

Improvising the Future: Politics, Speculation, and Pragmatism

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IR's meditations on the future are caught in a binary focus between embracing hope or hopelessness, utopia or dystopia, apocalypse or redemption. (As reflected in the past and present titles of EISA events!). This status quo is a repetition. André Gorz once described such moments as periods in which “the meaning of history [is] suspended.” Without either a past, present, or future to adore, we turn to the imaginary. Thus, ‘futurism’ becomes a suffix, speculation a prefix, and critical-pragmatic engagement with the status quo a lost goal. Again, such a politics is a politics of suspension. The future becomes a vanishing point, to be imagined but not reached. But can we think things differently? How do we bring the future into the present?

In this workshop, we are interested in how practices – whether academic or quotidian, ideational or material, embodied or disembodied, aesthetic or technical – practices of improvisation, tinkering, design, sabotage, bricolage, wondering or wandering, collage, patchworking, fabrication, and experimentation can escape this suspension of history. To improvise a future is to think about how we can engage pragmatically *in the here and now* in ways that embrace ontologies of becoming and emergence but also seek to critically prod, nudge, adjust, influence, or gently recompose their trajectories. This necessarily involves an acceptance of the impurity of political processes, the friction of all sociality, and a willingness to collaborate across contact zones. But at its core is, again with Gorz, the idea that we must “discern the unrealized opportunities which lie dormant in the recesses of the present” in ways that open up a fuzzy future beyond utopia or dystopia.

To explore these themes, we are interested in contributions addressing the following broad themes:

- What might a critical-pragmatic form of speculative engagement with imaginaries of the future involve? What are its possible politics?
- Can such an embrace of improvisation, speculation, *and* pragmatism retain critical political potential? What are the obstacles to a critical-pragmatic engagement with politics and its futures?
- What can we learn from existing initiatives to ‘improvise the future’ (e.g., prefigurative politics, decolonial projects, design initiatives, etc.)?
- What forms of collaboration are necessary to improvise a future? What are the risks involved in such collaborations?
- How is engagement with the material-technological important for improvising a future?
- What is the place of aesthetics (broadly understood) in such a project?

This is a very non-exhaustive list. Above all, we are interested in exploring *alternative* ways of understanding the future, and its politics, which remain nonetheless ‘grounded’ in the present and its potentials.