

The Artistic Position on the Prediction of the Future – A Plea for the Performance of Prognosis

a lecture by Sibylle Peters

In the first year of the previous century the learned G. Tarde published an article on the opposite of belatedness in the *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale*. The text, which had already been composed 25 years previous to its publication, carried the title *L'Action des Faits Future*, which could be translated as *The Effect of Future Facts*. And, it examined a thought-experiment that poses the following question for itself: what if causality had two directions, thus what if a part of what exists could be correctly understood only if one conceives of it as the effect of a future fact? This text itself could possibly be read as an anticipation of considerations that will have primarily played an important role in physics in the century following its publication. But, G. Tarde's thought-experiment also anticipates a social phenomena that today, a century later, has unfolded its broad effects: for the present society, much of what exists actually appears as the effect of a future fact. More precisely: that which claims to be present must stage, or exhibit itself as the effect of a future fact. In the same way that the actual value and thus the stock of a business is assessed according to how its prognoses for the future look, institutions, persons, social constellations, discourses etc. are present to precisely the degree that they can claim a future potential for themselves. In the course of this development the future significantly changes its character: it is no longer, or only secondarily, a space of possibility that opens the present for changes or transformations. Because it participates so essentially in the constitution of the present, the future appears rather as something that reduces the spectrum of possibilities and functions as necessity or as an exigency of the matter.

What consequences does this change in the 'character' of the future have for the relationship of art to the future? For two to three hundred years (one could take Schiller's poem "Die Künstler" as a date for the time at which this understanding becomes dominant) art has been understood as being ahead of its time – as an anticipation of the future in the sense of that which is possible, or better, latently present, but not yet visible,

and thus is associated with concepts like utopia and the avant-garde. The history of this relationship to the future in culture and art is obviously an extremely wide field. In the epic forms, literature and film, we find utopias and in science fiction we find dystopias. All of these genres, which are obviously geared toward the future, are tied, in one way or another, to the concept of history or *grands recits*, often creating narratives about the ambivalence of current ideologies of progress. In contrast to this, in the pictorial arts as well as dance, in the performing arts in general, one finds numerous forms of cultural praxis that are ahead of their time insofar as they only later become widely effective.

The affinity of this latter kind of anticipation with the demand for innovation in economic systems is not new. Nevertheless, it seems that the temporal composition of art expresses itself, now more than ever, in a qualitatively transformed relationship to the economy. Since the beginning of the 90's, for example, the art market has exploded to such a degree that the large public institutions in financial terms can no longer keep up with the acquisition of new pieces. In this reversal of market leadership, art now entirely becomes an investment in the future that is no longer thought of historically or politically, but economically. And in the course of this the artist is stylized as the model of the independent self-employed whereby the supposed exemplary character of artistic personal responsibility essentially henceforth aims at the ubiquitous and thus, at the same time, de-politicized form of 'being ahead of the times.' That the numerous attempts, in the past years, to reactivate the utopian moment of the creation of culture, have remained largely inconsequential is hardly astonishing given this situation. Simply returning to the situation in which the character of art as 'being ahead of the times' was still consequential in a genuine political way cannot be successful if this artistic position has already become the economic 'state of the art'. Instead of this, art and culture's 'being ahead of the times' has, for some time in certain circles, turned into a feeling of being prodded or impelled, and as a result the logic of economic appropriation effectively pushes cultural production ahead of itself.

In the search for alternatives, for other artistic/cultural forms of the relationship to the future, one could also say, for another *use of time*, the project "prognoses of movements" proposes to make prognosis into a formula for cultural production.

Compared to other, now classic forms of ‘being ahead of the times’ this might only be a minor shift that, from the perspective of the producers themselves, is also not so simple to get a view of. But still it might work as a reversal or at least a standstill, that disrupts the impulsion in order to engage with a ubiquitous present praxis regarding which art and culture, as of yet, surprisingly have no position. It might, thereby, no longer be a matter of being ahead of the times, but, for this reason, of allowing oneself to be overtaken by the effects of future facts or events in a manner other than the current one.

In my contribution, I would like, in what follows, to ask what such an artistic position about the prediction of the future could look like and what constitutes it. I ask this in my role as artistic director of the project “prognoses of movements,” thus in the sense of an investigation that rests on scientific and theoretical knowledge and discourses, but whose empiricism can be found in the realization of the project itself, and thus which, up to the present, in which the artistic “prognoses of movements” are being created, still has a strongly speculative character. To be more precise: I am describing, in the sense of an applied cultural theoretical investigation, a few preliminary considerations for an experiment the results of which we do not yet know.

So, what difference could such an artistic position make for the prediction of the future? What differentiates it from the current positions of economics and the natural and social sciences and, on the other side, the self-appointed, commercial or popular oracle? What kind of practices could the production of prognoses in artistic and cultural theory associate themselves with?

In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault writes:

The true discourse [...] was precisely that discourse that was proclaimed according to necessary rituals by those who were authorized; it was the discourse that proclaimed the law and that allocated each his lot; it was that which not only prophetically heralded the future, that which would happen, but also contributed to its realization, [...] one day the truth shifted from the ritualized, effective and lawful act of declaration to declaration itself: to its sense, its form, its object and its reference. Between Hesiod and Plato a division was asserted which separated true and false discourse [...]. This historical demarcation undoubtedly gave our will to knowledge its universal form.

Where this will to knowledge, then, has recourse to truth-telling, in the sense of predicting the future, predictions are also basically seen as declarations or assertions that are true or false, that are the case or not, which naturally can first be verified in the future. However, complications always arise for this approach because the characteristic performative effect of prediction, and, in its extreme form, the figure of the self-fulfilling prophecy that is closely associated with it, cannot be adequately understood from this perspective. With respect to the verification of assertions it appears as something secondary, even as a kind of trick, a manipulation that reduces the status of prognosis as assertion without eliminating it.

Before this background it seems plausible, even obvious, that an artistic position on the prediction of the future has to find a more open and productive approach to make use of the performative character of prediction. This would have consequences for situating such a position in relation to the difference according to which the consideration of prognosis or forecasting has oriented itself since Plato, namely the difference between scientific and unscientific or popular forms of predicting the future. The understanding of prediction as a correct or incorrect judgement about future facts or events reveals this difference and at the same time shows its unity: scientific forms of prediction can be roughly defined by the fact that they are troubled or irritated when their assertions are proven false and can accordingly optimize their methodology with respect to the goal of making true assertions, whereas forms of the prediction of the future designated as popular or occult are not troubled by this. Given this 'freedom of fallibility', predictions of this sort have traditionally been classified as performances in the pejorative sense. Though those who practice this kind of prediction do not follow this designation, and thus do not primarily affirm its performative character. Rather, part of their self-conception is that they claim that they are in the position to make true assertions on the grounds of a disposition of the world that is not obvious at first glance. This is true even when this self-legitimation primarily serves to create enough seriousness that a play of meaning construction can be introduced that then becomes productive in multiple and, especially, commercial ways.

In their association with the performative character of prediction, artistic prognoses or predictions would have to avoid this classical distinction between scientific and popular kinds of prediction. The affiliation with the popular play of meaning production might, thereby, initially be closer: To assess this play in terms of a performance would mean understanding predictions generally as indications that create complexity – independent of their factual prognostic competence – by generating feedback that turns contingency into significance. Within the horizon of such predictions, in view of otherwise contingent events, one can deliberate about the extent to which they depart from prediction and why; meaning production and analysis come into play here. Clearly this play of prediction stands in close relation to those processes that constitute the reception of art. In one case, as in the other, there is an ‘as-if’ (it was, it would have been, it would be) involved that first initiates the play as such. This ‘as-if’ appears especially when an assertion’s not being the case does not elicit any attention, but when, on the contrary, an assertion’s being the case does. The accurate prediction is a, sort of, special case of typical inaccuracy. Already in antiquity, critics attributed the great success of popular forms of truth-telling or sooth-saying to the fact that this led to false judgments remaining uncommented and everyone held correct assertions in their mouths, – this situation in particular is common to truth-telling and fiction. In the case of fiction as well the fact that it is not really true, by definition, elicits no surprise, but on the contrary, when it becomes true it regularly leads to public discussions about the extent to which art anticipates reality.

But, with this we are led to a decisive problem because wouldn’t making predictions through artistic means necessarily mean that by explicating performance we are at the same time explicating this notion of saying something ‘as-if’ it were true? And doesn’t this explication also necessarily involve the fact that in securing an artistic form of prediction, its tie to reality is dissolved and it becomes an empty game that, in the end, is no different than fiction?

On the other hand we encounter a number of relatively new artistic formats that undermine, shift or even, to be more precise, spectralize the borders between fiction and documentation. As the terminology of documentation already describes, these forms have

hitherto been essentially retrospective in their temporal orientation and are concerned with something that (did not) happen or currently, at times, something that is (not) happening.

Thus a question could be: what would a docu-fiction be that orients itself toward the future? A docu-fiction that would leave the question about how fictional or real something will be, to an occurrence that would nevertheless be initiated and accompanied by the same artistic agenda, an accompaniment that does close of its openness, but first allows for it. What is being described here is a kind of collective process of research. And really: if the ‘as-if’ implicit in popular prediction is explained by the adoption of an artistic agenda, then linking prediction to reality requires a counterbalance, or a debt, similar to the case of scientific prediction, which would allow such predictions to be irritated or troubled by their truth or falsity in order to make prediction into a setting of research or the production of knowledge. However, with this counterbalance, irritability or corrigibility would have to be transformed: from the level of an assertion, in the sense of a true or false judgement, to that of performance, thus precisely where, – in the sense of rituals of truth-telling and their authorization that Foucault addressed –, no irritability was conceivable. How is this supposed to happen?

The irritability of scientific predictions exists between the assertion and its referential content that can be proven to be true or false. From the accuracy or inaccuracy of a prediction, conclusions can be drawn through whose assistance the process of creating predictions can be optimized. This irritability is constitutive for scientific prediction (even there where it is not always explicitly stated, namely, in experimental science) because it first makes the doubled character of prediction, the fact that it is both the product and instrument of research, possible. But for the sake of its stability as a relation it necessarily suppresses the performative effect of prediction, which, as such, is always operative. Contrary to this, a quasi-inverted irritability would be conceivable, which rests on the relationship between the processes that predictions as such produce and the processes that are produced by prediction.

To conceptualise the prediction of the future as a performance and, with this, not only to analyse but also to carry it out in the sense of an artistic agenda cannot lead back to the pure performance of a truth-telling, which is already true qua ritual and

authorization, and can equally as little practice prediction as simply a play of meaning production in the sense of an explicit 'as-if.' By imitating the critical self-relation of scientific prediction it can, however, claim a relation between the performance of producing predictions and the performance of the effect of prediction as an area of its entirely own individual competence, a competence for prediction, which is derived from performance.

In order to become more familiar with this relation and its possibilities it is important to begin by exposing that this is precisely the field of relations that is designated by an expression such as 'the performance of prognosis.' The relations between the praxis of making a prognosis and its effect would thus need to be investigated with the help of the categories of performance and movement analysis. This could be done, for example, along the lines of the following questions:

How does the action of soliciting a prediction stand in relationship to the spatial/temporal arrangements for which a prediction becomes relevant? What kind of caesura, what kind of spaces are created in the course of questioning an oracle? Need a path be traversed which leads out of the given situation? What kind of deferral does this carry with it? What other temporal order becomes generally relevant in soliciting a prediction? Do conflicting parties, for example, thereby find themselves in another situation than before?

What kind of collectives and figurations are constituted in prediction? Making a prediction, whether it be popular or scientific, is always a procedure with multiple steps in which at every phase new information, forms of knowledge, interests in different embodiments and personalizations become correlated with one another. What would it mean to understand these correlations, not primarily as necessary conditions for making an accurate prediction, but conversely, to understand prognosis as a protocol that brings about these correlations?

Similarly the question could be raised as to which themes become objects of predictions. Because when prognosis as assertion or judgment is viewed in terms of its reference we necessarily assume that the themes that become the objects of predictions are ones that are especially meaningful for our lives or living together. But this

relationship becomes inverted when viewed from the point of view of the performance of prognosis because, with a certain inevitability, precisely those themes about which predictions are typically made are shown to be important for our lives and living together, because they function, qua the praxis of prognosis, as media of our temporal orientation.

In this context the question also arises as to whether and how something mutually shared by a social group is constituted or strengthened through practices of prediction. What is striking is that the so-called popular practices of prediction are now primarily used for the prediction of individual fates and developments – collective perspectives are largely missing here. If, on the contrary, one looks at scientific practices of prediction that have the greatest relevance for public life, a social context becomes visible that is constituted, primarily, according to economic parameters and, secondarily, by parameters that concern the so-called environment. A certain social universal arises in such a praxis of prediction, then, even before the question of which developments will help or hinder whom and, contrary to this, with regard to popular prediction, a certain individual singular arises. Both of these are precisely the result of the fact that they are not explicitly dealt with in these terms.

If we attempt to understand the performance of prognosis with regard to the methodology of prognosis itself, then the scientific figuration of evidence necessarily informs our perceptions. Given this background, a historical view is particularly helpful which shows that the difference between scientific and non-scientific predictions has made a cut in the continuum of the practices of prediction at different points and with different arguments. Against this background the numerous cross-overs between the practices of prediction and other arts of knowledge become evident, like that between prediction from (more or less) holy books (in particular, the Bible, the Sibylline oracles, and the writings of Nostradamus in the European context) and the praxis of literary interpretation. Additionally there are numerous ties between practices of prediction considered unscientific or folkish in their time and the development of observation and experiment in the natural sciences. And naturally one shouldn't forget the cross-over between prediction and gambling or the connection between prediction and the creation of calendars, thus the measurement of time itself.

Practices of prediction were always decisively important for the emergence of the reflections of semiotics and media theory: for, exactly what kinds of references are there between observed movements and the future movements that are read out of these? Are they causal, indexical, figurative? Is there something to be read here, does it show itself? The question about the performance of prognosis also hits upon the tie between occult media practices and media-theoretical reflections. Because media are never simple instruments for concerns that exist independent of this media, but rather, gradually shape their own worlds and times in their difference from other media, occult practices of prediction that associate themselves with the new media of their time can retrospectively often also be read as a serious confrontation with the yet unknown potential, at any given moment, of new media, their times and their world.

If one attempts to abstract from such historical features, prediction, in quite general terms, proves to be a continuum of practices that provide processes for self-direction and the generation of knowledge, without already anticipating the concrete manner of their use; processes, therefore, to which a specific balance between openness and reification, contingency and significance, belongs. The question as to which processes appear appropriate for this always at the same time implies, when viewed from the performance of prognosis, decisions about which movements and media constellations around us deserve our attention, which arts of knowledge are cultivated, and from which archives we want to draw not only references to the past, but also references to the future.

The historically unbroken popularity of so-called un-scientific practices of prediction shows that the plausibility of these decisions could never be completely grasped by the guardians of epistemic thresholds. Why did people in England at a certain time begin to systematically catalogue frog croaks, why did people in middle Europe believe that they could predict the development of the price of grain from the movement of wheat grain that was heated on the hearth? Why did people at a certain time have to attribute special significance to the first words a stranger said to them? And what movements, what media constellations would be of interests today in order to read, in and through them, something of the future? Which agencies, then, does such a process place at its disposal, once chosen as such, isolated, called forth, observed, registered and

archived? What kinds of connections does this process make possible for those that want to integrate it in their form of self-direction?

The area that I have called the “performance of prognosis,” which has been sketched out broadly and provisionally with these questions, includes all those features of practices of prediction in which the methods and effects of prediction are correlated in a way that is not thought of primarily in terms of the reference of prediction as a specific judgement about the world. As an artistic-theoretical research project, “prognoses of movements” views this area not only as a field for scholarly observation but as an area in which an artistic agenda can move or be moved. Certainly what is being considered here is a specific artistic agenda that is seemingly full of presuppositions and is only now developing, an agenda that, in the liminal spaces between art, science and politics, initiates, accompanies, documents and presents collective processes by means of performance and does so precisely in the knowledge of the unpredictable, uncontrollable, necessarily open space of such processes. To the engagement of this kind of agenda with making predictions corresponds the hope that prognosis can develop as a formula that functions here equally as a product and instrument of collective research in which intervention and observation, alongside the relation between making predictions and their effects, are intertwined in a productive way. Naturally, the criterion according to which these relations can be prompted to self-correction remains in question. This would precisely not be the criterion of correct versus false reference of prediction as judgement which drives scientific prognosis, but a criterion of ‘positive effects’ that is in itself always to be negotiated anew, thus it would be a criterion that, as in questions of art, lying between science, ethics and politics, does not want to claim its own space, but can create and cultivate its own practices.

Allow me, in conclusion, a final speculation on the relationship between art and economy thematized at the beginning: when so-called ‘futures’ are dealt with in virtualized marketplaces possibly the exact same thing is at work that is being discussed here with respect to an artistic agenda. Namely, a displacement of economic prognosis from its scientific basis and the development of a praxis of prognosis that ceaselessly

draws conclusions from its 'performance,' in the sense of its achievements in the market, about the optimization of making prognoses and, whether it be only those whose predictions show no 'performance,' no longer makes effective predictions, whereupon the question about whether or not a prognosis proves itself to be true or false simply recedes ever further into the background and finally becomes indistinguishable when faced with this criterion of performance.

Lets assume that this praxis of prediction is already developing itself further today by the performance of prognosis stepping back inside itself, then this can not be seen as a discouraging sign for the fact that the economy is once again playing a game of hare and tortoise with the avant-garde. Rather, it is an important motivation to oppose precisely this economic figuration with a comparable prognosis-praxis in which performance is something different and more than achievement in the marketplace.

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