

Editorial

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Defining the future is not easy. As we at *e-flux journal* look simultaneously backward and forward over our ten years of publishing, we wonder what lies ahead. This is issue #99 of the journal. Since we started with issue zero, this is actually our hundredth issue, amounting to nearly a thousand essays.¹ Thinking ahead can be tricky, because the future always harbors a hidden object. Time does not move in one direction; it is not only the period we think we're living in. Looking sideways, backward, at multiple shared timelines at once, we plan and we think ahead – but ahead of what? The restoration of many buried futures is long overdue. In this situation – which is also marked by imminent planetary precarity – how do we put the future together again?

In the twentieth century, Kazimir Malevich famously stated, “I transformed myself in the zero of form and emerged from nothing to creation.” He explained of his work that “it is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins.” One hundred years ago, in his 1919 text “On the Museum,” the painter called for staunch noninterference in the ongoing decay of old museums, whose function was to store the art of the past. The aim in this provocation was to let conservative history burn, preserve its ashes in laboratory jars, rethink the museum as a pharmacy, and let those ashes come together – and perhaps ferment – into a more generative art of the future.

“At the time Malevich wrote his anti-nostalgic essay,” Boris Groys relayed in these pages six years ago, “the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and the general collapse of state institutions and the country’s economy. The Communist Party responded by trying to save these collections. Malevich objected to this pro-museum policy by calling on the state to not intervene on behalf of the old art, since its destruction could open the path to true, living art. He wrote:”

Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy, one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly, thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on a single chemist’s shelf. We can make a concession to conservatives by offering that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up one pharmacy.

“Later, Malevich gives a concrete example of what he means:”

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The aim [of this pharmacy] will be the same, even if people will examine the powder from Rubens and all his art – a mass of ideas will arise in people, and will be often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).²

Planning for the future of course depends on the quality of one's present – and as there are many presents in operation, the images we create of the future are also manifold. On the one hand, there are people and institutions that charge forward with the certainty that the future belongs to them. If they know the end is coming, they also know it will not come for them. On the other hand, there are peoples, collectives, and assemblages who cannot take the future for granted. Instead of charging forward, they move sideways, trying to build a world while carrying hidden histories and smuggled knowledges that have already survived many endings, knowing they may not be lucky enough to survive the next one. These two extremes have always existed, but seem to have become more pronounced the further we get into the twenty-first century.

Sometimes defining the future or destroying the past appear to happen instantaneously, when only a moment ago it seemed painfully impossible. This week, a massive fire hit Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral. Another fire consumed Al-Aqsa Mosque in Palestine. Last week a white arsonist, son of a sheriff, was arrested for attacking three historic black churches in Louisiana. At least one of these had already been rebuilt from fires past. In September, millennia of art at the Brazilian National Museum succumbed to fire. Mourning the loss of material history is always peculiar for how it resembles mourning the loss of human life – to this day, we are still lamenting the loss of Alexandria's library. At the same time, such a massive loss of meaning and heritage could be seen as a mere change in the state of inert matter. This paradox defies not only comprehension, but conventional processes of grieving.

Speaking of paradoxes, in 1962 Debord wrote the following in his pamphlet "Into The Dustbin of History": "The story of the arsonists who, during the final days of the Commune, went to destroy Notre Dame, only to find it defended by an armed battalion of Commune artists, is a richly provocative example of direct democracy."

In the case of Notre Dame, the cathedral spire that burned is actually from the nineteenth century. In a way, it is not the original church, but corresponds to an active reconstruction of the past that art has had to enact. For buildings, the concept of truth to an original became more

material and literal in the twentieth century, so that today, building to appear "medieval" or in "the spirit of" might seem kitsch. But that is probably due more to a modernist purism obsessed with historic originals and authenticity since the dawn of technical and mechanical reproduction. What then to make of the reconstruction of the Reichstag, and of the entire city of Berlin, which in the 1990s was made to look as if the Second World War had never happened?

The futures of some histories are insured and ensured, shielded by capital and backed up by digital replicas, like the intricately scanned version of a seventeenth-century Notre Dame produced for the video game *Assassin's Creed: Unity*.³ On April 17, when a philosophy professor showed up with gas canisters at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York to replicate Notre Dame's flames, the police were already there to apprehend him.⁴ Many places of worship or import cannot count on such state-backed protection, or can count on the exact opposite. When the visible futures of other histories go up in flames or are buried under Culture, torn up, looted, and run through with pipelines, there is of course no assurance of reparation. It's an old story that keeps getting coauthored. Many different kinds of cathedrals are built over older holy places. Futures are built and traded on the compacted and resold bones of other humans and extinct species. There has long been living and thinking, underground rooting and overgrowth, in the space of shared timelines. Just look below you. Maybe when spaces of parallel histories and presents are better seen, there can be something like dancing, somehow, into shared futures.

– Editors

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e-flux journal no. 0 (November 2008) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/>.

2

Kazimir Malevich, quoted in Boris Groys, "Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich" *e-flux journal* no. 47 (September 2013) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>.

3

Ben Gilbert, "As France rebuilds Notre-Dame Cathedral, the French studio behind 'Assassin's Creed' is offering up its 'over 5,000 hours' of research on the 800-year-old monument," *Business Insider*, April 18, 2019 <https://www.businessinsider.com/notre-dame-fire-assassin-s-creed-maxime-durand-ubisoft-interview-2019-4>.

4

Ali Watkins and Ali Winston, "Man Arrested With Gas Cans and Lighters at St. Patrick's Cathedral Is a Philosophy Teacher," *New York Times*, April 18, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/nyregion/st-patricks-cathedral-marc-lamparello.html>.

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