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As told to Willa Köerner, 2782 words.

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On creating spaces to imagine and dream

Artist and researcher Salome Asega on the power of speculative thinking, digital equity, and decentralizing our visions for the future.
How has your quarantine been going? Has anything in particular been pressing on your mind lately?

Quarantine has been very slow for me. It's been a process of embracing a new understanding of time, moving at the pace that my mind and body allows, and really listening to that. I've been less productive in terms of deliverables and output, but I have actually been more productive in terms of my thinking and creativity, and where I've allowed myself to just kind of wander. I have had more time to journal and write, and just feel a little bit freer in some ways.

Something that has given me hope lately has been the rise in mutual aid support. This might not necessarily be new, but it has felt amplified, maybe because of the digital platforms we're now all connected on. Things like social media and Slack are changing the way people are organizing. It's been moving so efficiently and so quickly, and change is happening at really hyperlocal levels in concerted, networked ways. That kind of organizing—where somebody builds a model for something, and then that can be replicated in other communities—has been really exciting to me. That's something I hope continues when we work our way out of this.

I've also been thinking a lot about interdependency. I mean, it's a frame that disability justice activists have been lifting up for us forever, in all their organizing. I love what Ki'tay D Davidson wrote, "No one is actually independent. We are all interdependent."

The difference between the needs that many disabled people have and the needs of people who are not labeled as disabled is that non-disabled people have had their dependencies normalized. Moreover, I think a society under capitalism doesn't value the labor of care because it would require us to realize our interdependencies. Disability justice activists have really shown us the ways we need to show up for each other and work together, and what true inclusion looks like.

So far the pandemic has been a real meditation on collective care. That's what I've taken in the most in the last couple of weeks, I think. People are thinking about self care and what they individually need, yes. But people are also really pushing themselves outside of individualistic thinking, and trying to do collective care work, which is exciting. And maybe I'm reading and watching too many of the Haymarket books and talks, but it's been so great to see activists and theorists breaking down the interlocking systems of capitalism and oppression, and again, reminding us that these systems obviously divide us. I think some of that is unraveling now, as we're trying to figure out how to care for each other.

How do we care for each other?

I think by having a gauge of your needs and the needs of people near you. And by being able to manage excess—like knowing how much you need, and not needing more than that, and sharing. Like, the really basic kindergarten stuff. Sharing and listening, you know?

There are so many mechanisms right now that usually carry individualistic currents, but in crises can become channels for care. Something like Instagram, for example. In the last few months, it has become far more conducive to sharing and listening.

Yeah. I'm on a Slack channel for my neighborhood in Bed-Stuy called Bed-Stuy Strong. I have a Zipcar

membership, so I was helping to deliver groceries to folks who couldn't leave their house for whatever reason. And there was a sub-channel on that Slack that was a food channel. So if you wanted kombucha or sourdough starter, you could hit someone up and go to their house and get it. They'd leave it in a baggie outside their door. That is also a form of mutual aid, right? Where people are actively putting out what they need or what they have, and then people are finding each other to share.

I think that's one of the best ways we have to move outside of capitalism: by recognizing that resources shouldn't be hoarded, because they're most valuable when they're shared.

Yeah. I also feel like people have very quickly mapped resources, especially within arts and culture communities. The number of newsletters from all these different organizations' listservs that released relief effort funds for artists and organizations, those came out so quickly. So I'm excited by that.

How has your work evolved during quarantine? Has your focus shifted?

I'm a Technology Fellow with the Ford Foundation in a program area called Creativity and Free Expression. I'm there working at the intersection of art and technology. [Laughs] Sorry, every time I say that phrase I think of the "meet me at the intersection of art and technology" meme. But I'm there to help our team understand the different ways artists are making things with emerging technologies, and how these new processes of making are playing out through an art historical lens. I'm also helping our grantee arts organizations figure out how to support artists.

Since the pandemic hit, I've been more focused on designing digital strategy workshops for arts organizations who are transferring a lot of their programs online and who want to make sure they're doing it in a way that is accessible and equitable, and that they're using the best practices. There's a lot of language floating around right now, like we're doing things "virtually" or "digitally," and I think people are really excited about the potential of doing things online but are overwhelmed by the options they have... So I'm building out a curriculum that involves a lot of artists and comms experts for arts organizations, and doing a workshop series.

I'm curious to hear you talk about how you've carved out this area for yourself. You do so many different types of work and have many different practices. Do you feel like there's a central story that ties it all together?

I'm very process-driven, and I'm interested in building protocols for working collectively on storytelling projects. So I might have the seed of an idea for a project that can happen in partnership with an organization. I might have some keywords, or a mood attached to a project idea, but I feel like I can never concretize anything until I have all the people at the table. Then I like to think about the story we want to tell, and then figure out what's the technology, if there is technology, that can help us tell the story. But overall, a lot of my work starts with getting people to the table first.

How did you end up focusing on this type of work?

Some of my first experiences in more formal art-making practices were through an internship with Creative Time. At that time I was exposed to an array of social practitioners. It just kind of amazed me that there was a way to make art that blended community organizing with asking questions aesthetically. These two worlds merged for me in a way where all of a sudden, nothing felt static. People were actively making things with the "artist," and challenging and critiquing. I wanted to make work like that. But I also was a tinkerer. So I wanted to bring in that technological aspect as well.

I did my MFA at Parsons in a Design and Technology program, and I had so much access to physical computing and fabrication tools. So I was always trying to figure out, "How do I get some of this stuff out for more people to play with?" I'd bring out soldering irons and microprocessors and servomotors, LEDs, really small things to start. And I'd try to figure out how these pieces could become the innards of something we could build using other more accessible materials, like cardboard or whatever was in the education room of the community space I was partnering with at that time.

Digital equity was a big part of the work I was doing early on. Making sure that more people could have access to some of these tools, so that they could have an understanding of the things that we carry around with us every day. It shouldn't be a privilege [to understand how technology works]. It should be a right. You should know how things work around you. You don't need to be a superstar coder. You just need a basic understanding.

What do you think shifts when someone can develop a basic understanding of how these opaque, black-box technologies work?

I think it opens the door for someone to understand that something was designed by a person. There was a person who made certain technical and aesthetic decisions for this thing that you're now using. I think it starts to tease out some of the power behind design decisions, and some of the potential biases, right? All of those become apparent when you're in the driver's seat.

You use the word "speculative" a lot in your work. I'm curious what strategies you've found to take speculative ideas and bring them into a non-speculative world for people to understand. How do you keep things from feeling totally abstract?

I think science fiction and speculative thinking are playful approaches to—and a safer mode of thinking

about-injustice and pain in the present. So when we're doing these speculative workshops, either through Iyapo Repository or other workshops I've done, we're always really talking about the things we carry with us when we walk into the room. It then becomes this backwards process, when the participant explains what they've made. It's like, "What were you thinking?" Or, "what questions were you asking?" And then you begin to hear a story of a concern someone brought in with them that day and wanted to solve for. It always comes down to a problem, and the speculative "output" is their poetic attempt at a solution.

In an Iyapo Repository workshop a couple of years ago, I remember we had this woman who's a musician and a sound engineer. I think on the day of the workshop, the microaggressions she feels in her work were kind of lifted up for her. And so she built this speculative seashell that could play music by women and femmes from across the diaspora and across time. So it was this time-traveling, pirate radio seashell. Her sketch of it and the description of it was just so celebratory of women's impact on sound production. So in some ways, I felt like it was therapeutic for her to write that out and draw that out. And then we built it together and made a physical piece of art. By making it real, I feel like it physicalized the things she wanted to celebrate.

How does the speculative thinking come into play with your Ford Foundation work? Or is that approach more just a part of your creative practice?

Recently we have been thinking about futures in different ways, and the plurality of futures, which is really exciting—the idea that people can be building multi-visions for the kind of change they want to see. There isn't a singular approach to building a more just future, right? We can use an intersectional approach that's not centralizing a vision of one future.

As part of that work, do you try to help people understand how to be speculative, or how to imagine possible futures?

Yeah, it's interesting. Historically oppressive institutions have a specific idea for the world they want to see, and can drive fully forward in that vision, which can leave folks who are on the more social justice and side of this work holding the line against these forces. But it's kind of like, how do we move out of this reactive lane of hoping that we'll get to the place we want to be by holding, pushing, or reforming the line, and instead move into this lane of radical imagination, and run towards that?

You're talking about a mental switch, where instead of taking a defensive position against something, you're working in a more offensive way—fighting for something more radical and imaginative that's not just a reaction to what we have now.

Yeah. In Dunne and Raby's Speculative Everything, the first sentence of the book is something like, "A younger generation hopes, it no longer dreams," which is the reality. At this point that book is over a decade old, but that first sentence still holds so true. I mean, the first president I ever voted for was Obama, and his candidacy was based on the idea of hope. I am part of a generation that hopes, but I want to dream. I want to do the work of imagining.

That's such an important point. If society doesn't offer us space to dream, how do we create that space for people?

I mean, that's the real question. I did a residency with Recess, as part of their Assembly program, which is an arts diversion program for court-involved youth. I remember one of the participants in that program telling us early on in the process, "Getting to a space of imagination is a privilege, full stop." We have to sit with that and realize, yes, we're bringing people into these art spaces that are built as imagination hubs and dream hubs, right? We're trying to make spaces for people to have these kinds of conversations.

But a lot of this work needs to be done outside of these spaces, or in concert with them. Sometimes doing that means bringing a program outside of a space that maybe doesn't feel like it's for everyone, you know? A lot of our arts institutions and organizations don't feel like they're for everyone. I know there are a lot of people who are actively doing the work to change some of that. But even if there is a free day at a museum, something like that, it's a small window of time for people. So it's about extending some of these programs and offerings even more, and meeting people where they are.

There are certain spaces where I know that if I attend any of their programs, or go to an event, I can feel like there's a grounded understanding in this kind of stuff. These are organizations that are thinking about technology in the right ways, too—not just about the technology itself. Again, technology is such a broad word, but like, they're not just thinking about the tools, they're thinking about the social implications around the tools. These organizations still get into the specificities of how these tools move in the world, and how they're affecting people, but they push further into conversations about power. And so I think for me, organizations like Data for Black Lives, or BUFU, or School for Poetic Computation, these are spaces where critical conversations are happening about technology, and I feel safer and more ready to dive in with those folks.

I feel like there's a lot of dread associated with a lot of tech-related stuff right now. What do you feel is the most hopeful thing happening right now inside the world you inhabit?

There are a couple of folks I know who are starting reading groups for books that are a part of my "prime bookshelf," books like Algorithms of Oppression and Race After Technology and Dark Matters. I'm seeing these books that have felt so important to my learning and my growth, as someone working in technology,

and I'm seeing people dive in collectively in this moment. And that's really exciting, and hopeful. These are books written by Black women, or women of color, about technology-and people are really wanting to understand their perspective, you know? So that's giving me hope right now.

Salome Asega recommends:

1. Annika Hansteen-Izora's list of Black funds and creative ecosystems to support.
2. "Algorithms of Oppression" Book Club and Study Group presented by Women's Center for Creative Work and Feminist AI in alliance with The Free Black Women's Library. (Shout-out Mandy Harris Williams for leading this group!)
3. Critical Resistance's "History of Policing and Resistance" timeline
4. @mazzybell's Design for Black Lives, a list of designers offering their services for free
5. Chroma's Source of Nurture, a music compilation supporting Black Lives Matter, Undocumented and Immigrant communities, and Essential Workers

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