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## Xeno-Architecture: Radical Spatial Practice and the Politics of Alienation



By [Alison Hugill](#)

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Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture (of knowing) to match

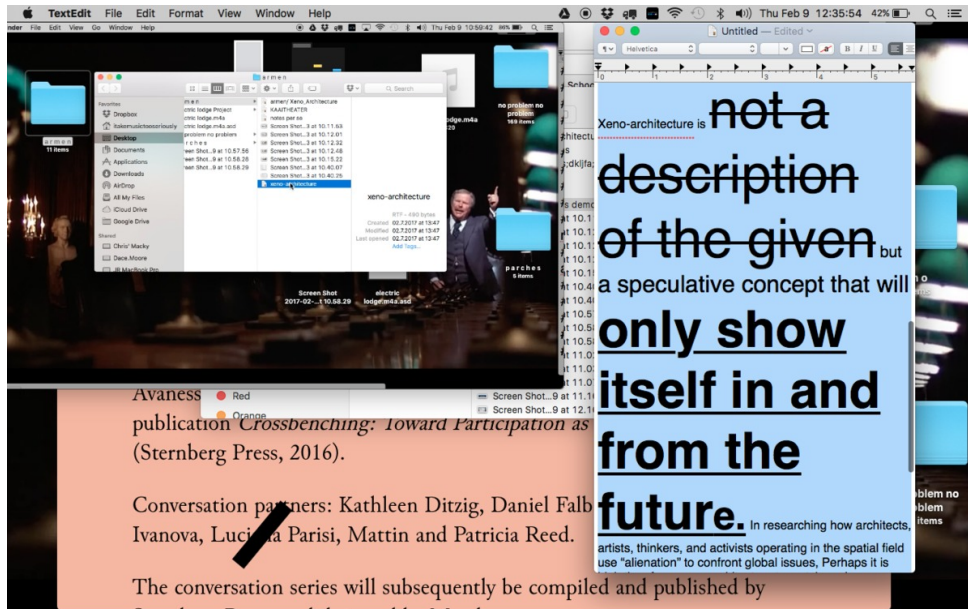
[perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match](#)

Following on from Archinect's [interview](#) with Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, authors of the recent book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*—wherein the pair discussed the implications of their 'accelerationist' political theory for the field of architecture—we spoke to a Brussels-based curatorial and research platform that seeks to transpose 'xenofeminist' politics on to considerations of spatial practice. Xenofeminism is a critically updated, queer and gender abolitionist response to accelerationism's political and economic theory, laid out in the manifesto of collective Laboria Cuboniks, [The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation](#).

[Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match](#), initiated by Lietje Bauwens, Wouter De Raeve and Alice Haddad, seeks to examine the possibilities for re-radicalizing spatial practice. The platform appropriates a quotation as its title, borrowed from philosopher Armen Avanessian's preface to architect and writer [Markus Miessen](#)'s recent publication *Crossbenching: Toward participation as critical spatial practice* (Sternberg Press, 2016). Picking up on Avanessian's neologism, the platform's first collaborative production invites Avanessian and Miessen to continue this conversation, in collaboration with other thinkers addressing this topic from different perspectives. The platform will host future productions, collaborations and experimentations toward an expansion of the concept of 'xeno-architecture'.

While the platform does not directly address the feminist side of xenofeminism, they have staked their claim on the *xeno*—a prefix meaning 'alien', 'strange', or 'other'—aiming to embrace the alienation at the heart of contemporary capitalism and to co-opt it for its emancipatory potential: "liberating ourselves from ourselves." The political framework and platform for spatial practice that emerges celebrates the strangeness at the heart of ourselves and our communities and uses this as the basis for approaching architecture, urbanism and design.





Work-in-process by Tim Tsang and Parches for the performance at the Kaaitheater, April 18

**In your research project and platform *Perhaps it's high time for a xeno-architecture to match*, you identify xenofeminist politics as a useful political philosophy to approach contemporary spatial practice. How do you differentiate xenofeminism from similar theories, accelerationism or speculative realism, for example?**

The collective Laboria Cuboniks rooted at the Emancipation as Navigation summer school in 2014 in Berlin. Over two weeks, thinkers from all over the world came together to elaborate on different rationalities and knowledge productions in times of 'organized disorientation' (c.f. Badiou). Among the points that bonded the feminist collective was the fact that a lot of the female thinkers had been accused of bowing to the patriarchy for avowing such concepts as 'reason', 'science', and 'universalism'. The xenofeminist manifesto is basically a reclaiming and re-appropriating of those concepts, arguing that feminists—better yet, everybody—should stop settling for the margins. Xenofeminism is strongly influenced by accelerationism but it's the focus on the 'xeno' instead of 'acceleration' that appealed to us. Especially Patricia Reed's closing essay in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, where she expresses her dissatisfaction with the ambiguous injunction to 'accelerate', which serves to popularize and polemicize the movement inspired us. She offers seven alternative prescriptions which are inspirational for our search for a "xeno-architecture": reorientate, eccentricate, speculate, fictionalize, geometricize, commonize and abstractify. In their *Accelerationist Manifesto*, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek already gestured in this direction, pleading for "a future that needs to be unbound, upfastening our horizons towards the universal possibilities of the Outside." Going further, the usage of the prefix 'xeno' opens up a whole spectrum of possibilities where it becomes possible to think of other futures that surpass what we take for granted, what we think as normal, as 'natural'. The alienation our society produces becomes, in that way, not something to fear but something we can build on. How can we imagine this 'alienation'? It could, just like the notion of 'speculation,' very easily mean everything and nothing. In order to better grasp how it could be interpreted, it's necessary to investigate the philosophical background of xenofeminism and take a better look at speculative realism.

*How do we start thinking about solutions when it's impossible to even truly capture the problem?*

It's needless to say that we live in a time facing challenging issues of ungraspable sizes: politics of austerity and exclusion, protection of privacy, climate change, etc. How do we start thinking about solutions when it's impossible to even truly capture the problem? Timothy Morton refers to these events, whose size and structure transcend human cognitive

capabilities, as *hyperobjects*. Often engineered by ourselves—technology, the financial system, data profusion—they have themselves outgrown into actors, planning our present from the future. If Facebook tells us who to hang out with, or Google is selecting which phone we talk through and the mattress we sleep on, who is then actually governing whom? In order to deal with this new situation, it is necessary, as speculative realism shows, to break with the correlationist conception that centralizes the human being and to start incorporating an inhuman (as Avanessian underlines; not non-human, post- or trans-human but a new, extended humanism) perspective. Only if we learn to think from the future, as argued by Suhail Malik and Avanessian in *The Speculative Time-Complex*, and by re-appropriating complex (power) structures and breaking open the borders of our current imagination, it will become possible to stop passively following norms, and start to rather co-create them. This 'alienation', or 'othering' is an inhuman thinking that

transcends linearity of time; it is central to the xenofeminist manifesto and has a tremendous global political urgency in the current Brexit/Trump-era. What we take away from studying these discourses is that the options are simple: either we become/stay xenophobic (which corresponds to a nostalgic or fearful call for retreat) or, by starting to speculate about the as-yet-unknown and acknowledging global complexity, we embrace the xeno.



The first conversation in a series occurred in Berlin, including: Armen Avanessian, Markus Miessen, Anke Hennig and Patricia Reed, January 2017

**This nostalgic call for retreat (labelled ‘folk politics’ by Williams and Srnicek) tends to result in hypostatizing a unified communitarian identity that seeks to efface the ‘xeno’ through assimilation or consensus (identity politics). We have often seen this manifested in socially-engaged art or architecture practices. In the idea of ‘xeno-architecture’, how can you hold the importance of community or collectivity together with a process of alienation?**

Since postmodernism, grand narratives and ideologies have been regarded with fear and suspicion. This aversion to the all-encompassing view has led to the advent of “short stories,” focusing on particularities, subjectivity and critical (self)-reflection. However, when, on the one hand, our problems are getting more substantial and complicated every day and, on the other hand, our answers need to be nuanced, modest and self-critical at all times, we cannot but acknowledge facing a disastrous discrepancy. It is therefore not sufficient to expand our current imagination on an individual level only. Precisely, Reed asks, how can we collectively reorientate from “what is” toward “what could be”? We believe there is a need to develop what Dutch philosopher Thijs Lijster calls “Tall Stories” that can function as new collective horizons and imaginaries.

This notion of “Tall Stories” is similar to the concept of “hyperstition”—fictions that cause the conditions that subsequently make them become real. Attaching the prefix ‘Left’ before the concept that originates from CCRU and is loved by capitalist economist, Avanessian and Anke Hennig claim that ‘left-hyperstitions’ can be an emancipatory ‘tool’ to build confidence and cohesion within a globally networked capitalism. Imagine a lasso that you throw beyond the extent of your imagination, aiming to catch something you only hope will exist. When the rope has clung onto its point, you slowly pull yourself towards this—at that moment still hardly imaginable—goal, ultimately creating a path for yourself that did not yet exist before the throw. In a way, both the accelerationist manifesto and the xenofeminist manifesto are hyperstitions themselves; their theory was born the moment it was written down. As lassos, their words and concepts were thrown into the world, full of plain provocations and demands, to now, retrospectively, pave the way to collectively dream our futures. We hope the same will happen with Avanessian’s neologism of “xeno-architecture.”

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*Imagine a lasso that you throw beyond the extent of your imagination, aiming to catch something you only hope will exist*

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**The idea of the Commons seems to me to resonate more with the folk political paradigm. Despite**

**Stavros Stavrides' efforts, there is still a clear connection to a moment, or a series of breaks (primitive accumulation), which inaugurated a violent separation of people from their communal livelihood via the introduction of capitalist wage labour. Commoning practices tend to suggest a return to pre-capitalist practices rather than an embrace of new techno-possibilities. How do you reconcile that?**

We'd like to address commoning at different scales. We believe that what is being sought through a definition of "xeno-architecture" is not incompatible with practices of commoning, but indeed we definitively reject such typical folk political tendencies that end up into nostalgic or territorial retreat, quite paradoxically excluding rather than assembling.

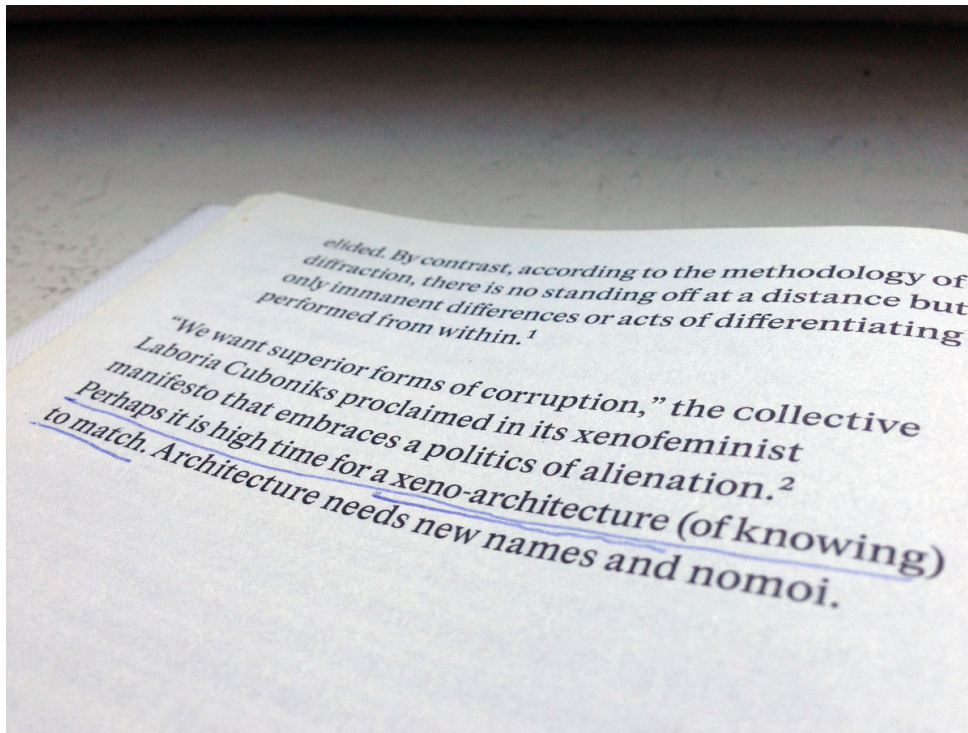
Our project precisely started with a critique towards what Srnicek and Williams call "folk politics." When it comes to the translation of political engagement into the spatial realm and spatial practice, resistance against authority has been directed towards local and direct actions, and horizontal, transparent and participatory practices. Examples are countless, from the occupation of vacant buildings, the construction of D.I.Y. shelters, to local urban farming initiatives and citizen's committees. Some have proven effective in advancing social cohesion in urban neighborhoods or modifying legal norms in favor of inhabitants and fragile minorities; however, ever since these well-intentioned practices got incremented in the 1960-70's, their radicalism and political potential has decreased, while their actions have more and more been absorbed by the system they sought to resist.

We see this tendency in our Brussels environment too. The Belgian contribution to last year's Venice Biennale, *Bravoure Scarcity Beauty*, not only accepts scarcity and poverty but celebrates it as beautiful. Although the project touches upon the curatorial topic of the biennale from a practical and aesthetic point of view, which gives the impression of an apolitical approach to Aravena's curatorship, it nevertheless is political. Instead of speculating on progress, such discourse emphasizes a melancholic attitude of retreat and decline.

Another example is the research project and exhibition *Productive City – A Good City Has Industry*. This celebrated project reflects on how to re-introduce productivity—industries—into the city. Although it presents several interesting architectural proposals, its line of thought emphasizes a short to mid-term response looking at "what was" instead of a long-term vision that embraces a new take on a complex future. Although we agree on the societal analysis of the project—globalization as exploitation needs to stop, rapid growth in urban demographics needs urgent solutions etc.—these challenges won't be tackled if restricted to *re-*installing factories within the city. We emphasize the '*re*' because this displays our point of critique. Instead of searching for manners of developing society in ways we can hardly imagine today, the project looks back at what was once working, puts it in a contemporary jacket and presents it as the ideal solution.

Folk political interpretation of the commons, may seem innocent—in the political spectrum, they would position themselves in complete opposition to Trump/Brexit voters for instance—but the call for "the local," the "handmade" and "direct action and solutions" is also a leitmotif in dangerous forms of politics, such as the rise of the Right who calls for retreat within their own borders, local economy and the exclusion of the other. For us, this blurring evolution emblemizes how our current ways of thinking is reaching a dead end. This is why within our project we aim to investigate the possibility of radically different forms of knowledge production.





Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match appropriates a quote as its title borrowed from philosopher Armen Avanessian's conceptual intervention in form of a preface in architect and writer Markus Miessen's recent publication *Crossbenching: Toward participation as critical spatial practice* (Sternberg Press, 2016).

#### How does this scale up to a global political thinking?

A start is to re-appropriate the definition of commoning. Society as such is already a common project, however this simple reality has been dismantled due to neoliberal forces. Aspects within our project focus on the ways to involve a community within society as a whole, and can start creating a common narrative in a constantly evolving horizon. We do not aim at re-aligning with a system that once supposedly proved its effect and for which the existing infrastructures would need to be smashed in order to be implemented, but rather choose, as Srnicek and Williams also suggest in their manifesto, to use society in its actual state as a springboard towards a more social and inclusive commonality.

With this objective in mind, we do not want to dismiss bottom-up efforts—there are valuable lessons to be drawn from investigating how existing practices implement the commons to address questions of ownership, labor and production management, the sharing economy, open-source and so on.

Beyond specific practices, stimulating seems to consider commoning at a scale that exceeds individual agency, and rather instates it as aggregative force, maybe as some sort of large-scale infrastructure. Practices which, for instance, through a radical engagement with reformulating rules and norms can interweave complex relations between specific situations and hegemonic structures. Xenofeminism argues for “a politics able to think an intersectional or ‘relative’ universalism as a gluing operation after decades of identity politics that emphasize particularisms.” This line of thought criticizes the Modernist legacy that advocates top-down impositions of norms and values under disguise of an ideal universal model, and it also denounces the postmodernist stance, which certainly achieves to expose contradictions of power structures through the concentration on locality and specificity, but fails to rally the force to effectively act upon abusive conditions. Instead of standing in opposition with these two precedents, a xenofeminist approach calls for robust ideological constructions that take advantage of the work on particularism. In other words, it advocates for a “bottom-up universal” that includes “the ability to move back and forth between local and global scales.”

This resonates with Avanessian's interest in “the recursive effect that follows the continual integration of new elements into a whole” and cultural theorist Luciana Parisi's examination of mereotopological architecture in which “parts can be bigger than wholes, as much as wholes can be smaller as parts.” Taking these insights back to considering commoning, we take inspiration from Benjamin H. Bratton's ideas on designing “the stack to come,” or more concretely and closer to home, from peer-to-peer economics as founded by Belgian cyberphilosopher Michel Bauwens; a dynamic model of creating relations between people and production that corresponds to commoning knowledge by use of digital networks to organize immaterial and material production. We believe that it is by investigating how to consolidate these relations that we can start thinking about desirable normative propositions and the “Tall Stories” demanded by Lijster, going from the specific to the universal and vice versa in order to build a collective horizon (rather than homogenized horizontality).

*Rather than focusing on forms and looks, we aim to collect thoughts about new ways of approaching spatial practice*

**Speaking to practicing architects, how do you translate this semi-poetic or non-teleological politics beyond the critical and into concrete terms that could change the conditions and relations of the field?**

Within the architectural landscape, we are inspired by transdisciplinary practices that expand the reflection beyond the built form and aesthetics, and approach policies, codes and regulations as malleable components that are integrally part of their poetic—understood as projective—process. Building, and also socio-cultural, norms are ingrained in architecture (from concepts to drawings to buildings); they usually form the constraints against which architectural design has to compromise. Rather than seeing them as immutable impositions, they fundamentally demand to be constantly reinterpreted. Abduction as methodology lies at the heart of such a mode of operations; by imagining ‘what could be’, it revises the social constructs at the base of current rules and regulations, in order to invent new ones and formulate powerful narratives more adequate to the worldview we demand.

As we mentioned before, “xeno-architecture” is not a description of the given but a speculative concept first mentioned by Avanesian in various discussions with architects such as [Christian Kerez](#) and [Rem Koolhaas](#). In our search for new forms of radicalism in spatial practice, we have been inspired by both Miessen’s work and the philosophical theories mentioned above as a starting point. For us, both came together in the closing sentence of Avanesian’s preface to Miessen’s recent book *Crossbenching*: “Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture (of knowing) to match.” It became the name of our platform.

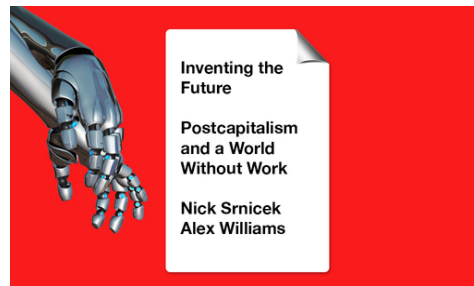
We started off with a collaborative production, asking Avanesian and Miessen to continue their line of thought, exploiting its potential further. Picking up the ball, they initiated a series of conversations with other “xeno-thinkers/practitioners” such as Patricia Reed, Anke Hennig, Daniel Falb, Luciana Parisi and Benjamin Bratton. These conversations are happening as we speak and will result in a performance in Het Kaaitheater in Brussels on April 18.

It is within the spatial realm that the way society is thought comes forth. It works in both directions. On the one hand the spatial realm “displays” how society is thought, but at the same time it also has the ability to “create” how society is thought. Hence, what is left for spatial practices to effectively challenge the prevailing hegemony? What role can spatial practitioners endorse to speculate on future possibilities? Instead of retreat towards the local, the tangible, or the natural, we are interested in practices that embrace complexity and the unknown. But whereas for example *Bravoure Scarcity Beauty* presents an aesthetic expression of ‘nostalgia’, our platform is not looking for an aesthetic translation of ‘xeno’. Rather than focusing on forms and looks, we aim to collect thoughts about new ways of approaching spatial practice: rather than translating a concept directly into a physical appearance, theory and practice are inherently intertwined in *Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match* —thereby opening up lines of thoughts and experimentations that cannot (yet) be anticipated.

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