the 1990s, works that slow down and stop our phenomenal overload might make us realise how fast we are travelling or allow a suitable distance for viewing the world in its complexity.

As Marcus Verhagen noted in the concluding remarks of his 'Slow Time' (Features, *AM*318), we cannot 'view the experience of time in isolation from the forces that currently shape it'. Slowness need not be a bad thing, but its adoption cannot be viewed as a solution to the conditions that it strives to critique. Slowness, too, can reveal complexity. Claerbout's *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*, 2013, on show as part of Holden Gallery's exhibition, demonstrates this. The work presents a group of men gathered under a bridge in a downpour. The image was culled from the internet, the small JPEG then being reworked using 3D modelling software to give the photograph depth and movement as the camera pans across. Claerbout points to the conditions under which we operate: the image is archetypal of the globalised exploitation of labour in late capitalism. Workers paid little for their time, doing difficult, dangerous and exploitative work, caught in a moment's pause that is extended out across minutes in the video work. Slowness must remain critical and avoid falling into a therapeutics that simply gives the viewer pause in order to return refreshed to the marketplace.

The question that must be asked is this: who is making demands on your time and why? Central to Srnicek and Williams's vision is the fact that technology applied to automation can liberate people from work if it is backed up with the provision of a universal basic income for all, enabling people to reclaim time for themselves. What might prove crucial in achieving this is a patchwork weaving of speeds and temporalities, with slowness giving pause in order to refocus the mind to the matter at hand and reveal the mechanisms beneath the onrush and an acceleration of the pace of technological change towards a liberatory end.

This slowness, however, requires directedness – a navigational element – in order to become effective. Withdrawal, in and of itself, cannot change anything; as Williams and Srnicek put it, quoting Jodi Dean: 'Goldman Sachs don't care if you raise chickens.' ▮

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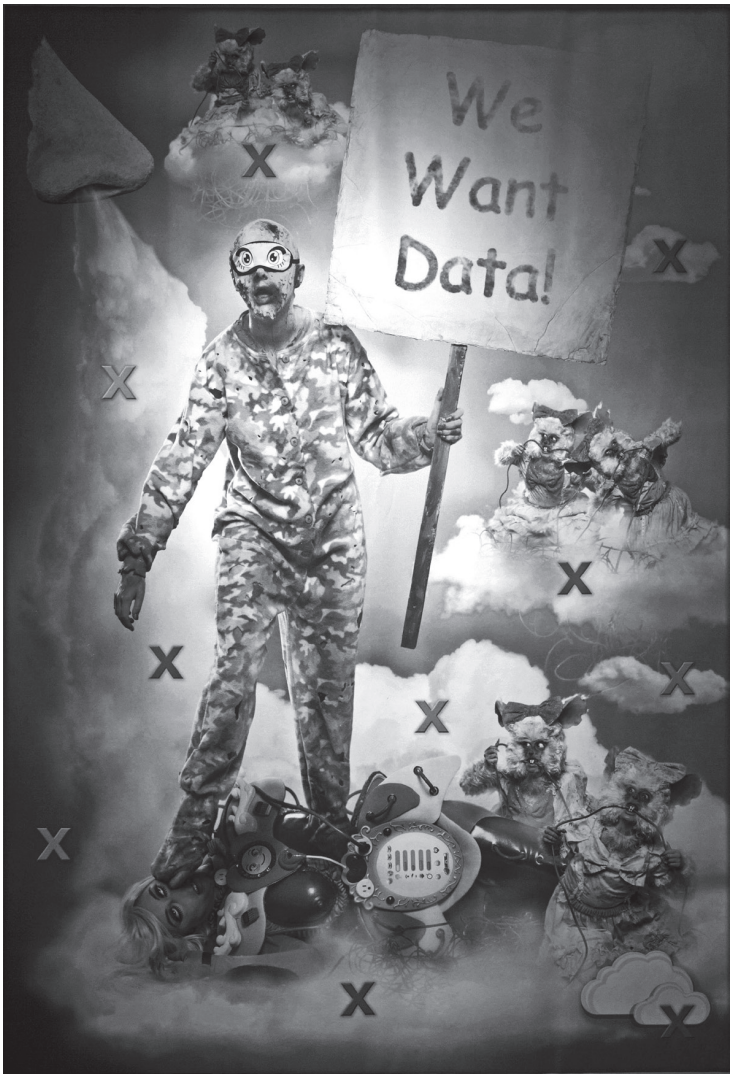
Rachel Maclean
Wot u :-) about? 2016
installation detail