

Unbewitching Finance

The collective Unbewitching Finance formed in 2017 “around a shared desire to look at the relationship between finance and witchcraft.” This entailed explicitly walking in the footsteps of anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada and the philosophers Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre, who, in their respective works, rendered the language of sorcery current and, more importantly, operative. The collective proclaims itself to be “a wild laboratory for experimental research”; it adopts a multidisciplinary, multiform, highly committed approach to its investigations, which lie at the crossroads of art, activism, and the social sciences.

The research project *Witching Interferences* was conducted along three main axes. The first consisted of foundation research into the origin of the words and images that the collective had been using for two years in its rituals, workshops, and other public events. The second centered on the *Slow Frequency Walk*, a collective walk along the High-Frequency Trading Line connecting stock exchanges from London to Frankfurt, which took the form of a series of experiences of strolling and even wandering through the midpoint metropolis of Brussels. As a corollary to the second area of research, the last one involved a study of the geographic areas traversed by the walk, one that took the form of data collections and the creation of maps.

However, the pandemic changed how things would play out. First, it compelled the researchers to relocalize the issues they were exploring. A line of research undertaken in the workshop *From Diagram to Cosmogram*, conducted in the fall of 2019 with graphic design students at the St-Luc School of the Arts in Brussels, restricted its initial scope of investigation to the capital city and its housing issues.

The health crisis also compelled the collective to focus on the project's premises. After two years of engaging in unbewitching practices, its members decided to take a step back for a moment to consider the language used in the various formats. Thus, a part of the research centered on the compilation of a Glossary, which proved a way of taking stock of the work as they went along, and an opportunity to produce a guidebook to be distributed and

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Witching Interferences

reappropriated widely. A version of the Glossary has already been presented at the Biennale de l'Image Possible in Liège, and another one, in the magazine *Papier-Machine*, with yet others to follow.

Lastly, since the lockdown and its aftermath halted the projects that involved the movement of bodies through walking, the radio-phonetic medium became a new terrain of exploration, a “medium” in the fullest—that is, including the spiritual—sense of the term. This was also an opportunity to revisit the issue of “interferences” that lent their name to this project.

The following interview was conducted in Brussels on September 25, 2020.

(A/R) What were the circumstances that gave rise to the Unbewitch Finance Lab that brought you all together?

(L.G.) Unbewitching finance above all represents a need to free ourselves of the grip that finance has on our very bodies. Contrary to what we might think, this is not conceptual, instead something more emotional that comes straight from the gut. Its birth was also marked by a paradigm shift, namely our moving from the impetus to protest to the desire to create the world in which we truly want to live. The links between finance and witchcraft sprang forth, as if we had rubbed two flintstones together. Our research consisted of generating and then studying these sparks. Looking at finance through the prism of witchcraft turned out to be a way of disavowing the belief that finance is a rational domain, and of summoning and harnessing all our vital energies to rediscover our ability to act.

(F.S.) When Luce, Aline, and I first met in 2017, all three of us were thinking about how to regain control over financial power, from different yet converging perspectives. Emmanuelle, who had founded asbl Loop-s with Luce, and then Camille joined us shortly thereafter. From the outset we wanted to submit a project to Art-Recherche. Investigation, artistic creation, and its experimental and multidisciplinary forms lay at the core of what had brought us all together. When we began our discussions, I had just finished reading *La Sorcellerie capitaliste* [“Capitalist

Connecting to other frequencies, creating alternative paths

Witchcraft”] (2005) by Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre to understand what, aside from questions of rational comprehension, hinders our perception of economic data and issues. Luce was interested in the gestures of traders, the jubilation and trance-like state that exist in stock exchanges, amidst these mountains of screens that people gaze at as if they were watching gods, a process that seems akin to a magic ritual. All of these mechanisms place us at a certain distance and in a state of submission before something that escapes us. This was how we came to realize that, from our respective positions (visual arts, performing arts, design, and finance), we had begun to examine this sensation we were having that something bewitching was preventing us from mastering the subject of finance. At this time, our studio was on the 25th floor of the World Trade Center, near the Gare du Nord, in the former premises of Dexia, the bank that avoided going under in 2008 only because of massive government intervention. The place was symbolically loaded.

(A.F.) We also talked a lot about the anger that activists and organizations felt about the repeated disappointments and setbacks, as the economic, social, and environmental state of affairs was and remains very worrisome. We began to feel our way around, and we organized an initial evening to talk about witchcraft and finance. We experimented with some rituals under the towers, and we practiced our first wallet unbewitchment. That's when we joined forces, even if our initial application to Art-Recherche was unsuccessful...

(E.N.) We then took the opportunity of the *Nuit Blanche*, which in fact concerned issues of power, and which took place in the Royal Park in Brussels, which was symbolically interesting. We performed our first ritual to unbewitch finance here. This was also when we formed our collective and laboratory in accordance with this triple format of artistic performance, sorcerer rituals, and political action.

(C.L.) We then began to think about how we could preserve a trace of the tools and forms that had undergone a magical transformation during the rituals. We assembled an “Economic Curiosity Cabinet” to collect objects that were emanations of the rituals, which we exhibited for the first time in late 2017. Since then it has increased continuously and

taken different forms, depending on where it is being exhibited. The most recent version is currently on display at the Biennale de l'Image Possible in Liège. And from here on out, we envision other contexts besides artistic ones.

(E.N.) The objects are more curiosities than artworks. We consider the results of our productions mainly as things to be activated.

(A/R) Aside from Stengers' and Pignarre's pioneering work, what other references got you interested in the domain of witchcraft?

(C.L.) The main one is Jeanne Favret-Saada, an anthropologist who worked on witchcraft in the 1970s in the Bocage Mayennais in France. In her book *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (2009), she explains how the verb *desorceler*, to "unbewitch," does not merely signify to free oneself of a spell under which one has fallen; it also predicates using witchcraft to cast the spell back at the other sorcerer. It's a question of both freeing oneself and counterattacking. Favret-Saada invokes several notions that inspired us greatly, mainly at an esthetic and scenographic level, but also in terms of the practice of witchcraft.

(F.S.) "Unbewitching" has become a method. Our relationship to finance is not just ideological. It's not that we have been blinded or that we don't understand. As Stengers and Pignarre say, it really is our body that has been placed under the spell of capitalism. That is why it is important for us to include the general public in our rituals and other formats, to work with our audience so that we can collectively start moving forward. We are trying to create what we call an *egregore*, a collective spirit. (L.G.) Another fundamental reference was the study of the "open outcry" method of communication that brokers have traditionally practiced on trading floors¹.

(F.S.) We also read the works of eco-feminists like Starhawk, Donna Haraway, and Silvia Federici (*Caliban and the Witch*, 2004), and Giordano Bruno's 16th century treatises on magic, especially *In tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis*, translated into French as *Des liens*. (E.N.) We are interested in the figure of the witch as an incarnation of feminist struggle, but we haven't really ever used it as such. We are instead mainly interested in witchcraft and magic per se.

(A/R) Since your collective was formed on the occasion of a first application for Art-Recherche's call for projects (which is now managed by FRArt), does that mean that you initially conceived of your work as "research?"

(A.F.) Yes. The definition we provide for our collective is a "wild laboratory for experimental research." From the start, the idea was to weave together finance, witchcraft, art, and political action, which is not immediately obvious... The collective is really based on research that takes the form of series of experiments. And on a sense of the multidisciplinary, given our very different personal and

professional trajectories. From the very first ritual, we welcomed anthropologists, visual artists, musicians, activists, among others.

(L.G.) I would add that creating a "wild" laboratory for "experimental research" was also a kind of experiment in and of itself, namely as a way to question the customary forms of academic research. It was a way of experimenting "by doing," an alternative to the financialization of research that is now threatening this sector.

(A/R) How is your structure organized? Around your core founders?

(E.N.) Loop-s asbl leads the Unbewitching Finance project. There were thirty of us at the first ritual. To make the project more durable, we in fact had to establish a core group to define and deal with the goals, responsibilities, administrative tasks, and issues of production, research, financing, and others. But very quickly, depending on the formats, we were able to reconnect to others. In fact, with the grant from FRArt, the collective was able to open up and grow somewhat. We are now a dozen very active members, and our research has become even more multiform.

(L.G.) The structure itself is more a movement than an architecture. We conceive of it as a living organism. All the activities have been constructed by embracing context as fully as possible. From the outset, the structure's geometry has varied depending on each project and its size. Each member's involvement might vary considerably in this process. Our initial goal was for each person participating to become a researcher in his or her own way. We have to remember that, the more people are unbewitching finance, the more active the disenchantment becomes.

(A/R) This brings us to the project you submitted to FRArt. You defined your project along three "lines." How did they evolve over the course of the year?

(F.S.) The first line was called "From the euphoria of numbers to the consistency of words and images." We had defined this as a fundamental research, but which did not directly entail a specific format. After spending two years launching projects, the idea was to stop for a bit and question the words and images that we were invoking. We know that words have incredible power in witchcraft. We needed to specify things. This is what we did the whole year, and it has taken the provisional form of a "Glossary" at the Biennale de l'Image Possible, a glossary of a future, hypothetical "grimoire," a kind of "book of spells" that comprises our working methods, a handbook for disseminating and transmitting our tools. We also wanted to research the images and sounds used to access finance. To do this, we worked on financial columns, their performative-ness, and how to subvert

them to create these "witching interferences" that formed the subject of our research. As to the images, we worked with students at the St-Luc art school in Brussels through several workshops. One of them involved drawing banknotes by hand to consider and experiment with our relationship to money and its materiality, for example. More generally, we want to reinvent our mental images, which are central to the glossary, cartomancy, and the rituals. (L.G.) The line of research "Pilgrimages, drifts, and immersions into the heart of the matrix" is the one that has evolved the most from our initial intentions. The issues involved in this line of research have remained core concerns for us, but they have adopted alternative forms. So, instead of trying to follow the straight line between two high-frequency trading antennas to mimic the trajectory of a financial transaction, we decided instead to draw a sinuous line, as if we were literally drawing the curve of an interference on paper. We found that physically confronting finance was a lot harder than what we could ever have imagined. We had greatly underestimated the psychological and political weight of such a challenge. Suddenly, we felt the exhaustion that the financialization of our society inflicts on living things in our very flesh and bones. Being in direct contact with finance gradually became unbearable. How can you stay on your feet when you have an incessant transmission of buy and sell orders coursing through you? How can you put one foot in front of the other when everything becomes monitored and encrypted?

(C.L.) We based Line C, "Cartographic veils: rendering the invisible visible," on Alexandre Laumonier's book 4 (2019), which talks about the high-tension geography between London and Frankfurt. We used this as the basis for a workshop with graphic design students at St-Luc. We ask them to think about this trading line using visualization and mapmaking tools, and to look for ways to grasp it. Some of them worked on the line as a whole, while others preferred to work on specific points, sometimes based on their own personal experiences. Others yet proposed diverting the high-frequency trading line, sabotaging it via the realm of the imaginary. Our idea was to propose a more general map using the materials created by the students, but that's when Covid struck...

(F.S.) Rather than look at this vast geography between London, Brussels, and Frankfurt that this high-frequency trading line cuts across, we were forced to look at things more locally. Thus, high-frequency trading went from being a research topic to a methodological issue, something to overturn. Against its speed, the straight line, and the disembodiment, we pitted slowness, detours, and the human body. One of the detours we took concerned the financialization of housing in Brussels, questioning the local organization of space and the bodies that inhabit it. Using data from various sources, we are going to work with the notion of a

“micro-cosmogram” to reveal the connection between individual experiences of housing, or a lack thereof, and large-scale public policies and financial strategies.

(E.N.) To be honest, the experience of Covid did halt some of our activities. It also forced us to act more directly and to confront the context as residents of Brussels. In our own way, we all became involved in the struggle to meet people’s primary needs and access to fundamental rights. This forms part of the laboratory’s DNA and basic artistic approach. If something touches us, it becomes hard to remain in our bubble. We have only begun to get some distance on what happened.

(A/R) The decision to refocus the research is very understandable, if only for the physical constraints of the lockdown and its aftermath. But how did you connect this new theme of housing to the already numerous ones in the initial project, especially witchcraft?

(A.F.) On the London-Frankfurt line, everything is calculated in nanoseconds, but all along this line, there are low and high points, concentrations of capital, areas of struggle, and so on. The writings of finance geographers clearly show to what extent office buildings and housing are places where capital resides, especially in crisis and panic situations, like the ones that unfolded after 2008. This settling of capital is particularly visible in metropolises such as London, Frankfurt, and Brussels. Which is why the issue of housing became so interesting, a prism for viewing certain issues in our research involving mapmaking, cosmology, and other things.

(A/R) In concrete terms, how did your research into this real estate issue get started?

(A.F.) At this point, the research involves working with activists, researchers, architects, and geographers. We begin by working on representations, maps of struggles, and networks of resistance. In early September, we conducted a workshop at La Bellone, “The art and technique of approaching your landlord to ask for a rent reduction.” Three weeks from now we are going to work with housing activists on “reopening the imaginary,” specifically in the form of a workshop on the creation of newspaper headlines from the *Jour d’après* website on these housing issues.

(E.N.) *Le Jour d’après* is the kind of news we would like to see on the front page of the papers... and which are displayed and shared at the end of the rituals.

(C.L.) It is also worth mentioning that housing has always been an important subject in our ritual; it is one of the first and most oft-repeated that we have performed. For that matter, we had planned a ritual to unbewitch this specific financial market in Herstal. It was scheduled for June, following a residence in May, but that too was cancelled.

(A/R) What have been the other consequences of the health crisis on your research?

(A.F.) There was a moment of bafflement at the start of the lockdown. We didn’t talk during the second half of March. When we began working together again, we discovered videoconferencing, along with everyone else. This let us include members of the collective who don’t live in Brussels, and that was great. We realized that we could work on the Glossary using this setup. The health crisis definitely encouraged us to work on Line A...

(A/R) How did the selection and writing process unfold?

(C.L.) We created three word families: finance, witchcraft, and action-creation. We began by listing the words that came to mind, that concern us, and the ones we use the most, even in our practices within the laboratory. Then, for the writing, each word led to the invention of a new method; this was the experimentation and research part. Some definitions emerged individually and were then discussed, others collectively. Some words, like “magic” or “witchcraft,” carry a lot of weight for the laboratory, and we had to find a definition that was truly suited to our practice. That was hard. We ended up using drawing, each one of us submitting frameworks for what witchcraft is and does. We then commented on them, passing from drawings to words.

(A.F.) We spent almost a entire day on “magic” and on “witchcraft.” And they’re still not done... “Debt” took up a whole afternoon! Each time, we didn’t just try to come up with a meaning. We wanted the definition to be unbewitching, to disenchant us, and to return the power to its sender.

(C.L.) The text also depends on the medium on which the Glossary is presented. For example, we were asked to publish a part of it in the last issue of the magazine *Papier-Machine*. The definitions couldn’t be too long. Readers had to be able to understand the issues in just a few words. The exhibition at the Biennale de l’Image Possible in Liège was different, as it will be yet again in its radio version. The definitions are constantly being reworked and retailed.

(A/R) What form did you give to the Glossary in the Liège exhibition?

(F.S.) The glossary definitions were printed using a thermal printer, like the one that prints out receipts at the cash register. The ribbons are installed so that they flow and spring forth from a pillar. The installation is three meters tall. Each ribbon contains a path of words and references. We wanted to use a somewhat poor format, especially to reflect the temporary nature of this inventory.

(C.L.) It’s very volatile. When someone passes by, the ribbons flutter, as if they were alive.

(A.F.) The ephemeral nature of this printing on off-white papers felt a bit like an invitation. And in fact, the exhibition is in an old mall.

(A/R) What are your future plans for the Glossary?

(A.F.) When we talked about this in video-conference during the lockdown, we said that it could work well in a sound medium. That gave us the idea to do a radio program. We will produce five episodes about the body: the body feeding itself, the body that one takes care of, that ages... Underlying this are of course issues concerning food and health, among others. It’s a way to render our research audible and feasible, and especially to share it.

(F.S.) These recordings also take our working method on vocabulary out into the real world, where it is most needed. We will go to retirement homes to work with the elderly on the words they need to describe what has happened to them, especially in response to the lockdown. We will meet with the people who manage these facilities to learn about the orders they were given to “lock up” their residents. We will question the financialization of retirement homes through the prism of their vocabulary. The goal is to reappropriate the language. We don’t want to stick to words that ruin us. This is why the Glossary is full of neologisms. We are missing certain words that we need to invent to describe what is happening to us.

(A/R) Ultimately what place did the notion of “interference,” present in the title of your research project, occupy?

(A.F.) It was fairly central. By working on the “worn-out” words of finance to say something else, we are interfering with the dominant meaning, by means of this subtle background music. We are trying to reroute certain flows that come from power and finance, as we did with the financial columns, for example, in the introduction to our workshop with the students. The goal is to interfere with the high-frequency trading waves by scrambling them and broadcasting other frequencies. The radio formats we are currently exploring stem from these interrogations: the radiophonic form of the Glossary and the “radioactive” form of the ritual to unbewitch finance. This was all created as part of our research.

(F.S.) There was something that fascinated us in Laumonier’s book, namely that stock market information sent in a microsecond could be disturbed by fog. Fog can create crackling over the waves.

(A.F.) For that matter, in our work on the Glossary, the words “interference” and “crackling” seemed particularly fertile to us, just as our exploration of the French words for fog [“brouillard”] and jamming [“brouillage”] led us to create “brouillarge”, the need to take action [“nous débrouiller”], to free ourselves of what fogs or jams our perspective, our bodies, and which weighs down our existence, so that we can rediscover our strength, to begin moving again and open our imaginations, as we announced in our manifesto.

(L.G.) The notion of interference occupied a central place in our research for me, and it made me profoundly reconsider how were

doing things in Unbewitch Finance. The interferences were not where I expected them to be, within intellectual research, radiophonic technology or the surveying of geographic areas murdered by finance; they instead live in the earth, in wild plants, in the music of the soul.

1. Our main source of information on this topic came from the website <https://tradingpithistory.com>

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Radioactive ritual, Pôle Nord Center, Brussels, October 15, 2020. Photo credit: Fabrice Sabatier.
- fig. 02 Scouting photo from the search for High Frequency Trading antennae for the *Slow Frequency Walk*. Photo credit: Luce Goutelle.
- fig. 03 Cabinet of Economic Curiosities, Biennale de l'image possible (BIP), Liège, September 19–October 25, 2020. Photo credit: Grégory Edelein.
- fig. 04 Installation of the Glossary in the Cabinet of Economic Curiosities, Biennale de l'image possible (BIP), Liège, September 19 – October 25, 2020. Photo credit: Fabrice Sabatier.