Antonia Hernández
Token-Futuring

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Given your work shifting our attention to the margins of so-called platform capitalism, how would you describe or define token-futuring? It might be helpful, in the meantime, to clarify the term token within the context of sexcam platforms and the ecology of value extraction it reproduces.

Antonia Hernández: I like how you are presenting the question, thank you for this. I will start by clarifying what I mean by tokens. In the context of sexcam platforms (or sex webcam platforms), tokens are often the currency used for monetary exchanges between the audience and the performers. As with casino chips or similar, the audience buys tokens for tipping in the performers' channels (*rooms*). Tokens may have a banal name and a playful digital representation that resembles coins in a slot machine. But a token contains multitudes.

A token is a hack that contains a secret. While a token is a medium of exchange, it is not exactly a coin. Or, at least, not a single one. The audience can buy tokens using major credit cards or standard payment providers. But it is a very different story when the performers want to cash the tokens. Mainstream payment systems are now banned. Tokens are half their original price. What just happened? Inside a token there is a workaround for connecting two different payment ecologies, each one intended for a different type of user (the audience and the sex workers). And a way to exert further differential exploitation. The matter of tokens, then, is financial discrimination.

Presenting payments as unexpected gifts, tokens also serve for maintaining the illusion that performers are not really working but having fun. They also convey affect, activate remote teledildonics, etc. Tokens also contain encapsulated time disguised as real-time. While the webcam is built upon a promise of *realtimeness*, the gap produced by financial discrimination creates a time problem. Tokens keep the real-time illusion by delaying time, creating two alternate presents: one to be cashed in on another.

Token-futuring, then, relates to this magic object, to this multifaceted device. Looking at its bare qualities, stripped of its role as a tool for differential exploitation, a token is a token is a token. It is factual, technological, symbolic. A device, following water anthropologist Andrea Ballestero, is a contextualized instrument for critical thought with "wondrous capacities to transgress

ontological boundaries."[1] Token-futuring, then, challenges the seemingly unbreakable link between a thing and its habits, including sense-making ones. By denaturalizing the objects that are used for extraction, token-futuring becomes a type of disposition, a modulated attention to imagining alternative arrangements of reality.

I see it as a two-step process. The first deals with denaturalization. The second has to do with staying in the newly-formed gap. That was my experience using a dollhouse to investigate sexcam platforms.[2] I translated sexcam elements (the room, the performer's role) into a reduced performative space, and transmitted back to the platform. The first gesture opened up the space and created that gap. But the really interesting thing happened through play and engagement with the audience. That is how I envision token-futuring.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I like this idea of rearranging as opening up a possibility of, or even enacting, an alternative within the present, thereby widening the future beyond its historical or structural boundedness while still directly engaging with its present conditions, whether material or imaginary. As you framed it, the multitude within a device hinders any complete domination, always leaving room for contestation and transformation.

Amid this richness of the term, where do you situate token-futuring in your work involving theoretical and artistic production (e.g., *tokens* [2020] in collaboration with Lotte Louise de Jong)?[3] You also have works tracing the continuities across digital and non-digital spaces, as well as varied thematic inquiries, such as your most recent work on the commodification of hydro commons at Transmediale 2023 (in collaboration with Laura Cugusi).[4] What do you make of these historical threads and theoretical resonances among your work from the current perspective of token-futuring?

Antonia Hernández: I think the common denominator is a question about poetics. A contemplation of the form of things used to interface reality. I am fascinated by the enactments of abstract principles, discourses, or desires, and I highly value the capacity of art (or humor, play, or poetry) for shedding light on the acquired habits and briefly decoupling them from their regular meanings.

For me, the question started as an interrogation of the technologies of intimacy: the tools for conveying intimacy on new and larger scales and the daily habits these tools foster. That is why I was looking at webcam sex platforms, pornography, or online domesticity. To better consider the loaded nature of the environments where those habits unfold, highly influenced by discriminatory discourses, I shifted my perspective toward governance. An emphasis on governance, then, allows

me to hold both a relational take on infrastructure and to situate it in a broader context.

The examples that you mention (on tokens or the commodification of water) can be seen as explorations of the poetics of governance: the forms that governance acquires and the types of engagements that people have with those forms. From this perspective, governance can be seen as a set of habits, something that only exists through its daily activation. In these two collaborations, the aim was also to subvert established extractivist practices by pointing out their arbitrary nature. An emperor's new clothes kind of gesture. But I am not interested in arguing for a more *natural* type of engagement, I don't believe in that. Just another one, but better.

That is why a poetic disposition and emphasis are important. It is about both attuning attention and animating imagination. In this sense, imaginary is not necessarily unreal, and it matters. As it became clear in this investigation on water, it matters how matter is imagined. I am interested in developing a sort of post-material stance where matter does not have just positive connotations and is neither the ultimate truth nor a construct, but something in between that informs and modulates relationships and meanings. I think token-futuring goes in that direction.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: It seems that we keep returning to the multitude of tokens, and I like how verb forms come forth, such as re-arranging, modulating, and enacting, rather than identifying them in definitive terms. Following that, I will bring up the question of where to locate the counter-gesture. What would your engagement with intimate, domestic places afford in terms of resistance and emancipation as much as a critique (especially beyond some totalizing narratives regarding platform capitalism)? Could it be a way of reimagining those gendered and racialized places anew even though online platforms profit off of these inequalities and thus deepen them? Of course, all this can be situated within a larger history of cyberfeminism and its radical intersections with the politics of sexuality and sex work. On the other hand, you emphasize the temporal dimension, like intervening in the temporal regimes of financial and digital extraction, which seems crucial for grasping the concept of token-futuring you are contributing. Would you like to further unpack such ideas here?

Antonia Hernández: Token-futuring calls for the reappropriation of the makeshift devices used for extraction, for seizing the *memes* of production. This is about using the absurd for collective enlightenment and direct action, not to create more confusion. As Geert Lovink says: *make darkness visible again*.[5] This is not pure nihilism: the token-futuring revolution will be led by the sound of a one-hand clap.

And time. As I said at the beginning, a token contains delayed time
disguised as real-time. Subscription platforms, such as OnlyFans,
manage time differently, presenting the repetition of the present,
based on the past, as a reliable future. But this is also clearly a
trap. The present that the asset form offers is recursive and haunted,
carrying along the ghosts of past discriminations. This is not the
future; these are just habits. Following Barbara Adam, however, the
future is bound to the present through practices (and through
discourses and institutions). That is why token-futuring is important.
Containing a time spell among its wondrous capabilities, token-futuring
rejects cheap time-binding tricks and calls for better, liberating
ones.

That is also at the core of my previous work on domesticity. Attention
to the stubborn repetition of domestic actions has a subversive
potential, raising suspicion of what would happen if it were to cease.
The need for maintenance discloses then the possibility of an accident,
failure, or decay. And all of that is prevented, re-enacted, and
perpetuated through everyday practices, evidencing the relational
nature of infrastructures. If they need to be re-animated constantly,
why not perform this differently? And because it is about reproduction,
it is of course political.

Despite widespread attempts to co-opt *care*, and as feminists have long
argued, care can be a radical practice. For example, I really like
Cassie Thornton's *The Hologram*,[6] a plan for forming peer-to-peer health
networks, or the Mamitas Capucha collective,[7] organized and badass
women, who cared for protesters during the last social uprising in
Chile. As for imagining, for example, sexcam platforms differently, I
would just hear what sex work collectives are saying.[8] They are not only
fighting criminalization but redefining, in the process, what work,
direct action, and art activism mean. When sex work is not only work
but anti-work, I think we're talking about token-futuring.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: The way you carry out and articulate your work and
collaborations made me wonder about your historical, artistic, or
theoretical references while navigating through these online and
offline spaces of labor and intimacy. For instance, most apparent in
your work *Maintenance Pornography / Sexcams in a Dollhouse (2018-2022)*,
your reference to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "Manifesto for Maintenance
Art" (1969) caught my attention, which also relates to what lies beyond
the critique. This feminist angle on social reproduction and
performance reconfigures the line between the mundane and the poetic,
in which you seem interested. Another dimension could be your nomadic
mode of production from South America (Chile) to North America, often
involving artistic collaborations. So, how would you like to reflect on
these material and discursive infrastructures of your own production?

Antonia Hernández: Yes, you're right. Mierle Ukeles is a crucial reference for what I do. I take delight in the way her work produces a subtle yet pervasive subversion, like a crack in a dam, that brings along a torrent of questions about why things are the way they are. But this kind of awareness is not attainable from the outside, it is not an add-on. Perhaps it is then not just a matter of reconfiguring but erasing the line between the mundane and the poetic. That is why my most important influences are performance artists, poets, activists, and mystics. Following their example, I try to cultivate a practice where concepts and words have a potential for action, which I call a *performative imagination*. It is about ruptures in reality and also about the creation of reality. I find that a disposition toward movement allows for unexpected encounters between ideas and forms. I like both simplicity and excess. Finally, this disposition and types of practices (especially with humor, or poetry) ease connections with people and facilitate collaborations, and I am very grateful for that.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I guess we need a whole other conversation on your beautiful idea of performative imagination. For now, following up on your joy of playful twists, as you did with the term tokens, could you please suggest further examples of N-futuring or N-computing?

Antonia Hernández: What about mystic-computing? It would be about reclaiming esotericism from its fascist new-agey Silicon Valley incarnation. AI is a kind of contemplative-computing, so that's covered. What would an accident-computing be like, made only of non-categorizable events? A swamp-computing or a compost-futuring? I am waiting for all of them.

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1 Andrea Ballestero, *A Future History of Water* (Duke University Press, 2019).

2 See https://www.antoniahernandez.com/artwork/work/maintenance-pornography-sexcams-in-a-dollhouse/.

3 See http://lottelouise.nl/tokens_page.html.

4 See https://2023.transmediale.de/en/artwork/water-cybernetics-hydrofiction-01-holy-waters.

5 Geert Lovink, *Extinction Internet: Our Inconvenient Truth Moment* (Amsterdam: University of Applied Sciences, 2022), available at https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ExtinctionInternetINC2022Miscellanea.pdf.

6 Cassie Thornton, *The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-to-Peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future*, Vagabonds 002 (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

7 Peter Thaler, "Capuchas," *Pictoplasma Conference* (blog), 22 August 2020, available at https://conference.pictoplasma.com/2020/capuchas/.

8 Such as Hacking//Hustling, Decoding Stigma, RedTraSex, Putas Indignadas, the Black Sex Worker and Berlin Strippers collectives, among many others.

Antonia Hernández's Bio:
Antonia Hernández is a Montréal-based artist and researcher, and a postdoctoral fellow at McGill University. Mixing art practice and theoretical investigation, her current research explores the grammar and poetics of governance.
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