

# Potentials of Time

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Translated from the French by Kendra Walker

**O**UR BOOK *The Potentials of Time*, coauthored with Camille de Toledo, attempts to lay out the “historical regime” to come, invoking by this terminology the concept theorized by historian François Hartog, who defined it as the manner in which “a society” organizes its relationships to the past, present, and future.<sup>1</sup>

Hartog further proposed a periodization for these successive historical regimes: from eschatological times (of salvation, with eternity as their horizon) to the modern regime of temporality, up until contemporary “presentism,” characterized by the present’s domination over the past and future and delimited by the saturation of memory, on the one hand, and the compression of the horizons of expectation, on the other. The feeling that the future cannot be delivered other than through menacing omens—be they ecological or sovereign debt crises or apocalyptic obsessions—overshadows the possibility of the future as ideal for collective emancipation, such as modern temporality once offered through its timeline and unwavering belief in progress; a gardener’s *episteme* for the world-as-object-of-urban-planning, once it lies beyond the promise of the “*grand soir*”—the messianic attitude that Derrida identified as “messianicity without messianism.”

In following the logic of Hartog’s analysis of the tipping points that allow us to slide from one regime of time to another, we have formulated our own hypotheses on what *could* be, or what *should* be, the next historical regime—to seek its forms, its reasons, and its forces. By no means do we wish to discuss the validity of or opine a diagnostic on the contemporary. In other words, are

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<sup>1</sup> Aliocha Imhoff, Kantuta Quirós, and Camille de Toledo, *Les potentiels du temps* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2016); François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. S. Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

we still in Hartog's presentist regime or have we transited to another time? Have we, for example, moved on to the postcontemporary regime of theoretician Armen Avanessian, who defends an order of time in which the future occurs before the present, notably because of worldwide algorithmization, which allows for derived financial products to become future mineral deposits to be mined in the present?<sup>2</sup> As seductive as this theory may be, Avanessian's de-linearization of time is accompanied by a Promethean belief in technology, which strikes us as an inadequate departure from existing infrastructures, which essentially remain bifurcated and reprogrammed.

Our purpose in *The Potentials of Time* is rather to envisage an order of time in which the ontological plurality of fictions or, more precisely, the manner in which we inhabit fictional worlds can be considered *as world*. For this, we seek guidance from different practices in the arts. We have named this impending historical regime the "potential regime" (*régime potentiel*). The potential is not in opposition to the actual or real, but rather, following Agamben, it marks the *presence of an absence*, the persistent and paradoxical existence of a not-yet-being, which preserves itself in its actualization. "When we close our eyes, rather than not seeing, we see that we do not see."<sup>3</sup> Potentiality as its own mode of existence.

The future that the potential regime seeks to capture arises from an entirely different temporal knot. If, following emancipatory scripts and past utopias, the future was *what will be*, then the tomorrow we speak of is all that can happen, all that could be, all that *would have been*. In the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, we must learn to think the present—the "now" in which we live in the moment in which we speak—as irreducibly a non-one, "constantly fragmented,"<sup>4</sup> as Deleuze had proposed in *Difference and Repetition* (first published in French in 1968). The future, for Deleuze, was not a historical future but rather an infinity of the now. As for the actual, it is not a utopian refiguration of the future but rather the now of what will come to pass.<sup>5</sup> *The future is now and this "now" is an infinity of now*. Deleuze further proposes to rework Bergson's concept of *fabulation* along political lines. To "fabulate" is a collective action, caught in the act of legend-making. Both speech in acts and acts of speech participate in the constitution of a people, a people to come who lack, according to Paul Klee, the advent of an emancipated community. Fabulation opposes itself in this manner to the idea of utopia—that Platonic ideal—which exists above the world, outside courses of action. The Bergsonian inspiration of Deleuze's political thought does not envisage a difference between the possible as a project and its realization.

The potential regime protects us from these alluring Sirens of modern planning visions. In so doing, it distances itself from recent waves of accelerationism, one of today's major chronopolitical discourses that places yet again the machine in the center of political and intellectual constructions and, above all, one more time, modernity as ideal. A real experience would imply, to the contrary, the affirmation of a radical relationship with that which has not yet been thought of or that which cannot yet be written.

<sup>2</sup> Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik, eds., *The Speculative Time-Complex, Post-contemporary Issue* (Name Publications, 2016). Contributions by Benjamin Bratton, Elena Esposito, Victoria Ivanova, Laboria Cuboniks, Aihwa Ong, David Roden, Nick Srnicek, and Alex Williams.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La puissance de la pensée* (Paris: Rivages, 2006). See also G. Agamben and K. Sheshadri, "The Power of Thought," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 480–91.

<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Foucault, historien du présent," *Magazine littéraire*, no. 257 (September 1988), trans. T. J. Armstrong in *Michel Foucault Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

It is along these lines that we consider certain devices that arise from artistic practices on a scale of 1 to 1: the recent General Assembly of Milo Rau; the diverse assembly projects of Jonas Staal that, in his own terms, exist as the *in-between* of real democracies; the *preenactment* (defined as the reconstitution of an event before the event itself) of the COP21 (the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties of the UN Climate Change Convention) by Bruno Latour and Frédérique Aït-Touati; the mock trial of Jean-Stéphane Bron after the subprime crisis; etc. These practices constitute forms of Deleuzian fabulation and thought experiments on a scale of 1 to 1.

In May 2015, at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre, Bruno Latour, Frédérique Aït-Touati, and Sciences Po Paris reenacted the COP21 six months before the conference was to unfold in Paris. This challenged the widely diffused technique of reenactments, which have often been used in the art world and important universities as instructions in the exercise of power and decision-making and as exercises in social reproduction, in contrast to the activation of bodies and memory, as in Jeremy Deller's work and the "parallel history" of the vanquished.<sup>6</sup> *Make It Work / Le théâtre des négociations* united two hundred students divided into four delegations,<sup>7</sup> in anticipation of what then appeared to be the programmed failure of COP21.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they were to create a modality of representation that included more than just nations, which often had proved themselves inept at deliberating the future of the oceans or migrants, for example. During *Make It Work*, not only nations but cities, oceans, and lands were invited as political subjects to the negotiation table, prolonging Bruno Latour's reflections on the institution of a Parliament of Things made of hybrid collectives, humans and nonhumans. This simulation was closely followed by the real actors of the COP21, such as Laurence Tubiana, who was to represent France toward the end of 2015.

The collective experiment proposed by Latour forges the capacity to anticipate the unthought-of, the unthinkable aspect of an event whose failure has been predicted. The tactics were neither contamination, infraction, disappearance, nor the aestheticizing of the arts in politics, all of which constitute alternate, recurring strategies by which the ties between art and politics are habitually considered. The stakes here were both more modest—to respect the rules of the game—and more ambitious—to anticipate the experts and produce plausible solutions, while leaving space for all possibilities to unfold. *Preenactment* here is neither an oppressive future scenario (as anticipated by the planning programs of the political Left) nor an unqualified opening to all possibilities. It responds on a modest level to our temporary situation: how to undo the programmed failures of the future? We could, in fact, argue that the scenarios of our defeat guarantee our impotence and melancholy. These announced defeats act upon our imagination in such a determined manner that they are *already here*, in the present as much as in the future. If this is taken to be true, what realm of action can be called upon to counter these prophecies of defeat?

The power of the projects we have chosen to discuss in *Les potentiels du temps*—by Yael Bartana, Jonas Staal, Jean-Stéphane Bron, Milo Rau, and Bruno Latour and Frédérique

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<sup>6</sup> *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) is English artist Jeremy Deller's reenactment of the historic battle between the miners of Orgreave, Yorkshire, and the police, which was at the heart of the 1984 contestation of Margaret Thatcher's ultraliberal politics.

<sup>7</sup> The students were mostly from Parisian schools, but some were from universities in other countries, such as Columbia, and Tsing Hua.

<sup>8</sup> The failure initially seemed to be relative, because for the first time in twenty COP meetings, the parties finally arrived at a second agreement on December 12, 2015, before Donald Trump brushed it aside.

Aït-Touati—resides precisely in their double ontological status, both real and fictional.<sup>9</sup> This works against the most commonly recognized strategy of conceptual art, which is to exit art, deactivate its aesthetic function, and thus go back to political action. It strikes us that this double ontological status allows perpetual suspensions in a course of events “as fiction” in order to rediscover the inherent possibilities of each moment, as if each of these events could go on to be inscribed in the course of an actual causal chain—in a sort of quantic time or superposed time of *what is taking place* and *what could have taken place*. To be able to do, undo, redo. In history, an event takes place. In these fictions on the scale of 1 to 1, the event both takes place and remains as a potential fiction—and vice versa. It is then possible to correct, to bifurcate, and to come back to—all devices that create themselves as they play themselves out. Fiction authorizes us.

This is the first condition we should have established. Fear switches places: it is no longer a prerogative of the bourgeoisie or the middle classes, supposedly afraid of losing their privileges, but a form of contemporary astonishment lodged between the dread of the past (faced with its failures and the enfants terribles of revolutionary movements and radical politics) and the fear of the future. We sense that we no longer have a second chance, unlike the revolutions of the past, where we could still believe in the *attempt of it all*. Yet there is no second chance. There is no planet B. We are paralyzed, dumbfounded by this *double bind*. Only fiction, protected by numerous cases of jurisprudence,<sup>10</sup> remains a space in which to adhere to a more fragile world.

In following this path through the chronopolitical devices realized in the realm of the arts, we have gleaned an *invitation to extend this artistic regime to include the entire society*, social and political spheres alike. Like the plans on a scale of 1 to 1 drawn by Lewis Carroll, Jorge Luis Borges, or Umberto Eco, *the map must be extensible, double the world, conflate itself with it*.<sup>11</sup> Our map is that of the arts. It is no longer a case of dissolving art into life but rather of extending it to the infinite, to all spheres of society; the power of the double ontological status of art is no longer the artistic practice of what they are and propositions of what they are<sup>12</sup> but rather the capacity of art to superpose the actual and the potential.

*Once our map is entirely unfolded, the potential regime will be here.* A

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<sup>9</sup> We discuss Yael Bartana’s LRMiP (Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland); Jean-Stéphane Bron’s film *Cleveland versus Wall Street* (2010); Milo Rau’s film *Les procès de Moscou* (The Moscow trials; 2013); to which we could add the assemblies of Jonas Staal (New World Summit, 2012–18; and New World Embassy, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> The trial concerning Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in 1857, to name but one.

<sup>11</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “On the Exactitude of Science” (Buenos Aires, 1946), in *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Umberto Eco, “On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1,” in *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays*, online ed. (London: Vintage Digital, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> In following the tradition of the readymade.