

What Is The Speculative: a roundtable

By speculativesession

In this issue's Session, we were eager to push "speculation" as far as we could by inviting four speculative artists who had never met before to speculate together via one of our arguably most speculative mediums: email. Their conversation was guided by simple rules: each participant was asked to come up with a prompt and respond at least once to the other three prompts. The wide-ranging conversation that resulted was a product of the participation of sculptor Kelly Akashi, "The Museum of Capitalism" curatorial team FICTILIS, speculative fiction author Margaret Killjoy, and speculative fiction editor/anthologist Ann VanderMeer. Together, over the course of two weeks, they built a virtual dialogue that encompassed, but was not limited to, thought-experiments, subjective reality, speculative finance, and art's influence on social change.

PROMPT 1

Kelly Akashi: I like to think of the speculative in relationship to the way I have read Ursula Le Guin write about "thought-experiments" in relationship to science fiction. She draws this term back to Schrödinger and his use of it "not to predict the future—indeed [his] most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the 'future,' on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted—but to describe reality, the present world."

I am interested in how each of us uses the speculative to engage in thought-experiments that address reality through fiction or lies. Analogue photography largely informs the backbone of my artistic production—formalized now through fixed and transitory indexical objects. I feel that I had to move away from photography years ago because of its super strong tether to reality: either the lie was too great for me or not great enough. Through object-making I can create works that exist in the same space as reality, move along the same timeline as reality, and even speak the same language as other "real" objects (blown glass, wax candles, bronze figuration). This creates a small space where the tether of an object to reality can be torqued through presentation, display, proximity, and/or strangeness. For me, this is where the thought-experiments and speculation can come into play. It creates a way for me to drive meaning beyond the obvious into something unexpected yet rooted in real, concrete information.

FICTILIS: In our case, we use institutions as material to try to not only describe the present, but to point out its contingency—to suggest that the permanence of the world as we know it is a kind of lie, and that every institution is a kind of fiction, something people agree to imagine exists. This is more obvious in a project like the Museum of Capitalism, which in memorializing the era of capitalism helps visitors imagine that something other than capitalism can exist, but also might help train them to see the implicit agendas of other institutions. But other projects, like a retail establishment that incorporates all negative externalities into its prices, or a renegade hauling service designed to include environmental justice in the waste remediation strategies of gentrifying neighborhoods, also involve a verisimilitude of institutions that lets them exist more

on a level with “reality.” So maybe an institution-making practice is similar to your object-making one.

Lies that are almost true, or that for some reason or other we wish were true, can be more seductive than lies that are so fantastical that their fictionality is obvious. So there’s something nice about Kelly’s idea of the lie being too great or not great enough—like there’s some crucial sweet spot. Which relates to the idea of the “tether.” For us, another tether we try to torque through this institutionality is not the one binding what we make too strongly to reality (as in photography) but the tether connecting it to the *unreality*, or knowing, winking fictionality, of the so-called Art World. A project’s critical potential, not to mention its audience, can be diminished if its public presence is overdetermined by its framing as “merely” art.

Margaret Killjoy: As a fiction writer, I’m obviously pretty excited about addressing reality through lies. As a fantasy writer, it’s even easier—I get to use the speculative to make metaphors for the real world. I get to embody things like “the desire to take power over one another” as literal demons and pit characters against those demons and see how they react. These are sort of the more blunt ways I get to use the speculative to get ideas across.

A thing I’ve been thinking about a lot more recently, though—and this ties into the “the lie is neither too great nor great enough” idea—is what it means to be specifically writing fiction set in the real world overlaid by magic. In my current series, my characters are punks and travelers in the modern world who have stumbled upon the occult. What’s interesting to me about this is that I get to explore ideas that I both believe and disbelieve in. I both believe and disbelieve in magic, and those two contradictory ideas share space in my head at the same time. I think a lot more people do this than we realize; I think we just avoid talking about it. So I get to write about a world that doesn’t *really* exist, where you can curse your enemies and ask for favors from demons to get help with hitchhiking, but it’s also a world that, by believing in it, maybe exists. I think that’s something that’s valuable about the speculative: the ability to help people come to terms with their own contradictory positions and opinions. It seems like the best storytelling is storytelling that destroys the barriers between black and white, good and evil, science and spirituality, all those dualities that have gotten the world into the mess it’s in today.

Nonfiction is a bit more underhanded, because it purports to tell the truth. There’s a value in that, don’t get me wrong, but with fiction you get to just make shit up and use that as a way to guide the reader (or viewer of art) into the sort of headspace you want them to be in. That guiding is a spellcasting of its own. If I get to help someone think about the world that’s underneath this world, then that’s cool, I’m happy with that.

Most days I wouldn’t have gone on about this magic shit, but I guess that’s where my head’s at the past week or so, and with the work I’m doing at the moment.

Ann VanderMeer: The best fiction allows us to experiment with changing the world. Fiction, or storytelling, is how we have communicated our thoughts and ideas to others since we could speak. It’s how we tried to make sense of everything around us. And the earliest storytelling was of a fantastical nature. The purpose of all writing, whether it be nonfiction or fiction, seeks to communicate something to someone. And the audience is part of this creation as well. The message received may not be what the author intended, however, the reader’s perspective is just as valid. What the reader takes away from the story can even be more powerful than the original piece of fiction.

I see speculative fiction as having a more difficult responsibility in world-building. Make no mistake, even realistic fiction is engaged in world-building, because each setting is seen through the eyes of the characters. My New York City may not be the same as Character X's New York City. But when you are building a fantasy setting, whether it be based on the real world, you still have to anchor it in something concrete, something that you can relate to, because the audience has to recognize something in order to see the truth through the lies.

Speculative fiction allows the writer to play in a world they've created populated with characters of their own design. Of course, all fiction writers do this, but with fantastical works, there is a freedom to explore different scenarios—what ifs. Then you can extrapolate from there how the world would work in this new way. Is it better? Is it worse (i.e. utopian vs dystopian)? How is it different from now, or from the past? Currently, we are seeing a huge popularity of dystopian fiction in the marketplace. Some dystopias are purely fantasy, those works that do not take into account the real world today or our historical past. Others are grappling more realistically with the challenges we face, such as climate change, and trying out different responses.

I'm reading a lot of older works of fantasy fiction at the moment as I prepare for my next anthology, *THE BIG BOOK OF CLASSIC FANTASY*. I find it most interesting to see how writers in the past faced the pressing issues of their times (or ignored them, in some cases), and how those stories can still speak to a modern audience. I am fascinated by how the writers and their work were received as I delve into their biographies. Of course, a lot of what I am reading doesn't date well, but you would be surprised at how some of the older works are still relevant, which is scary and insightful at the same time.

PROMPT 2

Margaret Killjoy: What I'm interested in is the role of the speculative in shaping culture, and more broadly, the role of culture in shaping the world.

The current moment, politically in the western world, as I see it, is a fight between cultural and political power. Specifically: it seems to me that forces generally aligned with the left—but not a 20th century, authoritarian left—have been making steady gains on a cultural level. Trans people are no longer the butt of every joke in every movie, women are learning their collective power to speak out against harassment and assault, people of color are demanding that they no longer be treated as a disposable source of pop culture. All in all, culture has been shifting towards acceptance and diversity.

This scared the right wing—and the old guard of politics in general—so badly that it lashed out to grab onto whatever source of power it could. Because cultural power skews towards youth, while political power skews towards age and wealth, the right wing made a desperate grab for political power. In that realm they're winning, and still might win the larger fight.

So the speculative, by this understanding, has some very, very real power. I'm interested in exploring what that power is: how as creators and curators we shape culture and how we confront reactionary forces that fight back against us on the terrain of culture or politics.

Ann VanderMeer: Although I see speculative work becoming more and more a part of the

larger cultural conversation, I am not convinced that cultural shifts as a whole play as large a role in shaping the world directly. It must affect the political realm first in order to make any significant impact. I do agree, however, that cultural changes can inspire and inform political action, but then again, politics also influence culture as well. A circular relationship.

Even though the internet has opened up opportunities to connect with each other in virtual spaces and to spread the voices of those previously unheard (or under-heard), we still have cultural gatekeepers in the form of museum curators, book editors/publishers, and academia. True, there are more gatekeepers today than ever before, so if one gatekeeper doesn't "get" your work, there is still the possibility of reaching another. But there are still gatekeepers. When people create their own platforms and use self-publishing/self-promotion, working around the gatekeepers, it can still be difficult for an artist to reach a wide audience.

In this case, are we talking about culture as a whole or popular culture? Because culture as a whole is also controlled by an older, more wealthy population. When considering gatekeepers, the average age of a museum curator is 43 and one third of them are over the age of 60 (actually older than corporate CEOs overall). In the publishing world, the average age of an editor is 42 and the average age of a writer when selling their first novel is 36. Of course, current American politicians (on a national level) have an average age of 57 for the House and 61 for Congress. Older, but not by much. Ages for millionaires and billionaires are in a similar range. In considering this information, it is difficult to determine which age group controls what, but it seems that the older, more wealthy population runs it all.

That being said, cultural norms do change with the times. Whether or not this is related to contributions of the arts is not so clear to me. In some cases, I've seen direct correlation between fiction and the future, most notably with science fiction. There are numerous examples of how reading science fiction inspired many young people to go into the sciences. Indeed, you could say that NASA, our space program, wouldn't exist without science fiction.

More to Margaret's point, I never thought I would see legalization of same-sex marriage in my lifetime. There are others better qualified and more informed than me to discuss the history and struggle behind this revolution, but I've read that personal relationships helped to change peoples' minds. If someone from the LGBTQIA+ community is your relative, neighbor, coworker, etc., there is a better chance you will stop seeing them as "other." It is more about seeing this as "normal" and acceptable. Now, did *Will & Grace* play a hand in this? Perhaps.

I also know a casting director who works for a hugely popular, mainstream TV drama series. He often casts mix-race or same-sex couples when the script calls for a couple. At first, the writers complained that they would now have to change the script to reflect this and he challenged them on this. No changes are needed. The parts call for a couple. This is a couple. Let's go. And guess what? It worked. The viewing audience can now see this as "normal" because what we see on TV is a mirror of the real world, right? (As many may believe.) And the more the viewer sees this representation on TV, the more acceptable and normal it becomes to the dominant, mainstream culture.

FICTILIS: As artists or makers of culture, we catch ourselves being tempted to overestimate the power of art and culture to shape politics. Just as academics might favor the potential of knowledge production, plumbers the value of plumbing, or any other practitioner might overestimate power or influence of what they do. In our case, in order to keep doing what we

do, and keep trying to do it better, we cultivate a sort of Gramscian “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” regarding the actual power of the kind of culture we make.

We would echo Ann’s observation on the circular relationship where politics also creates culture. Specific policies can produce behaviors, just as the rules of the game create certain ways of playing. Viewed this way, and viewed historically, certain “cultural” gains like increased visibility or more respectful representation on television for certain marginalized groups might also be seen as the opening up of new market opportunities for capitalism and consolidation of power for those already in influential positions. (This dynamic is nicely encapsulated in the hardcore punk band Minor Threat, whose very name was meant as a skeptical understatement about the danger they represented to the establishment—despite the fact that the band went on to have enormous cultural, or at least countercultural, influence.) Hence the need, as Ann also points out, of distinguishing between popular culture and culture as a whole—a wider conception of culture which may include things usually considered to be in the domain of the “political.” We might also ask what “power” really means.

To follow Ann into demographics, surveys reveal the popular conception of millennials as “less racist” (i.e. more tolerant) than their parents as a pernicious myth. As an age group they are, but millennials also happen to be the most racially diverse demographic, so if we correct for race and separate out white millennials, for example, we see little difference with racial attitudes from older generations. The main difference, studies show, is how they *self-report*—how non-racist (or perhaps “post-racial”) millennials *think* they are. Add to this the statistics that American schools are now just as segregated as they were in the late 1960s, that almost a quarter million African-Americans lost their homes during the housing crisis, after almost half of all loans given to African-Americans were subprime, and the tragedy we witness over and over again (tragedy, as Stalin so bitingly distinguished from statistics) that bodies of color are still very much considered disposable in real life—and the view of culture getting progressively more tolerant seems itself a kind of fiction.

So maybe, again, it all depends on what we mean by “culture.” This too is a battleground, to use Margaret’s very appropriate language of struggle, and our definitions are battle lines being drawn. Maybe we can speculate that culture, and art’s *potential* influence, can be very broad, while still questioning whether if we “free our minds,” in the words of the great philosopher George Clinton of the P-Funk school, our asses will indeed follow.

Kelly Akashi: I think that the culture can greatly shape the world, but I think it often happens in very intimate ways and can take years, even decades to affect change. I like the dichotomy that Margaret set up between cultural and political power, and playing off of that I feel that the way these kinds of powers are wielded can soak in at different rates.

I think culture is incredibly powerful and can root deeply in human consciousness. I think it can really affect one’s way of engaging with the world. For this reason it is exploited for political power (market opportunities too, as FICTILIS pointed out), but that doesn’t weaken its ability to communicate other kinds of sensibilities (maybe a kind of “personal speculation”). Works are made by artists all the time that carry very real sensibilities that circulate and are insidious to the sensibilities of the current administration, and I really believe that it can lead to real change.

Margaret Killjoy: Yeah, to me, cultural shifts are absolutely the long game. I don’t mean to overstate their importance, but I think sometimes the fact that they take so long to bear fruit

(and only do so occasionally, because it's very easy for cultural ideas to slip back... I don't mean to speak with some fatalistic optimism about progress) means that we overlook them as a site of struggle.

I grew up in a society saturated with transphobic imagery. It absolutely affected me. I can't even remember the number of movies during which I left the room crying as a kid, as yet another crossdressing stereotype or "ha ha ha it was a guy all along" was shown to me on the screen. There's simply no question in my mind that the idea of a transwoman as monstrous led me to internalize transmisogyny, nor is there any question that it was the cultural reversal of that which gave me the courage to come out to myself and the world in my mid-thirties. This is the first step of how cultural change works—getting people out of the closet, or willing to step into their power and not be ashamed of who they are. The next step is when those people become cultural creators—or wielders of political power through activism or more traditional channels—allowing a feedback loop.

But I think Ann is right, if I understand her correctly, in that cultural change doesn't cement itself until things change on a political level. Some of the famous pictures of Nazis burning books are actually of Nazis burning books from the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft... a research institute that promoted LGBT issues. Weimar Germany was remarkably progressive, along social lines, before it suddenly wasn't. Because by wielding political power against us, people can just destroy us. There's this nice saying "you can't kill an idea" but we've learned from history that if you kill enough of an idea's practitioners, and physically destroy enough of its history, then you can sure bury that idea for generations.

To be honest, I worry a bit less about the recuperative power of capitalism than I used to. Yes, absolutely, capitalism shifts itself to incorporate elements of its opposition. But I think it's too one-sided to assume that this is capitalism gaining territory over us, when in fact I think sometimes it is us gaining territory over it. It's hard, because I see both sides of this, but I think sometimes what we call recuperation might actually just be our enemies ceding ground. To use my own identity as an example: there are ads for alcohol based on trans-acceptance. Do I want my body to be used to sell fancy shit? Absolutely not. But I still see this as our enemy having ceded ground, because trans-acceptance gives us the platform with which to gather our strength. The only problem I foresee is that some people might think the fight is won on identity issues alone, and not continue the struggle until we end all systems of oppression.

PROMPT 3

FICTILIS: Borrowing from the linguistic concept of markedness, we might point out that the speculative is a "marked" term. To call something speculative is to mark it off from what is unmarked, or what is not speculative. What is assumed to be safe, certain, predictable, realistic, concrete, proven, grounded, demonstrable, self-evident, and so on. This is often done to dismiss what is considered speculative. And as with most dismissals, this is often done sloppily.

One knee-jerk reaction is to throw the term back at its speaker. (This too may be done sloppily, even if there is something satisfyingly poetic in rejoinders like Christ's "*Physician: heal thyself!*" or Pee Wee Herman's "*I know you are but what am I?*") To point out the ways that finance, for example, or capitalism itself, is inherently speculative. Though some speculations are allowed to

structure—or destruct(ure) entire lives or communities.

In his book about financial speculation, legal historian Stuart Banner retells an old joke about the guy who says “I was once called a gambler, then I had some success, my scope expanded, and people called me a speculator. My influence increased, and now I’m called a banker. But really, I’ve been doing the same thing the whole time.” Banner later poses this question: “What is the difference between investment and gambling? Where is the line between good speculation and bad speculation?”

We want to ask a different question: *How else might we characterize or categorize the speculative?*

Banner presents one possible scheme, which might be the simplest and also the most boring: good speculation and bad speculation. This is the purview of some predictable Left-Right squabbling about government regulation, which takes for granted a certain kind of speculation. But what other kinds of speculation might we identify? What distinctions might we make between different forms of speculation? What taxonomy or spectrum might we place the speculative within or across?

Responses need not be systematic or exhaustive. Proposed terms and categories may be arbitrary, Borgesian, or deeply personal. How do you experience the term being deployed? What else is its marking supposed to say about those who bear it? Or how do you find it useful or not in your own practice? And can we mark out the speculative in ways that cross over into the unmarked territory of the non-speculative or disturb that binary marking? Or is it better to keep it intact and protect the speculative from further Specification?

Can we speculate on the speculative?

Ann VanderMeer: The word speculative brings to my mind how this word is used in a fiction context, rather than financial. Although, I will admit that oftentimes I’ve seen it used as a marketing term to help categorize certain types of fiction in order to sell books—making it financial (in a sense) in this context, too. The word, as it applies to fiction, was first coined by Robert A. Heinlein back in 1941. He wrote an essay titled “On the Writing of Speculative Fiction” that was published in 1947 when he was addressing questions about how to write fiction. He wanted to differentiate between what many viewed as science fiction that was more idea-based, gadget-focused (the pulps) and other fiction that came out of character, but still focused in the future (more like his own work). It was a subset of science fiction.

Of course, since that time, the use of the word speculative to describe fiction has changed and changed again and is still changing today. In the 1970s it was used to describe stories that had a more political or sociological bent, and in some cases philosophical, but again, still set in some kind of future or alternate world. Lately I’ve seen it used to help promote the legitimacy of genre fiction. Indeed, I have seen many people describe their own work, or others as speculative, rather than science fiction or fantasy. Somehow this term sounds better, more highbrow, whereas science fiction and fantasy are usually seen as a less serious, more commercial form of fiction. Margaret Atwood doesn’t describe her work as science fiction. It is the same with Cormac McCarthy, and indeed you typically won’t find their books in the SFF section of a bookstore. Because she sees her work as an exploration of *what is possible* and science fiction as work that is *impossible*, she differentiates her work.

I prefer Judith Merrill's classification of speculative fiction in which she describes it as "a special sort of contemporary writing which makes use of fantastic and inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality and any other topic under the general heading of philosophy" (from her introduction in *SF: THE BEST OF THE BEST*). This definition expands speculative writing to include works of the fantastic that have no elements of science fiction. I also appreciate pushing the boundaries of the imagination and pushing back against Literature (with a capital L).

I find it very interesting that when searching for alternate words to use for speculate or speculative, I come across other words such as hypothetical, theoretical, and academic. Further, additional words include gamble, hazard, venture and taking risks. I would like to also explore how work in a speculative vein is taking a leap of faith. Any act of creation is a leap of faith, really, in that you can't always predict how the work will come out or be received. This holds true for all artistic endeavors, be they the visual arts, literary, musical, etc. So, in this sense *all* art can be considered speculative, regardless of other labels.

Kelly Akashi: This topic points back to my use of speculation in the form of thought-experiments, which I brought up in my prompt. I think of it as a useful process in life in general. It's kind of like daydreaming or fantasizing with an anchor to reality (a real person or situation or thing). It's a means for me to try to grow outside of what I know, and in artmaking a way to surprise myself.

Because of the growing real estate speculation in Los Angeles, where I grew up and currently live, I can't help but think of the marketing use of the word too. Like Ann wrote, it's a leap of faith and offers no promises or predictions aside from the gamble and potential payoff. I wonder if its overuse in this framework has given the word a flimsy correlation—by this I mean its potential usefulness or power is lost for the consumer. It becomes a gamble, hazard, venture, or risk.

On another similar note, this reminds me of two frames of mind in regard to cryptocurrency speculation. There are two mindsets I've noticed people are coming from in regard to their participation in Bitcoin currency. One is speculation regarding how cryptocurrency could be used to create a new global currency independent of central banks and government scrutiny. Early adopters speculated about how it could eventually challenge or create an alternate path to our dominant system of currency (this is a long and very interesting topic, but I'll keep it short). The other mindset is interested in investing in it for financial gain—at worst an unregulated currency that can be pumped and dumped. Of course there are people who cross over into both fields of thought. But for this discussion I think it highlights the different mentality, or philosophy, behind two kinds of speculation, which puts power and agency in very different places. I think this illustrates different, contrasting uses of the word, which Ann also mentioned in her reply, and articulates how speculation can be used a powerful tool to create new means of exploring or exploiting.

Margaret Killjoy: I find myself unreasonably partisan in the literary/speculative divide (and firmly on the side of the speculative). It's dangerous, because at the end of the day it's a bullshit dichotomy like most dichotomies. At the end of the day, fiction is some stuff someone made up. It irritates me, sometimes, that I feel like I probably should add a wizard or some technological breakthrough or an apocalypse to my work so that it is more commercially viable or so that people will want to read it.

That said, there are two things that seem to be at odds with one another that are two of the reasons I love speculative fiction. First, speculative fiction (or “genre” fiction) is firmly in the gutter. Spec-fic writers are more likely to see themselves as blue collar workers who create entertainment. This puts us firmly in the legacy of minstrels and storytellers and wandering bards and away from academia and monasteries and all the stuff that just doesn’t interest me as much. I have an aversion to any spec-fic writer who insists that their work is “literary.” Literary fiction (or rather, the culture around it) has always felt classist to me, with its insistence that writing ought to not be a profession but instead a labor of love. Okay, but, on the other hand, speculative fiction is... yeah... as folks have pointed out, *speculative*. It’s an infinite world of possibilities. It can be part of shaping the world and imagining futures. It’s lying in the gutter but it’s got its head in the stars.

Maybe I love speculative fiction because it’s marked, as someone brought up. Speculative fiction is outside the aristocratic idea of what the status quo is. We live in a world where the upper-middle-class white cis-hetero experience is presented as the normal, unmarked state, but most of us live outside of that. Most creators come from outside that.

I can’t decide how I feel about comparing speculative as an adjective for creative work with speculative as relates to things like finances and gambling. Maybe it’s perfect. We can romanticize the gambler, who is the low-class speculator, but we live in a world that’s been gutted by bankers—the upper-class version of the same. I think the difference between the two is that the banker is—more often—doing her gambling safely. Capitalism is an economic system set up specifically to allow wealthy speculators to hedge their bets and to reinforce the power of the powerful. Their speculation is safe, the same as boring, bourgeois science fiction is safe.

But still, there’s a part of me that bristles at the comparison. That the words share a spelling doesn’t necessarily make them the same. That might just be how partisan I am, though. Who knows.

PROMPT 4

Ann VanderMeer: I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the role of fiction, in particular speculative fiction, in today’s fast-changing world. We are facing so many challenges that require immediate attention or thoughtful discussion and I wonder how fiction can engage us. During my travels last year I came across some that mentioned publishers who were planning to forego any more fiction titles in their upcoming lineup, stating that they are focusing on nonfiction books instead.

I go back and forth on this topic, because on one hand, I feel that fiction can move us and inform us in ways that nonfiction cannot (people can engage with difficult topics better through storytelling). And yet, I also struggle with concerns that I am spending so much of my time on this when I should be doing something else more productive.

Do other artists ever feel the same way? Visual artists, dancers, actors, musicians, etc.?

FICTILIS: Ann, as curators who work with a lot of artists of all stripes, we can report that, yes, this is something other artists feel. After Trump’s election, for example, we felt a wave of self-

questioning among the artist community, at least from our position in it here in Oakland. At the time we were in the middle of a large project that was about capitalism, and particularly the form of neoliberalism which led to Trump's election. We sent to the project's many participants what we now jokingly call our "now more than ever" email, which tried to encourage those despondent over the election to continue the important work they were doing. (We later noticed that almost all of the nonprofit orgs we subscribe to sent out a post-election email soliciting action or funds, and invariably they contained that cliché phrase, "now more than ever.")

One of the points in our email was that, if anything, Trump's election to the US presidency demonstrates that things many of us couldn't imagine happening can indeed happen. All the more reason to continue to introduce new possibilities into the world through art. So we think those artists who feel their work is important should continue—not "now more than ever," but now *as ever*. But maybe also vice versa: that those who don't, shouldn't. Trump's America is polarized, but if some worthwhile artists are encouraged and some not worthwhile artists are discouraged, that is a polarization we can live with. We probably know people who could be doing something more productive—and some probably feel that way about us! "Anyone who can be discouraged, should be," said the writer Harlan Ellison, whose advice to aspiring writers was to become a plumber or something else more "useful" to society. Questioning the value of whatever it is we do, and whether we could be doing something better—that is a speculation worth having.

Of course, the word "productive" has historically been associated with actions that have a very narrow kind of economic value. And even if one's alternative to artistic speculation is some kind of civic engagement or political activity, this too deserves to be questioned: whether forms of "resistance" are not just as shallowly reactive (if not reactionary) as Trump's tweets. Some actions need more thought, to determine if they are useful actions—study of context, history, theory, strategy, effects. But even if we are weighing art against other worthwhile pursuits, there's a balance to be struck. A balance between two strategies, like that between fighting a battle and a war, addressing symptoms or causes, or advocating reform or revolution. And maybe your "going back and forth" is actually an appropriate response, like a pendulum swinging, your average position being somewhere in the middle.

As responses to challenges go, "immediate attention" and "thoughtful discussion" can be two very different things. That is, certain kinds of thought, discussion, organizing, etc.—even certain kinds of attention—simply cannot happen at high speeds, cannot produce immediate responses. Certain things take time, and insisting on the slow work of writing fiction (or reading it, or other creative practices) can be a way to gain a foothold in a world whose continued speed depends on commandeering our immediate attention. And in the long run, we might see the value of speculative writing according to Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," as a cultural technology that can hold words and meanings that might otherwise be dropped.

We wanted to elicit alternative categorizations of the speculative in order to suggest a fundamental relation between financial speculation and artistic speculation. One takeaway from noting how "markedness" is culturally constructed is that the non-marked term (as Margaret pointed out, e.g., upper-middle-class white cis-hetero...) is not any kind of natural default from which all others deviate in specific ways. The marked is simply the specificity that happens to be dominant. So it is with financial speculation. Capitalism is inherently speculative. From high finance, where futures markets deal in wild possibilities, to real estate speculation or cryptocurrencies, as Kelly mentioned, there are real fortunes being made—and worlds being

shaped—because of someone’s speculations. (Or as the writer China Miéville likes to say, “We live in a utopia—it just isn’t ours.”) And ironically, since these dominant speculations have gotten our world into pretty bad shape, the powerful are now doubling down and their speculations are merging with those of science fiction in the form of geoengineering—an action that needs more thought, if there ever was one.

So our hope is that we all continue our speculations and counter-speculations, if only so we’re not relegated to playing out the speculations of others. Introducing new juxtapositions, entertaining unfamiliar ideas, and so on, we practice the speculative as an ongoing process, a kind of permanent revolution. And not just because of the possible effects that our speculations might have, like creating something useful or productive for readers or for the wider world, but because of what Kelly pointed out in her own practice: the crucial possibility that we might surprise ourselves.

Margaret Killjoy: It’s on everyone’s minds, definitely.

I genuinely don’t think creative output is “enough.” It probably wouldn’t be enough even in times of comparative peace... in the world I want to live in, even though I’m specialized in storytelling, I would also be tapped by friends who specialize in growing food to help out during harvest, or to clean up after communal meals, or whatever other tasks need doing. In times of... “war” might be hyperbolic at least for me since I’m a citizen of the country I live in and I’m white, but “increased conflict and tensions”... in times of conflict, I think it behooves us to step up harder.

For all his flaws, I look at Orwell for this. He didn’t go to witness the Spanish Civil War because it would enrich his art. He thought, “Oh, shit, fascists are invading Spain,” and risked everything to defend a country and even an ideology that wasn’t his own. We don’t currently have an armed fascist invasion on our hands, but we sure live in interesting times. It makes sense for us to figure out how to apply our skills to that social conflict. It also makes sense for us to step outside of what we’ve specialized in and take risks. I appreciate a good antifascist parable but I appreciate it even more from someone I know who would be willing to hide minorities in her house or interfere bodily with displays of bigotry.

I know this isn’t easy, and it would be a terrible trap to fall into if we decided to get all judgmental on each other about who is sacrificing the most for the cause. Everyone has their own understandings of risk, of what they ought to do to be productive. I almost hate to speculate on “what is to be done” publicly, because I’m so afraid of contributing to a culture in which we hold each other up to artificial standards.

I do think prioritizing nonfiction over fiction is sort of meaningless, to be honest. Both fiction and nonfiction are ways of helping people shape their thoughts about the world. I doubt either is more helpful than the other. Which is to say, they’re both enormously helpful, but neither one has any meaning at all if they don’t exist in a context in which people directly take control over their own lives, defend their communities, and resist fascism.

At the moment, I’m maintaining some level of creative output. That might change if things get worse. If so, then, the cliché I keep in my head is: “If we survive this, think of the stories we’ll tell.”

FICTILIS: *snapping fingers*

Nicely put.

Ann VanderMeer: I thank all of you for your thoughtful responses here. And I am not surprised to learn I am not alone in these thoughts. Two things happened this past week that brought this subject even closer to home.

The first was the passing of Ursula K. Le Guin. Her death has left so many of us grieving. But it has also provided a time for us to reflect on all that she has given to us, not just in her fiction writing, but in how she lived her life. She influenced so many writers. Her speech a few years ago when accepting the Distinguished Contribution medal at the National Book Awards ceremony took on the publishing industry for valuing sales over quality, and argues that “Books aren’t just commodities; the profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art.” I could reprint her entire speech right here. It contains all of the arguments for continuing to do the work “*now, as ever.*” You are absolutely right.

I haven’t read all of the tributes, interviews and quotes recently posted about Le Guin but there was one that stuck out for me on this subject: “Go on and do your work. Do it well. It is all you can do.” I feel as if I found this quote at just the right time.

The second event—more personal. I am preparing for a family reunion next month. I was asked to write up a history and background about my branch of the family. As I was doing this, I realized that my nephew embodies this work wholly and completely. He is a dancer and choreographer, and heads his own dance company. However, when I take a closer look at the work that he does, I can see the impact he has on the wider world. He uses dance to reach out to marginalized communities, to help them tell their stories. He runs a program for high school students in Miami called LEAP (Leaders of Equality Through Arts and Performance) that trains the next generation of leaders. As I was writing up his accomplishments, it reminded me again of why we do this work.

And yes, Margaret, just think of the stories we will tell. In all the ways we can tell stories.

And on a side note, I am particularly amused by the offer from the Guggenheim museum to the Trumps of the golden toilet. So very appropriate.

Kelly Akashi: Again I will reference “thought-experiments” as a way I navigate imagination and reality—reality being an equally important part of what I do since it all manifests as objects in spaces that people inhabit and move through. Thinking about space, architectural and otherwise, as a kind of nonfiction is an interesting perspective that I am considering right now, in this conversation, in response to the topics Ann’s prompt brought up.

In some ways I think this idea of inhabited space as being a kind of nonfiction that can become an extremely convincing fiction (everything from a set to a staged home to a personalized bedroom) is a good example of a spectrum of speculation that I think many people navigate consciously or subconsciously—a kind of daily speculative fiction that many people control and utilize, more or less. As Margaret wrote, it isn’t about creating a priority or a hierarchy. They exist in tandem, in relationship to people’s daily lives, as tools to communicate ideas regarding very real and abstract things that are happening in the world right now. Things that are

intangible yet manifest in very real tangible ways. This drive is inspiring to me, personally. I think as long as people are open to learning from these moves, understanding and respecting that visual language is a very real way to communicate, people can continue to learn through hands-on, constructed speculation, which is balanced against function or nonfiction. But when the fiction, or speculation becomes a means-to-an-end, a prediction or veneer, I'm not sure there is a conversation to be had.

I think the unpredictable makes for the best story, or in my case, artwork. Failure, as dismal as it can be, can also later lead to some great unpredictable (beyond the speculative) success. For me, the use of fiction/nonfiction or speculative/fact is a means to the unpredictable, a way out of everything we discussed, into something far beyond what is knowable, understandable, or classified. Ha ha—out of the speculative and into the... fire.