Futureless, curated by the Australian artist and curator Oliver Dougherty, at Berlin’s SomoS Art House: from the political roots, queer-feminist identities, ideas and actions offer various perspectives on how society should be constantly modeled and remodeled. As the capitalist dream of endless progress vanishes, the Futureless exhibition recognizes the important history of queer-feminist futurism, creating possibilities to shape another world, that is real, through imagination. Webs of meanings for the future were established: imagination, fantasy, fiction, speculation, alternative futures, technological and scientific development, terrestrial-ecological-environmental precariousness, ecosystems, mythologies of a precarious planet, utopia/dystopia, future of genders, queer-feminist ecosystems, ecological struggle, universal emancipation, rituals for a lost future, minorities, resistance, Afrofuturism, indigenous futurism, decolonization, trans futurism, and others...

In a conversation per e-mail, Dougherty comments on the relationship between art, politics, COVID-19 and obviously about the future – or the lack of it.

**How do you think it is possible to critique a system if we are part of that system?**

This is a really big question which I am continually asking myself. For me, it is not only possible but necessary to critique the system we are part of, the question is really how we achieve that. The state-capital complex has the tendency to feel all-encompassing, especially in our current historical moment with the very salient presence of broader ecological and health crises. Because of that, imagining outside of our system becomes quite a demanding task (I’m thinking of the quote credited to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”). In any case, if a system can be built up, it can also be...
brought down.

No matter how intrusive or suffocating a system may feel, there is always the possibility to develop alternatives. What *Futureless* aims to achieve is to open up this imaginative space, critiquing a system (namely, the art market and capitalism) which it knows it is part of. The voices contributing to *Futureless* look at the broken promises that the system has prescribed for our future from queer-feminist standpoints and sees them as opportunities to open even further this imaginative space, rather than as dark or immobilizing precursors of our time. Through such a shift in perspective, suddenly the feeling of suffocation becomes somewhat relieved. The participating artists’ work span a number of different yet interconnected issues, from the seeds that grow communities of queer-feminist Afroturist voices in Fallon Mayanja’s video installation *Or the Inescapable III*, to the simultaneous fear and euphoria experienced through New York’s queer beaches and their loss to climate change in Heather Renee Russ’ installation *Tidewrack*, to the ongoing role of borders and the nation-state in women’s migration as in *The Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Xena-Maria*, a series of watercolor paintings by Maria Kulikovska with Uleg Vinnichenko. At the same time, they also collectively emphasise the very apparent possibilities of a radical system change through imagining otherwise.

I should also mention that queer-feminist voices are at a really insightful position for achieving such a system-critique. *Futureless* has been developed in line with a history of queer-feminist writers, artists and performers alike; Octavia Butler, Shu Lea Chang and Rebecca Belmore to name just a few examples. These are voices that are not part of the dominant mainstream, and therefore have the ability to dismantle and critique it in a powerful manner.

**Do you imagine that *Futureless* “call for participation” could be the start of a larger project not only the exhibition?**

The questions that are central to *Futureless* are some that we will be asking for years to come, so it is somewhat difficult to think that the project will become finished or closed once the exhibition has taken place. Quite the opposite, in fact; I think *Futureless* only has the possibility of evolving from its upcoming iteration.

One beautiful element of having put *Futureless* together via an open call is that I received submissions which pushed the ideas behind the project in directions that I would not have otherwise expected. This for me was really a sign of how rich the
I can’t say right now what the next stage of the project will look like, but I can say that the ideas behind it are continually rolling around in my head and evolving, as is the same case will all the participating artists I’m sure. Actually, one unexpected positive outcome of having to postpone the exhibition due to COVID-19 in March was that it gave time for some of the participating artists’ work to grow and develop even further in line with the implications of experiencing a pandemic, or multiple pandemics. For example, it has been great to see the development of the work of multidisciplinary artist Zoë Marden, whose ongoing research into multispecies ways of being and particularly tentacular thinking has been given new meaning in the recent intense political climate. Like the tentacles of an octopus, her work now titled Mermania: Tales of Tentacularity (Tentacles of COVID Capitalism) reaches out towards the social and systemic symptoms of the COVID pandemic and seeks out ways to think collaboratively and collectively, to make kin.

What I can say is that the past months have led the project already to grow and take shape in formats which were not originally thought of. For example, we are currently developing a virtual performance and artist talk event. Even though such formats do call into question artistic liveness and presence, it felt necessary to engage with them since they will inevitably be part of our future. Like this, the exhibition is a living, breathing and evolving organism.

How do you expect the mainstream – art market mainly – to relate with concepts like this without “assimilating to neutralize” – particularly such strong proposals such as Futureless?

I’ve been lucky enough to curate Futureless at SomoS, which is an independent, non-commercial artist/curator run space. I think art houses like SomoS are really important in providing a space that is mostly removed from the capital-driven art world for radical or political artwork, such as the queer-feminist futurist proposals presented during Futureless. It gives such works the space to grow and be witnessed without the potential infiltration of market norms or some sort of capitalist appropriation. So, in the process of launching an open call for and curating Futureless, I haven’t had to think too much about the potential of works being “assimilated to neutralize”.

In many ways, it is a dangerous world out there for radical queer-feminist art. Even the term “queer-feminist” has been used as a buzzword and has thereby been made
marketable, which for me is a little terrifying and even contradictory. Perhaps the process of placing huge capitalist value on queer-feminist art alienates it from the position from which it was created in the first place.

There are two methods which I think would be helpful in reshaping the relationship between radical queer-feminist art and the market/system; reform or creating something new, working from the inside and the outside. I think both are important and complimentary to some extent. For the former, we need to have people working within and against the system, working to change the very structures of the institutions/market. This is important because attempts to build something outside of the system can never be truly outside; they will always have some sort of relationship to institutions/the art market/the system, for example in the language that they use. Therefore, building something else from the outside needs to be coupled with radical folks on the inside who can chip away at the system however they can.

Work from the outside could include focusing on forming more networks of solidarity amongst artists, curators, art workers, art spaces and the public. The public and the people should define which art is valuable and what value is in the first place. Art should speak to our time and all those involved from its production to presentation should be supported in delivering projects that don’t have to adhere to some affluent standard. A great example of this is the project **Garage 33 Gallery Shelter** by participating artist Maria Kulikovska.

**I am using the word “radical” for art that addresses root questions of the real world, facing art in two indivisible aspects – aesthetics and ethics. Do you think *Futureless* can be seen in this light?**

Absolutely. I think *Futureless* was borne out of a need to not just to talk or write about the possibilities of deconstructing and reshaping a radical future, but also to see, listen and feel it. Art has the power to evoke visceral experiences that I think can really act as transformative turning points for people, and *Futureless* in many ways aims to draw upon such an opportunity.

I think that it also makes sense to artistically materialise the questions raised by *Futureless* – namely, of what our world could look like if it were to not be held back by capitalist rhetorics of progress and unlimited growth, and their connections to broader issues such as climate catastrophe. Questions like this demand a great deal of invention, or reinvention, so keeping that purely in non-aesthetic forms to me feels
more like a limitation than anything else. The works presented during *Futureless* are queer-feminist proposals for a world that looks radically different, interweaving fiction and reality in a way that casts a critical eye on the now as seen from a futuristic standpoint. With such an imaginative task at hand, I believe the most powerful responses are those that embrace the moving potential of the aesthetic.