

Melanie Gilligan
**Visits from the
Future**

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Visits from the Future

This past October in the UK, the ruling Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition announced £81 billion in government spending cuts, the most severe since World War II. In his unveiling speech, Chancellor George Osborne declared that “today is the day when Britain steps back from the brink,” predicting that the cuts would restore “sanity to our public finances and stability to our economy” by decreasing the national deficit. The Chancellor consoled the public by saying that this “is a hard road but it leads to a better future.” The cuts are wide-ranging and include: a reduction of 8 percent in welfare spending, with an £11 billion cut announced first, followed by another £7 billion, slashing housing and child benefits and placing new limits on incapacity benefits (for those who cannot work due to illness or disability); the layoff of nearly half a million public servants; a 51 percent funding cut to local governments across England; and an increase in the state pension age by one year. A 40 percent cut to higher education will increase yearly university tuition fees from £3,000 to £9,000 (which students will automatically take on as debt) and end the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a subsidy of up to £30 a week for students from low income households who are aged sixteen to nineteen and enrolled in college or optional secondary school. This grossly exclusionary restructuring of higher education was the first measure to be put before Parliament.

The world witnessed the UK’s angry response to the education cuts over the past months: mass demonstrations on November 10, 24, 30, and December 9, and occupations in almost fifty university and college campuses across the UK have seen some of the most vital public resistance and violent clashing between the state and the UK population in many years. The marches were attended by masses of students from pre-teen to university age, by staff from throughout the education system, as well as by countless supporters, while the absence of many established political groups that normally hijack demonstrations of this kind attests to the spontaneous self-determination and organization of the movement. While the demonstrations have focused on cuts to higher education, it has been made clear again and again throughout the protests that most see this movement as part of a wider struggle against the entire range of cuts being implemented. Whereas Osborne asked people in the UK to make sacrifices in order to bring about a better tomorrow, the speeches and placards of the education protests retort that a future without access to benefits or education, with increased

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Benj Gerdes and Jennifer Hayashida, *We Were Told to Be Afraid: Järva Fields*, 2011, HD video stills.

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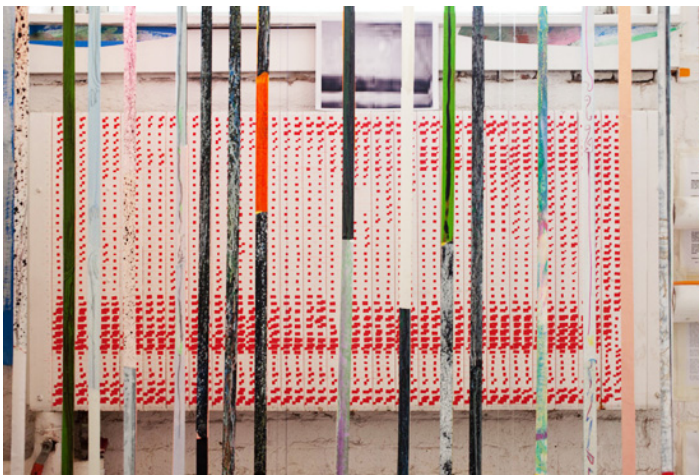
unemployment, poverty, and indebtedness, is no future at all.

In light of the public resistance to the cuts so far, an obvious question is: Why did the UK government take such draconian steps to reduce its debt? Many countries currently laden with hefty deficits are avoiding such steps, when economic perils still abound. While the aptly renamed “Con-Dem” government clearly chose the axe end of the fiscal-stimulus-versus-belt-tightening debate, their chosen course is by no means guaranteed to ensure economic recovery. In fact, many predict that such cuts will push the UK back into recession, and possibly even increase the deficit.¹ Among possible reasons for the coalition’s savage cuts to the budget, one stands out: it was a preemptive move to avoid the financial market attacks that have dogged other European countries in the wake of the economic crisis. Although the UK was not in any immediate danger of this and is much better positioned to repay their debts than other eurozone countries, Con-Dem politicians and their advisors from London’s “City” financial district nevertheless decided that their first priority would be to maintain their AAA credit rating and win the approval of the currently deficit-averse markets.

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government cuts its debts preemptively and as long as a UK sovereign debt crisis is postponed they can say the strategy was successful. 2) Predictive assessments of risk (e.g., Moody’s or S&P credit ratings) are such naturalized truths that when a credit rating changes, these assessments automatically materialize a future projection in the present. 3) Using such evaluations to pressure economies, the self-moving spirit of the market “says” that it’s worried about sovereign debt but forgets to mention that investors profit from that fear.² In any case, nations are forced to reduce outstanding deficits, which could be used to help their populations survive economic hardship. 4) When the market takes a pessimistic view on a country’s economic future, the resulting panic and sell-offs render the prophecy self-fulfilling. The question of which market anxieties around national fiscal deficits are warranted and which are simply profitable commotion is open to speculation (literally). The result, however, is that such financial strategies, which annex particular future outcomes in order to capture profit in the present, also have other immediate effects, pushing through austerity measures that impose hardships. This is not to paint an all-too-simple picture of speculators as greedy or finance as evil. Such arguments shift blame to individuals or one sector of capital when it belongs to our economic system as a whole, of which financial investment and speculation is a fundamental part. Since a nation’s social spending on education, health, and welfare is so often deemed dispensable in such a system, the crisis we are witnessing is really a matter of direct antagonism between the needs and wants of people and the expansion of capital, a conflict that becomes evermore stark each day.

The present-future of financial markets described above is mirrored in the explicitly anticipatory and biopolitical character of UK governance, which aims to forecast and regulate risks to the health, safety, and economic welfare of the social body. As is well known, UK government policy has for years focused relentlessly on “at risk” individuals – whether “at risk” physically, socially, or economically – and, as with the preemptive financial strategies described above, potential risks take hold of and overwhelm present events. An example of risk preemption from the education protests can be found in the policing techniques used – for instance, police repeatedly deployed a much-decried “kettling” strategy, whereby they penned in demonstrators in advance of (i.e., without) any signs of aggression, ostensibly to maintain public safety. London police detained demonstrators in the cold without access to water, food, or toilets, and, unsurprisingly, the



Franklin Evans, *timecompressionmachine* (detail), 2010. Acrylic on tape, tape collage, and watercolor on paper.

The recent period of European sovereign debt crisis has seen the fluctuations of financial markets – namely rising bond yields – exerting unprecedented, direct neo-liberalizing pressures on national fiscal policies, whereby markets play a policing role normally reserved for institutions such as the IMF. While the wisdom and fairness of this state of affairs has been challenged from various quarters, the situation continues unabated. Scrutinizing aspects of the UK’s particular case can be worthwhile for informing us about the loops of the present and future that characterize the sovereign debt crisis. 1) The UK

tactic incited antagonism that may not have erupted otherwise, at which point they responded on some occasions by beating protesters, on others by charging them on horseback. As an added bonus, the police could point to the resulting bedlam to justify their brutal techniques. Furthermore, many of the demonstrators “kettled” were video profiled as a preemptive (read: intimidatory) measure, although not arrested. The pretext of preserving public safety falls away in the context of such police brutality.

In all the above instances in which state and capital invoke the future, emotion and affect are key ingredients in forging the possible as a pressing reality. Philosopher Brian Massumi has made a comment regarding affect and the logic of preemption that could easily be applied to the UK budget cuts, the European sovereign debt crisis, and the policing of the protests: “Threat triggers fear. The fear is of disruption. The fear *is* a disruption.”³ For the markets, as for the Con-Dem coalition, fear is the medium that forces cuts to national budgets. At the moment, the anxiety surrounding debt (that age-old extension of present into future) is very coercive. The Con-Dem coalition would have people docile and fearful from the weight of their economic burdens. Without a social buffer to save them from poverty and homelessness, people are pressured to take on self-managing, cautious attitudes toward the future. However, the protests of the last months have shown that many in the UK will not, out of fear, swallow the cuts. In fact, the education protests themselves have offered another future-oriented affect: hope – the hope that fighting back is not futile.

Capitalist accumulation has always been aided by predictions of various kinds. However, the future is the frontier that capital cannot invade, and preemption is only ever a violent closure of possibility. While such capitalist need drives Europe’s sovereign debt crisis and UK government policy, the UK cuts to education are an exemplary instance of dashed hopes for the future. As an insightful article on the student protests by Nic Beuret entitled “Hope Against Hope: A Necessary Betrayal” has pointed out, the hope focused on the right to education in the UK contains opposing meanings within it. On the one hand, higher education can channel hopes for social mobility within the unjust structure we have today as an “investment” that obtains future employment for some, while excluding others. On the other hand, these struggles contain a more radical hope that through collective resistance to the current privatization of knowledge in the UK – a struggle of crucial importance in and of itself – a broader fight for social transformation can also emerge. “The riot

is as much about dreams that have yet to become possible as they are over the loss of existing entitlements. There are hopes that lie dormant or hidden that speak of different ways of being; of different kinds of dreams and futures.”⁴

Philosopher Ernst Bloch said of hope that it “dwells in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy.”⁵ While indeterminate amalgams of future and present permeate the landscape of politics and economics today, hope can also build on blends of present and future; struggles to keep welfare programs might also conceivably further a struggle toward a less circumscribed future. The education protests generated hope by offering a view beyond the closed projections pursued by capital to where, by rejecting barbaric social policies, we can imagine other versions of the future.

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Melanie Gilligan is an artist and writer based in London and New York. Gilligan has written for magazines and journals such as *Texte zur Kunst*, *Mute*, *Artforum*, and *Grey Room*. In 2008 Gilligan released *Crisis in the Credit System*, a four-part fictional mini drama about the recent financial crisis, made specifically for internet viewing. Her most recent serial video works *Popular Unrest* and also *Self-Capital* both look at the current state of politics post-economic crisis. In 2010, Gilligan showed *Popular Unrest* as a solo exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery, London; Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne; The Banff Centre; Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver; and the work received the illy Present Future Award at the Artissima Art Fair, Turin.

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