

Did you know bullets used to be fabricated in *shot towers*, on top of which workers dropped molten lead through mesh? Thanks to surface tension and gravity, perfect missile spheres landed in a water basin on the tower's ground after their freefall.

Halfway through our art studies, my partner Jannis and I applied for a substantial grant from the city of Hamburg, awarded for the completion of projects in public space. We were a more affordable option for funding that, at the time, might have typically paid for a rusty Richard Serra sculpture or, as far as German cities were concerned, some huge granite blocks split by sculptor Ulrich Rückriem. We proposed building a concrete sculpture that would serve as an exhibition venue. Composed of cubic elements—two walls, three floor slabs, a stele that looked vaguely like an altar and two towers—our proposed open space stretched over a width and height of about four metres. Once the jury gathered to select projects, a woman from the city's arts council called my mobile phone with a question. They were wondering if our proposal was a joke. “No,” I told her, “it actually isn't.” And we got the funding.

In retrospect, the most surprising factor was that we were given funding to complete a big project without stating any conceptual goals other than venturing into the unknown. We wanted to work out what the project was about while undertaking it, not anticipate an impact in language. After all, who could have predicted the implications of a sculpture claiming to be exhibition space? We simply wanted to find out what an idea entailed in reality. We held 18 shows in the space, which we titled Betongalerie/Türme der Hoffnung (Concrete Gallery/Towers of Hope). The first part of its name was our working title, a blunt description. As this was still not satisfactory, and for fear of the blank page, we just wrote down anything that came to our mind resembling the name of a venue.

In the Towers of Hope, together with fellow artists and prospective gallerists and curators, friends, and neighbours, we showed large-format paintings on tiles, which we auctioned off per piece for a good cause; we showed the structure Christo/ Jeanne-Claude-style, wrapped in rubbish bags; we produced a four-act play; screened short films; turned the space back into a sculpture; planted a garden in the frozen ground where the fathers of artists gave a speech about gardening and raising sons; put on a piece made up entirely of the opinions of some 200 neighbours; turned the towers into a temple while providing a firework show at midnight on New Year's Eve; transformed the space into a car over whose speakers we presented an audio programme, while the temperature dropped below -5; massaged bodybuilder bronze cream into the concrete corpus after the site was turned into a platform for public speeches and book exchange.

According to Maggie Nelson, “art is characterized by the indeterminacy and plurality of the encounters it generates,”<sup>1</sup> and we felt strongly that this indeterminacy would have been lost had we pre-formulated what we wanted the project to accomplish. And we never could have anticipated the achievements that eventually ensued. For both of us, and possibly for some of the artists and other contributors with whom we have collaborated, the project has had a profound impact on our understanding of what art can do. At the risk of sounding too grand, it's made us think about how something that does not reveal its intentions (perhaps because they are not clear-cut), how something that cannot be fully defined (possibly because no definition pre-exists), opens a window of freedom, a surprising capacity for agency in both viewers and makers. Concerning the viewers, the project was a constant site of re-negotiation because people open-heartedly offered their opinions, since the site we had chosen for our work was also theirs. Both sides—makers and public—had a funny curiosity about each other's choices and reactions. Each time, for instance, we were installing or de-installing, passers-by informed us whether what we did was art or not. Likewise, the local tabloid press titling the project a “public toilet” was part of that aspect of art's status which Jacques Rancière describes as a third thing between people, whose meaning “is owned by no one, but which subsists between [artist and spectator], excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect.”<sup>2</sup>

Projecting into the future, asking what a work of art intends on *doing*, can be challenging to avoid. Ever since building Betongalerie, I've written many applications while trying to heed the warnings of my tweaking guts telling me not to fix something on paper which would later determine my thoughts or agency in the project. If only art were excluded from a Western obsession with the future. I wonder if we could re-learn a way of reception that focuses on what we perceive right before us rather than thinking about the effect an object or project is purported to achieve. In this regard, it might be helpful to think of expectations or hope as a signifier in the transition from the pre-modern and tradition-bound to the future-oriented society. Or, as Terry Eagleton phrases it, “from timeless metaphysical truths to the historically open-ended.” He continues, “Modernity is a question of viewing the present in the light of its

future, and thus in the light of its potential negation. Essence is now expectation. What defines a phenomenon, in a reversal of linear evolution, is the inner form that inflicts it toward the as yet unrealized. In a Benjaminesque inversion, it is its future that determines its present.”<sup>3</sup>

#### In a Year of the Tower

Last spring, I went to a tarot reading. Francesca, my card master, told me I was entering a year of the Tower. The card in question shows a tower built on rough cliffs with flashes of lightning striking and flames bursting from its orifices. Left and right of the tower’s erection, two figures are falling from a great height. Unlike other tarot cards with a dark twist to an otherwise optimistic reading—such as the Devil or the Hanged Man—the Tower has a less favourable reading to offer, except to suggest that after a period of devastating destruction, one will be left with nothing but the bare essentials and will come to know the relevant constituents of a life: materially and ideally. I pushed the reading to the furthest corner of my consciousness, asserting to myself that it was only soothsaying. Six months later, when life had been a bumpy ride, Anja asked me for a contribution to this issue: ‘high’. Given my ceaseless interest in architectural topics and, lately, twisted fascination with high-rise buildings, I thought about writing a text on skyscrapers. As I began my research on tall buildings, all of a sudden, I *did* remember the card.

From about my birthday onwards, events seemed to be choreographed in a mysterious chain reaction. The first pearl lined up at an appointment in Brussels’ town hall where, after seven years of living between Belgium and Germany, I wanted to commit and have a real, official life. I was excited to finally register and brought an armful of elaborate paperwork, imagining how I would surprise them with my excessive preparation. But the date was quick: they told me I needed to earn more money in Belgium, and there was nothing they could do except give me another three months to prove a decent local income. I felt like that tower myself—shaking with eruptions, my windows clattering. The truth was, I was not expecting any money in the coming months, and it was only now that I realised that I had been fuelled by hope for a long time.

#### Hope

Hope is the state of permanent suspension in which one waits for the occurrence of a certain, expected positive event, which, however, does not yet happen. While hoping, money is invested, resources are mobilised materially and mentally, promises are made, and networks established. In short: investments are made in an anticipated upcoming event. The contemporary crux, as found, for instance, in realms of freelance occupation: because there are so many hopes, and one permanently assures oneself that a single non-occurring event is part of the game, one hardly notices the disappointment because one is already busy with the next application. Is hope the fuel we need in order to exist in such inhospitable working conditions? Or does hope—as delay of real events—prevent us from making decisions that might allow us to feel good here and now?

As is well known, hope marks a central Christian virtue. Nonetheless, I wonder if this particular virtue of expecting/speculating about positive events in the future and incurring debts in the present moment has helped lay the groundwork for the current Western economic system. As much as religious hope might provide a railing to hold on to, it does create dependency. Unlike desire, a robust hope does not simply glance at a future contentment above the abyss of the present, one might argue in its favour, but has a foretaste of its fulfilment with a certain euphoria setting in. The firm belief in fulfilled narratives of achievement and—along with hope—other virtues, such as diligence and discipline, have a secure place in Christian tradition. Eschatology, which implies the primacy of the future over the present, is one of the central categories of Jewish Christianity. “God is not yet, but is yet to be.”<sup>4</sup> Major religions agree on this outlook as the virtue of hope, yet Buddhism views it with suspicion, and a famous Lojong slogan rejects it completely: “Abandon any hope of fruition. Don’t get caught up in how you will be in the future, stay in the present moment.”<sup>5</sup>

Terry Eagleton notes that “hope, like desire as such, is the way in which the human animal is nonidentical with itself, its existence an eternal not-yet, its substance a kind of suspension.”<sup>6</sup> This eternal “not-yet” reminds me of Kafka’s “not-yet” motive in *Before the Law*, also known as *The Parable of the Doorkeeper*. In it, a man from the country seeks entry to the law through a gate guarded by a doorkeeper. Despite the man’s insistence, the guard informs him that he cannot enter—yet. Access is not strictly denied but permanently suspended, even though the door is wide open. The man eventually dies after years and years of waiting in front of the door. Is the story of hope also a story about access? Not access in a spatial sense, but in a temporal one. On the other hand: do we have tools to take on challenges without hope? Expecting an outcome objectively: it could be a yes, it could as well be a no. Desire is always at risk of being disappointed.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about hope in reference to Pandora’s box: “Zeus did not wish man, however much he might be tormented by the other evils, to fling away his life, but to go on letting himself be tormented again and again. Therefore he gives Man hope—in reality, it is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of Man.”<sup>7</sup>

On one of the more troublesome days, I called my friend Stacy to confess that I had to cancel a trip to New York, where I was going to stay with her. Even though I had already bought the plane tickets, it seemed like it might not be a good idea to travel while I was broke to a city where the prices for everything had skyrocketed. How would I enjoy the trip, especially since I could handle the essential tasks of the journey remotely? Stacy is a great friend and her

reaction was very warm and understanding. She had some advice for me and asked if I had heard of visualization. “You have to imagine yourself in the situation that you desire to be in. Your goal. Think of how you would be, what you would do, where you would be and what you would look like if you reached that goal—in the greatest detail possible.” This did not match with my new conviction about abandoning hope. But Stacy insisted it was not quite the same: it’s not about hope—it’s about making yourself understand what will be if you are there! You essentially skip hope! I got confused. By the end of the call, I felt consolidated by the warmth of friendship and someone genuinely listening. I really couldn’t see myself embracing the visualization concept, yet if it had helped Stacy, then it couldn’t be wrong altogether...

#### Visualization

- Be a Thermostat or a Thermometer: The thermostat responds to the environment. The thermometer sets the temperature and creates the desired condition. For example, if you’re trying to lose weight, you might create a vision board of images of your goal body. Put it somewhere so that you can see it regularly. This works similarly to a goal visualization and analytics dashboard commonly used in business. That which is measured and monitored is improved!
- Winning and Achieving: Another effective visualization technique in a physical environment is to write yourself a check (if your goals are monetary in nature). For example, if you want to become a millionaire by age 40, you can write a check to yourself for one million dollars and have it framed. Most of the time, the best way to utilise visualization is to picture a single outcome; you win the race, you lose the weight, you get the promotion, etc. But it may also be helpful to visualize multiple potential outcomes.
- Avoid Negativity: What are all the ways this could pan out? What are the best-case and worst-case scenarios? Again, this is a way to moderate your fears. Just don’t spend too long visualising negative outcomes, or they may come to dominate the narrative. Always shift back to a more positive mindset.
- Create Goal Pictures: Another powerful visualization technique is to create a photograph or picture of yourself with your goal, as if it were already completed. If one of your goals is to own a new car, take your camera down to your local auto dealer and have a picture taken of yourself sitting behind the wheel of your dream car. If your goal is to visit Paris, find a picture or poster of the Eiffel Tower and cut out a picture of yourself and place it into the picture.



The Swiss writer Robert Walser (1878–1956) lies dead in the snow. He died on December 25, 1956, while walking in the vicinity of Herisau, Canton Appenzell.

Not long after speaking with Stacy, I was on the phone with my friend Anja, who wanted to know how my text for Pfeil was going. When we first chatted a little, I told her what I had learnt about visualisation and how I doubted the concept. It turned out that Anja was already practicing the technique, as instructed by her yoga teacher. Nevertheless, she offered a different take on it and told me about the death of Robert Walser. After a lavish lunch on Christmas day 1956, the writer left the Swiss sanatorium where he had been living as a patient for many years to go hike in the snow. Walser loved long, solitary walks. The exact circumstances of his death are unclear, but it is believed that he may have suffered a heart attack or hypothermia while out in the cold. A passerby discovered his body the next day. The dramatic incident instantly evoked an eerie reminiscence to a scene in his first novel, *Geschwister Tanner*. In the story, the description of the poet Sebastian’s death in the snow accurately anticipates that of the author 50 years later.



## Vertigo

Through my tower-tinted glasses, fulfilled prophecies bring before my inner eye J.G. Ballard’s grotesque, surreal (yet all the more realistic) novel *High-Rise*. Its protagonist is a towering apartment building, freshly designed for middle-class and upper-middle-class tenants as a self-contained community with all the amenities they could need. However, the architecture itself has a strange influence on its inhabitants, imprinting its hierarchical design on their behaviour, first causing the residents to lose touch with the outside world and then clogging them into cliques which stage wars against the respective lower classes as the high-rise descends into chaos and violence.

The expectation of social upwards mobility is engrained in the archetype of the tower. In the material world, towers are home to extremes of the social spectrum: social tenements are tower-shaped, as are banks, offices, and hyper-contemporary forms of luxury dwelling. However, the nature of power symbolised in the erections in a cityscape has changed since the watchtowers of pre-modern times. Part of fortifications or demarcation walls: defence mechanisms and vantage points which regulated access or were rock-faced reminders of a prevailing hierarchy. These towers were also shaped by their practical functions; prison towers, water towers, siege towers, lighthouses, bell towers, minarets and clock towers. By contrast, in today’s satellite-monitored and software-controlled environment, the tower is less functional and more symbolic than ever. In his book *Vertical*, Stephen Graham explores the relationship between social class and verticality in the built environment, highlighting the ways in which the tower has been used to reinforce social hierarchies and power structures. He suggests that the symbolism of the tower may be a reflection of our own psychological preoccupations with power and social status rather than a reflection of the functional needs of the built environment.

With modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tower became a typology for social and affordable housing. The rise of steel-framed construction, elevators, and industrialised prefabrication fused with modernist urban ideas resulted in elevated apartment blocks being widely celebrated as powerful forces of social and economic modernization in response to industrial poverty, rapid urbanisation, and the mass strategic bombing of cities. Lifting the urban masses up into the light, sun, and air of functionalist towers would bring social and moral improvement to ‘lower’ life.

Yet, then came backlash and critique: high-rise towers were seen more and more as the embodiment of the lowest end of the social ladder, and no one wanted the symbol thereof to shape the silhouette of cities. High-rise housing was increasingly rejected in favour of giving working-class residents a ground-level space that could be surveyed and controlled.

As further consequence, mass social housing projects were largely undermined by processes of neo-liberalization, and vertical housing transformed into investment opportunities, primarily office towers and luxury apartments. This created a new type of city where previously only the small area above the surface could be commodified and leased. But now, air itself can be monetized and enclosed into rising towers. So much money is floating in the market in need of investment opportunities that it has caused housing to transform from its most basic function of providing accommodation into a lucrative investment strategy. The rise of super skinny towers as the ultimate assets has brought the symbolism of the tower to a maximum level of abstraction. In this new urban landscape, the value that towers signify has become distorted and disassociated from their original functions.<sup>8</sup>

## Post Hope

The lighthouse and ‘the tower’ play a central role in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy. In the story, the latter is a vertical underground tunnel accessed through a spiral staircase that leads deep beneath the Earth, and yet the novel’s main character, the Biologist, insists it is a tower. In *Annihilation*, the series’ first volume, we learn that both towers are located at the heart of Area X, a restricted zone where mysterious flora and fauna, as pristine as disturbing, have taken over: unleashed nature is spreading inexorably. Expeditions have been undertaken to find answers, draw maps, and understand the strange landscape, yet their participants either never return or change in uncanny ways. The lighthouse is a tangible, built, phallic manifestation, while the underground tower is a phantasmagoric sensation which seems to lead into the protagonists’ innermost mental and psychological depths and paranormal states. In a world where natural forces prevail, they remain the only distinct human imprints.

VanderMeer’s novels count among the literary genre of the New Weird, in which ecologically dystopian scenarios are often conceived in the form of speculative fiction. However, it has been debated whether the word ‘weird’ is appropriate or ethical given the severity and scale of the ecological problems of the Anthropocene or whether it conveys implications too cute for its true gravitas. Writer Kaisa Kortekallio argues that we find a sense of vertigo in New Weird novels, building on research in ecology to claim that the continuous transmutations of ecosystems are philosophically just as radically unknowable as Area X. She suggests that “groundlessness could thus be mapped as a particularly ecological feeling.” Furthermore, she claims that “the sense of vertigo at the edge of weird ecologies marks an ongoing disintegration and reconfiguration of subjectivity. As the masterful, purely human subject quickly loses its viability as a lived condition, fiction begins to sketch and suggest new templates for experience.”<sup>9</sup>

In *The White Lotus*, a 2021 Netflix comedy-drama, Paulina enters the scene in the first episode sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with POST HOPE in bold letters across her chest. The teenage protagonist and her friend Olivia are representative of Generation Z; headstrong, reading Nietzsche,

Freud, and Butler, educating their parents on matters of equity yet self-centredly unwilling to cut down their privileges. POST HOPE—the slogan struck me. Could it be a demand in a contemporary landscape that is also the environment of a Last Generation,<sup>10</sup> in which the implications and concept of hope need to be re-read? Questions concerning the natural world can no longer be the subject of hope, as the Anthropocene heads toward extinction. In this respect, there is no alternative to action, since waiting here means losing time to irreversible processes: is hope in the face of melting poles, bleaching corals, and drying fields synonymous with loss?



Käthe Kollwitz, *Tower of Mothers*, 1937/38, Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin.

## New Sobriety

When I was small, my parents had three art catalogues on the bookshelf in their shared study in the attic, all of which I had studied meticulously, sneaking upstairs when they were busy. One was a catalogue of prints, drawings, and sculptures by German artist Käthe Kollwitz. I vividly remembered the photograph of a sculpture and recently looked up its title—*The Tower of Mothers*. This was perplexing because nothing about the work seems remotely reminiscent of a tower. A small piece, only measuring under 30 cm in height, *The Tower of Mothers* from 1939 is a curious example of modernist sculpture. Rather a fortress of skirts and aprons than a tower, it depicts a group of women with strong, emotion-filled expressions and bodies that convey a sense of solidarity and protection. At the skirts’ level, we can catch glimpses of children nestled between the bulwark of bodies and fabric. In 1938, *The Tower of Mothers* was removed from an exhibition by the Nazis with the statement claiming that in the Third Reich, mothers would not have to protect their children any longer—the state would do it for them. The sculpture reflects Kollwitz’s political activism and her commitment to promoting social justice. Like other representatives of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, her art was deeply coined by experiences of the First World War and the ensuing crises. Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, was a predominantly German phase in literature, music, and visual culture during the turbulent Weimar years 1918-33. In the visual arts, it was most prevalent between the mid-1920s and early 1930s. Although ‘New Objectivity’ has been the most common translation of Neue Sachlichkeit, other translations have included ‘New Matter-of-Factness’, ‘New Resignation’, ‘New Sobriety’, and ‘New Dispassion’ as the original German term in its specific nuances cannot be captured in a single English word.<sup>11</sup> Some of the movement’s famous representatives are Otto Dix, Lotte Laserstein, Jeanne Mammen, and George Grosz. It was a recurrence of the visible world, emphasising the thing-like through portraits and still lifes, in which realism often would border on the grotesque. Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, who first employed the term Neue Sachlichkeit, notes in an exhibition catalogue that it “tears the objective from the world of contemporary facts and projects current experience in its tempo and fevered temperature.”<sup>12</sup>

Trained as one of the few female painters in the late 1900s, Kollwitz decided in her thirties to abandon colour altogether after reading a treatise by Max Klinger, who stated that black and white techniques were the most adequate form of expression for human pain. Pain and misery of the working class and war-ridden people are at the core of Kollwitz’ oeuvre. She had an extraordinary ability to point out social injustices. In 1924, she designed the poster “Nieder mit den Abtreibungs-Paragrafen!” (Defeat the abortion paragraph!) or in 1925 “Mütter gebt von eurem Überfluss!” (Mothers, give from your abundance!)—promoting breast milk banks that helped to defeat infant mortality and foster female independence. Most prominently, however,

she depicted the incredible sadness of mothers who lost their children in the war, a fate which she suffered in the First World War, having lost her son Hans whom she had actively encouraged to serve in the field. I get a sense from her work that it depicts a world after hope. This sense is also conveyed in titles such as *Raped*, *Woman with Dead Child*, *Mourner*, *Woman in the Leap of Death*, *War*, *The Sacrifice*, *The Widow*, *Unemployed*, *Hunger* and *Child Mortality*. Still, her work is not nihilistic, and when I try to remember the feeling the images evoked in me as the child that could not read the titles yet, I think it was strength.

When describing the work of Käthe Kollwitz, especially her poster-like prints, contemporaries sometimes used the term *Tendenzkunst*. “*Tendenz* (a cognate of *tendentious* and occasionally translated as ‘purpose’) was a clear reference to art that is not ‘fine art’ because it was instrumentalized for political or social ends.”<sup>13</sup> Avant-garde artists under the trauma of the war, however, agreed that *Tendenz* was no longer something to be avoided.

### New New Objectivity

I try to practise visualization, and it is really not as easy as it sounds. I know what I want, but for some reason, I cannot reconcile those goals with a halfway realistic vision of a near future. I feel that unrealistic visualization misses the point, even though I begin to enjoy how a thought system starts to unpack itself in paradoxical patterns. Still, I want to be a good student and try harder. Is the problem not my lack of imagination, but the relationship between a present in crisis and its future? Spending my time speculating instead of visualising, I think of how Lauren Berlant questions our fantasies of “the good life” in her book *Cruel Optimism*. She suggests that “lives and livelihoods we have taken for granted” become more and more impossible to attain, and that only by recognizing that these fantasies are fraying can we develop alternative ways of living in the present. “Cruel optimism names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility.”<sup>14</sup> I feel this explains a lot but am in doubt about if it explains my failed exercise. Finally, I go to the studio without yet knowing what I am going to do there.

1) Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom. Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 2021, p. 51.

2) Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott (tr.), Versa, London and New York 2009, p. 15.

3) Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2015, pp. 100-101.

4) Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The God of Hope*, in *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 18, No. 3, University of North Carolina Press 1968, p. 289.

5) Encyclopedia of Buddhism, <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Lojong>, last accessed April 18, 2023.

6) Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2015, p. 84.

7) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (tr.), University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1984, (First published by Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1878), p. 71.

8) See for example: David Harvey, *Abstract from the Concrete*, Sternberg Press, London 2016, or Oliver Wainwright, *Super-tall, super-skinny, super-expensive: the ‘pencil towers’ of New York’s super-rich*, The Guardian, February 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/05/super-tall-super-skinny-super-expensive-the-pencil-towers-of-new-yorks-super-rich>, last accessed April 25, 2023.

9) Kaisa Kortekallio, *Turning Away from the Edge of Madness: Kinesis, Nihilism, and Area X*, in *Collateral*, No. 16, 2019, <https://www.collateral-journal.com/index.php?cluster=16>, last accessed April 10, 2023.

10) Last Generation: (from German) Letzte Generation is the name of a German and Austrian ecological movement that came out of both Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion.

11) Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: the Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Philadelphia, 1999.

12) G.F. Hartlaub, *Ausstellung “Neue Sachlichkeit”. Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925), exhibition catalogue Anton Kaes, et al., eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994, pp. 491-493.

13) Louis Marchesano (Ed), *Käthe Kollwitz: Prints, Process, Politics*, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2020.

14) Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011, p. 24.