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Moving together, in St. Louis: Dwell in Other Futures

MERVE BEDIR on June 13, 2018 at 9:36 AM

"Imagination, from the very beginning is in motion, is embodied, is a collective exercise of care. Movement is the realization of the imagination, and imagination is the process of movement." – Max Haiven

Our imaginations are constituted by a continual questioning of how we want to live; how we want to relate to food, environment, technology, and money; and how we want to live together. The current political system, however, relies on an imagination of each of us being "a vector of competitiveness, individualism, and fear."¹ Challenging this system will take more than just devising other economic and political policies, we also need to transform the current culture and imagination.² Art has been functioning more and more as a kind of rigorous laboratory dedicated to researching the imagination of the alternatives, and exploring places of projective imagination. This impulse was fronted at the recent *Dwell in Other Futures: Art / Urbanism / Midwest*, a two-day, art and ideas festival that explored the collisions of race, urbanism, and futurism, providing a platform for alternate visions of St. Louis to come. Organized by Gavin Kroeber, Tim Portlock, and Rebecca Wanzo, the festival asked the questions of "how images of the future shape the city in the present," and "what competing futures are emerging in the urban fabric."

The festival initiated with the legendary Samuel Delany, whose influential fiction is an early inscription of Afrofuturism – speculating on popular culture and science fiction, while deeply rooted in history and futurity. Through "past-future imaginations," he suggested a thinking that "who and where we've been is an essential part of who we can become," and emphasized continuity rather than rupture for futuristic

thinking. Delany was accompanied by interlocutors Sophia Al-Maria, Terrance Wooten, Treasure Shields Redmond, who both expanded and rooted Delany's fictional explorations into personal and societal aftershocks and influences.



Addoley Dzegede, In Site (2018). Installation view at the exhibition Revisions to Tomorrow, curated by Tim Portlock. Photo by Gina Grafos.

The opening event included a pop-up exhibition featuring works by Jonathan Hanahan, Alix Gerber, ICE, and Tim Portlock, as well as two new commissions. The exhibition and accompanying commissions served to root the proceedings in place, offering primarily St. Louis based artists a space to experiment with notions of place and futurity. For "In Site" Addoley Dzegede curated building artifacts, clay tiles, steel columns, stone column capitals, and ornamentation elements from the deconstructed or destroyed buildings in St. Louis, exhibited in .ZACK, which itself is re-purposed from an early 20th ct. Classical and Egyptian Revivalist style building initially designed for the Cadillac Company. The artifacts were selected from The National Building Arts Center, which is an archive of building materials and components representing the urban culture throughout the history of US, based just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Investigating notions of moving bodies, belonging, place, and hybrid identities, Dzegede explored the artifacts as metaphors of these notions, and the colors, patterns, and materials almost as means to assign movement and belonging. Basil Kincaid and Reuben Reuel's "Untitled" was another new commission for the festival, a quilted textile piece, which also took the themes of movement, place, and belonging as its departure points. Kincaid and Reuel's work was an invitation to think on collective care, and the politics of interiority.³

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Eric Ellingsen and Species of Space, the earth is blue like an orange (landscape performances welcoming the future now Chouteau Greenway), 2018, presented as a part of Dwell In Other Futures: Art / Urbanism / Midwest. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis. April 28, 2018. Photo by Michael Thomas.

The second day of the festival started with the landscape performance of Eric Ellingsen and Species of Space “the earth is blue like an orange,” which was a social engagement and performative design experiment, co-producing knowledge, memories, and stories through participation. Inviting the participants to make statements from custom built speaker platforms, the work underlined the notions of inclusivity in public space,

and democracy in action. Similar in nature, but different in method, “Imagining St. Louis Futures” by Amber Johnson with S. Jewell S. McGhee o The Justice Fleet was an urban design board game open throughout the day at the Pulitzer Art Foundation, which hosted the second day of the festival.



Autumn Knight, *The La-a Consortium: Convening #3*, presented as a part of *Dwell In Other Futures: Art / Urbanism / Midwest*. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis. April 28, 2018. Photo by Michael Thomas.

Autumn Knight snapped the institutional context into focus with her performative *La-Consortium: Convening #3*, consisting primarily of a list of fictional institutions that take on stereotypically Black names and speculations of what types of activities they may contain. This futurism was simultaneously a critique of the historical absence of Black voices in institutional spaces and a collective imagining of calling forth these rooted Black narratives through a nuanced performance of naming.

Following a series of screenings from Sophia Al-Maria, which zoomed out to a more global view with reference to her now-jaded phrasing of “Gu Futurism,” Amanda Colón-Smith, Jae Shin, and V. Mitch McEwen presented their projects in pockets of St. Louis and Newark, and a single family dwelling in Detroit, respectively. Colón-Smith focused on projects that involve education and communal gatherings in the Dutchtown and adjacent communities in St. Louis, and Shin explained the two methods they work with—creating the public around a project, and bringing design in organized communities for the park they designed along Passaic River in New Jersey. In their presentations, Colón-Smith and Shin emphasized the importance of working with young people, design being a small contribution in a larger effort of organization, and architects enabling institutions to critique themselves. Colón-Smith pointed to the large redevelopment projects being planned for the south side of St. Louis and expressed concern on the lack of organization in and among the communities there, commenting on the “intentional *disorganization*” of the mostly low-income tenants over decades of decline. McEwen referred to Samuel Delaney’s “Times Square Red Times Square Blue,” in relation to urban transformation and the disciplining of bodies in cities. She talked about her project on the re-designing of a Detroit house from a site of disease, fear, and anxiety to a place in the cultural life of Detroit to be used for music, art, neighbors to engage with each other. Creative disciplines facilitating processes of cultural production, designing for daily life, exercising politics, and designing policy offered fascinating alternative imaginations on (urban) growth, and on the future of the practice.



Katherine Simóne Reynolds, *You're the Only Reason I'm Staying Here*, (2018), commissioned for *Dwell In Other Futures: Art / Urbanism / Midwest*. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis. April 28, 2018. Photo by David Johnson.

Another new commission in the festival, *You're the Only Reason I'm Staying Here* by Katherine Simóne Reynolds, was a highlight. Screened thr times throughout the day, the three-channel, five-part video installation continuously shifted the position of the gaze, perplexing the viewer, but ir way questioned the pronouns *me/you/it/us/them* and the norms assigned to these pronouns by using the visual and spoken language around the Depicting a series of scenes with young, Black performers (including the artist and her brother) set into various landscapes ranging from the St. l riverfront to the entrance to a high-rise, these bodies performed for an unattributable audience. The work was a critique on the cultural and institi positions attributed to Black bodies, and particularly how the white imagination limits access to particular kinds of physical and cultural space.

Mendi and Keith Obatike presented their existing soundscape works such as *Overcome*, *Blues Speaker*, *Sonic Migration*, *Utopias seeking a City* duo's work is a critique on the prevalent comprehension of the city, the square, the street, the house, the room merely as spaces with physical characteristics, which are produced strictly through design and/or planning, but as spaces where personal, public, and societal relations such as political struggle, conflict, disagreement, and joy take place. This kind of comprehension internalizes the relational and the spatial with each othe thus assembles the architectural space with the relations that produce it, or the relations that it produces.⁴ In Mendi and Keith Obatike's work, th personal, public, and social relations are represented by sounds, which echo with public structures in cities, and infrastructures connected with movement as well as trauma, such as Times Square, Pettus bridge (notable as the site of "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, AL in the Civil Rights Era), structures built out of the Great Migration. Another new commission, an audio piece, *Bloom of EROS* by Damon Davis depicted radical imaginati the "verb form," where he focused on labor protests, movements for black liberation, community action, Black Lives Matter, and the idea of radic democracy. One of Davis' particular propositions in his introduction to the piece was to give Black communities control over their future, especial considering housing. Davis here defines the relations-in-movement that produce their own (architectural) spatiality, where the space in turn defin characteristics of these relations.



Maxi Glamour performing during "Manifestos for a Future St. Louis," as a part of *Dwell In Other Futures: Art / Urbanism / Midwest*. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis. April 28, 2018. Photo by David Johnson

Perhaps the most important part of the festival was at a final presentation of manifestos, prepared by St. Louis artists and thinkers. "Before us lie: of continuous decline, economic stagnation, and state oppression and yet an unrealized moment of human liberation, ecological vitality, and rest metropolitan urbanism." said Michael R. Allen, drawing a manifesto of a century of St. Louis taking it from 1968, when the fair housing act was di to prevent the perpetuation of disarray and de-facto racial housing discrimination, to 2068, when capitalism would begin to collapse. He projecter future where the City of St. Louis will declare bankruptcy, the airport, the rail link, and the water supply will be sold to private developers, River flr force more evacuations in suburban areas, where the State of Missouri will take over the city under emergency management regime with an app city manager, followed by people's coalitions' demand to secede from the city, artists operating colonies in subdivision houses, Washington Univ purchasing more land and instituting drone surveillance on its property, urban parks being managed by private corporations, and the city's popul hitting a record low. What was surprising to me was that this dystopian future scenario did not sound fictional at all, not only for St. Louis, but als Istanbul, or Hong Kong, or Rotterdam. In an age of austerity and "public/private partnerships" this is perhaps a more sober observation than it se

In her *Ars Poetica Number 3*, Alison C. Rollins offered a more open reading of the manifesto form with a poetic embrace of leaving, of mourning, memory:

"We must start with an enemy,

Poetry is dead, we spend more time dead than alive in future.

...

Grains of sand.

Leave the South of the city, travel to the North.

Become everything and nothing.

Forgive yourself for dancing and the fire."

ARTC (Artists Right to Create) collectively appeared on stage, and asking the audience to join in their ritual of “shake hands, squeeze, and share their own foundational manifesto. The imitation of others; the alternative to an institution; the gesture of affection; past present future shaking hands where people are packed like sardines; a house for everyone; an outlet for creativity.

De Nichols exclaimed: “We cannot be in silence! We must not stop the work!” as she insisted on justice and equity for all, and the need for project a future of alternative regional growth that would take its foundations from these principles, in solidarity across borders with all that share these projects. The peak of her provocation was when she asked the questions of which parts of ourselves, our systems we would need to give up, self-destructive futures; which parts of ourselves we would untangle from systems of oppression; which parts of ourselves and practices we would render obsolete.

During the discussion following these presentations, Michael Allen emphasized that his manifesto was a warning of St. Louis in flatline/stagnation a city going down. In response to a question on what must be done, ARTC reflected on the (invisible) borders St. Louis, how they need to be blurred disappeared, and Nichols mentioned the inspiration of policy design exercises for communities, and just the need for being social, showing up at being present, and being curious.

Dwell in Other Futures was a convocation of St. Louis imaginations, connecting the sharers while being shared, creating openings to understand what has been known, and potentially lessening the threat of differences.⁵ If “blackness” is effectively being removed from the future, *Dwell in Other Futures* a bit of a space for it. Building shared imaginations and transversal understandings among ourselves is the reinventing of how we live and move and it is a key to solidarity.⁶ The future has not happened yet, and we have no luxury of not being hopeful.

Header image: Katherine Simóne Reynolds, *You're the Only Reason I'm Staying Here*, (2018), commissioned for *Dwell In Other Futures: Art / Urban Midwest*. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis. April 28, 2018. Photo by Gina Grafos.

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MERVE BEDIR

Merve Bedir graduated from Delft University of Technology (PhD), and Middle East Technical University (BArch). She is a member of Matt transnational women collective in Gaziantep, and a founding member of MAD (Center for Spatial Justice) in Istanbul. Merve is part of Futu Academy, an independent school for urbanism and art in Shenzhen.

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