Preface *Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match*
Lietje Bauwens, Wouter De Raeve, Alice Haddad, July 2017

> *Editorial Notice:*
> *This preface is part of the upcoming publication* Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match, *edited by Armen Avanessian, Lietje Bauwens, Wouter De Raeve, Alice Haddad, and Markus Miessen. Taking up the challenge issued by the curatorial and research team of* Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match, *architect Markus Miessen and philosopher Armen Avanessian discuss the potentiality of Avanessian's neologism "xeno-architecture" in a series of conversations with Benjamin H. Bratton, Kathleen Ditzig, Daniel Falb, Anke Hennig, Victoria Ivanova, Luciana Parisi, and Patricia Reed. Besides this preface, the publication consists of an introduction by Armen Avanessian, the four estafette-conversations, and a postscript by Markus Miessen. The book is published by Sternberg Press and designed by Metahaven.*

"Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture (of knowing) to match" is the second last sentence from Armen Avanessian's preface to Markus Miessen's publication *Crossbenching*.[1] Intrigued by the neologism "xeno-architecture"[2] and its emancipatory possibilities for spatial practice, we approached Miessen who, in turn, asked Avanessian to collaborate on developing their idea and investigate what potentiality there is in the confrontation between "xeno" and "architecture." They curated a performative event that took place in Brussels on April 18, 2017, and initiated the series of conversations compiled in this publication, inviting different thinkers and practitioners to continue each other's line of thought—like an estafette—intentionally injecting contingency into the thinking process. By intertwining theory and praxis, our collaborative inquiry *Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match* slowly evolved into a research laboratory and xeno–test case in itself—a complex process providing fertile ground for critical assessment.

In contrast to the modern Western approach to rationality, it no longer seems tenable to base our assumptions solely on human presence and perception. Since it is impossible to isolate the design of our environment from such analyses, we felt a pressing need to examine how this paradigmatic shift impacts our understanding of space and how various practices can act upon the present reality to fulfill their emancipatory potential. The arrangement and use of our environment is the result of countless political and societal (in)actions. The city of Brussels, our hometown and the breeding ground that prompted us to start this collaboration, is instructive in this regard. It embodies a long tradition of social engagement, of which the resistance to the urban development of the '60s and '70s is emblematic. In response to the dramatic mutilation of entire neighborhoods in the name of modernization and profit—a phenomenon known as Brusselization—citizens, architects, artists, cultural workers, academics, and the like called for the right to make decisions about their city and for a politics that emphasizes particularities. The productive force that emerged out of the struggle from that era still resonates today and serves as an inspiration and, more importantly, a political instrument for the negotiations between the city's civil society and its administrations. Transposing this phenomenon to a wider scale, we can observe that spatial practice has

---

[1] Markus Miessen, *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
[2] "Xeno-architecture" is not a description of the given but a speculative concept first mentioned by Avanessian in various discussions with architects Christian Kerez and Rem Koolhaas.

redefined itself continuously through self-reflection and transdisciplinarity, thus reconfiguring its tactics and methodologies to affirm the quest for a more inclusive society. However, we notice a tendency within engaged practices that are committed to models from the past to either get caught up in the systems they oppose or retreat within the borders they hope to keep under control, thus forfeiting any power to effectively instigate change. On the other hand, we have also witnessed a noticeable efflorescence of practitioners who are searching for ways to build on the rich legacy of previous social engagement, utilize legal frameworks, and benefit from current technological innovations by constructing a practice tailored to the challenges of the twenty-first century—a practice able to speculate upon its/the future by "rethinking the foundational principles of citizenship," as Victoria Ivanova states in this publication, "with the emergence of new techno-architectural systems."[3]

The following conversations show that this future is already our present; symptomatic of this are the scale and structure of our current global issues, such as climate change, financial systems, national security, and their attendant crises, which exceed our human cognitive capabilities. The technological revolution we have engineered has spawned influential components that are steering us toward a society based on prediction and preemption. If Facebook convinces us whom to vote for at the next election, Google tells us what treatment to seek when we feel sick, and fridges, mobile phones, and public transport passes are in constant interconnection, tracking and determining our daily movements, we should be asking ourselves who, or what, is truly governing reality.

Breaking with the correlationist conception that constructs the world centered on human perception and embedded in what has been coined the speculative turn, Quentin Meillassoux acknowledged the contingency of mankind itself, opening up a terrain of its own non-presence and reviving the desire for what he calls "The Great Outdoors": "That outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere."[4] The possibilities of an inhuman—not non-, post-, or trans-human but a new, extended humanist—perspective emerged.[5] An inhumanism that embodies a continuous redefinition beyond itself which is not only receptive to an outside but, as Patricia Reed notes in the first conversation of this publication, is "a mode of seducing this radical outside—and by outside I mean here the infection of alien perspectives."[6] The interest in contingency evolved into the emphasis on the xeno and processes of "othering." As Anke Hennig suggests, "one could call 'xeno' a very specific form of the inhuman in the human."[7]

It is this notion of an alienating "xeno" that the collective Laboria Cuboniks celebrated in their Xenofeminist Manifesto (2015). Instead of rejecting the (as yet) unknown, which is a key element within the xenophobic debate, they propose to fully engage in it and foster it further. "The construction of free-

[3] "Conversation 4," in *Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match*, ed. Armen Avanessian, Lietje Bauwens, Wouter De Raeve, Markus Miessen, and Alice Haddad (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

[4] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009), 7.

[5] Reza Negarestani, "The Labor of the Inhuman," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 425–66.

[6] "Conversation 1," in *Perhaps it is high time for a xeno-architecture to match*, ed. Armen Avanessian, Lietje Bauwens, Wouter De Raeve, Alice Haddad and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

[7] Ibid.

dom," the collective states, "involves not less but more alienation."[8] By emphasizing the xeno, a whole spectrum of possibilities opens up, surpassing what we take for granted, what we think of as normal, as "natural." The alienating forces of society thus become not something to fear but something we can use and build on as ground for new universal architectures of knowledge production. It is through the re-appropriation of and hacking into complex (power) structures that we can stop passively following or vainly deconstructing norms and rather start to (co-)create them. This production of norms is exactly the work of design in its broadest sense "because architecture implies an instrumentalizing logic that is already *undeniable*, emphasizing the negotiation of speculative thought as it unravels in practice."[9]

Avanessian used his intervention in *Crossbenching* to question the "criticality" fundamental to Miessen's Critical Spatial Practice in its ability to go beyond the confines of a self-approving circle of peers to speculate about new norms and activate real progress. In this publication, Benjamin H. Bratton expresses a similar concern about criticality used as an end instead of a means when he argues, "We perhaps share a degree of fatigue with 'capital C' Critical Practice, for which perpetual undermining and problematization is not only a method but the preferred way of carrying out the work."[10] He proposes that the entrenched tools and protocols that are being deployed within the design process need however to be critically—with a small c—exposed and transformed in order to increase qualitative spatial production. The current discourse on spatial practice cannot evolve toward radically new definitions and outcomes if its (work) methodologies and (work) relations stay the same, since these are what pamper you to stay in your natural habitat. "We want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls,"[11] asserted the Xenofeminist Manifesto—there can be no true novelty without truly taking risks.

According to Avanessian, the key ingredient for such risk-taking is the implementation of radical contingency—a step outside what is conceptually possible and a constant search, as he formulated it, "for how to provide a setting in which we are not in charge, in a way forcing the other to do what he or she cannot do."[12] Miessen's notion of "the uninvited outsider"[13] gestures towards Avanessian's interest in a process of "othering"—however, the former also reminds us in *Crossbenching* that the architectural practice comes with responsibilities: "It is important to move away from the idea of the spatial practitioner as an artist, insofar as the position of the artist can often imply a lack of either obligations, demands or repercussions for their actions for which they are answerable."[14] This comparison to artists is for him certainly also applicable to thinkers in a broader sense. The risks are high when one wanders into unknown fields (of expertise). Configured in a speculative setting, this publication, the xeno-architecture event in Brussels, and the underlying collaboration became a xeno–test case in itself—a diffuse relationship "othering"

[8] Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation," accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/.
[9] "Conversation 4" (see n. 3).
[10] "Conversation 4" (see n. 3).
[11] Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism" (see n. 8).
[12] "Conversation 1" (see n. 6).
[13] Ibid.
[14] Miessen, *Crossbenching* (see n. 1), 45.

Avanessian, Miessen, the conversation partners, the artists, and ourselves; yet did the process expose certain limitations?

The event organized in Brussels was, as speculated upon by Avanessian in his introduction and the first conversation, "an attempt to abductively produce something new."[15] Challenged by us to freely set up what could be a "xeno-architecture of knowing," Avanessian and Miessen used the xeno as a curatorial methodology; they aimed to amplify an understanding of the xeno through an audio, visual, olfactory, and relational experience by giving carte blanche to different artists.[16] The modus operandi leading to the event showed that in building this chain of contingency, while its outcome was unpredictable, the notion of responsibility also became unstable. The diverse artistic interventions, lacking a collective anchor to hold on to, ultimately flattened into overall confusion. Uncertainties have a productive potential; however, they also turned out to be problematic when they started to resemble—as pointed out by Mattin, one of the participating artists—an alienating neoliberal logic that outsources its work force into disconnected parts and obscures the structure in which they are embedded.

As opposed to what Meillassoux calls "hyperchaos"—a theory to show that time includes both fixity and change, being and becoming—the event resulted in a disorder of *things,* instead of making sensible the contingency of *laws* themselves. "A world that obeyed no law has no reason to be chaotic rather then ordered";[17] in the absence of causality, stable, regular and expected situations are as (un)likely to happen as ruptures, virtualities, and inconsistencies. Overemphasizing chaotic and accelerating characteristics in the xeno does an injustice to the incoherent nature of speculation. The difficulty lies, as Meillassoux points out in a conversation with musician Florian Hecker,[18] in breaking with this lawful randomness in a way that is other than random, and showing that controlled narratives can still be constructed in a world without substance. He suggests that the determined form of randomness "needs to be enclosed in a case rather than dominating everything"[19] in order to initiate rational access to the notion of hyperchaos, and thus destroy the opposition between reality and imagination, between laws and contingency. The relay of conversations that took place over the course of two months and are included in this publication followed a homogeneous buildup that carefully, though also more conventionally, managed to knit individual discourses into a stimulating architecture of knowledge. Both implicitly and explicitly, all the conversations touch upon the (synonymous) relationship between reason and imagination and a subsequential tension with regard to how to deal with speculation responsibly.

Serving as more than just a test of what xeno-architecture could entail, our inquiry brought to the fore the struggle inherent in the desire to move away from "what is" toward "what could be" and the necessity to still be held accountable for "what actually happens." The distinction between criticality as a

---

[15] "Conversation 1" (see n. 6).
[16] The artists invited to participate in the sense event at Kaaitheater in Brussels on April 18, 2017, were Mattin, Parches, Beau Rhee, and Tim Tsang.
[17] Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction,* trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2015).
[18] "Speculative Solution: Quentin Meillassoux and Florian Hecker Talk Hyperchaos," accessed June 7, 2017, https://www.urbanomic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Urbanomic_Document_UFD001.pdf
[19] Ibid.

means versus an end-in-itself—small c versus capital C—proved to also be applicable to (the methodologies of) a xeno-architecture of knowing: How are we to overcome a fetishization of the xeno? This project showed that new architectures of knowing may not be generated in large spaces of uncertainty but rather emerge in small (interdisciplinary) blind spots that are created at the intersection of thoroughly studied and practiced parts. Miessen invited Metahaven to manipulate the material of this book. In the spirit of continuing the "estafette" series, we are challenging them to work with a persistent question that appears implicitly throughout our inquiry: How does Speculation with a capital S relate to its lower-case variant? How big can the "S" grow before it loses its emancipatory potential for spatial practice?