

SOLID KNOWLEDGE

Bunkers, data and the materialities of information

a hands-on transdisciplinary research seminar by **PRAXXstudio**

XX SEMINAR SERIES SOLID KNOWLEDGE SPRING 2018



A **PRAXXstudio** seminar to explore the constellations of knowledge, design, security practices that cement around the figure of the bunker.

BUNKERS

The bunker has encapsulated, molded, and stunted the imaginaries of the 20th century as an architectural by-product and illegitimate spawn of aerial war, cabin ecology, cybernetic systems, and modernist brutalism. But, far from being abandoned, the current return of looming apocalyptic futures lets new lives crawl and move into the empty spaces and deep figures of underground shelters. While humans are still the beneficiaries of the security of these spaces, other less fleshy kinds are increasingly making their way in: knowledge, information, data are all crowding into the narrow niches of old and new shelters.

Bunkers nowadays are meant to protect, hide, manage and make accessible the circulation of knowledge. These spaces represent a useful vantage point to consider current articulations of theories and practices of knowledge, and their various materialities. While modernity relies on its profession of faith in the immateriality of information - especially in the excitement of the coming singularity, it simultaneously grounds itself in very specific and solid material infrastructures. Attending to the contemporary transformations of bunkers as part of these infrastructures, the seminar will focus on this figure, object, and space to unfold the ways in which knowledge is materialized today; and will ask what these materializations do to modernity, and how playing and tinkering with them might allow us to undo modernity.

SESSIONS

The first three sessions (reading sessions) will be dedicated to building a shared conceptual infrastructure to approach this theme. We will read accounts and explorations of the convergence of ideas and practices of knowledge, design, security and access that will help us elaborate a theoretical toolkit to approach bunkers. Following this conceptual phase, three more sessions (PRAXX sessions) will be devoted to specific cases - also with the help of invited speakers. These will emerge from the discussions and interests of the group, but will also include cases like the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, CyberBunker, the bunkers of the UvA collections, or other examples of encounters between data and bunkers. Aim of the seminar is to develop the conceptual and material tools to rethink the articulations of knowing, designing, protecting, accessing and bunkering. Our thoughts, experiments, examples and collaborations will ultimately be assembled in a collaborative virtual exhibit-repository and be discussed in a one-day seminar in autumn 2018.

PRACTICALITIES

Contact: info@praxxstudio.nl; +31(6)20426946

Location: PRAXXstudio, Singel 425 (rooms C3.02), Amsterdam

Dates reading sessions: 26.04; 17.05; 31.05

Times reading sessions: 14.00-16.30 hrs; **NB we will pick you up at front door library building at 13.50**

Wrap up reading sessions: date 13.06, time 12.30-15.30 hrs

Dates PRAXX sessions: September-October (specific dates will follow, depending on invited speakers)

PARTICIPANTS

1	Filippo Bertoni	Amsterdam	PRAXXstudio // GeoMedia UvA
2	Jeltsje Stobbe	Amsterdam	PRAXXstudio // Race Matter UvA
3	Tjitske Holtrop	Amsterdam	PRAXXstudio // Centre for Science & Technology Studies LU
4	Arvid van Dam	Leeds & Amsterdam	University of Leeds
5	Marcello Aspria	Rotterdam	Erasmus University // Webster Leiden
6	James Babbitt	St. Louis & Amsterdam	Washington University St. Louis
7	Tait Mandler	New York & Amsterdam	Chemical Youth UvA
8	Jennifer Hsieh	Stanford & Amsterdam	Max Planck Berlin
9	Sean Kinnear [LD]	Glasgow	SLK Architecture
10	Cassie Newland [LD]	Bristol	University of Bristol // Kings College London
11	Emily Glass [LD]	Bristol	University of Bristol
12	Carolyn Birdsall	Amsterdam	University of Amsterdam // ASCA Cities Project

PART I READING SESSIONS

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The first part of the seminar (sessions 1-3) is aimed at collectively assembling a conceptual infrastructure to explore the figure of the bunker, and its current re-purposing as a secure node in the planetary infrastructure of data. We started venturing in this dark, underground space while venturing through our new studio. The studio is located at the third floor of the University Library, an upperground mirror of an underground book cellar of three levels deep which is only accessible through 'bunkerdoors', meant to keep books safe in case of atomic warfare. While wandering through these shelters that used to protect the collections of the University Library we quickly realized how these architectural phantasms of aerial warfare became rearticulated in relation to another concern: the transformation of the materialities of knowledge.

Over the course of the last century, the rise of digital computation embodied the dream of information as the 'immaterial currency' at once constituting and organizing the planet - and the universe. Yet, historians of technoscience and media remind us how this flaunted dematerialization relied in fact on the coming together of novel materialsemiotic infrastructures, weaving biosphere, technosphere, and the geopolitical sphere in new patterns. These novel and elusive threads in the fabric of our everyday constitute the planetary matrix of late neo-liberalism that is closing in on Western knowledge practices – and that we, as researchers, experience in our own lives.

Session #1 – This seminar & the materialities of knowledge

We want to begin our conversation with an attention to the changing role of intellectuals and intellect: critical media theorist MCKENZIE WARKS *General Intellectuals* (2017) is a provocation – voiced through his Public Seminar website – to bring the work of various contemporary thinkers together, while remaining “critical of how neoliberal universities militate against cooperative intellectual work that endeavours to understand and also change the world”. With Wark's encouragement to “work out how different kinds of knowledge of different parts of the metabolism might cooperate, other than via the commodification of knowledge as intellectual property” (p.14), we will begin to venture into another book that will accompany us throughout the seminar, historian of design ORIT HALPERNS *Beautiful Data* (2015). Attending to the “historical construction of vision and cognition in the second half of the twentieth century” (p.1), Halpern unfolds a genealogy of cybernetics and its radical reorganization of rationality, originating a regime she calls “communicative objectivity”. We will juxtapose this genealogy to the analytical framework elaborated by organization theorists PAUL DOURISH and MELISSA MAZMANIAN in their chapter titled *Media as Material: Information Representation as Material Foundation for Organizational Practice* (2011). There, they unfold different ways of understanding the materiality of digital goods that will hopefully be relevant throughout our seminar.

Session #2 – The Design of Planetary Knowledge

Armed with this rearticulation of the materialities of knowledge and data, we will move deeper into the figure of the bunker, to consider the role of design in the making of the current planetary data infrastructure. ORIT HALPERNS *Beautiful Data* (2015) will continue to help us to reveal the particular constellation of cognition and vision and its materialization in the history of design. Resonating with her exploration of cybernetics, cultural historian PEDER ANKERS *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design* (2010) describes the impact of ecological understandings of the planet on the history of design – and criticizes its imbrication with modern institutions and powers.

Session #3 – Securitizing Knowledge

The final session of this part of the seminar will bring light to the darkest part of the bunker: its entanglements with the military-industrial complex, its continued kinship with warfare and its protean transmutations, and its concrete origins in the imagination of solidity and security. Once more, ORIT HALPERNS *Beautiful Data* (2015) will lead the way, with her exploration of the interplay between information, design and governmentality. But to complicate her story, we will also read anthropologist of postcolonialism ANN LAURA STOLERS *Introduction to Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (2013) and anthropologist of science JOSEPH MASCOS essay in the same collection titled *Engineering the Future as Nuclear Ruin*. In an effort to redirect “critical focus from ruins as evidence of the past to ‘ruination’ as the processes through which imperial power occupies the present”, the two pieces remind us of the imperial and violent history that is also weaved together in the very foundations of bunkers. Simultaneously, they allow us to connect the rearticulation of knowledge and its novel materialities with the question of conflict and of political dreamscapes. This will find another echo in one of JOSEPH MASCOS books, *The Theater of Operations* (2014). The second episode illustrated there, *Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis*, offers a powerful snapshot of the technoscientific, intellectual, and sociopolitical transformation that took place during the post-war and enabled the shaping of a planetary theater of operations, and its relation with climate science and aerial warfare. By the end of this part of the seminar, we hope to develop a language and framework to move on to engage with bunkers in more specific cases.

LITERATURE

The list below is required reading yet may possibly change during the seminar.

If books are not available, specific chapters can be sent on request.

Session #1 – This seminar & the materialities of knowledge

Wark 2017, Introduction pp. 1-14 & Donna Haraway: The Inhuman Comedy pp. 311-25; + **Halpern 2015**, Introduction pp. 9-38 & Archiving: Temporality, Storage, and Interactivity in Cybernetics pp. 39-76; Dourish & Mazmanian 2011

Session #2 – The Design of Planetary Knowledge

Halpern 2015, Visualizing: Design, Communicative Objectivity and the Interface pp. 79-144; **Anker 2010**, The Ecological Colonization of Space pp. 83-95, Taking Ground Control of Spaceship Earth pp. 96-112, & The Closed World of Ecological Architecture pp. 113-25

Session #3 – Securitizing Knowledge

Halpern 2015, Governing: Designing Information and Reconfiguring Population circa 1959 pp. 199-238; **Stoler 2013**, Introduction: “The Rot Remains”: From Ruins to Ruination pp. 1-38; **Masco 2013**, Engineering the Future as Nuclear Ruin pp. 252-286; **Masco 2014**, Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis pp. 77-112

Articles

Dourish & Mazmanian 2011 [working paper](#)

Bookchapters

Anker 2010 (3x) in [P. Anker, From Bauhaus to ecohouse: a history of ecological design \(LSUPress 2010\)](#)

Ecological Colonization: also in [Environmental History 10\(2\) \(2005\) 239-268](#)

Closed World: also in [The Journal of Architecture 10\(5\) \(2005\) 527-552](#)

Halpern 2015 (3x) in [O. Halpern, Beautiful data: a history of vision and reason since 1945 \(Duke 2015\)](#)

Temporality, Storage: also in [Configurations 13 \(2005\) 285-321](#)

Masco 2013 in [A.L. Stoler ed., Imperial debris: on ruins and ruination \(Duke 2013\)](#)

Masco 2014 in [The Theater of Operations \(Duke 2014\)](#);

Bad Weather: also in [Social Studies of Science 40\(1\), 2010, 7-40](#)

Stoler 2013 (2x) in [A.L. Stoler ed., Imperial debris: on ruins and ruination \(Duke 2013\)](#)

Wark 2017 in [M. Wark 2017, General intellects: twenty-one thinkers for the twenty first century \(Verso 2017\)](#)