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Editorial

As we put the finishing touches on this issue last week, we heard the terrible news that our colleague and comrade David Graeber passed away. You and we are among so many changed by David's work and acts of solidarity. His fierce commitment to a just world will be sorely missed at a time when it is especially needed. Along with Nika Dubrovsky, his wife, David wrote "Another Art World" (parts 1 and 2) in these pages. In the close future, we will publish part 3. Over the weekend, Nicholas Mirzoeff wrote a tribute to his friend and fellow traveler for this issue. We anticipate that further remembrances will be forthcoming. May his memory be a call for a radically better future; may he rest in power.

We dedicate this September issue to David Graeber, as well as another e-flux journal author taken far too young. Robert Bird, scholar of aesthetic practice and theorist of Russian/Soviet modernism, died on Labor Day. His essays on how to keep communism aloft in Soviet cinema and articulations of Soviet realism should have been only the beginning of a longer series.

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Who remembers the title of last year's Venice Biennale? One long year and change later, it seems that nobody's

worst enemy could have made a threat, a promise, or a curse that we may live in times quite as … "interesting" as the ones we find ourselves in now. Arguably, anyone paying even the most distant attention to 2019—or to history and the evolving present in general—could have foreseen what we were heading towards. It's hard to imagine, though, that someone could have envisioned just how deadly fascinating these times would turn out to be.

In any case, here we are. A new semester begins in old virtual digs; renewed vigor bubbles up behind decades- or centuries-long movements and ancient oppressions. Perhaps, through the summer, a glimpse emerged of something like hope for new regimes, new leadership, or better yet, new solidarities, despite the stubborn persistence of failed (or rather, too-efficient) structures and institutions across the globe. It promises to be a wild ride ahead; perchance we'll eventually enter into less interesting times.

From Jerusalem, Berlin, and Beirut, Lara Khaldi, Yazan Khalili, and Marwa Arsanios discuss the post-1990s turn that saw politically active cultural organizations in Lebanon and Palestine become neoliberal fundraising bodies promoting competitive, individualistic visions of contemporary art. Franco "Bifo" Berardi takes us to the thrumming edge of the American abyss, shattering any rose-tinted lenses that remain with words coming directly from that exceptional pit. Serubiri Moses, charting Edouard Glissant's use of language, traces a fecund and generative landscape of self-expression in exodus. Iman Issa courses the complex evolution of the state of monuments in Egypt over recent years. Sophie Lewis, nine months after her mother's death, finds a needed, if only digital, being-with grief in today's physically distant reality.

Ben Ware confronts the many real threats of the end and of extinction that define our shared present. In a text written in the 1980s that reads just as pertinently today, Boris Groys examines the metamorphoses of engagement, and artistic autonomy, through a study of Trotsky. From Australia, Terry Smith attends to the deep art-historical and contemporary importance of the *Yirrkala Church Panels*, large-scale paintings by the Yolŋu people that will tour the world when traveling exhibitions and museums are open to visitors once again.

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Nicholas Mirzoeff

For David, with Love

Spread from the children's book by David Graeber and Nika Dubrovsky What Are Kings? (2019).

Was it only last Thursday that those of us in the Americas awoke to the bewildering news of David Graeber's (1961–2020) passing? Whenever a person at the height of their capacities dies, there is shock. But among David's extraordinary circle of friends, the confusion is absolute. How can a person who embodied the possibility of another world, who truly lived as if he was already free, not be here? Was it the sheer force of that astonishing intellect? Did it burn so very brightly that it could not be sustained? How can it be that David, who cared so deeply about the radical possibilities of the imagination, endured a death in Venice during this pandemic, as if critiquing even at the last?

Yet this is the media age, and all has already been wrapped and disposed. His anarchist publishers posted David's own biographical statement.[1] In a flurry of hours, the initial Twitter storm gave way to the obituaries from the liberal publications like the *New York Times*, which never had much time for him in life. Even *The Guardian*, which David detested so much for its role in creating the moral panic over "antisemitism" alleged to have run rampant in the UK Labour Party that his Twitter account still has a pinned tweet quantifying the false statements they printed,[2] quickly ran a long remembrance.

But David's work isn't even all published yet—his next book with David Wengrow is called *The Dawn of Everything*, a very David title. Here was what academics keep saying they wanted: a scholar engaged with the widest questions there are to ask, completely connected to the world as it is, and as it should be. People carried *Debt: The First 5000 Years* in the streets during Occupy Wall Street and read it together page by page in seminars David organized. Yet Graeber was driven out of US academia, by underhanded means, into what he called "exile" in London. It is a bitter irony that he had recently established both professional and personal happiness in the UK, above all with his beloved wife, the artist Nika

David Graeber on the Charlie Rose Show, 2006. Screenshot. For full episode →.

Dubrovsky. Among their many ongoing projects was a fabulous series of illustrated books for kids on conceptual issues like anthropology.

The untimely dead leave behind them a gift, one that the living may not want. That gift is the perception of the shape of the space that we have imposed on the departed, above and beyond the space that they actively chose for themselves. Did we not ask too much of David Graeber? Perhaps so, and there will be time to consider and to mourn. Before that time comes, each of us that found energy in all that David did and thought, from his direct actions to his exposure of debt and the identification of bullshit jobs, will have to look at that space and decide, individually and collectively, how it is to be filled.

Here again, it will be possible to learn from David Graeber. In his decades of activism, he persistently refused to do "leadership." Not that he didn't intervene, or give advice, or mentor people, because he did all of that and much more. Because he tried to live an everyday communism every day, he would not impose any direction, even if he would sometimes express frustration outside movement spaces as to what was happening. A movement was just that: a moment and course in time and space. If and when it fails, you go on to the next one. As all of his writing insisted, the utopia of unchanging rule is that of religious or political domination, not one of freedom. There are ways to learn, and ways to help others learn, in there.

During Occupy Wall Street, the refusing words of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" became a slogan: "I would prefer not to." The phrase appeared on signs and stickers around New York City. It was a fold in the times of resistance, where pasts that are not fully past become present and available; the unexpunged energy of past refusals to move along or to pretend there was nothing to see became active again. This is what we mean when we say David is now with the ancestors: that his immense archive of words and ways of being, laughing, and being with others have become a permanent resource to draw upon when needed, especially in the dark times that are upon us now.

It's not Melville or Thomas Mann that I turn to now in measuring the loss, in preparing for the dark times, in making do the undoable. It's the words of the Irish exile and French Resistance supporter Samuel Beckett in closing *The Unnamable* (1953): "Perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." I'll leave you here. Go on.

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See https://www.pmpress.org/blog/2020/09/03/in-loving-memory-david-graeber/ (scroll down to the end).

2
See https://twitter.com/davidgraeber/status/1210322505229094912?s=20 .

Yazan Khalili, Lara Khaldi, and Marwa Arsanios

What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 1

When I started comissioning this series (see part 1 and part 2) to think collectively about the formation of the category of contemporary art, its discourses , and its institutions in relation to the neoliberal economy that came with the 1990s reconstruction project in Beirut, I was obviously not only thinking about Beirut as one exceptional locality, but rather taking it as a place from which to start the discussion on larger historical shifts in the region. In fact, what happened during that time in Beirut was very similar to what was happening in Palestine, if we abstract the economic mechanisms that were at play. Later on, for example, the same politics of international funders' retreat, the appearance of local donors, and processes of institutionalization — or at least attempts at that — were underway in both places.

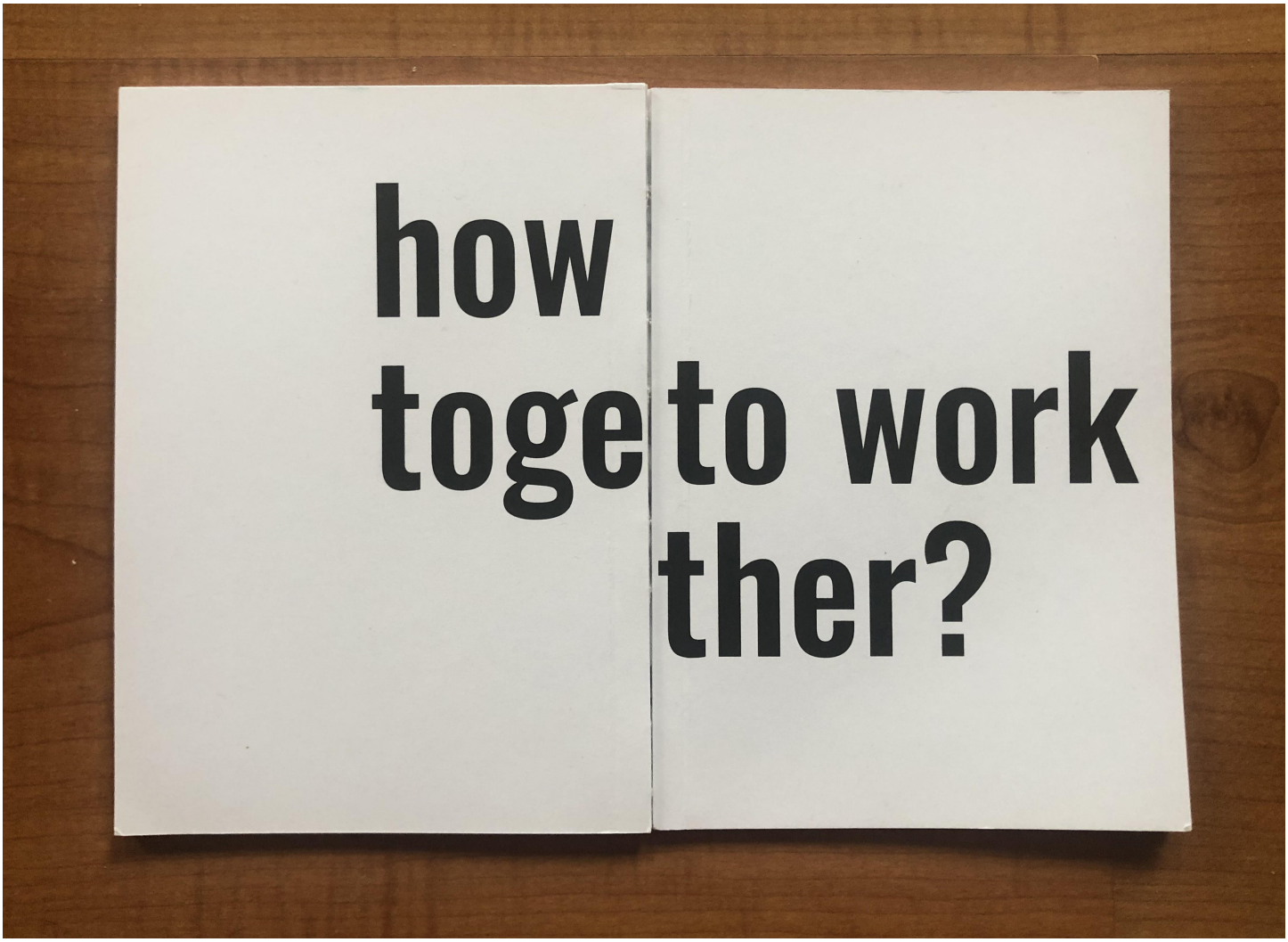
Lara Khaldi, Yazan Khalili, and I belong to the same generation of artists and cultural workers who started their professional life in the 2000s, so we witnessed the shift towards this institutionalization. But we also witnessed the '90s with a little more distance. I would still argue that many of our so-called practices were to a certain extent affected by those earlier economic mechanisms.

—Marwa Arsanios

Marwa Arsanios: It is strange to be having this conversation now while we are locked down at home because of Covid-19, and while many cultural workers are struggling economically because of all the cancelations in the economy where we function: the gig economy! That said, perhaps it is a good moment to try to think about the neoliberal ideology that drove the '90s, the separation between the work of art, the politics it represents and wants to tackle, and its politics of production, or on an institutional level the separation between the production of culture and discourse, and the greater economy that drives it as a whole. The purpose is thinking about how to do things otherwise.

Yazan Khalili: Well, in the '90s two big events in Palestine and Lebanon acted as starting points for the historical conditions you're describing: the Oslo Accords in Palestine, and the end of the civil war in Lebanon. Unlike Egypt, for example, where neoliberal economic policy started in the '80s and slowly expanded in the '90s, in Palestine and Lebanon the Oslo Accords, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (the PA, in 1994), and the Taif Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war marked the beginnings of the neoliberal shift.

The PA arrived in Palestine while the neoliberal economy was en route to becoming the world's dominant political ideology, exchanging the power of the state for the power of corporations. At first, the PA tried to establish itself like most postcolonial states—a nation-state that runs institutions that aim to produce and maintain national and



Spread from the booklet How to Work Together? 10.5x15.5cm. Part of "Debt" collective exhibition meetings.

state culture. However, they quickly realized that those institutions needed to take the form of NGOs in order to apply for international funding and to attract donors.

In 1995, the PA established the Ministry of Culture, and in 1996 the Ministry founded the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center. By becoming an NGO in 1998, the Center gained independence, allowing it to apply directly for international funding. Once international funding was allowed to enter Palestine, institutions such as Riwaq (est. 1991) also followed this model. Other institutions began to form after this economic model became more accessible. Another example is the Al Ma'mal Foundation in Jerusalem, established in 1998 by Jack Persekian (after he founded Anadiel Gallery in the old city of Jerusalem in 1992 and worked for a few years in the Ministry of Culture himself).

The new political structure created a division between freshly established cultural centers and those that were there before Oslo. The older cultural clubs took part in political movements; they were often grassroots organizations founded with social goals. During the years of direct occupation, when political work was prohibited in Palestine, politics were happening within these cultural clubs. The political work was hidden within cultural work. Since they were unable to carry out overt political activity, the whole structure had to act politically. Nearly everything was volunteer-based, collective and communal practices were familiar and widespread, and there was no separation between the producers and the audience. When the PA arrived, there was no need to hide anymore. This was the moment when the separation between culture and politics really took place. Cultural institutions were no longer a product of the community, but rather top-down structures. These institutions had to form heavy administrative bodies to apply for and manage funds. Maintaining these bodies became the primary task of the institution. As audience numbers became one of the measurements for institutional validity, the institutions' other main concern became outreach: they were looking for audiences for their activities, and sometimes creating them through their outreach projects. These projects

became the bread and butter of many cultural institutions.

Community centers that had formed in the '70s and '80s had to follow this new model in order to access funding, too. Their structures had to transform radically: they adopted new governance boards, management bodies, and employees to fulfill donor requirements. All of this of course affected the kind of cultural production the centers could carry out: in their proposals to international donors, they needed to show that they were responding to new developments in art and cultural practices around the world, regardless of whether these new practices had organic audiences and practitioners. At some point, both needed to be created. Traditional Dabke dancing, for example, had to shift from its political role of maintaining Palestinian culture after the Nakba into contemporary dance performances focused on the movement of the body. Contemporaneity became a way for these institutions to enter the funding economy—in their production as well as structurally. (I'm not against contemporary dance here, but am trying to bring out the issue of the shift from collective dancing to individual expression.)

MA: So you are saying that contemporary art became a tool for institutions to survive and continue on into the neoliberal fundraising economy?

YK: Yes, contemporary art is not the production of the institution, but is rather the institution itself. The relationship between the structure of production and the product is very entangled. They both function on the same economic basis: proposal writing. It is a framework of thinking and an act of language that is always happening in the future tense: "The project aims to …," "The work will …," etc. Writing the proposal becomes part of the artwork itself. The person who knows how to explain the proposed piece, mainly in English, will be more likely to get grants. This process relies on the artist's embeddedness in spaces that hold cultural capital, and not only on the artist's or the work's merit. The claim of equality in open calls for funded projects is contested.

Lara Khaldi: Right, and to know how to use this language, one must come from a certain social and economic class.

YK: It is not enough to be able to speak English. One has to understand the frameworks of proposal writing in order to put that specific language to use. In today's NGO-ized world, there are people who specialize in writing proposals for specific donors: for the EU, USAID, SIDA, and so on.

LK: This economic system has created the profession of the fundraiser, and subsequently turned the artist into a fundraiser, too. There's a whole culture of fundraising—and not only in the cultural sector. Many of these fundraisers were once activists or political organizers in the '80s. Many NGO directors from the '90s, for example, were once enrolled in leftist parties—they were organized and politicized.

MA: So this process transformed politicized people into technocrats by putting them in bureaucratic managerial positions.

LK: Yes, technocrats—including the artist as well. Artists began to consider their work a paid representation of political activism. Whereas they were self-organized and had formed collective structures such as *al rabita* in the 1970s, and considered art to be one form of practicing politics through mobilization of the masses.

YK: This is so important for understanding the economy of cultural institutions. The proposal is also a form of censorship, or a filter that gives power to institutions or donors to decide which institution and which artwork can be supported. This is different from the '80s when political parties supported artists, or when artists needed to have another (primary) job such as teaching in schools, or doing anything else for a living. I think there was a fundamental change in the role of the artist when art became a profession in itself. As a result, culture came to be considered its own economic sector, or rather part of a larger neoliberal economic policy.

MA: One thinks about the culture that was produced back then and also remembers that nothing was clearly called contemporary art yet.

LK: It was still called conceptual art.

MA: Yes, true! And with this new system that has fundraising at its center, what kind of culture is being produced? It's one that seems to be thinking about politics but wants to detach itself from it by creating distance. It tries to think about history and its rewriting as if it is outside of it. It is not close to any political party; it dissociates itself from all ideologies, and negates them. It desires to be outside of politics, even its own politics of production. But its main subject matter is politics.

LK: Yes, and in that reactionary moment, the reflection shifted toward individual experiences and away from collective ones. So many films about personal stories came out in the mid-90s. The focus on the individual story was a way to avoid belonging to a political party or project. Instead of being part of a local political project, artists joined a larger humanitarian, universal project, and thus became global subjects. Since the '90s, if you are doing conceptual art, all the references are global, so you belong to a larger community beyond the local and the collective. This is the dominant way of thinking.

MA: Exactly. This focus on the individual was hidden under the collective, and wanted to unravel it. This is the logic of the fundraising proposal: you have to prove that you have an individual, singular story (that no one else has

gone through something similar), and convince the jury that you are bringing this "valuable" experience out of the dark.

YK: It brought the whole cultural process down to a group of individuals competing with one another. It was more like individual stories competing between each other over funding, trying to prove which one is most worth telling, and which are less important.

LK: There is always the excuse that the open call is a democratizing process, but in reality it pits individuals against each other while a judge decides who takes money and who doesn't. And all of this happens under the claim of a fair distribution of opportunities for artists.

YK: But of course this so-called "just" system hides layers of injustice. Who knows how to write? Who knows the people on the jury? How much can you travel? How do you use social media and talk about yourself? How famous are you? And also what form of suffering do you belong to? Which conflict do you represent? How are you responding to what is hot in the news at the moment of application? How are you engaging with the identity politics criteria? The decisions do not depend on your proposal or the brilliance of your project, but on who you are as an artist. So all the material capital becomes intertwined with the cultural capital that you build. For example, this cultural capital can be built by volunteering even if you are not remunerated for your work—participating in exhibitions, screenings, and so on. And of course institutions and galleries use this fact to exhibit work without any artist fees, claiming that the artist will be paid in cultural capital.

MA: We know by now that this whole system of meritocracy is a delusion and a side effect of this economic system.

YK: I often think of the production of films in former socialist countries. Every director, or every graduate of a film director program, joined the directors' union. Afterwards, every member of the union received money to produce a film every few years rather than applying for funding. For example, Andrei Tarkovsky used to get money every five years to produce a film. It is irrelevant whether you were an amazing filmmaker. All that's to say, this open call format is specific to contemporary art. This new economy produced the contemporary institution. In short, contemporary art couldn't have been produced by a different economy. Every economy creates its ways and mechanisms to distribute its funds in the way that helps it maintain power. It is important to understand the political and historical context of the donor economy in cultural practices.

MA: Let's go back to the question of the relationship between NGOs, civil society, and contemporary art, to the way discourses are produced between these three spheres.

YK: Yes, for sure, the cultural institution is part of the NGO-ization process. It is the creation of a civil society that is separate from direct politics. The cultural institution becomes divorced from political work; the intellectual is separated from direct politics or political movements, and is integrated into the cultural institution and its economy.

LK: And, more to the point, the cultural institution becomes apolitical. Direct politics, rather than their representation, become taboo. It is very strange, of course, because before Oslo all the cultural institutions were politicized in the sense that *al rabita* was affiliated with Fateh, Markaz el Fan el Shaabi was affiliated with the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), and then suddenly the rupture came. The idea that civil society organizations should represent the whole of society entails a lot of compromise. But the paradox or incongruency is that the majority of society itself is still politicized by belonging to certain parties. Also, artists practice art with a particular political stance in relation to the Palestinian political context.

YK: Fifteen years ago, USAID had a set of exclusionary criteria for granting money. They wouldn't give money to grantees belonging to any political party on the US's terrorism blacklist, such as Hamas, the PFLP, Islamic Jihad, and so on. Now the EU does the same thing. This obliges cultural institutions to declare that they don't adhere to any politics, and that their employees and beneficiaries aren't affiliated with any of these political bodies either. And here the cultural institution starts to talk about politics aesthetically, but it cannot be politicized. It's a moment of stark division between politics and aesthetics. And add to that the fragmentation of struggles. The feminist struggle becomes separated from the struggle for a democratic apparatus, liberation, the economy, the youth, etc. Each of these issues have their own NGO or organization; there is no longer a total view of the struggle.

LK: This fragmentation means specialization. If one organization is fighting for the rights of prisoners, the others won't. And they compete over funding as if they are in an open market.

YK: And this is what then sets the stage for the primacy of identity politics. Everyone starts talking about themselves—about their individual identity, their gender identity, their sexuality, their race … You don't have to have a political position, but rather only work on your individual fragmentary politics.

MA: I think that the division and fragmentation of struggles is also the transformation of struggle into a project. Everything is emptied of its political content; you are not working towards systemic change, but on different projects. And this fragmentation creates a kind of competition between identities.

LK: This fragmentation has affected the whole region. For example, when the Syrian revolution started, most of the regional funding went towards that. This competition is not only produced between cultural workers themselves, but is also provoked on a regional level. Funding is distributed according to who has more death, more poverty, who is more marginalized. There is an entire economy built on catastrophe. Of course this affects networks of solidarity and support within the region.

MA: So you are not allowed to think historically anymore, and you start seeing yourself as the worst victim in the present moment. I think that this process produces ahistoricization and apoliticization. It produces a victim subject who gets stuck in historical narcissism instead of a political subject who remains inside an ongoing struggle and in close solidarity and alliance with other struggles.

LK: When you separate women's struggles from the struggle of political prisoners, for example, you are not only erasing the politics from it. You are doing away with the whole history of the relation between the struggles. At its base, what is the economy? It's a series of power relations. Someone has capital, then distributes it to an institution, which produces a power relation. In this conversation we are thinking of power relations and how they dominate discourse. But it's a struggle. It's not a one-way relationship. A lot of small institutions try to do something. Yet there is always struggle against the hegemony of relationships produced out of funding, even if it remains largely invisible. Today, young practitioners are starting self-sustaining initiatives, such as Om Sulaiman Farm, where a group of cooperative members plant and distribute organic produce and run community workshops.

MA: Yes, of course producers have agency, and that is why the struggle is ongoing. But also, when you are entangled in this economy, you are already subsumed by a set of power relations, and it often becomes a matter of survival.

LK: The problem is a lack of attempts to change those institutions structurally and conceptually.

YK: The institutions once had agency too, but they were pulled into a system of crisis economics. They transformed their economic crisis into a cultural crisis. For this reason there is an urgency to critique and even think of alternatives to the institution. The institution became interested only in its presence and continuation. Thus, institutions became evidence of the existence of cultural activity: if there's an institution, then cultural production continues, and if not, then society will ostensibly end up in a barbaric state (or a radically conservative one, to say the least). So, one needs to not only critique the institution, but also ask if it is necessary, and whether it can be toppled. From here comes the critique of the institution that is also a critique of all its discourse and ideology—of the NGO-like discourses inside culture. Is the culture industry the only way to work on culture collectively, or are there other grassroots structures that can be formed—and are already forming—which can bring the production and sharing of knowledge and politics to the center of cultural work? Culture is not a secondary product in the economy. It is not a byproduct, but the economy makes it appear separate from other, more "primary" spheres of production and consumption.

LK: But that's also an old paradigm related to surplus. If there is surplus in society, then there is also cultural production. Surplus as money. As if the only resource the institution has is money. And they end up working with a logic of: if there is no money, there is no cultural production. So yes, as you say, the prevalent conception is "if there is no cultural institution there is no culture," but in fact what this statement means is "if there is no money for the institution, there is no cultural production." It is a pure capitalist formula. Money in exchange for a product. So a way to critique this state of affairs is to ask: What if there is no money? Will there be cultural production, or not? Of course there will be, but its form and whereabouts in society will necessarily have to change!

YK: Here culture is utilized as part of state formation—the state as the only form of emancipation, as if there is no culture without an institution, and no Palestine without a state.

LK: The art institution claims to be separate from the many crises of contemporary society. For example, the art system claims innocence with regard to widespread violence against women, as if structural violence doesn't touch the institution. At the same time, all the money that it receives comes from the crisis economy.

MA: If there's no crisis, then there's little possibility to receive funding. The institution's role is to offer false solutions for crises, or rather to produce an "alternative" nonviolent society, for example. Given that it is beholden to the violence of economic systems for subsistence, it's not surprising that the institution generally fails to self-reflect on the structural power dynamics inherent to it.

YK: It's exactly this question of institutions being tasked with producing alternatives. The alternative is a retreat from politics. In politics you don't produce an alternative, you produce antagonisms. Ideology produces opposition and struggles. But the dominant ideology is that inclusive culture produces alternatives. The idea is that we are all working together without having to struggle for wages or create conflict regarding the role of the institution, or the role of culture broadly speaking.

LK: It's the free market mentality with different types of organizations in competition. For example, religious organizations and propaganda are becoming more popular. Instead of openly attempting to form opposing

propaganda and infiltrating popular opinion, cultural institutions are happy to act like alternative, marginal institutions for the middle class who are already somewhat religiously progressive but socially conservative.

YK: Yes, or rather the institution claims it is an alternative to the state project. But when the institution is established, it typically disconnects from the social sphere. It needs to build this relation with society. This is a question of sustainability that becomes linked to the economy, not to the role the institution plays in the cultural sphere. Why is the institution there? Well, it's for reasons that are completely different from art. It is present because of sociopolitical relations. Because the state needs an institution to activate its cultural presence.

MA: Yes, the raison d'être of the institution. In line with that, it's all about accumulation.

YK: Every art process functions through the terminologies and protocols of capital.

MA: NGOs and cultural institutions function specifically within the logic of capitalist charity and ideology, sure. But I want to come back to the terminology of "crisis" that's so prevalent in art discourse today. The *crisis* of culture, the *crisis* of the institution. What do we mean when we use that word?

YK : I think that the crisis of the institution stems from the larger economic crisis. This then creates an existential crisis: the institution needs to continually justify its own existence. But there is also the crisis of the institution in the sense of its capacity to have political resonance, and how much it can interfere in social conservatism. These conditions are linked to each other: the institution's projects, its crisis, and its relation to the social sphere. And the institution tries to analyze and look at the social sphere as it refuses its progressive politics; therefore it is regressive or backwards. So it projects its crisis and its separation from the social sphere onto the social sphere itself.

In *The Crisis of Arab Culture, or the Crisis of the Arab Bourgeoisie*, Mahdi Amel talks about a conference in Kuwait in 1973 that brought together many Arab intellectuals, including Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber). In the book, Amel harshly criticizes the way Arab intellectuals understood the defeat of 1967 as a consequence of the decadence of Arab culture, as if Arab culture itself produced defeat. His response was that it was actually the problem of the Arab bourgeoisie, of the state, of the postcolonial institution. He takes this approach rather than essentializing Arab culture and projecting the problem onto it. You cannot say that culture produces defeat. The crisis of the institution is then projected onto society and creates a civilizational crisis.

MA: This is the "Adonisian" enlightened elite frame of thought, right?

YK: Yes, Amel was critiquing Adonis directly. However, I think that our institutions still function within this logic, because they see their role as the educators of society.

LK: Nongovernmental institutions in Palestine form part of a human rights–led ideology where individual freedoms are protected inside a society that is perceived as backward and governed by collective coercion. Since the PA, for example, works in ways very similar to NGOs that require funding from international agencies, there is an ongoing, binary competition between the PA and NGOs. This also creates a binary where one has to take a position with and against the politics of those organizations. Yet both the PA and nongovernmental organizations are structurally the same, with the economy being an integral element of how they function and what political cultures they proliferate. I have heard arguments such as: "If you want a nonviolent society, you should put money into culture"—which means that if you want a society without armed struggle then you need to neutralize youth with culture. Cultural institutions see their role as the neutralizers of violence. This role has been prescribed by international funding bodies and internalized by local NGOs.

YK: Or alternatively: "If you want a society without ideology, make money the only way to fund culture."

LK: Young people who are politicized here in Palestine have an antagonistic and purely economic relation to cultural institutions, premised on jobs and survival. These NGOs haven't created a civil society. They have created distrust amongst politicized social youth, who call NGOs "shops," because they understand the economic structure and relationships that govern them very well.

YK: Fifteen years ago, a group of friends and I got funding to do a pinhole photography workshop in the refugee camps. The organization set up the project with the camp and we started going there. The children asked us for money to attend the workshop. They clearly told us: you got money because of us, so don't just raise money on our backs. Pay us, and we will attend. I thought that was the most politicized communal response to this cultural economy, demanding that we share the wealth produced rather than capitalizing on their status.

MA: Shall we come back to the specificity of Palestine? What happened in Palestine is a condensation of certain global moments. Things happen unexpectedly there and global changes are reflected there, causing immediate repercussions.

LK: This is similar to what happened in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, when so many institutions supported by the Soros Foundation opened. It

was a strategy to confront and eliminate communist ideology. At the beginning of the 2000s, they suddenly closed down. They served their purpose in promoting and ensuring that communist ideology receded in favor of a new, neoliberal one. And many of these were contemporary art institutions. The history of contemporary art is entangled with the history of the capitalist system. Not all aesthetic forms are inherited from a capitalist mode of production. There are forms that were borrowed from art history as well, but were then reattached to this present economic system, its institutions, and the promotion of this culture. We shouldn't forget that many aesthetic elements in contemporary art come from a radical political context or history, but have been unfortunately commodified within this system.

YK: Once, Sami Khatib came to the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Palestine and did a lecture about "criticality" as a commodity and "critique" as the highest form of solidarity. We always link contemporary art to the system that produces it, but this art also produces contemporary practices that attack this structure and actively change it. Contemporary art allows the artwork to be an intervention into the structure of the institution that is producing it. Contemporary art is not only a product, it is also a process, therefore it can sometimes escape the absolute attachment to the neoliberal structure that produced it. Contemporary art is open formally, and does not have to be a material object. The success of this process to escape and to create new forms, shapes, and aesthetics of the work of art can only happen through proposing and practicing new economic forms and structures that become possible with all the ongoing crises since 2008: the revolutions in the Arab world, and now the Covid crisis, and so on.

MA: But didn't this already happen? I mean these escapes and the creation of new forms, such as participatory art, socially engaged art, or community art. But perhaps this happened through practice, not structurally?

LK: Yes, exactly. They are based on individual practices, and mostly do not work at a structural or institutional level, because this is where things become reproducible and ideological. But those institutions are closed. So how can this become open and happen on a bigger scale, and not only through one project that ends?

MA: Between 2005 and 2015, there was an expansion of cultural structures and museums (to come) in Lebanon. It seems like there was something similar happening in Palestine, but this process was halted for economic reasons and also because of certain cultural politics. The Palestinian Museum not meeting the ambitious claim of its building is one visible example.

LK: The biggest and most established cultural institution in Palestine is the A. M. Qattan Foundation. They have historically funded and produced cultural projects. Recently, they have also been receiving grants from international funders in order to distribute them locally. So in a sense they've replaced the Ministry of Culture. The problem of this model is that it could create a homogenization of cultural institutions. Collectives can apply to this fund, but are required to have governance models that look like institutions: a board that is registered as an NGO and access to a physical space. This "democratic" model of the institution is imposed by the funders. Some institutions even need to undergo structural reform in order to receive the grant. So we are talking here about structures of governance. A relationship based on the economy produces certain structures that in turn will trickle down to artists. This might lead to a homogenization of cultural production as funding bodies impose certain ways of producing culture. In general there is a growing centralization of resources and power in cultural institutions, which is reflected in their administrative and physical size.

The A. M. Qattan Foundation is a private institution. Historically, the Qattan family were philanthropists—they gave a lot of money to the Palestinian cause and culture. The founder, Abdel Mohsen al Qattan, was the head of the Palestinian National Council. So he not only contributed commercially, but also politically. However, the foundation performs in a way that makes it seem like a public institution. It is similar to the Palestinian Museum (PM), although the PM is a bit more complicated because it has a parent association—Taawon (Welfare Association). Taawon is another nongovernmental institution formed by Palestinian philanthropists. The Qattan family is one of the biggest donors to the PM. Many members of the board own construction companies in the Arab Gulf. That is very much reflected in the building of the museum—although designed by an Irish firm, it is meticulously realized.

It could be seen as a monument to the national capital. PM is a private nongovernmental museum. They claim to have a different project than the PA, a project beyond politics. But their political project is exactly the same as the PA, based on a two-state solution. Both institutions are very similar to state institutions, especially the PM. As an edifice, it represents the project of the neoliberal state that the PA aspires to. At the end of the day, Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) inaugurated the building. So it clearly represents the same political desire as the PA. At the same time there was competition between the two openings, of the PM and the YAM (Yasser Arafat Museum).

YK: There was also a conflict around the name: at first the PA did not give its consent, because "Palestinian Museum" must be the name of a state institution.

LK: But in the end they took the name because their relation to the PA is really strong. They are important people. But this tension with the PA is part of the PM's

performance as a public institution. Although the Palestinian Museum is neither formally tied to nor associated with the Palestinian Authority, the way I see it, ideologically and politically they are part of the same neoliberal project. The museum becomes the epitome of this power and politics and the desire for recognition.

YK: But don't you think that in this sense they have a lot of big and false expectations of what a cultural institution can do? The institution as such is already in an existential crisis, and there is pressure on it to prove its necessity so it can justify its high running costs while smaller organizations and independent groups are able to produce vibrant and agile cultural practices and content with much less of a budget.

MA: Yes, Qattan plays the role of the Ministry of Culture, but the PM is unable to play the role of the national museum.

YK: For now it's not able to, but that was the ambition. That's why there is always an inner administrative crisis. For example, they are trying to build an archive of the visual history of Palestine through a grant. But there is a much simpler and much more energetic project called *Khaza 2 en* by a group working in Jerusalem, which organizes these archives and gives them back to their owners. They're working in a completely different way than the PM, which is trying to own the archives.

MA: The PM wants to control and dominate the state narrative.

YK: Yes, the narrative of the state to come.

LK: The failure to perform as the national museum also comes from the impossibility of having a modern museum in Palestine. The museum has so much to do with the birth of the nation-state, and in forging the story of this birth. In a colonial context this is not possible, so the museum becomes an ideological tool to deny the continued struggle … which is ongoing, open, and stateless.

MA: The whole "building institutions in the Middle East" Ford Foundation agenda in the '90s was part of this ideology against the Islamization of society.

LK: And against its politicization. Its goal is to spread the concept of personal freedom as a replacement for liberation, and to trade in emancipatory struggles for individual freedoms.

X

Editor's note: A previous version of this article inadvertently implied that the Palestinian Museum is formally affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, and that the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive seeks to own the physical material that it digitizes and archives. The museum is in fact a nongovernmental organization, and the archive returns the physical material to the original owner after digitizing it.

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Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher who reconsiders the politics of the mid-twentieth century from a contemporary perspective, with a particular focus on gender relations, urbanism, and industrialization. She approaches research collaboratively and seeks to work across disciplines.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

The American Abyss

Surfing the Waves of the Unknown

During the summer of 2016, I was writing the last chapters of a book titled *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, where I outlined the prospect of a bifurcation: either social solidarity and conscious subjectivity will be reconstituted, or the world will be drawn into a new form of global fascism. In that context, I was obliged to confront the impending American elections given that after Brexit in June of that year, the victory of Donald Trump became possible. Both of these events were symptoms of a widespread psychosis invading the scene of the global brain.

That book was not especially about America, nor about elections, nor about Trump. Nevertheless, a consideration of the American scenario was crucial to understanding trends in human evolution.

Now, in summer 2020, Trump seems to be drowning, but it’s hard to say what will happen next. The man has many arrows in his quill, even if his victory becomes more unlikely. He is already sending signals of his unwillingness to accept the results of the election; he is already hinting at Democratic Party fraud; and, most dangerously, he has referred his followers several times to the Second Amendment, which, in plain words, is a threat to trigger a wave of armed violence.

I know that it is dangerous to write in simultaneity with events that nobody can precisely foresee, that can only be vaguely intuited. But the only way to imagine something about the becoming of the psycho-sphere is to run ahead of the dynamics of the disaster. My job is not fortune-telling, so I will not engage in predictions about the results of the American elections, but my point is that whatever happens in November, a conflagration has been sparked in the US that will bring increasing violence and that, in due time, will lead to the explosion of the federal state, with unimaginable geopolitical implications.

The Unmaking of the USA

I would say that the main historical thread of the last twenty years of world history is the not-so-slow disintegration of the US. Of course, the September 11 attacks are one starting point for this unbelievable process. This is by far the most powerful country in the history of the world, the most armed, the most aggressive, the least accessible, protected as it is by two oceans. The only way to destroy it is to turn the giant against itself.

This is exactly what bin Laden’s strategy achieved. Under the unintelligent direction of Dick Cheney and George W. Bush, the giant entered into a process of self-destruction. First the quagmire of Afghanistan, and then the quagmire

of Iraq, provoked a sort of self-destroying fury in the American brain.

Salman Rushdie recounted with some anticipation this self-destroying fury in a book published in 2001 titled *Fury* .

Then came the financial collapse of 2008, and the election of a black president. Barack Obama in the White House was a shock for the supremacist instinct, deeply rooted in American history and in the white American psyche.

The rise of Trump must be viewed as an effect of the white reaction to a long list of perceived humiliations: defeats in two wars, the impoverishment of the middle class in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and a sophisticated, elegant black person dancing in the rooms of the White House.

Four years of Trump have almost finalized the disintegration process of the structures of the US state. In 2020, this process was almost complete when the pandemic erupted and swept the country.

What's next? Obviously, I do not know, but I have noticed that, after a series of political setbacks, Trump has turned into the leader of the people of the Second Amendment. When the most recent Black Lives Matter protests spread across the country, and earlier when a group of Trumpists entered the Michigan state capitol building with their weapons drawn, the likely backdrop of the next five years was exposed.

Trump called for the army to crush the riots, and the army said no, defying the word of the president. Then he sent federal troops to Portland, fuelling rage and escalating the riots. Is he pointing to a fully-fledged fight just before the elections?

"The Masked Versus the Unmasked" is the title of a May 2020 article published in the *New York Times* by a liberal, moderately progressive, highly educated journalist—actually, my favorite American journalist, Roger Cohen. The title promises something enigmatic, but the

text is very clear, from the very first lines:

> A neighbor in Colorado would tell me it was time for liberals to "gun up." The other side was armed, he argued, and would stop at nothing. What would we tell our grandchildren when Ivanka Trump took office as the 46th president of the United States in 2025 and term limits were abolished? That we tried words, all manner of them, he scoffed, but they had the rifles.[1]

Unsurprisingly, Cohen immediately adds that he disagrees with his neighbor and that American democracy has nothing in common with Hungarian democracy. I'm not sure that his optimism is well founded.

Even if Viktor Orbán is a fascist and Hungarian democracy is in very bad shape, I'm sorry to say that American democracy is even worse because it is the expression of the American people, and they are the product of centuries of genocide, of deportations, of slavery, and of systematic violence.

American democracy has been a fake since the beginning, when slave owners who wrote the Declaration of Independence stopped for a moment to consider the possibility of writing something about the problem of slavery, but instead decided to postpone such discussions indefinitely.

We should not think that Trump is an aberration of the American spirit, or the exception in a country of sensible people: he is the perfect representation of the white unconscious, pestered by a devastating sense of guilt resulting from the genocide of the native population, the forcible importation of millions of Africans, the long-lasting oppression of black slaves, military aggression against countless populations, the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the killing of millions of Vietnamese people, the extermination of Chilean democracy, the killing of Salvador Allende and of thirty thousand people after September 11, 1973. Not to mention the phosphorus bombing of Fallujah and the uncountable victims of the catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Thanks to his ignorance and moral abjection, Donald Trump represents the true soul of America, the unmovable soul of a population formed by a never-ending sequence of exploitation, oppression, bullying, invasions, and abominable crimes. Nothing but this. There isn't an alternative America, as many thought in the 1960s and '70s. There are millions of women and men, mostly nonwhite, who have suffered from American violence, and especially at a certain point in the '60s and '70s, fought to reform America to become more human. They failed, because there is no way to reform a nation of bigots and killers.

Now more than ever, it is possible to envision the opportunity to destroy America, not to reform it. And this is possible because America is destroying itself. Osama bin Laden succeeded in his attempt to turn the greatest military power against itself. The 9/11 provocation succeeded in drawing the giant into a war against chaos. Those who wage war against chaos are doomed, because chaos feeds upon war.

In 1992, when George Bush Sr. said at the first summit on climate change in Rio de Janeiro that the lifestyle of the American people was not subject to negotiation, we learned that the planet faces a dilemma regarding its future: unless America is broken, humankind will not survive.

In the American literary consciousness, we can find countless footprints of this horrible manifest destiny, and in the following paragraphs I want to retrace some of them. At first I considered writing about the books of Joyce Carol Oates, particularly *American Martyrs*, or of Octavia Butler, especially the dystopian premonition of *The Parable of the Sower*. Instead I decided to speak only of white males, so that the abyss may be described from the inside: Cormac McCarthy, John Steinbeck, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Franzen. I know that this is a debatable choice, and some may reproach me for it. I am reproaching myself for this choice, but I excuse myself for a very personal reason: I am male, I am white, I am old.

I know what I'm talking about.

Inner Dark

Cormac McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, published in 1968, may be read as a metaphorical journey back to the original soul of white America. The time and the place of the story are nebulous: wilderness, the absence of historical references, and a pervasive sense of obfuscation.

Somewhere in Appalachia, sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, a woman whose name is Rinthy gives birth to her brother's baby. The brother, Culla, leaves the nameless infant in the woods to die, and eventually tells the sister that the baby died of natural causes. The woman does not trust him, and goes away, into the darkness looking for the child.

"The children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth," reads the Gospel of Matthew. The oppressive presence of the Biblical God is in the background of the book: the shadows of guilt obsessively haunt the characters of the novel, but no consciousness emerges from their actions,

nor from their words.

After abandoning the child, Culla goes wandering and looking for a job (what else?), finds a job and weapons, kills a squire, then finds a new job, then flees from the police.

Nothing makes sense. Culla's actions are like fragmentary memories of a nightmare.

The final episode of his journey is the most absurd, and the most creepy: Culla falls into a river, breaks his leg, and comes out from the water to meet the three people who have been following him. These three men are carrying his son, the child Culla abandoned. The child is horribly wounded, with a torn eye. The men accuse Culla of fathering the child, and of abandoning him. Then one of the trio slays the baby.

The ending of the novel is swathed in the surrealistic light of madness: after surviving his creeping adventures, Culla makes friends with a blind man. He watches the blind man walk towards a swamp: certain death. The novel ends with Culla thinking: "Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way."

The fake glory of the colonization of the West is recounted here as a nightmare, as a foggy meandering between violence and fear and abjection.

Wrath

From the nightmare of McCarthy to the historical reality of John Steinbeck—I was reminded of the most important American novel of the 1930s while reading an article from the far-right libertarian financial blog Z *ero Hedge*, an interesting reference for white supremacy.

As a reader of this repugnant but useful rag, my attention was captivated one day by an article titled "The Old America Is Dead: Three Scenarios For The Way Forward." Written by Wayne Allenswroth, the article was about John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the 1939 film

adaption by John Ford.

The novel stages a community of farmers in Oklahoma in the days of the Great Depression. Due to debt, and due to the financial context that the farmers are unable to understand, one day they receive a visit from the landowner's men, who bring the message that they are evicted:

> Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel … And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves. Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped that mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, the Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them … The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die.[2]

Steinbeck describes here, in a quite vivid way, the impotence that workers, and functionaries, experience when facing the monster of financial capitalism. But the interesting thing is that the pro-Trump *Zero Hedge* resurrects Steinbeck now, as the scenario of the Depression returns through the conditions triggered by the pandemic. Steinbeck continues:

> At last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick.[3]

The tenants sit on the ground while the landowner's lawyer finally tells them:

> You'll have to get off the land. The plows'll go through the dooryard.
>
> And now the squatting men stood up angrily. Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An' we was born here. And Pa had to borrow money. The bank owned the land then, but we stayed and we got a little bit of what we raised.[4]

But the owner's men are inflexible:

> We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man …
>
> The tenants cried, Grampa killed Indians, Pa killed snakes for the land. Maybe we can kill banks—they are worse than Indians and snakes …
>
> And now the owner men grew angry. You'll have to go …
>
> We'll get our guns, like Grampa when the Indians came. What then?
>
> Well—first the sheriff, and then the troops. You'll be stealing if you try to stay, you'll be murderers if you kill to stay. The monster isn't men, but it can make men do what it wants.[5]

These pages illuminate the sentiment and the mythology that lie beneath Trump, and make up his strength. The white people who earned this land by killing Indians are under threat because of liberal globalism. Trump is their weapon against the globalist threat. The people of the Second Amendment are facing their last opportunity to save their social dominance: this opportunity is Trump. Just read what Allenswroth writes at *Zero Hedge*:

> Our people, our culture, our history, everything we hold dear, is under relentless attack by the Main Stream Media, politicians, "activists," and kritarchs in the courts, aided and abetted by enemies within, often our own kith and kin, who have internalized the blood-libel Leftist narrative of an irredeemably "racist" America that must be razed to the ground …
>
> Our enemy, in this case is the globalist Blob and its militant would-be Che Guevaras and LARPing Leninists, the MSM, the bureaucracy, the courts, the big corporations, and the education establishment. Yet, for the most part, until recently, the Blob has not confronted the Historic American Nation head-on. The Blob has been patient, killing us by the death of a thousand cuts, taking ground steadily through subversion, using propaganda and misinformation, censorship via Tech Totalitarians, and the slow encroachment of what the late Sam Francis called "anarcho-tyranny," with mass immigration ("the Great Replacement") as its weapon of mass destruction. The Blob is amorphous, a slippery, slimy thing that probes and gropes its way into whatever social-economic-political cracks it can exploit, eventually engulfing its prey like quicksand. Then

> Donald Trump was elected president. The Blob was shocked. Orange Man Bad seemed to threaten its plans to finish off the Historic American Nation. And so, ever since November 8, 2016, the MSM have kept the country in hysterics with one manufactured crisis after another. Fake news via a social media, a hybrid warfare tactic, kicked into high gear: Russiagate, Ukrainegate, the Chinese Virus panic and ensuing lockdown and economic crash, and now the myth of St. George Floyd and blacks being "hunted" by whites that catalyzed the mobs that have looted and burned American cities. Using the Chinese Virus and Floyd riots as cover, the Blob and its militant wing—Antifa and Black Lives Matter—ratcheted up anarcho-tyranny to new heights.[6]

This narrative is rooted in racialized memory and supported by an army of white people who own weapons and who Trump has unified with the definition "people of the Second Amendment."

At the end the article, Allenswroth turns to an open invitation to prepare for civil war:

> If we bank solely on electoral politics, we will lose, especially as the demographic ring closes. The winners will show no quarter. Political life as we knew it in America is over. Again, the America we grew up in and loved is dead. Elections are a holding action at best. It seems highly unlikely that Trump (or anyone else, for that matter) can, for instance, deport and encourage to self-deport tens of millions of illegal aliens, even assuming a desire to do so.[7]

Trump cannot do the job alone, is the claim. "We" must take our weapons and do the job: deport tens of millions of illegal aliens, right? We did a century ago, when we deported indigenous people, when we slaughtered them. And now, goes the racist white position, we have to do it again.

Madness? Yes, but what the political pundits cannot grasp is this: madness, and only madness, is now ruling a world that is totally out of control.

Allenswroth wonders, *What if Trump loses the election in November?*

And this is his answer:

> Trump loses, and the Blob and its allies triumph. But because this is a country now and not a nation, with no shared sense of common identity and agreed-upon history, culture, beliefs, or language, only a full-blown police state can hold it together. Even that might not ensure order in a chaotic post-America, and the diminishing number of whites will surely not enjoy the protection of the state. At some point, white Americans might well be living like white South Africans, ever in fear for their lives. If order breaks down, vigilante groups, even criminal gangs, will step into the void, as vigilantes have done in Mexico and Hispanic gangs have done to protect their neighborhoods during the Floyd riots. The good news: white men have followed suit when mobs threatened their homes and history.[8]

This Country Is Frightening

From the years of the Great Depression I jump to the 1960s, when progressive consciousness spread out from black revolts and from universities.

In *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth stages the tragedy of a man who has grown up in with a somnambulant trust in the American Dream. Suddenly, he is obliged to face the reality of a mental breakdown that traverses his family, his village, his country, and the world as a whole. He is called the Swede, but he is a young Jewish man from New Jersey. He's tall, handsome, a good baseball player. We are in the '50s and life looks joyful and glorious for him. He marries Miss New Jersey, and they have a child, Meredith, aka Merry. Merry is affected by a pronounced stutter. There's no way to heal this flaw, this small stain on the picture of perfect American joy at the beginning of the '60s.

Then Kennedy is killed, and one day while Merry is watching TV she's shocked by the image of a Vietnamese priest, dressed in saffron, who lights himself on fire and stays still until the moment he falls, a human inferno. For Merry, this is the beginning of a monstrous mutation. She recoils from this image, she cries, she babbles. Then more Vietnamese priests kill themselves, and the girl's brain is forever scrambled.

The new American reality tears a whole in the fenced-off garden of the Swede's American Dream. The black uprisings erupt: Watts is on fire, Newark is on fire. The Swede protects the factory that his father bequeathed to him. But everything is changing all around. Most importantly, Merry has gone crazy: she does not come back home at night, spending her nights with communists and anarchists instead.

Then comes the tragedy, the irredeemable tragedy. Merry becomes a murderer, a terrorist: she sets off a bomb that kills an innocent passerby. Merry is on the run, Merry will never come back, her mother has a nervous breakdown. Then Merry meets up secretly with her father, but she is as

thin as a rake, she's dirty, she's ruined. Merry has been raped.

The world of the Swede has broken down, but he must resist, the factory must go on, his wife is out of her mind, she's fucking the heinous neighbor, an intellectual. The Swede calls his brother, his cynical brother, and tells him that nothing is left of his world. His brother replies:

> "You think you know what this country is? You have no *idea* what this country is ... This country is *frightening*. Of course she was raped. What kind of company do you think she was keeping? Of course out there she was going to get raped ... She enters that world, that loopy world out there, with what's going on out there—what do you *expect*?"[9]

Earlier in the same chapter Roth writes:

> Yes, at the age of forty-six, in 1973, almost three-quarters of the way through the century that with no regard for the niceties of burial had strewn the corpses of mutilated children and their mutilated parents everywhere, the Swede found out that we are all in the power of something demented. It's just a matter of time, honky. We all are![10]

It's just a matter of time, says Roth. We are all under the power of something demented.

Now the time has come, I guess.

No one would have ever fathomed that America—the greatest country in the world with "the greatest economy ever"—could be on the cusp of another civil war. Now, after more than one hundred and seventy thousand dead in the unspeakable massacre that the American health system has committed, after the killing of George Floyd and the explosion of protests with continuous escalations in police violence, after Trump's warning about the coming electoral fraud by the Democrats, after the call-to-arms he issued to the people of the Second Amendment, after the lines of people buying weapons in the early days of the pandemic, after the armed mobs protesting against the lockdown, I think that civil war is the most likely prospect for this country that is the terminal malady of humankind.

Senility

> The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end.[11]

This is the opening of *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel that marks the passage to the new century—a century of swift disintegration, beginning with the disintegration of the human brain:

> Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal. Alfred's cries of rage on discovering evidence of guerrilla actions—a Nordstrom bag surprised in broad daylight on the basement stairs, nearly precipitating a tumble—were the cries of a government that could no longer govern.[12]

Alfred Lambert is an old father of three, and husband to Enid. The Lambert family is the protagonist of the novel.

Indeed, *The Corrections* is an account of the decomposition of the American brain, through the story of a couple of old people: Enid, a woman on the brink of depression who discovers the magic of psycho-pharmaceuticals, and Alfred, who is wandering on the border of Alzheimer's disease.

The world is getting less and less comprehensible, objects are sliding out of hands, actions get confused, overlap, lose their meaning and their functional relationships.

Not only because of neuro-chemical degradation, but also because of the transformation of the mental environment, reality has grown incomprehensible for the old brain:

> Black man performing oral sex on white man, camera shooting over left hip sixty degrees behind full profile, crescent of high values curving over buttock, knuckles of black fingers duskily visible in their probing on the dark side of this moon. She downloaded the image and viewed it at high resolution. She was sixty-five years old and she'd never seen a scene like this. She'd fashioned images all her life and she'd never appreciated their mystery. All this commerce of bits and bytes, these ones and zeros streaming through servers at some midwestern university. So much evident trafficking in so much evident nothing. A population glued to screens and magazines.[13]

Astonishment, sorrow, and absurdity are spreading

everywhere.

> And there was a very important question that he still wanted answered. His children were coming, Gary and Denise and maybe even Chip, his intellectual son. It was possible that Chip, if he came, could answer the very important question. And the question was. The question was.[14]

I use the word "senility" to refer to a condition of extreme dissociation of cerebral flow and the surrounding universe; it happens when the brain loses nervous system integration that is needed to consistently elaborate both semiotic and natural impulses. Senility, thus, is an individual condition that is encapsulated in a confused mental state of the old mind. But the expanding presence of old people spreads this condition well beyond the limit of a marginal pathology. Many signs in the present American situation point to a political diagnosis: the American brain is irreversibly rotten.

But before political senility it is psychological senility. And before being psychological it is a neurological dysfunction.

The contemporary widespread perception of an apocalyptic vertigo is not only generated as a reckoning with the long history of racial violence, industrial pollution, and economic hyper-exploitation. It is also the result of widespread neurological degradation, and of the inability of the American mind to come to terms with senility and impotence.

In the movie *Nebraska*, directed by Alexander Payne, a police officer discovers Woody Grant walking on the highway. Woody is then picked up by his son David, who learns that Woody wants to go to Lincoln, Nebraska, to collect a million-dollar sweepstakes prize he believes he has won. When David sees the sweepstakes letter, he knows immediately that it is a mail scam designed to get gullible people to purchase magazine subscriptions. David brings his father home, where his mother Kate becomes increasingly annoyed by Woody's insistence on collecting the money.

It is a heartbreaking story, the story of people (most white Americans) who have grown up with fake mythologies and have been nourished with horrible food (in both the physical and spiritual sense), and are now sleepwalking towards the swamp, but still trust in their superiority.

Un-American Quichotte

In the surrealistic baroque of the novel *Quichotte*, Salman Rushdie recounts the story of an Indian-born writer living in America who works for an opioid pharmaceutical enterprise (the producers of Oxycontin, by the way) and falls in love with an Indian-born TV star. He travels from California to New York City with his fictional son Sancho Panza, and is confronted by countless acts of racist rejection and aggression from the true white Americans who do not love the brown pair.

> "I want us to speak to each other in that language, especially in public, to defy the bastards who hate us for possessing another tongue."[15]

This is the best definition of Americans: those bastards who hate us for possessing another tongue (and also, it must be said, for speaking better English than they do).

Ignorance is the bedrock of American supremacy. They know nothing about the world, about the numerous and infinitely different countries of the world, they do not speak any language except an impoverished form of English, they do not know, and they protect their ignorance as the origin of their strength. And they have some reason to do this, because ignorance has been the force of those who don't want to be distracted by beauty, by unpredictability, by complexity, so that they can focus only on winning the miserable game of competition, profit, accumulation.

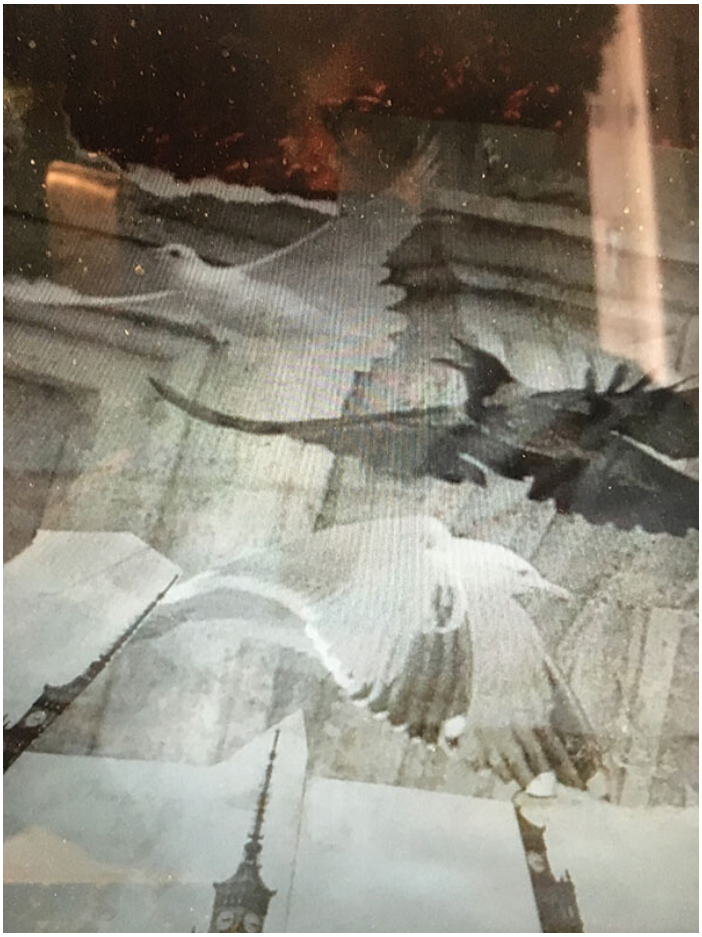
This has been the force of the American people during the last two centuries. But now?

Don't forget that there is another side of American power, which is the contrary of ignorance: knowledge. American universities and other cultural enterprises are the places where knowledge is stored, processed, transformed, created. By whom? By people who come from India, Japan, Italy, China, and many other countries. Silicon Valley would be nothing without the Syrian Steve Jobs, without the Tamil Indian Sundar Pichai, and countless engineers and designers who come from all over the world. The movie industry would be nothing without Italians and Jews. And so on and so on.

The ambiguous greatness of America has been the result of the marriage between Anglo-Saxon brutality (and ignorance) and cosmopolitan curiosity.

Now, for the first time in history, the integration of these two cultural components is breaking down. The anti-global reaction wants to expel, to forbid, to reject, to build walls, erase multiplicity, and reduce complexity.

The core of the process of disintegration is to be found here: in the social blame surrounding intelligence, irony, consciousness, and imagination.



Too Much and Not Enough

Then I read the e-book (not all of it, for God's sake) that Mary Trump has devoted to the psychoanalysis of her uncle. *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* is a useful book, written with some understanding of the psychoanalytic background of the current catastrophic situation. The author is not only a professional psychologist, but also the niece of this horrible man, who is also a poor unfortunate whose life has been miserable, as is often the case with people who are obliged to defend a self-image that is profoundly fake.

Trump's father, Fred, was a highly functional sociopath, according to Mary Trump. After describing the philosophy that the father transmitted to his son, Mary comments: "Fred's fundamental beliefs about how the world worked—in life, there can be only one winner and everybody else is a loser (an idea that essentially precluded the ability to share) and kindness is weakness—were clear."[16]

Then Mary recounts some family anecdotes. After having a bowl of mashed potatoes thrown on his head, Donald Trump feels humiliated:

> Everybody laughed, and they couldn't stop laughing. And they were laughing at Donald. It was the first time Donald had been humiliated by someone he even then believed to be beneath him. He hadn't understood that humiliation was a weapon that could be wielded by only one person in a fight. That Freddy, of all people, could draw him into a world where humiliation could happen to *him* made it so much worse. From then on, he would never allow himself to feel that feeing again. From then on, he would wield the weapon, never be at the sharp end of it.[17]

In Mary's opinion, Donald has a double problem: he had too much, and not enough. Too much ego, a resentful ego, nourished by a father incapable of providing affection. And not enough love, because his mother was sick, absent, and psychologically dependent on the sociopath.

This looks like a good introduction to the psychogenesis of the president of the United States of America. But also, I guess, it's a good introduction to the psychogenesis of American white males, and of America itself: the psychogenesis of the American abyss.

X

All images by Istubalz.

Franco Berardi, aka "Bifo," founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Italian Autonomia movement, is a writer, media theorist, and social activist.

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Wayne Allenswroth, “Old America is Dead: Three Scenarios for the Way Forward,” *Zero Hedge*, June 29, 2020.

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Allenswroth, “Old America is Dead.”

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Allenswroth, “Old America is Dead.”

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Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* , 46.

Sophie Lewis

With-Women: Grieving in Capitalist Time

An infant version of the author with her mother, Ingrid Lewis. Photo courtesy of Sophie Lewis.

Birthing me at the age of forty-two almost killed my mother. A midwife was by her side, however, at the hippie birthing home. And at the critical moment, this doula realized that this particular job was not going to be a case of "catching babies" (a popular industry definition of midwifery). She fetched a doctor, who saved both our lives—Mum's, and that of the fetal pre-version of me. This occurred just over three decades ago, in Austria. Today, I live in the United States, and I can happily say that I count midwives—birth doulas, death doulas, abortion doulas, and finally, full-spectrum doulas (who blend all three)—among my friends. I even briefly met my lifesaver, my parents' midwife, on a trip to Vienna years ago.

The word "midwife," at its Middle English root (*mit-wif*), simply means "with-woman." To be a midwife is to be a woman *with,* a companion to another, especially during the more slippery, amniotechnical moments of social reproduction: partum, miscarriage, departure.[1] I kind of like this etymology: it suggests the art Donna Haraway calls "staying with the trouble"; a commitment to being-with, no more, no less. But modern usage, as you

probably know, favors the word "doula," because our collective preference seems to be for the apparent gender-neutrality (false, as it happens … oops!) of a word that originally meant "slave, servant" in ancient Greek (*doule*; δούλη)—over any word that includes that ur-gendered word "wife." I'm not going to try to unravel, here, the co-constituting emergence of femaleness and servitude through history. For my purposes, it is enough that, demonstrably, anybody can be a good with-wife. What it takes is willingness to learn the labor of holding; staying; witnessing; facilitating the crossing of liminal thresholds; lubricating the beginnings and ends of human life-forms. The skills in question sprout up in the cracks throughout human societies, yet, under capitalism, there is next to no incentive for universalizing them. The fact of departing, or arriving, or undoing life, remains (for now) of limited market use.

How will we do birth and dying under communism? Today, training and certification in various forms of "doula-ing" is increasingly available throughout the world, as are the attendant opportunities for entrepreneurs and other capitalists to extract profit from a doula industry, which is a matter of hot ideological dispute among doulas themselves. Especially in the United States, the different subfields of the doula vocation are variously undergoing slow but sure professionalization. Yet doula-ing, as every doula I know insists, is not a profession, rather, it is an open-access verb (albeit a hideous one, at least in its gerund form). You or I, in other words, singly or as a collective, might at some point or another be called to doula the inaugural emergence, or terminal shutdown, of someone's body. You never know when an extra hand might be required on the occasion of someone's expulsion of a fetus (dead or living) from their uterus. You never know when your simple watchful presence might be called for because someone is dying and because, without you there, they would be utterly alone. As Madeline Lane-McKinley says, "if we must mother our friends, let us all be mothered."[2]

My mother was not of this mind. In 2016, she sent me the following WhatsApp:

> I am trying to coax Luna out of an attachment crisis. I discovered lots of moth holes in my old pashmina so now I keep it on the floor next to my chair to wrap my feet in. I think Luna thinks the pashmina is her mummy because she's milk-treading it all the time. :'(

To this, I replied:

> Well who is to say the pashmina isn't her mummy. Many things can be one's mummy perhaps

Luna, the feral Bavarian cat, who according to Ingrid Lewis was in need of resolving an attachment crisis. Photo courtesy of Sophie Lewis.

There followed a pause. Finally, I receive back, in capitals:

> I AM HER MUMMY. END OF

Further to which, after ten minutes of silence, there was further, hilarious clarification:

> Luna says I'm her mummy, end of.

It is not quite an exaggeration to say that the entire thesis of *Full Surrogacy Now*—mothering against motherhood—might be glossed as an extended meditation on this exchange.

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I know a little about what birthing me was like because shortly after the ordeal, my mother typed a lacerating

account of it on a typewriter in her first language, German. The text positions her in the third person, like an ancient archetype: " *die Frau*" (the woman). *The agony intensifies. The woman screams.* The other members of the cast, helping her, are " *die Hebamme*" (the doula), " *der Mann*" (the man), and after things start to take a turn for the worse, also " *der Arzt*" (the doctor). *Hebamme*, by the way, comes from *heben* (to lift).

It isn't just the description of my deeply non-mother-identified mother *as someone who desperately wants to mother* that is strange for me in reading this text. It is also simply odd to read her in German, since her West Germanness was usually another thing she—like many 1968ers of that nation—repudiated all her adult life. In the '60s, she was a first-generation undergraduate who'd defied her parents in order to be able to study, despite her sex, at the public university in Göttingen. She joined a Maoist group and seems to have been traumatically used by a sexist, closeted professor she fell in love with prior to marrying—and divorcing—twice—another mustachioed member of the cadre. Her father had fought in Hitler's army. Meanwhile, her maternal forebears had been Jewish, a fact Mum learned only in 2008. They were once "Sternbergs" who converted, changing their name, in order to embrace anti-Semitic Gentile life—a life carried out subliminally ashamed and terrified of discovery—some considerable time before the war. My authoritarian Opa died relatively young; and Oma, in her old age especially, was a nightmare of a person in whose presence, around her kitchen table in Hannover, I witnessed Mum, the wayward daughter, struggling to breathe. Nothing about Germany, in short, seems to have held my mother or felt worth holding onto. Inexplicable as this appears to me today, she was a profound Anglophile, enamored of Fleet Street and Dame Judi Dench. She yelled at Germans who couldn't pronounce her new surname, "Lewis." Living in France (which is where I was raised), she affected the airs of a vaguely aristocratic Englishwoman, albeit in a marked German accent I literally didn't hear until it was pointed out to me in my mid-teens. And she refused to teach her kids their "mother tongue" even when they asked to be taught it.

At the time of her writing of the typewritten account "Deine Geburt" (Your birth), in 1988, she had just married, on the cusp of menopause, a much younger man from England, the kind who passively believes that Earth's greatest civilizational achievement is William Shakespeare. Much later, while propped up in the alcoholism ward of a hospital, she glued the single piece of paper onto the first page of a kind of belated baby album for me.

The text occupies the page like a solid wall. At first glance, it looks like just one enormous paragraph. Overwhelmingly, it is a recounting of endless hours of desperation (*Verzweiflung*) and anger at *der Mann*, who isn't holding her correctly. She feels insufficiently lifted, insufficiently held. She hates and fears going forward with the task that stretches before her, through the sticky night.

Yet "Deine Geburt" culminates in an ecstasy of relief, an almost religious cry of love for the product of the birth-labor, *das Erhoffte* (the hoped-for one). There is a line break at the very end, and then a tiny surplus, a tadpole, a melodramatic closing clause:

Es lebt.

(It lives.)

***

As of today, I remain living still. But she, ever since late November, is dead. My mind still struggles to compute this aspect of reality, even though it was a long time coming. Over thirty-two years, we did not hold one other well. Where did she go? I still do not fully comprehend that I cannot send her a mini emoji-essay on WhatsApp. Mum herself, it has to be said, was willfully uncomprehending, to the last, of the fact that she was about to become unWhatsAppable. She did everything she could—principally, drinking—to avoid acknowledging her imminent deadness, to repress thinking or talking about it.

There was one nonhuman, however, who read the writing on the wall. After enduring months of Mum's frequent protracted absences whenever she was hospitalized, Luna, the feral Bavarian farm cat who hissed murder at everyone who wasn't Mum, eventually disappeared without trace from their cigarette-scented London flat.

Mum died Luna-less, therefore, at the age of seventy-three, shortly before the age of Covid-19—of more than one cancer, plus heart complications and whatever the effects were on her body of years upon years of immobility, alcohol, quasi-suicidal use of sleeping pills, not eating much or well, and chain-smoking. Following her cancer diagnosis, living as I do in Philadelphia, I made three trips to and fro across the Atlantic in 2019 while my visa status was—stressfully—in flux. Two of these trips combined time at her bedside in hospital (as she attempted to shame me by pointing out) with work, namely, gigs promoting my book.

During the one, final visit exclusively devoted to saying goodbye to her, she and I succeeded at spending some happy-ish hours in each other's company. But one day, she attempted to bestow on me some jewelry that had belonged to her late, hated, mother. "Do you want these now, or only when I am dead?" she asked me in a tone of coquettish grandiosity, fingering the string of pearls with affected sentimentality. "Uh, I don't know," I stammered,

A bedridden Ingrid Lewis before Luna the cat mysteriously disappeared. Photo courtesy of Sophie Lewis.

full of horror at the ineluctability of these moments of dynastic bestowal, no matter how untethered the scene to any real mother-daughter intimacy, how falsely charade-like, how hitherto despised (or at least disregarded) the pearls.

> "Um. *After* would obviously be fine … I really can't say. Now? I guess?"

Mum received this answer, her hand poised on the brink of releasing the pearls into my palm. Then, suddenly, she snatched the necklace back.

> "No! *After* … Hee, hee. Sorry."

As my face had flooded with humiliation, hers had lit up with glee.

> "To be honest," I said, "I don't want your fucking Nazi gold—"
> "Tch! It's not Nazi gold."
> —"and I thought you didn't want it either! You hated your parents, didn't you?"

Then she looked very tired, and I stormed out of the tiny electric-orange flat in order to make an emergency walk around a park with a friend, ashamed, hurt, disgusted, but also resolving to sell the pearls, if ever I got them, and donate whatever they earned immediately to a migrant fund.

***

Despite her being in the ongoing care of extraordinary hospice workers and of my brother (who lives an EasyJet ride away from her London flat), my mother was accompanied by no familiar presence at the time of her death other than her ex-husband's—my estranged father, the Englishman—who happened to be visiting that day. She was, however, listening while she died to a video recording of my brother and me, singing in harmony: "Don't you dare look out your window / Darling, everything is on fire / The war outside your door keeps raging on." A toy lobster I had brought for her earlier in the year lay on the pillow next to her head.

It was for reasons other than the coronavirus that she got no funeral. It wasn't a lack of money. It wasn't an objective logistical impossibility, either, although there *were* seas and oceans dividing her remains from the parties who might have gathered around them. No, the lack of funeral derived from the difficult fact that Mum, who lived alone and seemed to have alienated more or less every friend ever to have entered her life, simply *had nobody*. No one, that is, apart from her damaged and damaging "nuclear" kin, i.e., me and Ben and our father (her ex-husband). I defy anyone to tell me that the misery such situations entail, this heartbreaking insufficiency amid good intentions, this ideological blackmail borne of the very scarcity it itself produces, is a viable model for organizing human lives. If I had not been a family-abolitionist already, I can assure you, I would have become one last fall.

Please, hear the complaint I'm about to make not merely as self-pity, but as a scream for a world in which good deaths, the arts of witnessing grief, and grieving, are taught to all children from an early age. I will not gloss over it, nor counterbalance it with something hopeful and consolatory. *There was not enough doula-ing around Mum's death.* She had extraordinary hospice staff, yes, but no dedicated companion committed to seeing her over the edge. Rather, it was we, her default kin, who had to do our best at putting our selves to one side in order to perform that function. And there weren't doulas there for us, the death doulas, either, in any kind of sufficient number. Sure enough, looking back at the situation with the benefit of five months' worth of hindsight, it is easy to articulate this criticism about Mum's death in the register of the "transitional demand." *More damn doulas!*

Certainly the three of us would have needed a doula, or several, in order to make a public burial or cremation ceremony thinkable. Meanwhile, I am deeply, ragefully aware that many people in this world, to whose funerals masses of mourners would come, receive no ceremonies because of state violence, poverty, fugitivity, structurally produced anonymity, or prison walls. And this fact, that not

every human being gets a funeral, has always been one of the major symptoms of the depravity of capitalist societies for me. Yet the fact stubbornly remains: some human beings today end up in circumstances of practical friendlessness and un-mourn-ability. This is very different from being, as my white cisgender middle-class mum was certainly not, ungrievable.

Also, it turns out, funerals don't organize themselves. Also, it turns out, some funerals are impossible. They are impossible, for instance, because, among the three or four people who would attend them, at least two individuals cannot be in the same room together. It might be equally true, actually, to express this the opposite way: when two individuals *must not* be in the same room together, a certain kind of funeral is all too possible. Doula-ing is required, in those cases, to help a funeral *not* go ahead. In an essay by Laura Fox on filial estrangement, she writes: "Every day I have to resist the urge to reconcile with them."[3] Such individual resistance cannot prevail unassisted. We require women-with to help ourselves not-be-with. Resilience, even in estrangement, is necessarily woven together with others.

What is the antonym of doula-ing? Minutes after death happened to Mum, an up-close photo of her gaping, lifeless face was nonconsensually WhatsApped from her phone to my phone by my dad. (I have his number and email address blocked.) Seconds later, I received a notification that Ingrid Lewis, the very woman who hadn't been on Facebook for years and who had just died, liked several posts of mine.

***

Potent and sweet, however, remains the with-womanning I have known. At the formal level, I have discovered that diverse practices of grief-companionship exist in communities all over the world, including in my neighborhood—for instance, the Philly Death Doula Collective's grief circling initiative, whereby neighbors and strangers sit quietly and listen without comment to one another's grief.[4] It is grief itself, for Kai Wonder MacDonald, the founder of the Philadelphia grief circle, that is to be savored in its own right—not simply gotten through; or conquered; or shed as fast as possible in favor of a return to productivity.

Catching my eye, via a fly-posted flier, serendipitously soon after Mum's death, Kai's grief circles initially helped me understand that had I already enlisted many of my comrades as doulas in my grief long ago. What became clear only over time, however, was that it can be generous, in an odd way, to be greedy with one's need to be held: *more damn doulas!* The weaving of help-seeking and witnessing, giving and receiving, seems to operate on a non-zero-sum plane in the circle of the bereaved. Dozens of us are now swimming grievingly together on Kai's weekly or biweekly Zooms. Even before the era of coronavirus, in a work society defined by capitalist time (not to mention the opioid crisis), there was already a palpable sense of resistance in the death doulas' power to insist on non-progress, on the possibility of nonlinear evolution and non-healing. Kai personally, in fact, led me to the realization that it was not too late to hold a funeral: that I could be a Zoom-based death doula to myself and my brother via an honest, non-euphemistic ceremony about Mum to which we could invite only those people whom we wished to invite. Kai silently attended the ceremony, which felt wonderful.

Ingrid Lewis and the feral Bavarian cat, Luna, she wished to mother at the end of her life. Photo courtesy of Sophie Lewis.

Nine months into this strange adventure that is grief-circling (now, in the Covid era, via Zoom), for me there is no question: dying is a powerful site of anti-capitalist consciousness-raising. As North Carolina death doulas Saralee Gallien and Roxane Baker put it, there is resistance in "closing the door or being like, 'we're not done here.'" After a death happens, "the clock starts ticking really fast."[5] The art of the *mit-wif*, in many ways, is the steadfast solidarity of the unproductive.

And productivity was also sacrificed, in spades, for my sake, while Mum died. More than once, my closest kith traveled from the north of England to sojourn with me in the guest room of the building whose adjacent area (lands once dense with birds, no doubt) the feral Luna was conceivably still roaming. One friend helped me by non-aggressively saying "no" to Mum's absurd whims—something I didn't fully realize was possible—and just patiently sitting, or physically maneuvering her in and out of things. Another vacuumed a substantial fraction of the cigarette ash from her carpets and helped me assemble, when the time came, her special electric bed; a bed that was immediately disassembled after she transferred to her hospice deathbed. Whether on

WhatsApp, on Zoom, or in person, my doula-comrades simply participated. One evening, when there was an opening, a comrade knelt at Mum's hostile feet and drew tarot cards for her, which Mum, to my surprise, loved. Month after month, they listened to my heartbreak. Judy steadfastly refused to be offended by Mum's misogynist resentment and jealousy ("I don't like this Judy, why is she here?"), and simply stayed, modeling acceptance, enthusiastic appreciation of—and even *love* for—this un-mother of mine, without ever minimizing her brutalities or culpabilities.

interfering with her ability to print out a pro-trans email. Or the time she was fired from a volunteer job at a charity shop for calling her manager a "fascist" on the basis that he'd asked her to stow her handbag in the staff area. Or the time she was smoking a spliff in a field, aged sixty-one, and "tipped over backwards in slow motion until she was lying on her back with her feet in the air. Puffs of smoke rising up into the night sky like a steamboat."

Betrayal, abuse, cowardice, disappointment, unfairness, trauma: these central features of my mother's planetary footprint also occupy much of her crowd-sourced ode. The

"Perhaps, as a result, thanks to my many-gendered with-women and my grief circle, my heart has broken sufficiently to allow posthumously for my falling in love with Mum again, the way I did when I was a baby." Photo courtesy of Sophie Lewis.

Judy also gathered testimonies about Mum, after her death, into a Google Doc—at the top of which there is an "ode." "In her final days, after she became unable to eat or drink, she continued to imbibe wine via a sponge on a stick"—such is the general tone. Chiefly, the Doc comprises celebratory anecdotes, such as the one about her adulterous one-night stand with what turned out to be the former prime minister of a European nation-state (a man whose nickname was "Lewd Rubbers"). Or the time she thought there were trans-exclusionary Labour Party feminists, perhaps dwelling gremlin-like in her printer,

anti-funeral, based on that text, was magical in that it embodied the knowledge that grieving has to be about the departed as she really was, reflecting her relationships as they really were. My ceremony celebrated and condemned her—both—and it did her the comradely service, at least, of letting her mourners breathe. Perhaps, as a result, thanks to my many-gendered *with-women* and my grief circle, my heart has broken sufficiently to allow posthumously for my falling in love with Mum again, the way I did when I was a baby. As Judy says, the dead

inflict fresh wounds less easily than do the living, and so, they are much easier to learn forgiveness from.

X

Sophie Lewis is a communist writer based in Philadelphia, the author of *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family,* and a teacher of courses on queer and trans feminism at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. A member of the Out of the Woods collective, she writes and speaks widely on family abolition, ecology, and utopia.

1
For a discussion on amniotechnics, see Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now* (Verso, 2019), excerpted in *TANK Magazine* https://tankmagazine.com/tank/2019/06/full-surrogacy-now/ .

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Madeline Lane-McKinley (@la_louve_rouge_), Twitter, August 16, 2002.

3
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4
Sophie Lewis, "Grief Circling," *Dissent* , Summer 2020 https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/grief-circling .

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Roxanne Baker and Saralee Gallien, "Death Work," interview by Maggie Foster, *Mask Magazine* .

Serubiri Moses

A Useful Landscape

1. Language

How is one to conjure an imagination of a world? Edouard Glissant responds by affirming the power of the word. Language[1] seems a natural place to begin given Glissant's advocacy for words, self-expression, and poetics. This impulse in Glissant's thought echoes the Biblical statement "In the beginning was the word."[2] The author's attention to language reveals a site for interventions, refusals, dismantling totality, and bringing "one's world" or "the world" into being. This evokes the term "conjuring" to mean calling an image to mind, or calling a spirit to appear. Glissant calls this an essential process when he suggests that for Martinican people, the Creole language is "our only possible advantage in our dealings with the Other."[3] Glissant's notion of a "world" relates to his theory of literature, in terms such as *tout-monde* (all-world), and *chaos-monde* (chaos-world). These terms emerge from the theorist and poet's engagement with the Martinican landscape ("Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history," and "The landscape of your world is the world's landscape"[4]), where he describes contrasting images and forms of décalage. Language, which Glissant holds in sacred regard, is a conjuring of images of world(s) in self-expression, and certainly a site for creation. The sacred and its conjuring recall the Bible's opening statement: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.[5]

Self-expression, for Glissant, is an advantage to the Martinican people and mirrors the broader political aims of his statement ("We have seized this concession to use it for our own purposes, just as our suffering in this tiny country has made it, not our property, but our only possible advantage in our dealings with the Other—but having seized it does not make it into a means of self-expression, nor has our only advantage become a nation"[6]). I use "political" here to suggest that for the Glissant self-expression is understood politically, considering it to be the rightful inheritance of Africans in Martinique. Indeed, Glissant's references to the "scream" recall the experience of slavery. Rather than the inheritance of land and property in the French colony, he speaks of an affective and intellectual inheritance through sound, language, and expression. Glissant notes that African descendants' relationship to land is ambiguous, based on a history of dispossession and alienation: "The freed slave prefers the area surrounding the towns, where he is marginalized, to working himself on the land."[7] In a meditation on death, Glissant echoes Cyril Lionel Robert James in writing that "the first slaves wished for death in order to return to Africa."[8] Evocation of African spiritual traditions functions here as the connection between New World Africans and their ancestral land in Africa.

However, historians have alerted us to the immaterial aspects of land in indigenous West African cultures whose

Joseph Mallord William Turner, Seascape, c.1835–40. Oil on canvas. 90,2 × 121 cm. Photo: Tate. Copyright: CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).

descendants comprised the people of Martinique: Igbo people were attached to their land and derived spiritual and cultural meaning from it. They buried umbilical cords on ancestral land, thus, as historian Chima J. Korieh asserts, making "a connection between the living and the land."[9] Igbo people in the Americas responded to dispossession by carrying out various kinds of refusals that included disobedience, rebellion, and suicide.[10] It is no doubt that Glissant's notion of a "collective refusal" follows this severing with ancestral lands, and the impossibility of a land cosmology. That this was a process of psychological severing shouldn't be doubted either. Glissant conceptualizes disidentification with land as a process that works against nationalism, following the idea that nations are territories marked by borders, and tied to the land. The citizenship of African descendants in Martinique is granted, but cast in doubt. Rather than viewing inheritance through land and property, the author views inheritance through sonic and linguistic practices in Creole, noting how it differs from French in that it is not a national language.

2. Collective Refusal

I perceive an ethics of refusal in Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* (1992). This refusal runs parallel to a major theme in modern African philosophy, "personhood and communitarianism," which forms the basis for a social and humanistic ethics.[11] Glissant can be accused of conflating poetics with politics, culminating in his attempt to define the collective identity of the Creole community largely through the "Creole" language, which itself is viewed as a site for "rebellions." Glissant refers here to the internal oral protocols of Creole as pursuing a counterpoetics that is a "subversion of the original meaning" and a counter-ordering—that is, an "opposition to an order originating from elsewhere."[12] We generally perceive Glissant's political aims in his radical attempts at reorienting the purpose of language in the service of a

greater political goal to invent the world: "To declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence."[13] Removed from the "economic dimension," and considered through the political field, "poetics" is the "only weapon." This is a very useful formulation as it challenges the tendency to study politics only through financial and material history. In this sense, the author's overall thesis aims at a divergent articulation of politics through creolization (the collective notion of Creole community), which is inspired by dispersion, but isn't limited to financial systems in its naming of history and historical subjects. Glissant would later trouble this same question of community through further clarifying "diasporization" in the condition of errantry, as the basis for his idea of "relation." Glissant's conception of diasporization is fundamentally linked to his humanist perspective. Africa gave birth to Humanity: the first diaspora, he said in an interview. A diasporic humanism is the basis for what I view as the author's refusal of totality. He writes that the ultimate and absolute manifestation of totality is empire.[14]

For my own purposes, diasporization is thought of as "Being outside," but also "being outside of language."[15] Glissant, also following Sartre, makes this connection between the "diaspora" and the "poetic use of language." The poetic use of language is viewed as a strategy that leads to a "reorientation of Being" in what Glissant might call a "nomadic" space. The advocacy of self-expression as "our only possible advantage in our dealings with the Other" should be considered alongside the author's notion of nomadism, as it points to deeper reflections on African languages undergoing a process of dispersion in the Middle Passage.

Since this collective humanism rests so thoroughly on creolization, Antillean critic and novelist Maryse Condé argues that Glissant's emphasis on a collective identity is a threat to individual self-expression. The problem here is a theory of literature that proves too prescriptive, too instructive, and thus too limiting for creative self-expression. Additionally, Condé views this kind of committed literature as offering only reassuring images that prove seductive, but are, in fact, dangerous.[16]

Condé draws a direct link between this project of creolization and the representational model imposed on the Antillean writer, citing Aimé Césaire's notion of speaking for the voiceless[17] from his *Notebook on Return to the Native Land*, while maintaining that Glissant shares Césaire's ambitions and his belief in the importance of community.[18] Condé's criticism of Glissant can be summarized in her use of a term borrowed from Suzanne Césaire: according to literary critic Dawn Fulton, Condé's analysis suggests that reassuring images of a collective identity are a "smokescreen" that needs to be dismantled.[19] This dismantling is important given the extent to which Glissant's creolization is applied in the international visual arts. Creolization is utilized to remove contradictions, erase differences, and assume parity in large-scale exhibitions and international surveys of art. The application of creolization also gives the false impression that Glissant argued for the globalization of visual art.

Yet Glissant is critical of erasure through protocols of transparency that function to standardize art and language across the globe. In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Glissant articulates otherness through a lens of "transparency."[20] Writing on myth, he notes that "no myth will ever provide for the legitimacy of the other."[21] He considers that "transparency" functions as a form of "generalization" in which otherness is erased. "It will always be a question of reducing this other to the transparency experienced by one-self. Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated."[22] Treating these as distinct elements—self and other—might we view Glissant's dialectic as similar to Hegel's? Glissant, in fact, follows rather than diverges from Hegel's Christian sources. Glissant's account of "relation" fosters a consciousness in which an ethics of openness is implied within being-in-the-world. To borrow Gayatri Spivak's term, relation is "planetary." It is concerned with "planetary beings" who are, as Glissant might put it, facing the world.[23] Glissant's relation fosters a sense of openness to the world, while Spivak's planetary beings are seen as free agents on the earth. However, that openness is not without contrast and décalage. As Glissant insists, Creole consists of a counter-ordering protocol which functions politically against the imperialism of the French language.

3. Legitimacy and Land Possession

Colonial history is a history of property accounted for in world-scale financial systems and imperialism. Creolization strikes against imperialism via the internal protocols of the Creole community and via counter-ordering the French language. Thus, if a diasporic community is not legitimized through colonial property, what alternatives foster legitimacy? In *Poetics of Relation*, legitimacy is understood through filiation. While this term signals blood lineages and ancestry, Glissant is careful to precisely name filiation as the basis for colonial history. The author discusses filiation in relation to both land and violence, recalling colonial property and its violent acquisition, citing "a hidden violence of filiation" and "a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to claim its entitlement to the possession of a land."[24] Land possession is aligned, in Glissant's conception, with colonial territorial processes, similar to Spivak's use of the term "worlding" to describe colonial mapping as "worlding the world on uninscribed earth."[25] These statements follow Glissant's own doubts about African descendants' citizenship in Martinique, the massacre of the Arawak on the island, and his ambiguity toward the nation-state and its borders as a legitimating form. In addressing notions of wandering, errantry, and rootlessness—all considered "approaches" in *Poetics of Relation*—Glissant theorizes about identity by pushing against fixed and unchanging notions of being. These "approaches" or methods of

Joseph Mallord William Turner, Seascape with Distant Coast, c. 1840. Photo: Tate. Copyright: CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).

argumentation oppose blood lineages as a source of authenticity and legitimacy. Once again, Glissant advocates nomadism. What he refers to as an arrow-like nomadism is understood via Creole languages, in their multiplicity, oracy, and ultimately their counter-ordering of French imperialism in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti, and elsewhere.

Troubling the discourse of the nation like Sigmund Freud before him, Glissant turns to Egypt, a Biblical and mythical place. This is consistent with his use of Biblical terms such as "creation," "word," and "void," as well as his conception of language as conjuring an imagined world. I suspect that Biblical stories offer Glissant sources to counter blood inheritance, in the same way that Freud's research into Moses (*Moses and Montheism*, 1939) took place amidst the popularization of race purity as the basis for white nationalism in 1930s Europe. At the same time, Glissant goes against the idea of conquest and discovery that legitimizes violence against the Other as well as the "worlding" of their world—that is, the dispossession of their land. By advocating self-expression, nomadism, and orality, Glissant distances himself from colonial totality, reflecting his desire for a national literature.[26] It comes then as no surprise that Glissant would write that "to declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence."

Glissant's position for a community held together through a Creole language in *Caribbean Discourse* is reaffirmed in his attempt to "reconcile Hegel with the African griot" in *Poetics of Relation*.[27] Following commentary about the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Glissant adds a footnote: "Hegel, in book 3 of his *Aesthetics*, shows how the founding works of communities appear spontaneously at the moment in which a still naive collective consciousness reassures itself about its own legitimacy, or not to mince words: about its right to possess a land."[28]

The footnote stresses "naive collective consciousness"

and legitimacy. Here we encounter two major threads that run through Glissant's thinking: (1) the idea of roots; and (2) the idea of collective consciousness. While I have focused so far on self-expression, language, and the political ambition of a theory of literature, there is a Hegelian phenomenology in both *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation* that emerges in his articulations of collective consciousness. Thus, Condé's critique allows us to clarify Glissant's attention to the collective as being of a mythical and religious status. Glissant's "collective" is motivated by the uprootedness of diasporization, as well as the uplifting of New World Africans after slavery. His collective consciousness emphasizes the concept of *tout-monde* (all-world) and the act of facing the world as a position, directly relating to Hegel's *Weltanschauung* (worldview) and *Weltgeist* (world spirit). While Glissant utilizes these tools to describe history in the interest of Creole community and the emergence of a national literature, they may still function as a smokescreen. This is the equivalent of stereotypes that provide comforting images of unity, while erasing difference. I liken this to present debates about the stereotypical but reassuring images of kings and queens in Africa.

The latter part of the footnote on the "right to possess land" reflects Glissant's thoughts on Martinique's nineteenth-century Africans, who were only vaguely landowners. I use the term "vague" here following Glissant's suggestion that rather than the life of a peasant farmer, most free Africans in the Antilles wanted to live urban lives in Pointe-à-Pitre and Fort-de-France. He stresses that Africans did not immediately purchase land in large settlements after slavery was abolished. (Glissant does not engage maroon settlements that emerged during slavery. Rather than re-rooting, he recommends a horizontal movement inspired by Deleuze, framing errantry as a way of life.) I suspect that for Glissant, land ownership would mean a revision of uprooting. Legitimacy was attained via land ownership. Glissant's Christian model would suggest that Africans on the island did not inherit land from colonizers. The question set up here concerns history. Legitimacy through filiation, and inheritance, would have serious implications for the history of modern Martinicans. If New World Africans were not legitimized through colonial inheritance or land ownership after abolition, how were they to be legitimized in history?

4. Poetics

In order to address the question of legitimacy, we must address the role of the poetics of language in Glissant's books. There exists continuity between Glissant and the griot writers, as they are called in the Caribbean. Glissant, an advocate of poetics, was taught in Martinique by the poet Aimé Césaire. Maryse Condé suggests that the differences between Glissant and Césaire have been exaggerated.[29] Césaire was one of the central griot writers of négritude. Certainly, the work of the griot writers was founded in their intellectual calls for liberation through a praxis of language. According to philosopher D. A. Masolo, the négritude form was primarily poetic and "its content was pluralism." Drawing his readers to the questions of otherness and cultural hierarchization, Masolo continues: "The value of pluralism was built around an ontology that accepted diversity or otherness without hierarchical judgements of human worth based on racial or cultural characteristics."[30]

Philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne engages another figure of négritude, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose introductory essay "Orphée Noir" was published in the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948), edited by Leopold Senghor. "When these black poets meet" in the space of the poetry anthology, Sartre writes, it is not merely to praise Africanity, as Wole Soyinka might hold.[31] Nor is it "continental Africanity welcoming home her children who had left." Soyinka's statement ("a tiger does not proclaim his tigritude") continues to be referenced in contemporary debates involving race in Africa. But as Diagne, following Sartre, suggests, négritude is "the attempt to overcome a primordial dispersion of all into the darkness outside Being."[32]

In Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, self-expression confronts the totalizing thought of conquest: "A scream is an act of excessiveness." Thus a "poetics of excess" emerges adjacent to a discourse on land, whether considering its dispossession or the right to possess it. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant faults the mythical "opacity" of narratives of Christianity and other religions before finding in this mythical opacity the counter-narrative to modern "transparency." By positioning opacity in opposition to "transparency," the author issues his defensive articulation of the "right" to opacity. What fosters legitimacy of the diasporic subject who is "outside-of-Being" here is the imaginary (in Lacan's sense) of one's story beyond the judgment of the other. In Manthia Diawara's documentary *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2010), Glissant advocates the right to opacity in a way that recalls the statement "Thou shalt Love thy neighbor as thyself."[33] Yet, when speaking about the French language and its use in colonial domination, he is equally concerned about "language presented as universal."[34]

Here the relationship between legitimacy and the inheritance of language is presented as an economic question following colonization and empire. In a postcolonial reading, Glissant uses Samir Amin's idea of delinking to describe Caribbean islands as "self-centered" economies, perhaps a mirror of his notion of the "archipelago of languages." Following Amin, Glissant is suspicious of what he deems a "whole made up of peripheries" set up in the service of a center, thus contending that it is "necessary for these peripheries to have a self-centered economy."[35]

Thus, how do we escape totality? How do we escape the deployment of the kind of totalizing language used in the discourse of conquest and discovery? What is legitimation in the space outside-of-Being? Glissant juxtaposes the existential questions of Sartre with the economic theories of Amin. He also juxtaposes Antillean landscapes with isolated self-centered economy. It is a mélange, to use another term favored by Glissant. Much later, he will discuss island economies with respect to economic scale.[36] Glissant's Hegelian dialectic and its world consciousness is substituted, perhaps momentarily, for "smallness."

5. Horror

"The Open Boat," a chapter in Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, is an island-and-sea narrative. The chapter recalls Melville's *Moby Dick* and its descriptions of the "dark" interiors of the whale. It also recalls epics such as Homer's *Odyssey*, the ark in Genesis, and the majestic waters in Exodus. By positioning it at the "beginning" of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant introduces the kind of Biblical themes that are key to his philosophical arguments. The "beginning" in itself signifies both "creation" and "language," as mentioned earlier. This is consequential to Glissant's ideas on writing the world into existence. That is, the world which is to come will emerge from language as an act of creation, again reflecting the statement "In the beginning was the word."

The chapter faces toward darkness in its "beginning" and "creation"—that is, the creation of people of African descendant in Martinique, who were "wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and tutelary community."[37] Glissant views Africa distantly as the "inaccessible land," and locates the starting point of Caribbean discourse in this movement across waters and its experiences of horror.[38] "This boat is a womb, a womb abyss," he writes.[39] Glissant's philosophy thus ventures towards darkness, and finds within that darkness a miraculous beginning. He considers "the horrors of the slave trade as [a] beginning."[40] His explanation of the abyss takes into account the implications of creation through language, alerting us to the fact that the term "abyss" carries an optimism but then suggests decay: "In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green."[41]

Glissant's view of darkness recalls the Bible and Homer. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant describes "suffering without witness" and exclaims, "What suffering came from the unknown!"[42] This language evokes the kind of suffering found in Gehenna, the place of punishment in the Bible, which Matthew 18:9 chillingly characterizes this way: "It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than with two eyes to be thrown into the Gehenna." On page 5 of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant compares the horror of the Middle Passage to the bodily pain and torture endured in Gehenna: "The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas." In addition, the first part of this sentence recalls Homer: "To the black palace of eternal night: 'Still in the dark abodes of death I stood.'"[43] How is being in Gehenna different from being in normal circumstances? Emmanuel Levinas writes about what the experience of horror does to consciousness: "Horror is somehow a movement that will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity.'"[44]

Returning to Sartre, how does Glissant's emphasis on darkness suggest a Being outside, and a reorientation of Being? Being in the darkness, writes Glissant, can be viewed as a "measured disorder."[45] As Levinas suggests, modern European philosophy has a blind spot when it comes to this space of being outside of normal circumstances, viewing it as inconsequential.

I suspect that Glissant's adjacent focus on "excess" might help clarify his attention to the "dark interiors" in which the abyss is synonymous with birth, death, and language. Understanding that "order and disorder" are the basis of much theorization on being, Glissant turns to "the excessiveness of order" and the aforementioned "measured disorder."[46] In his theory of a literature of *chaos-monde*, Glissant describes both order and chaos as "the edge of the sea," revealing the landscape as a key source for this theory, which challenges totalizing scientific laws. Glissant advocates a non-totalizing science within this *chaos-monde*, revealing an optimism about the "unknown" and "unseeable" that constitute "suffering without witness."

Other theorists have also explored the status of this "dark abode." Derrida, affirming Glissant's challenge to scientific laws, describes alterity as "an excess which overflows the totality of that which can be thought."[47] Lacan stresses that "a logic is already operative in the unconscious."[48] Evidently, with the abyss and this space of darkness as a site of creation, Glissant wrestles with the limits of scientific knowledge.

6. Exodus as Double

Glissant's awareness of the law is tied to his understanding of legitimacy. After describing the massacre of the Arawak, the indigenous people of Martinique, Glissant suggests that Martinican soil does not belong to African descendants.[49] He describes the forced movement of millions of people to the Western hemisphere using a legal term: "deportation." Deportation is a legal form of expulsion involving border authorities and state governments. It is defined as the act of removing a foreigner from a country. Is Glissant commenting on the laws in Africa when using this term? Does he imply that

Paul Gauguin, Martinique Landscape, 1887. Oil on canvas. 117 cm x 89.8 cm. Photo: Scottish National Gallery. Public domain.

the millions uprooted were foreigners in Africa? Or does "deportation" become ambiguous in describing national laws that are also Biblical? Answering these questions is not the aim here. I am merely drawing attention to the way Glissant addresses the forced movement of Africans.

Glissant's narrative of diaspora unfolds as a Biblical exodus in which an Egyptian pharaoh enforced laws upholding slavery, and in which those who fled Egypt did so to escape captivity.[50] According to literary theorist Hortense Spillers, this interpretation of "fleeing the scene of captivity and dismemberment" is prominent in African-American sermons.[51] Using "exodus" as a term of ambivalence, *Poetics of Relation* reveals a situation of "suffering without witnesses." Glissant, who was teaching in the United States at the time, and who later wrote a book on William Faulkner, presents a theory of literature with a double ambition: (1) to inspire creative practitioners to form this Antillean literature of mélange, creolization, and *chaos-monde* as a model to rethink language and alterity; and (2) to serve as a political manifesto that opposes the re-colonization of the islands, expands on economic and political questions concerning land, borders, and states, and calls attention to the predicament and suffering of Martinicans in the post-slavery period.

If the setting for this predicament is Egypt, it is no different from the African-American preachers for whom Egypt references a place of captivity. The exodus has a double meaning: the dispersion out of Africa, and the attempt to escape captivity. Spillers suggests that the African-American sermon not only "catalyzes movement, but embodies it."[52] By way of example, she discusses Malcolm El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., both of whom embody the political and moral urgencies of public speech within the African-American community.

In King's 1968 sermon "I've Been to the Mountaintop," the "I" of the sermon travels through time.[53] He pauses and reflects on the different "ages," repeating, "I wouldn't stop there." One of the places King time-travels to is the "dark dungeons of Egypt," here echoing the Bible and Homer's *Odyssey.* King goes on to describe a journey "through wilderness on toward the promised land," anchoring his sermon in a re-visioning that combines Biblical historical interpretation and the political urgencies of the 1960s:

> Whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

Given that King's sermon is a rebuke of racism, segregation, white supremacy, and the various US administrations that enforced Jim Crow laws, "Pharaoh" here is not the historical Egyptian pharaoh of the Bible, but rather US law enforcement and political leaders who excluded African-Americans from civic life. It is in this double sense that Glissant's Egypt is not situated in the real Africa, but in an imagined one. This imagined Africa, for Glissant, shapes the political urgencies of the post-slavery Caribbean. *Poetics of Relation* thus attempts to "flee captivity" by reconstructing the history of the Martinican people through a sea-and-island narrative that consists of "exodus" and the mélange of island landscapes.

X

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1
The title of this article is derived from the Brazilian song "Inútil Paisagem" (Useless landscape), composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim, with lyrics by Aloysio de Oliviera, pointing to Edouard Glissant's theory of the landscape of Martinique, from which he derives his theory of literature. My title inverts the song's melancholia about loss to reflect the affirmative attitude of Glissant's theory.

2
John 1:1.

3
Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (University of Virginia Press, 1992), 167.

4
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 11; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 33.

5
Genesis 1:1.

6
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 167.

7
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 160.

8
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 59. C. L. R. James: "Suicide was a common habit, and such was their disregard for life that they often killed themselves, not for personal reasons, but in order to spite their owner. Life was hard and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa." James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage, 1989), 15–16.

9
"Land was not just a factor of production. It remained a link with the ancestors. For instance, the umbilical cord of a newborn child is buried in ancestral land—that way the Igbo can make the connection between the living and the land and between the land and the ancestors." Chima J. Korieh, "The Igbo Diaspora in the Atlantic World: African Origins and New World Formations," in *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diasporic Destinations* , ed. Raphael C. Njoku and Toyin Falola (Indiana University Press, 2016), 180.

10
Igbo in the Atlantic World , 161, 116, 142.

11
Kwame Gyekye, "African Philosophy," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* , ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

12
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 165.

13
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 169.

14
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 28.

15
Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude* (Seagull Books, 2007), 26–27.

16
Dawn Fulton, *Signs of Dissent: Maryse Condé and Postcolonial Criticism* (University of Virginia Press, 2008), 20–21.

17
Maryse Condé, "On the Apparent Carnivalization of Literature from the French Caribbean," in *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities* , ed. Jean Muteba Rahier (Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 91–97.

18
Maryse Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," *Yale French Studies*, no. 83 (1993): 121–35.

19
Fulton, *Signs of Dissent*, 21.

20
For Glissant's thoughts on "transparency" and "opacity," see the chapter "Transparency and Opacity" in *Poetics of Relation*, 111–20.

21
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49.

22
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49.

23
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetary," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* , ed. Barbara Cassin et al. (Princeton University Press, 2014).

24
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 143.

25
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rami of Simur," in *Europe and its Others, Vol 1: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature* (University of Essex, 1985).

26
Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom."

27
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 21.

28
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 16.

29
Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom."

30
D. A. Masolo. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 10.

31
Wole Soyinka said during a 1964 conference in Berlin: "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces. In other words, a tiger does not stand in a forest and say, 'I am a tiger.' When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker, you know that some tigritude has emanated there." Quoted in Jan Heinz Jahn, *Neo-African Literature* (Grove Press, 1969), 265–66.

32
Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy*, 26–27.

33
Matthew 22:34–40.

34
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 28.

35
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 28.

36
Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation , directed by Manthia Diawara (Third World Newsreel, 2010).

37
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5.

38
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 167.

39
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5.

40
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 74.

41
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

42
Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 159–71.

43
Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. G. H. Palmer (Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 173.

44
Emmanuel Levinas, "There Is: Existence without Existents," in *The Levinas Reader* , ed. Sean Hand (Blackwell, 1989), 32.

45
Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*, 92.

46
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 92.

47
Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference* (Routledge, 1978), 69.

48
Jacques Lacan. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," *Hegel and Contemporary Continental Philosophy* 19, no. 6 (1960): 205–35.

49
Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 147.

50
Exodus 5:1–23.

51
Hortense J. Spillers, "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 254.

52
Spillers, "Moving on Down the Line," 254.

53
Delivered on April 3, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Available online https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm .

Iman Issa

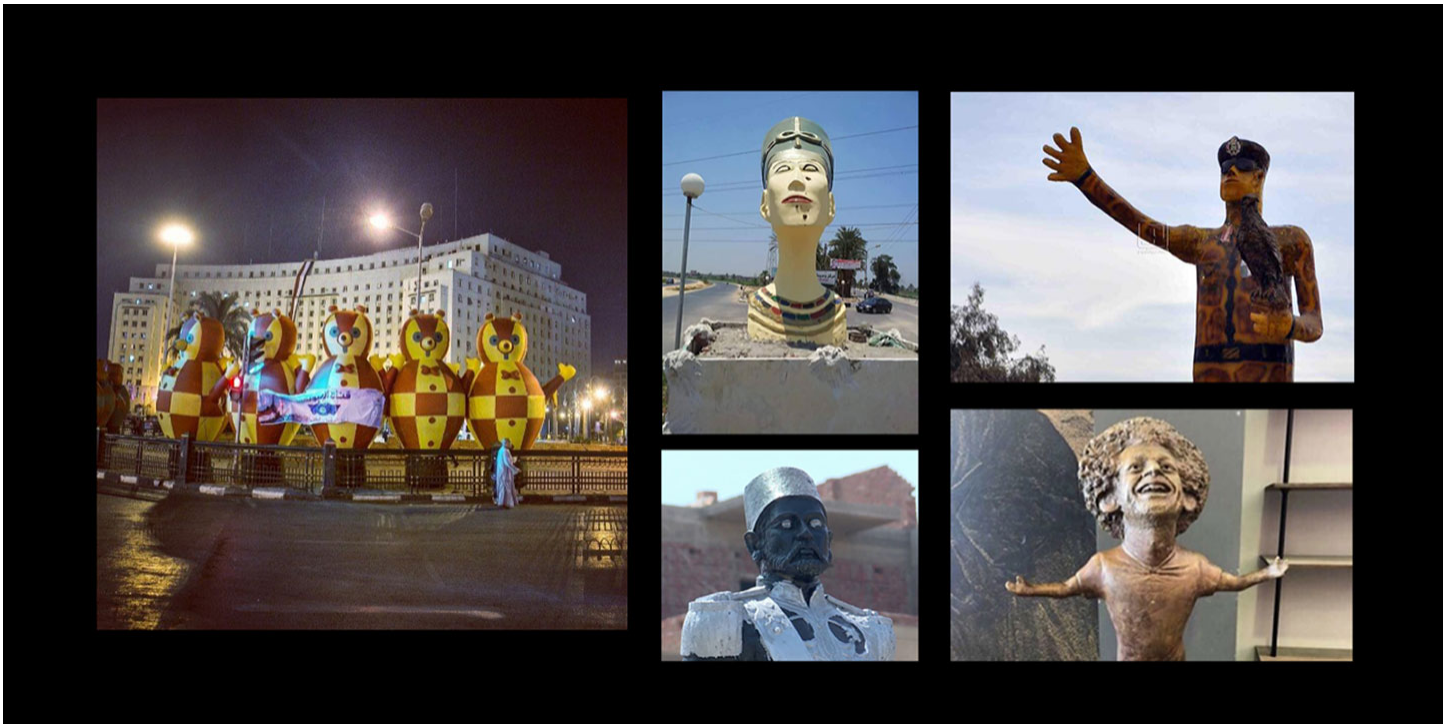
Proxies, with a Life of Their Own

It must have been in early 2014 that I saw the balloon sculptures in the middle of Tahrir Square in Cairo. They were placed by the then electorally validated military regime to celebrate a project expanding the Suez Canal. While accused by many of being a merely nominal project, unlikely to yield any real material gains, it was presented by the government as one of its grandest, and of which it was most proud. So what a strange choice to use inflated teddy bear–like balloons to commemorate it, and to place them in the physical and symbolic center of the 2011 uprising.

Over the next months and years, equally unusual officially commissioned commemorative monuments and statues started to emerge all over the country, such as the 2015 statue of Nefertiti in the governorate of Minya, whose form and careless execution were so extreme as to prompt a citizen-led outcry for the government to remove it (which they did), or the 2017 statue of Mustafa Kamil, a man commonly referred to as a national hero, in the village of Denshawai,[1] which resembled a figure straight out of a cartoon and was so ill-executed, with visible paint marks dripping all over its body.

It is tempting to attribute these monuments' forms to the carelessness and bad taste of the officials who commissioned and executed them, but I think such an interpretation fails to do them justice. Their large number and varied locations and sources suggest them to be symptoms of their historical moment.[2] As forms they have a comic character. And like many comic characters, they perform a double function, an assertion of a thing with its simultaneous rejection. Their audible speech is cloaked in insincerity, shedding doubt on the accuracy of its content as it is uttered. As they stand commemorating a nation's heroes, accomplishments, or history, I imagine these monuments winking at their viewers, telling them that as monuments they and what they stand for are a sham.

This dynamic doesn't seem so far off from what is happening in the United States government at the moment, best embodied in what its president has become most famous for: his lying. Trump is one of the first to admit of his lying, which he did in November 2018, when asked by an ABC News journalist if he tells the truth, to which, without bating an eye, he replied: "I try. When I can, I tell the truth."[3] Trump's behavior is in line with a public performance of insincerity, transparently predicated on his political position as president. His unapologetic flip-flopping of facts and statements makes clear (to a comic extreme) what presidents have always done: fail to consistently tell the truth. Disregarding differing motives and agendas (some noble, others less so), this behavior of concealing and bending truths, and the assumption of a distance between proclaimed goals and latent intentions, becomes nothing radically new but is arguably rooted in the very role and institution of a president. Granted, in this case, it is done in the most transparent of manners and with a level of ludicrousness, frequency, and intensity that



Composite of found images, from left to right: Image of balloon sculpture in the middle of Tahrir Square commemorating the inauguration of the Suez Canal expansion in 2014. Image of an officially commissioned statue of Nefertiti in the governorate of Minya erected in 2015. Image of the statue of Khedive Ismail in the town of Ismailia after a renovation in 2017, where the original plain stone sculpture was painted in black and silver colors in a careless manner that left dripping paint marks over its body. Image of a DIY statue of the president with a bird erected by a supporter of his in Isna in 2015. Image of a statue of the famous Egyptian soccer player Mohamed Salah by the artist Mia Abdallah, which was unveiled at the inauguration of the World Youth Forum in Sharm el Sheikh in 2018.

may have been previously unimaginable. In this way, like the air-stuffed balloons or the deformed Nefertiti which, while inhabiting the role of monuments, clearly inform their viewers that they are proxies for neither grandiose projects nor national pride, these performances of the current US president are immune to accusations of bad taste, lying, or insincerity, for these are the very qualities they openly celebrate.

This mocking of official structures and roles is surely not new, but the subject position from which it emerges is. For many years, it has been the traditional role of satirists, artists, dissidents, and cultural and social commentators to undertake such comic caricatures, with the aim of shaking belief in the stability of historically significant figures, narratives, and gestures, but rarely, in recent memory, have such caricatures been performed from the subject position of the very institutions they were meant to deconstruct.[4] For now the monument and its parody, the president and the comedian making fun of what a president is, are one and the same.[5] So what happens when the parody is not performed from the margins attacking the center, but is identical with the original, or more precisely is the original?

In *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Alenka Zupančič posits comedy as a practice resting firmly on its ability to link individual narratives or characters to the larger universal structures under which they can be grouped. She sees comedy presenting what she terms "the concrete universal," where comic characters are not subjects opposed to a structure, rather "they are subjectivized points of the structure itself."[6] In laughing at the botched statue of Nefertiti or Trump's incredible claims, we must be able to access something concrete about monuments or presidents in general. We link these individual cases to their larger encompassing structures and see how much they conform or depart. Comedy never departs too much from the norm it references, for it must be able to keep this link between the individual case and the universal concept. "Comedy is not a deviation from the norm, or its reversal, but its radicalization; it is a procedure that carries the (human) norm itself to its extreme point; it produces and displays the constitutive excess and extremity of the norm itself."[7]

Comedy also simultaneously accesses multiple dimensions of its subject. "It plays upon the duality of appearance and truth, of surface and depth. And it does so in a way, which, at some precise point, links the two."[8] This operation, when successful, alters both its subject as well as the universal concept this subject is attached to. "When

Composite of found images, from left to right: Image of the statue of the Egyptian writer and thinker Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad in Aswan, first when it was in plain bronze and then again in 2015 when it was painted under the rubric of "renovating" the statue. Image of a replica of a pharaonic lion erected at the entrance of the Teacher's Syndicate in Cairo in 2016. Image of the statue of the famous singer and composer Mohamed Abdel Wahab in Cairo, first when it was in plain stone and then again in 2016 when it was painted under the rubric of "renovating" the statue.

in comedy some imaginary Oneness or Unity splits in two, the sum of these two parts never again amounts to the inaugural One; there is a surplus that emerges in this split and constantly disturbs the One."[9] It is a revolutionary process, resulting in a reshaping of the very concept of the subject at hand, albeit in this case a revolutionary process carried out from the least expected of channels, those meant to guard and perpetuate the coherence of this concept. It is in this way a process unlikely to be easily reversed with a change of characters (a more tempered president or more graceful-looking monument), for its effect is not limited to individual players but extends to the entire larger conceptual structures they spring from.

One might be tempted to ask why these "parodies" have successfully and effortlessly been able to step into the shoes of the subjects they are "clumsily" copying, and why this attribution of parody to them is not enough to stop them in their tracks, to render them ineffectual. If there is an intelligence to these symptomatic eruptions, it lies solely in their ability to understand something fundamental about our modern life and its institutions, which is that it is only the channels that matter. If someone tells you straight out that they are going to tell you a lie, you will likely still believe the content of that lie if they say it from the right platform. More precisely, you will have no choice, for in our current systems, lying or telling the truth are equally capable of producing material results, once they come from a validated channel. Zupančič identifies this dynamic as most clearly embodied in Hegel's description of the Absolute Spirit, which, while emanating in consciousness, nonetheless has real, material, and historical existence. "This is the ultimate impotence of the reason of Enlightenment, the reason which knows that the Other (world) does not exist, yet remains powerless in the face of all its practices."[10] A point Zupančič further clarifies with the following joke:

> A man believes that he is a grain of seed. He is taken to a mental institution, where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain, but a man. No sooner has he left the hospital than he comes back very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid that it will eat him. "Dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a grain of seed, but a man." "Of course I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken?"[11]

"It is not enough that we know how things really stand in a certain sense; things themselves have to realize how they stand."[12]

"If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" writes Jalal Toufic.

> I, for one, don't, and not because I am depressed, but because I find this historical period largely so laughable that were I to start laughing I am afraid I would not be able to stop … All I ask of this world to which I have already given several books is that it become less laughable, so that I would be able to laugh again without dying of it—and that it does this soon, before my somberness becomes second nature … In a laughable epoch, even the divinities are not immune to this death from laughter: "With the old gods, they have long since met their end—and truly, they had a fine, merry, divine ending! They did not 'fade away in twilight'—that is a lie! On the contrary: they once—laughed themselves to death! That happened when the most godless saying proceeded from a god himself, the saying: 'There is one God! You shall have no other gods before me!'" (Nietzsche, "Of the Apostates," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).[13]

Indeed comedy upon comedy is piling up, hijacking humor and making laughter a risky prospect. But it could also be that as we somberly contemplate the comedies unfolding all around us, removing the distinction between surface and depth, linking literalness with its beyond, we are faced with a rare opportunity to short-circuit how things "think they stand" and with the right resolve to restructure it all. This assumes that we do not try to go for the less painful but surely more detrimental route of mending what has been irreparably broken and hallucinating into reality what is certainly no longer there and may actually have never been.

X

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1
A significant location as it was the site of a famous massacre by the British in 1906, which was one of the main factors in prompting the strong national resistance movement, of which Kamil was a major figure.

2
I have been able to locate at least fifteen such statues, including renovations that render the original unrecognizable. Examples include the 2015 mermaid in a public square in the city of Safaga located in the Red Sea governorate, the 2016 lions placed in the entrance of the Teacher's Syndicate in Cairo, the 2017 lion in Tanta, the 2018 statue of the famous Egyptian soccer player Mohamed Salah by the artist Mai Abdallah, which was unveiled at the inauguration of the World Youth Forum in Sharm el Sheikh, the 2017 renovation of the Khedive Ismail statue in the town of Ismailia, the 2016 renovation of the statue of the famous Egyptian singer and composer Mohamed Abdel Wahab in Cairo, the 2015 renovation of the statue of the writer and thinker Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad in Aswan, the 2015 renovation of the statue of the scholar and thinker Rifa'a al-Tahtawi located in Thata, the 2016 renovation of the statue of the revolutionary figure Ahmed Urabi located in the town of Zaqaziq, where he was born, and the 2016 renovation of the statue of the famous singer Om Khalthoum in the neighborhood of Zamalek in Cairo where she lived, among others.

3
Alexandra Hutzler, "Donald Trump Admits He Only Tells the Truth 'When I Can,'" *Newsweek*, November 1, 2018 https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-tell-truth-lies-1196677 .

4
Prior regimes may have come close to creating caricatures of the institutions they occupy as well, including the Mubarak regime in Egypt and George Bush Jr. in the US, or to go back even further, Ronald Reagan, but this moment seems to offer a new benchmark.

5
It is hard to distinguish Trump proper from his impersonator on *Saturday Night Live* , which has more to do with Trump's performance than his impersonator's skills.

6
Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (MIT Press, 2008), 55.

7
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 210.

8
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 210.

9
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 185.

10
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

11
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

12
Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

13
Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming* (Sternberg Press, 2014), 44.

Ben Ware

Nothing but the End to Come? Extinction Fragments

1. The Blindness of "Enlightened" Doomsaying

Let us begin by setting the artist Gustav Metzger alongside the philosopher Günther Anders. In his 1960–61 manifestos on auto-destructive art, Metzger speaks of an art that "re-enacts" capitalism's "obsession with destruction."[1] His vision is of artworks—lasting a few moments or as long as twenty years—which contain within themselves agents that automatically lead to their own destruction. Auto-destructive art is, Metzger says, "primarily a form of public art for industrial societies"; the only form of art which, following "the drop, drop dropping of HH bombs," is able to launch an attack against the continued "drive [towards] nuclear annihilation" by bringing "destruction into the centre of [the viewer's] consciousness."[2] If Metzger's art was a direct challenge to the threat of global destruction, then Anders took a similar path through philosophy. His concern was to reveal "the roots of our apocalyptic blindness" (*Apokalypse-Blindheit*) and to suggest new ways of fighting against, and thinking beyond, "man-made apocalypse."

Writing in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Anders argues that we have become "inverted Utopians": while "ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing."[3] This Promethean Gap—the distance between our capacity to produce and our power to imagine—defines the moral situation facing us today. Our society of machines and technological devices (the quintessence of science, and hence of "progress" and "morality") has allowed the great dream of omnipotence to finally come true.[4] This dream, however, turns out to be the very nightmare from which we cannot awake, precisely because "we are [now] in a position to inflict absolute destruction on each other." With these new apocalyptic powers, we enter what Anders calls "The Last Age": an age in which the old Socratic question "How should we live?" has been replaced with the altogether more terrifying "Will we live?"[5]

For Anders, surviving the threat of extinction will entail, at least in part, expanding our capacity for fear and anxiety and cultivating a renewed sense of the apocalyptic. He distills this message into a short parable that inventively retells the biblical story of Noah:

> One day, [Noah] clothed himself in sackcloth and covered his head with ashes. Only a man who was mourning [the death of] a beloved child or his wife was allowed to do this. Clothed in the garb of truth, bearer of sorrow, he went back to the city, resolved to turn the curiosity, spitefulness, and superstition of its inhabitants to his advantage. Soon he had gathered around him a small curious crowd, and questions began to be asked. He was asked if someone had died and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them

> that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: "Tomorrow." Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew himself up to his full height and said these words: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been. And when the flood will have been, everything that is will never have existed. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time, to mourn tomorrow's dead today. The day after tomorrow it will be too late." With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false." Later a roofer joined them, saying: "It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false."[6]

For the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, what we discover in Anders's Noah is a form of "enlightened doomsaying," which signposts a way out of our current impasse when it comes to thinking the planetary catastrophe. According to Dupuy, in Anders's parable the catastrophe is both *necessary*, fated to occur, and a *contingent accident*, one that need not happen. The way out of this paradox, based on a new understanding of the relation between future and past, requires us to act *as if* the catastrophe has already happened—or is fated to happen—in order to prevent it from becoming true. By acting *as if* the catastrophe has already taken place, we are able to project ourselves into the postapocalyptic situation and ask what we could and should have done otherwise. "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false."[7]

Both philosophically and politically, however, Dupuy's metaphysical "ruse" (inherited from Anders) is a dead end.[8] To advocate acting "as if" the catastrophe has happened is still to posit catastrophe as an existential dark cloud looming on the horizon. But this is like the case of the neurotic patient who anxiously awaits the occurrence of a terrible event in the future (a mental breakdown, perhaps), forgetting that they have entered psychoanalytic treatment precisely because this terrible event has *already occurred*.[9] We don't need to act "as if" the catastrophe has happened or will happen, because—as the Covid-19 pandemic has made abundantly clear—the future of recurring disasters linked to climate change and ecological destruction has *already arrived*— indeed, they are all part of one and the same crisis. Our task is thus not to try to avert the worst by prophesying it, but rather to find ourselves *within* the current moment of crisis and catastrophe, to take the reality of extinction as our starting point, and, in this context, to recall Walter Benjamin's words that revolutions aren't necessarily the locomotives of world history, but rather "an attempt by the passengers on [the] train … to activate the emergency break."[10] What needs to be halted, immediately, is capital's war against the planet and all living things which inhabit it.

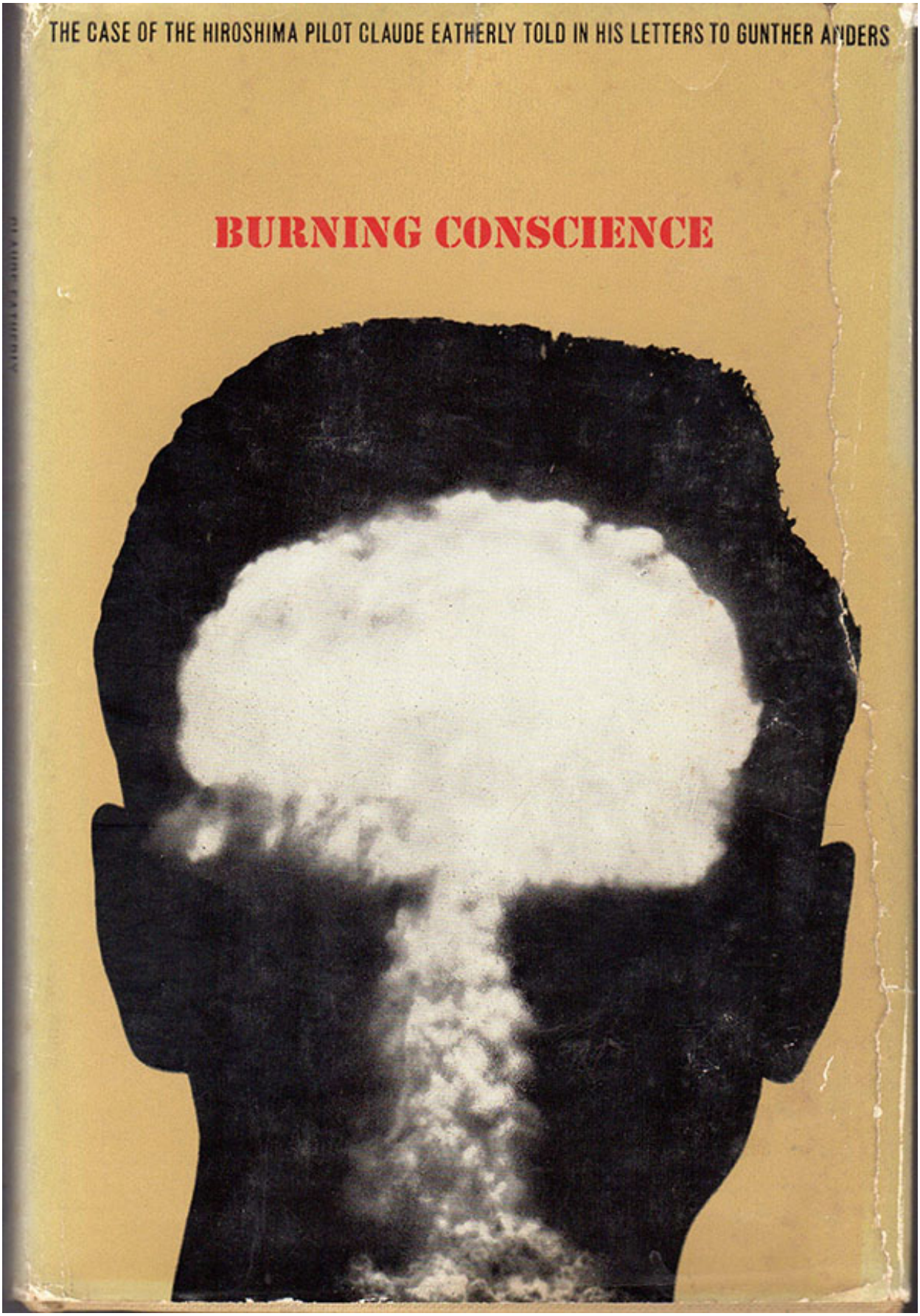
2. If Fools Should Tempt You

Finding one's feet and knowing how to proceed is, however, no straightforward task. Kafka's short stories and parables are populated by characters who have lost their way and who are seeking advice from those they hope will know how to guide them. The late short story "Give it Up!" ("Gibs auf!"), written between 1917 and 1923, and unpublished during the author's lifetime, is a good example:

> It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was on my way to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn't very well acquainted with the town yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself." "Give it up, give it up!" said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.[11]

This parable provides a neat description of the kind of psychic disorientation that one might experience when forced to consider current extinction threats. Time is running out. In what direction should one make haste? To whom should one turn for help? Who is the supposed subject of knowledge?

The first and second demands of the group Extinction Rebellion (XR) are that "the government" should "tell the truth" about the climate emergency and "act now" to halt the destruction of the biosphere.[12] Here, on the part of XR, there is clearly a belief in the existence of a big Other—a potentially benevolent (paternal?) agent (in this case, the UK government), who, having heard the ethical arguments and having seen the committed protests, will be moved to lead the way, protecting citizens against the danger of an extinguished future. But the situation here is precisely like the one in Kafka's tale. The figure(s) of authority being appealed to for help are those whose sole function it is to preserve existing economic and power relations and who are therefore not only ethically but also ideologically



Cover of the 1962 edition of Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in His Letters to Gunther Anders.

incapable of providing any kind of direction; indeed, requesting them to do so is enough to raise a smile. "You want help from *me*?" " *Me*?" " *Really*?" "Well, if that's what it has come to, I suggest you give it up!"

To whom, then, might one turn? In one of his last letters to Gershom Scholem, written on June 12, 1938, Walter Benjamin observes that Kafka was absolutely sure about two things: "First, that someone must be a fool if he is to help; second, that only a fool's help is real help."[13] The fool here is not simply the idiot, but rather one who is able to voice certain truths critical of the established order, precisely because of their relative lack of power or their position *outside* of dominant power networks. But, as Benjamin points out in the letter, the uncertain issue is whether the fool's help can really do human beings any good. The answer, sadly, is probably not.

Bringing the notion of the fool into the contemporary political context (and building upon comments made by Lacan in his *Seminar VII*), Jacques-Alain Miller says that "the fool plays at being the angel." He or she stops at the ethical exclamation "it's not fair"; and while the fool certainly aspires "to end injustice," they are fundamentally incapable of doing what is necessary to take power and thus to *actually* change things for the better.[14] (We are reminded here of the recent failed campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders.) The fool, as Lacan points out, can be contrasted with the *knave*: the bitter cynic and "unmitigated scoundrel," whose truth—which is always spoken from a position of authority and in the name of "realism"—is that things should carry on (more or less) *just as they presently are*.[15] While the fool proposes a "fairer world," the knaves sharpen their knives and wait for their moment.

In another of Kafka's micro-stories, "A Little Fable" ("Kleine Fabel"), a tiny mouse (a fool) does something *utterly foolish*: he turns to a fat cat (a knave) for help. The outcome: the cat tells the mouse he must "change direction" before eating him up. Let this stand as Kafka's lesson on the pitfalls of hoping that knaves might provide some meaningful assistance in the face of our current extinction emergency. If the future is to be salvaged, it will only be through a mode of revolutionary activity that combines the strategic cunning of the knave with the ethical commitments of the fool, while simultaneously *breaking free* from the political logic that holds both of these positions in place.

3. Truth Is an Old Bone

Benjamin's thought can help us to think about extinction in a variety of new ways, triggering unexpected chains of association. Halfway through his 1931 radio broadcast on the devastating Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, he reminds listeners that "no one was more fascinated by these remarkable events than the great German philosopher Kant," who "eagerly collected all the reports of the earthquake that he could find, and [what] he wrote about it probably represents the beginnings of scientific geography in Germany. And certainly the beginnings of seismology."[16]

Kant's response to the earthquake comprises three essays published between 1755 and 1756 in the *Wöchentliche Königsbergische Frag- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*. These essays, though still little discussed, mark a vital turning point in the philosopher's thought. In contrast to his contemporaries Voltaire and Rousseau, Kant is clear that the earthquake has no religious significance whatsoever: although devastating and disastrous, it is certainly not divine punishment meted out for "evil deeds," not an expression of "God's vengeance."[17] The only way to understand the event is as part of a complex picture of natural phenomena. In the concluding part of his second essay, Kant makes two crucial observations: first, "Man is not born to build everlasting dwellings on this stage of vanity," as life surely has a "far nobler aim." And second, the earthquake may be only the start of a larger terrestrial "catastrophe"; indeed, in the "destruction" of "those things that seem to us the greatest and most important" what we come to glimpse is "the transience of the world"—that is to say, *its possible extinction*.[18]

Here, it is as if Kant has stumbled across something so alien, inexplicable and strange, that he is immediately forced to retreat, to repress the very truth he has just caught sight of—which in this case he does with a homespun piece of moralizing: "The goods of this world cannot provide any satisfaction for our desire for happiness!" If Kant's initial response to encountering the real of extinction is to avert his gaze, he has good historical reason for doing so. Up until the late eighteenth century, the very idea of extinction remained almost unthinkable. The generally held view was that all the bodies of creation were bound together in a "great chain of being."[19] The chain was a single linear series, beginning with God, angels, and man and descending to animals, plants, and rocks. This deeply held idea brought together the notion of plenitude—the belief that the world is full, complete, and perfect—with the notions of continuity and gradation—the view that all things could be lined up on a vertical scale with no discernible gaps between them. The species comprising the great chain were seen to exist in a mutually dependent relationship: if a single link was broken, the entire edifice would collapse, with disastrous consequences for nature. As the English poet Benjamin Stillingfleet writes in the 1760s:

> ... each moss,
> Each shell, each crawling insect, holds a rank
> Important in the plan of Him who framed
> This scale of beings; holds a rank which lost
> Would break the chain, and leave behind a gap
> Which Nature's self would rue.[20]

Illustration from Georges Cuvier's book Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes de Georges Cuvier (1812). Photo: Public Domain.

While the idea of the great chain has still not vanished from history—"a highly articulated version of it still exists as a contemporary unconscious cultural model," as George Lakoff and Mark Turner point out[21]—in 1796 the French zoologist and paleontologist Georges Cuvier takes a step towards decisively breaking it. Having carried out extensive examinations of what look like elephant fossils, Cuvier finds that the fossils are "absolutely [not] from the same species" and that "these [fossil] animals differ from the elephant as much as, or more than, the dog differs from the jackal and hyena." Cuvier thus arrives at a devastating conclusion: "All these facts … seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe."[22] It is, then, through what Cuvier describes as "some half-decomposed bones" that extinction comes to be established as a scientific fact.

For Cuvier, every organized being forms a whole, a functionally integrated "animal machine" perfectly adapted to its specific mode of life. It is therefore impossible to imagine any species gradually becoming extinct; rather, extinction must be brought about by a sudden catastrophe: a disruption in ecological homeostasis effectuated by a "natural" crisis such as a flood or earthquake. With this theory of "catastrophism," Cuvier presents not only a revolution in scientific understanding, but also a kind of poetics of extinction. Balzac describes him as the greatest poet of the nineteenth century; Goethe credits him as being one of the leading intellects of the times; and Byron and Percy Shelley both mine his theories in the course of their own romantic literary experiments. There is something not only modern but also distinctly *modernist* about Cuvier and his ideas. His invitation that we follow "in the infancy of our own species, the almost erased traces of so many extinct nations" finds itself echoed nowhere more clearly than in the First Letter of Paul Valéry's 1919 essay "The Crisis of the Mind." As Valéry writes: "We later civilizations … we too now know that we are mortal … And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life."[23]

4. A Perverse Dialectics of Nature

While Cuvier was carrying out his scientific research, Donatien-Alphonse-Françoise de Sade (better known as the Marquis de Sade) was languishing in a cell in the Bastille. Having successfully appealed a death sentence for sodomy and poisoning, Sade remained in indefinite detention due to a *lettre de cachet* obtained by his mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil. In 1798—two years after the publication of Cuvier's groundbreaking essay—Sade anonymously published his marathon picaresque novel *L'Histoire de Juliette*. The work is a labyrinthine tale of unadulterated inhumanity: a defense of crime, cruelty, and unrestrained sexual activity in all its forms. This postrevolutionary horror story is, however, also an enlightenment tract (preoccupied with questions of philosophy, theology, and science) at the center of which stands a metaphysics of extinction.

The key section is a philosophical "dissertation," delivered by Pope Pius VI to the lapsed-Catholic antiheroine Juliette, where the Pontiff expounds his atheistic view of nature.[24] The Pope's position can be summarized as follows: (i) Mankind is the result of nature's "unthinking operations"; and so, at one level, man has no real relationship to nature, nor nature to man. (ii) At another level, however, the two are intimately bound together: if mankind reproduces as a species it takes away from nature the privilege of being able to "cast new entities" (767); consequently, "our" multiplication leads "her" to suspend propagation. (iii) Thus, what most humans regards as "virtues" (the preservation of living things and the continuation of the species) are "crimes" from the point of view of nature (768). (iv) But nature makes clear her displeasure: through wars, famines, and natural disasters she aims to bring about "the wholesale annihilation of cast creatures" to give herself "the chance to recast them anew." (v) It therefore follows that any figure who participates in this orgy of destruction—anyone who is prepared to help lay waste to the world through "wicked," "abominable," and "barbarous" acts—becomes a spokesperson for nature's desires. (vi) It is the libertine who fully assumes this role: their criminal acts striving towards " *the extinction of all beings*" which in turn makes "room for the new casting nature desires." In the words of the Pope: "The criminal who could smite down the three kingdoms [of animal, mineral, and vegetable] all at once by annihilating both them and their capacity to reproduce would be [the one] who serves nature best" (771).

Here one glimpses the philosophical underpinnings of Sade's empire of *jouissance*: virtue is criminal and criminality a virtue; propagation is violence against nature, and violence is an aid to nature's renewal; the principle of life is none other than death, yet the latter, strictly speaking, does not exist, as there is only the ceaseless motion and recycling of "matter" according to nature's laws. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer read Sade's perverse utopia as the dark shadow of Kant's universe of absolute reason, the negative side of his moral law: the "enlightened" libertine Juliette

> embodies (in psychological terms) neither un-sublimated nor regressive libido, but intellectual pleasure in regression— *amor intellectualis diaboli*, the pleasure of attacking civilization with its own weapons. She favors system and consequence. She is a proficient manipulator of the organ of rational thought.[25]

Jacques Philippe Le Bas, Ruins of the Sé Cathedral in Lisbon after the 1755 Earthquake, 1757.

While this is certainly true, up to a point, it is also clear that what one encounters in Sade is not "pleasure" as such, but rather that which runs *beyond the pleasure principle*: the death drive, which in this case involves not only a return to some inorganic state but also " *the total extinction of humankind*" (373) along with the annihilation of the very cycles of the transformations of nature. Sade's goal, then, is negation in its purest form: a delirious nothingness, an original and timeless chaos.

Here we can make two related points. First, this desire to wipe the slate clean and begin again from zero turns out to be a metaphysical *farce*—destruction is simply the flip side of creation; disorder another form of order; death the foundation of new life. Total annihilation, pure negation, turning the earth into "an extinct frozen globe" (to use Engels's phrase) thus reveals itself to be an illusion, as Sade's Pope himself acknowledges: "When I have exterminated all the creatures that cover the earth, still shall I be far from my mark, since I have merely served Thee, O unkind Mother" (782). What we encounter here then is a kind of Sadean *extinction comedy*: the libertine is unable to transform into deeds the appalling desires that nature has roused in him; but even if total destruction *were* possible this would come as a great disappointment to the libertine, as it would deprive him of the very system of value from which his libertinage takes direction.

And yet—and this is the second point—none of this is a mere relic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking. For nothing could be clearer than the fact that today's capitalism is still looking for ways to fulfil the Sadean dream. Indeed, it is precisely this dream that Gustav Metzger detects in the projects of atomic power and biotechnology, in which the quest for absolute mastery and total destructive power can only be realized through a forced violation of the most profound taboos, a faithful dedication to the perverse:

> The opening up of matter and the penetration to its deepest level to overturn the existent unites both [atomic and biotechnological] research, which are marked by a readiness and ability to enter previously

> closed domains. These domains were not only unobtainable because of an inability to enter them, there were also walls of ethical and religious interdictions blocking the entrance. This forced violation of the most profound taboos sanctioned in humanity led to a conduit towards the forbidden. Atomic power and biotechnology invented a means of destroying all life and found ways to create all life, and placed humanity on a god-like plane. This is a plane against which all religions have warned: the sense of holiness is entirely breached and, in breaching this plane, the human is being shattered, having conducted the ultimate irredeemable sin. This shattered being turns to a golem, who will march inexorably to its destruction, consuming the entire world.[26]

The character Veronique (played by Anne Wiazemsky) reads Marquis de Sade on camera in Jean Luc Godard's movie La Chinoise (1967).

If the moral and religious language here sounds somewhat quaint, we should perhaps remind ourselves of the current stakes. It is now accepted that we are moving towards a new phase of world war: war by algorithm; and specifically the development of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)—systems that are, essentially, outside human control.[27] In November 2019, US Defense Department Joint AI Center director Lieutenant General Jack Shanahan (in conversation with Google CEO Eric Schmidt) spoke frankly about a future of algorithmic warfare: "We are going to be shocked by the speed, the chaos, the bloodiness, and the friction of a future fight in which it will be playing out, maybe in microseconds at times. How do we envision that fight happening? It has to be algorithm against algorithm."[28] If the very idea of humanity rests, at least in part, on an ability to imagine the other's suffering, then what is being signposted here is a movement towards humanity's final negation. Today's researchers of destruction (acting in the interests of "security") would, by comparison, give Sade's band of libertines an inferiority complex.

5. How Not to Be "Fucked"

From sadism, then, to masochism—for it is the latter which characterizes the psychic landscape of much of today's ecological discourse. The problems with the universalizing, ecological "we" should now, of course, be fully clear: a faulty metaphysics which claims that all of "us" are equally responsible for the sixth mass extinction; that our destructive "lifestyles" are what are destroying the planet; that it is "civilization" itself—and specifically a civilization in thrall to "consumerism"—which is killing the human race (criticisms that are just as likely to emerge from the eco-alt-right as they are from the eco-soft-left). Following this logic, the only solution to our present problems appears to be a kind of *eco-depressive hyper-moralism*: an accelerated form of pseudo-authentic, "anti-consumerist," "back to the land" "green living," which turns out to be a parody of committed action and self-realization. Not only does such a position fail to register the true extent of the economic and political forces driving the climate and ecological emergency, it also seeks to instrumentalize this emergency: using it as the very *means* by which the "good subject" is able to save his or her own soul.

But problems run deeper still. Just beneath the surface of much of this contemporary eco-moralism there appears to be a strange *apocalyptic jouissance*. In 2018, XR activists dropped two banners, both thirty-seven meters long, off Westminster Bridge in London. One of them read "Climate Change," the other, simply, "We're Fucked." The slogan "Climate Chaos: We're Fucked" now appears on XR stickers, leaflets, and fly posters worldwide; "We're F**ked" also features as the title of a section in a recent book, *Another End of the World is Possible,* by the environmentalist John Halstead. The phrase "we're fucked" should indeed strike us as rather odd, managing as it does, in this particular context, to connect extinction and sexual gratification.

In his book *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze speaks of masochism (in a chapter engaging Freud and Reik) as the desire to be punished, the purpose of which is to resolve guilt and the corresponding anxiety. But this turns out to be merely the preliminary or "moral" stage of pleasure: one that prepares for, and makes possible, the higher stage of *sexual pleasure*; a stage that is in this case "passive," with the subject assuming the role of the object.[29] As Deleuze makes clear, however, such pleasure is only possible through a strict implementation of the law: the use of contracts and rituals which serve to proscribe the limits of the subject's *jouissance*. Seen in this light, then, it is not just that the slogan "we're fucked" eroticizes extinction, but rather that this eroticization, as we see in groups such as XR, must be staged through a series of performances and rituals—deliberately attempting to get arrested by the cops; playing dead; chaining, gluing, and

locking oneself to inanimate objects—which are distinctly masochistic in nature.

The position of the masochist has always been an ambiguous one. On the one hand, he or she appears to be the ideal capitalist subject: someone who *enjoys* being treated as a *mere means*. On the other hand, by deliberately becoming an object—by, as in the eco-activist case, identifying with one's *fuckedness*, by assuming it as a kind of negative pleasure — the masochist succeeds in establishing a minimal distance from the master, a small space outside of the realm of cruelty and exploitation. Is this enough to ground a program of liberation and transformation? The answer, I think, must be a decisive *no*; and, in the case of contemporary eco-moralism, for two reasons. First, the name of the master—capitalist accumulation and its "democratic" political anchors—is that which cannot be spoken, for fear of breaking the taboo surrounding politics as such. Instead, the violence is displaced back on to the self: it is "we" who are responsible for the fucking. Second, the libidinal ties between master and slave are *strengthened*, rather than contested, through the specific contract which the eco-masochist seeks to secure: an agreement that the government (one kind of master figure) will "create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice."[30] The demand here is that the master will no longer act like a master, but will instead treat the slave *as if* they were a political equal: a demand which the master may well be happy to consent to, at least temporarily, the better to disguise the vulgarity of his own power and that of the financial interests which he faithfully serves. Kant already sniffed out such maneuvers over two hundred years ago when, in a remark on British politics, he notes that limited parliamentary concessions often have "the insidious effect of discouraging people from looking for the *true* ... for they imagine that they have discovered it in an instance which is already before them."[31]

Moving beyond masochistic "rebellion," then, will involve a revolutionary redirection of libidinal energies: a politically creative desire to begin all over again in the midst of crisis. Part of this process will entail a return to the activity of *critique*—what Marx describes in a letter to Arnold Ruge as " *ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being *just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be*."[32] The eco-masochist position is sustained, at least in part, by a specific set of signifiers: the "Anthropocene" (that now infamous discourse of doom, irreversibility, and species alienation), "deep adaptation"[33] (a term denoting a new kind of blackpilled eco-survivalism, inviting ethical and "spiritual" reflection on "our way of life" in the face of inevitable social collapse), along with the neoliberal empty rhetoric of "sustainability" and "healing."

All of these terms, in different ways, feed into a politics of passive annihilation. In this respect, critique will therefore need to be (in Wittgenstein's phrase) *a critique of language*: an investigation into the attractions, ideological connotations, and unmapped unconscious significances of certain words; an investigation that will, at the same time, also be a reminder that "words are also weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and even poisons"; and indeed that the whole political struggle "may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another."[34] This fight over language is a fight for an *unfucked* future.

X

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Terry Smith

Marking Places, Cross-Hatching Worlds: The Yirrkala Panels

" *Maayin* " is the term used by the Yolŋu people of the Northern Territory of Australia for that which is both sacred and beautiful. It is also the name they have chosen for an extraordinary exhibition of over one hundred of their paintings that will tour the United States during the next few years. While the acrylic-on-canvas works, made since the 1970s by indigenous artists from the Central and Western Deserts, are widely acknowledged as constituting a major movement within contemporary art, few are aware of the parallel, and arguably equally significant, achievement of Aboriginal artists from regions across the northern coasts of the country who paint onto eucalyptus bark using natural ochres.[1] The sacred content in the exhibition "Maḏayin: Eight Decades of Aboriginal Bark Painting from Yirrkala, Australia" is its revelation of the original world-making actions by the most ancient ancestors of the Yolŋu during what is known as "the Dreaming," the time when indigenous peoples across the continent believe that the universe was created by Originary Beings from whom they are descended. The Yolŋu word for this time and its ongoing recurrence is "Wangarr." The beauty emerges in that world-making and in how it has been depicted by Yolŋu artists, painting onto bark, from the mid-1930s until now.[2] The Yolŋu elders see this exhibition as an opportunity to share their sacred knowledge and the beauty they have created with the wider world beyond Australia.

The exhibition will include early paintings on bark made to share aspects of the Dreaming stories with missionaries, anthropologists, and visiting museum curators, but its main focus is on recent works by indigenous artists fully committed to the practice of painting. Among them is Manydjarri Ganambarr, whose Dreamtime ancestor was Bulmanydiji, also known as Mäṉa, who took the form of a shark active across several Yolŋu lands (that of the Djambarrpuyŋu, Dätiwuy, Djapu, Dhudi Djapu, and Dhäpuyŋu clans). The stories of the shark's world-making actions are shared by the two Yolŋu moieties, or ritual groups, the Dhuwa and Yirritja. Among the paintings in "Maḏayin" is Ganambarr's *Djambarrpuyŋu Mäa* (1996), which shows two key moments early in the shark's journeys at Gurala. In the lower register, it is speared by the ghostly ancestor Murayana (who is not depicted). In the upper region of the image, the spirit of the now dead shark crosses the coast, shaping rivers and landforms as it goes, creating the homelands of its Yolŋu descendants, everywhere marked by its continuing presence. Such vivid depiction of transformation across multiple registers in space and time is typical of Yolŋu art.[3]

Yirrkala, Northern Territory, 1962–63

In the later months of 1962 and the early months of 1963, elders of Yolŋu clans from the area known by the *balanda* ("white people") as the Gove Peninsula in North East Arnhem Land came together to paint what became known as the *Yirrkala Church Panels*. Today, the panels and the

Manydjarri Ganambarr, Djambarrpuyŋu Mäṉa, 1996. Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 192.7 x 57.8 cm. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia Gift of John W. Kluge, 1997. 1996.0035.017

stories that they show are revered more than ever. As a collective statement, they continue to resonate on multiple levels, from the local community outwards through several registers to, I suggest, a worldly scale. The entirely collective process through which they were produced—and which I will explore in depth in this article—models a collaborative form of indigenous and non-indigenous participation in the processes of reparation and reconciliation so essential to Australia's national polity. Historical accuracy, moral accountability, restorative justice, and social unity were at stake, as they remain. For both their artistic merit and their social resonance, the panels deserve greater recognition in the history of Australian art. They are, at the same time, a founding document in the Australian postcolonial national imaginary. Finally, on the largest, planetary scale, they inform, and should inspire, the quest for postnational, coeval coexistence that is so urgently needed as geopolitical disunity increasingly fails to deal with the dangers of global warming.

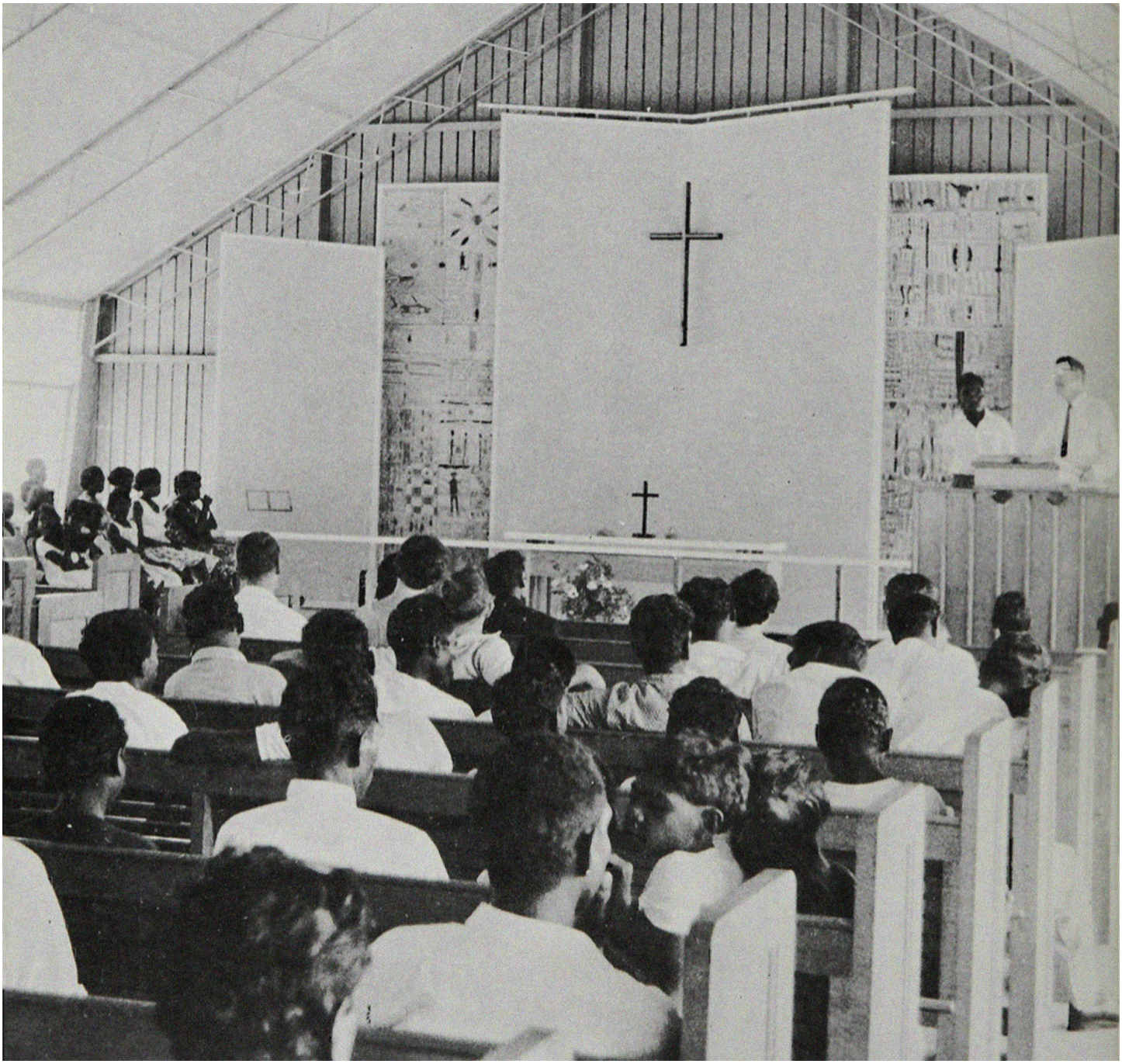
The Living Knowledge Project, Yolŋu Geography of North East Arnhem Land, 2008.

This Is Their Dreaming

The *Yirrkala Church Panels* were painted using natural ochres on two Masonite panels, each twelve feet high and four feet wide, in the later months of 1962 and early 1963, when large-scale mining of bauxite on the peninsula was about to begin. Yirrkala, where they were painted, was a mission established in 1935 at the site of a Yolŋu ceremonial ground and near a former Makassan station where Makassan people processed trepang with the help of Yolŋu people. Thirty years earlier, in 1905, the newly federated Commonwealth of Australian had asserted its sovereign claims on Yirrkala by closing this important Yolŋu trading center. Resistance to a similar takeover, this time on an existence-threatening scale due to mining initiatives, seems to have been on the minds of the clan leaders as they and Reverend Edgar Wells, the Methodist minister and superintendent of Yirrkala at the time, worked together to establish a viable, difficult-to-move community—including a bulk store, a technical school, and a mission church at the site. Wells recalls that Narritjin Maymuru, a clan elder, proposed "a painting or something," while his wife, Ann Wells, recalls him inviting the local elders to paint for the church "something of their own choosing."[4] Wells's motives are easily discerned. Based on his experience during the 1950s at the Yolŋu Methodist mission to the west at Milingimbi—where he had developed a deep interest in Yolŋu art and a close alliance with clan leaders—Wells understood that this was a way to give the clans a feeling of belonging within the church. A photograph from the period of a service in session suggests as much.[5] As well, he was outraged that both government and church officials were deceiving the locals about the nature and extent of the mining on their land.[6]

The clan elders at Yirrkala had parallel motives. They knew that the mission stations that had been established throughout central and northern Australia had only partially succeeded in diminishing indigenous belief systems. Their totemic song-cycle (*maayin*) remained alive and well across the region, existing alongside and with Christianity, which they did not see as a terminal threat. Instead, it was a recent story that could be incorporated as a subplot into their own vastly older and more replete narratives, and at the same time provide a bridge across which to communicate their law to this formidable new power called the Australian government.

During the 1930s, the anthropologist Donald Thomson encouraged Yolŋu clan leaders to paint their Dreaming stories on barks—a practice that he took from Baldwin Spencer, the first major anthropologist to work in the Australian colonies. A few missionaries saw its value as a means to open communication with the clans. Selling bark paintings and other artifacts also provided a way for under-resourced missions to raise funds from believers and tourists. The bark paintings draw on parts or wholes of complex song-cycles, "episodic narratives" that trace the arrival of ancestral beings, their acts of creation, and their journeys across Yolŋu lands.[7] To missionaries, the paintings paralleled illustrations of episodes in the Old Testament, while to anthropologists they were archival records of body paintings that were part of initiation ceremonies. To tourists, they were portable versions of the images that were painted onto the surfaces of rocks in "galleries" throughout the region, especially in Western Arnhem Land. A widespread art practice of bark painting for a *balanda* market continues to this day.



Edgar James Wells, Panels in Place in Yirrkala Church, 1963. Photograph. From Anne E. Wells, This is Their Dreaming: Legends of the Panels of Aboriginal Art in the Yirrkala Church (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1971), x.

In the Yirrkala church, which opened in March 1963, the panels were shown up front, behind the altar table and rail, slightly set back on either side of the large central panels that were unadorned except for a simple wooden cross. In the Methodist manner, the church had little other adornment. Its side walls were open windows, as befits the climate. Howard Morphy, the leading living anthropologist of the Yolŋu, emphasizes that the artists "decided how they would use their art in communicating with outsiders and how their sacred law could be presented in public contexts." They wanted to

> show that Yolngu had their own sacred heritage and to emphasize its connection to land and land ownership … Visitors to the church would be able to see the ways in which the paintings mapped their rights in land and also apprehend the sense in which land was a sacred endowment."[8]

Yirrkala Methodist Church, interior, 1963. Photo: Ron Croxford.

It would be misleading, however, to imagine the encounter between the Yolŋu and Christians as occurring between two peoples who saw themselves as structurally parallel or similarly constituted either politically or socially. In his pathfinding study *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, Morphy notes that the Yolŋu clans, while acknowledging that outsiders often referred to them as "Yolngu," usually used more specific clan, family, or language-group names among themselves. " *Yolngu* refers to a group of intermarrying clans whose members speak a dialect of one of a group of closely related languages."[9] The name "Yolngu" was first adopted in the late 1950s by Western linguists, and the Yolŋu readily accepted it as useful. ("Yolŋu" is the recent orthography, preferred by them. I will use it, except when citing earlier usages.) Before then, anthropologists used a variety of names depending on the clans they mainly worked with. The adoption of this name by the Yolŋu, by the anthropologists, and then by government officials and wider publics parallels a function of the panel paintings. Both the terminology and the images create a new pan-clan category, one that asserts the clans' collective sovereignty as a people, the kind recognizable to modern nation states, such as the Commonwealth of Australia, which was constantly attempting to impose its sovereignty.[10]

Dualism, Convergence

First and foremost, the *Yirrkala Church Panels* reflected a basic division within Yolŋu society into two distinct but complementary moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, each represented on one of the paired panels. This moiety system is an underlying cosmological dualism that unites the clans with each other and the cosmos.[11] The key stories of most of the nine Dhuwa and seven Yirritja clan subgroups appear in a defined section of each panel. The closely matching connections but also feared prohibitions within and between these clan groups evolved over centuries and continue to do so today. The changes to belief systems within the moieties during the period since contact with Malay and Indonesian peoples, and since the exploration and colonization of the continent by Europeans, suggest that they were not stabilized, and certainly not "timeless," before the seventeenth century. Little more than that can be known with certainty, although much about it is inferred by some prehistorians and anthropologists.[12]

If we take, as we must, the two Yirrkala panels to be one work of art, they amount to a statement of the coming together of the clans as the basis of an equitable, respectful mutuality. Every Yolŋu inherits stories from both moieties, as their mothers and fathers are always from different moieties. Thus, each clan is composed of both moieties. Every wife in the clan is a different moiety from her husband, in this case the elder who painted a section of one of the panels. The parallelism of the moieties is such that each person has a matching "manager" from the other moiety who is responsible for supporting that person's spiritual life. Therefore, every ceremony and story, and thus every painting, is known to each moiety, in that a manager of the other moiety is a less authoritative but nevertheless necessary presence in their telling. Communality runs through every aspect of Yolŋu life. Their clan identity devolves from the two moieties, as if two comes before one. So, an artist, for example, will usually have his uncle from his mother's side (and thus of the other moiety to him) as an adviser. What is unusual in the panels is how forthrightly the power of the binary structure of the moiety system is shown, as if to assert that *it* is what holds the clans together. Usually, these designs are used in traditional body painting, ceremony, and language to distinguish the clans from each other. In the panels, the clan designs are orchestrated into a unifying ensemble. The moiety system declares its role as the transcendental underpinning of the clans from which they ultimately gain their sovereignty (clans may be formed, or die out, but the moiety system is eternal).

The most historically notable aspect of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* is that this was the first time (at least as known to *balanda*) that the clans came together on such a scale to create a work of art with a single, focused, shared purpose.[13] The elders came to Yirrkala, to the church itself, and the mission house to plan the format and to execute the paintings. It is known that the senior members of two clans were unable to come, so they delegated others to paint their panels. Yolŋu clan members living at some distance from Yirrkala did not participate, for reasons unknown. Nation building is never a simple matter.

A photograph taken by Wells at this time shows several clan elders, Djarrkutjarrku Yunupiŋu, Muŋgarrawuy Yunupiŋu, and probably Nänyin Maymuru and Narritjin

Edgar James Wells, Painting the Panels, 1963, photograph. From Wells, This is Their Dreaming, 43.

Maymuru, working on the Yirritja panel. Each person paints his ancestral story on a section of the appropriate panel.[14] Illuminating the kind of commitment felt by the artists, Wells recounts a moment early in the process when Narritjin, acting as an interpreter between the Yirritja elders and the Wells, asked his seniors whether they would offer more than (as Wells puts it) "the routine outline of a well-known legend" in their depictions. Their answer, translated by Narritjin: "This time I will give you the *yuwal* (true) *dhawu* (word)."[15] If we take them at their word, the panels might be said to mark the first historical appearance of most of the clans together *as Yolŋu*. Certainly, those who led this project also stood out in the subsequent fights for Yolŋu autonomy and were leaders in developing the bark painting movement that flourishes to this day.

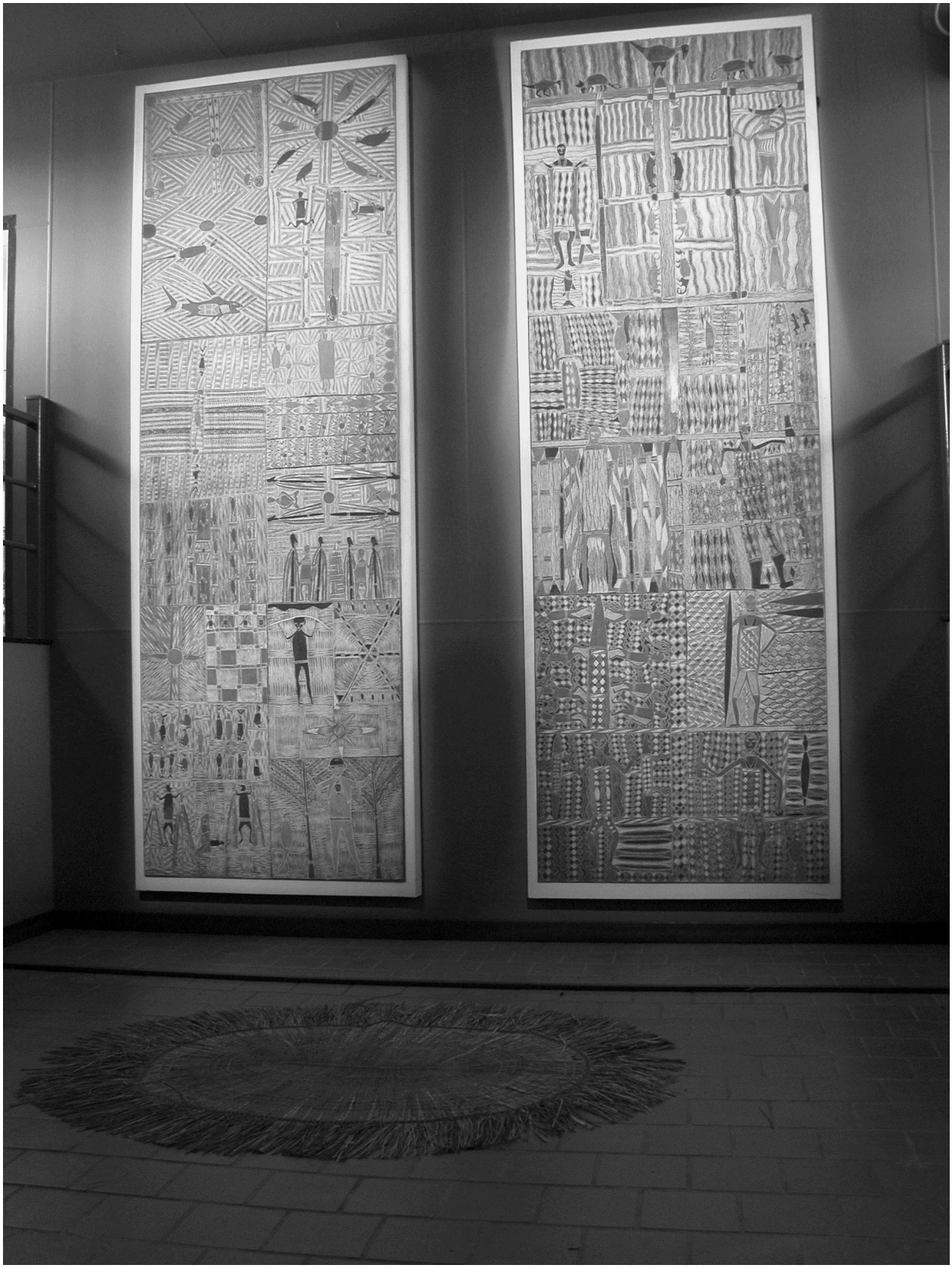
The Painting of the Panels

The Dhuwa panel (the lefthand panel) was painted under the direction of senior elder Mawalan Marika. Cross-hatching is its primary mode of mark-making. Each clan has its distinctive way of rendering the highly similar shapes, and each uses a particular sequencing of ochre colors. These generate signature styles, instantly recognizable to other Yolŋu. In the lower-right section, Mawalan's son, Wandjuk Marika, painted the most revered Creator Being, Djaŋ'kawu, appearing at Burralku, a mythical island from which he and his sisters came to the mainland, creating all geological formations, life-forms, and phenomena. These ancestors' world-making activities, shown on the bottom four sections of the panel, parallel those of Banatja, Barama, and others for the Yirritja moiety. At the bottom left of this panel, Mawalan Marika paints the sisters calling into existence the creatures of the sea. In the section on the right above the image of Djaŋ'kawu, Mathaman Marika paints the sisters entering dry land, creating waterholes, and disseminating Dhuwa lore across the country. In the upper half of the Dhuwa panel, Djaŋ'kawu and his sisters travel throughout the region, encountering much existent phenomena, which they react to or change.[16] Saltwater regions dominate the bottom and the top of the panel, while the sections at the center left, painted by Larrtjanŋa Ganambarr, show the small fish and grassland of the freshwater countries of his clan, the Naymil, and the closely associated D̲ät̲iwuy clan.

The Yirritja panel (the righthand panel) was overseen by Birrikitji Gumana, the acknowledged leader and custodian of their ritual legends. Each section evokes specific aspects of how their lands were created and what constituted that creation: in the second section from the bottom at left, the Ancestors convene to devise Yirritja law; in the central panels, freshwater regions cede to saltwater ones; while in the top third the landscapes of clans in which female Ancestors are most highly venerated are shown. The artists of these sections were, respectively, members of the Gumana, Wunuŋmurra, Yunupiŋu, and Maymuru families. Narritjin was most likely the designer of its integrated format: ten large sections, in five pairs, on either side of a central band—what Wells insightfully calls a "tree of life"—that changes according to the creation stories in the sections around it, until it reaches almost to the top where, capped like the screen in a church, and topped by curious birds and animals, wavy lines designate "the ether—the heavens—back to the beginning to Burralku."[17] The bottom-right section, painted by Gawirrin Gumana, shows Barama, today regarded as the most eminent of the four Creator Beings, emerging from the sacred waterhole at Gängan. Alongside him another of the Beings, Galparimun, is depicted, while above him a section shows a third, Lany'tjuŋ.

The diamond shapes always used in Yirritja representation originate from the first appearance of these Beings as crocodile-like creatures: foamy water runs off their backs as they emerge from the sea, and from their weed-covered bodies as they emerge from waterholes. Sunlight shining through these droplets, rendered in white paint, signals sacred presence, like a flash of lighting during a monsoonal storm. The diamonds, when slightly modified in shape, also represent honeycomb, fire, running water, or a mortuary sign, depending on when they occur within the narrative or which place or event they evoke.

What is most striking across both panels is that all of the sacred figures are shown at the moment they are doing the most important thing that was ever done, and would be done, that is, create *this* place, this world. The Creator Beings are being presented as they first appeared, when appearance became possible, when there was first something to see, something to be seen. The invitation to contemporary spectators, in 1963, and since, is to witness



The Yirrkala Church Panels, 1962-63. Natural ochres on hardboard, two panels, each 12 ft. x 4 ft. Left: Dhuwa panel. Right: Yirritja panel. Photo: Howard Morphy. Courtesy the artists and Buku-Larrŋgay Art Center, Yirrkala, Northern Territory.

the creation of these places, this Dreaming, as it happened. How does this sense of the world's beginning square with the other most powerful idea in Australian indigenous cosmology: that of the Dreaming's eternal return?

Time vis-à-vis Place

Describing the panels in terms of beginnings and ends gives a misleading sense of their temporality: it conjures parallels to the Book of Genesis, and implies that, for Yolŋu, time flows historically, in the manner it does for Europeans. Yolŋu recognize epochs, not least the changes engendered since the arrival of the colonists, but they also know, and do not see as mutually exclusive, the power of ancestral returning, the incessant recreating of places, the fact that these acts "abide"—as anthropologist Tony Swain (following his predecessor William Stanner's idea of "everywhen") puts it, using a somewhat Biblical word, but with an Aboriginal perspective.

> The basic tenant of Abiding Events, as Nancy Munn has perceptively shown, is that something came out of, moved across, and went into, the earth ... In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests on the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode. This, Munn correctly concludes, is the basis of Aboriginal "world theory."[18]

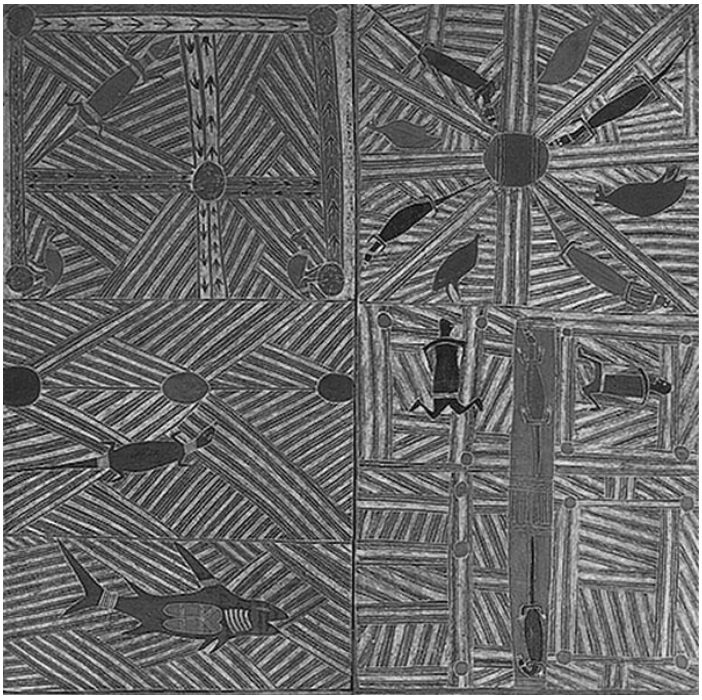
The Yolŋu believe that these acts of creation and recreation are constantly occurring, constituting a world that is always in significant ways the same but also in perpetual transformation. Yolŋu representation is animated by this sense. Dhuwa cross-hatching and Yirritja diamond-shaping is rarely simply decorative or infill: mostly, its flow and gathering seems to generate the figures that appear, or are implied, in each section. We saw this in the shifts between registers in Ganambarr's painting of the ancestral shark at Gurala, *Djambarrpuyŋu Mäa.* The acts of the Originary Beings founded places which they are believed to continue to occupy. This makes a place always alive. It also implicates the living beings who are ancestral incarnations responsible for them. For instance, Wukun Waŋambi, who I met in 2019, is a current member of the Marrakulu clan, which has the duty of keeping a particular eucalyptus (*gaayka* ; *eucalyptus tetrodonta*) alive through ritual observance, which is used to make *larrakitj* (hollow log coffins), *yidaki* (didjeridu), and *nuwayak* (the bark used for bark paintings).

The panels are another way of keeping Wangarr alive, of declaring place and therefore sovereignty. The artists declared this, first of all, to the other Yolŋu clans. In doing so, they argued for an equivalence between the moieties in a world shared by both. The overall narrative in both panels is that of the creation of Yolŋu lands, those subsequently owned by the clans. They describe acts as causes, and picture their effects on other Beings, on environments, people, and animals. True, a certain temporality *is* suggested in the movements from one section to another, mainly from the bottom to the top, although a strict narrative sequence is not followed in either panel. The actions of the Creator Beings occurred in the Dreamtime—the equivalent, for Christians, to God's eternal time, or the time of the gods in other mythologies. Perhaps the proximate sequencing of the stories in each panel was an adjustment oriented to just one set of intended viewers: the *balanda*, who are used to understanding things mostly via cause and effect, through accumulating, historical narration that plots movement from one place to another. The Yolŋu artists' gesture in this direction, however, does not preclude their own conception of temporality, with its multiplicity of roughly parallel and simultaneous occurrences.

The panels show the *yuwalk dhäwu*, the true word, as the Yirritja elders promised, but not all of it. The so-called Dreaming Stories are traditionally shared in ceremonies of the initiated that, after lengthy preparation, unfold over days, or weeks, or sometimes months, as in the case of major foundational events of the kind treated in these panels. Shorter ceremonies are devoted to parts of these stories, or to lesser ones. Brief ceremonies that show unrestricted material have been developed for the uninitiated, and others for *balanda*. While the Yirrkala panels introduce, with elegant compression, the main outlines of the Dhuwa and Yirritja Creation Stories, some aspects seem underplayed. The travails of the Djan'kawu sisters, for example, are a conspicuous quality of their story, even as shared with uninitiated audiences. In the top-right sections of the Dhuwa panel, they are shown pregnant, and dancing awkwardly, but in a rather restrained manner.[19]

Over a short time, there have also been shifts in the aspects of the stories present on the panels that are worth emphasizing. In 1997, an exhibition, "Saltwater: Bark Paintings of Sea Country," began an extensive national tour aimed at demonstrating that the Yolŋu exercised land rights over the seas of the region and not only the land. The catalog pages include images of the panels. Captions to them celebrate Barama, who is "said today to be the most eminent of the Yirritja Creation beings."[20] Current discourse in the region similarly highlights Barama's role. In the account given by Ann Wells, as told to her in the 1960s, however, the Yirritja peoples' "creative legends were based on and woven through those of Banatja," who is "an ancestor figure of ritual power, and leader or relation of three other spirit men."[21]

The *Saltwater* catalog does not mention Banatja at all. It names the figure in the section above Barama as a depiction of another of the four ancestors, Lany'tjuŋ. Wells, in contrast, devotes four pages of close description to this exact section, treating it primarily as a picture of



Detail, upper right section of the Dhuwa panel showing pregnant Djan'kawu sisters.

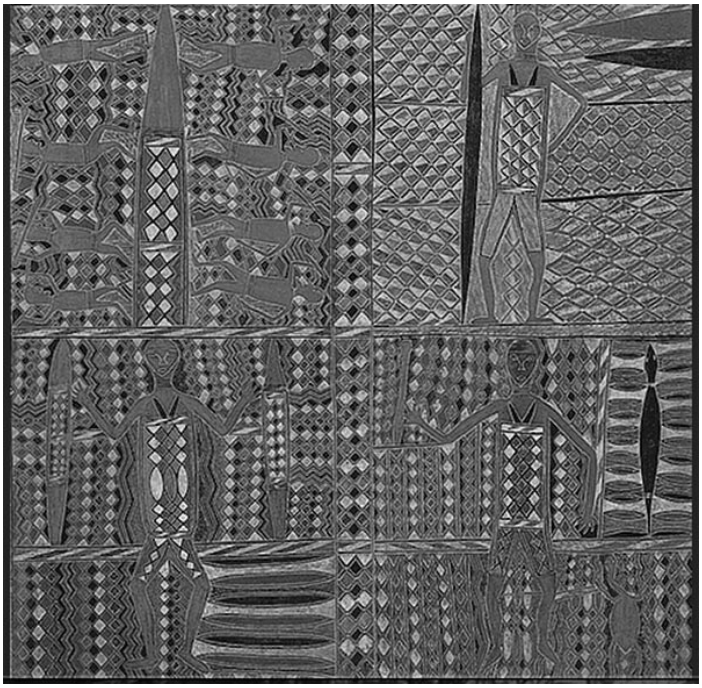
Banatja, but also saying that, in this case, Birrikitji painted both ancestors as one man "for that is the way they may be seen by those who are not initiated."[22] Is it possible that negative, contradictory, or confusing information is being withheld? Banatja, who brought knowledge to people, became so strong, wise, and beloved by all that the other three spirit Beings—Barama, Galparimun, and Lany'tjuŋ—grew jealous and killed him, an action that they immediately regretted, and have continued to regret ever since.[23] Is Banatja omitted because the story of what happened to him conflicts with the affirmative message that all involved in the making of the panels in 1963 intended to convey? I think not, because each of the images is, like the front cover of a book, a placeholder, a gateway to the complex, contradictory, and often confusing behavior of the ancestors and, by inference, their descendants. Wells was told one side of a complex story; current discourse wishes to emphasize another. She was also given to understand that there was a deeper level of meaning, one on which both Beings were manifestations of the same originary spirit, itself complex and contradictory, like much of Wangarr. This is what *yuwalk dhäwu* actually amounts to, when taken seriously.

Convergence and Difference

At the entrance to the exhibition "Old Masters, Australia's Great Bark Artists," at the Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2013–14 (and touring Asia in 2019 and 2020), hung a painting, *The Djan'kawu Cross Back to the Mainland* (1966), by Dhuwa artist Djunmal. Djunmal used Dhuwa cross-hatching to show the freshwater waterholes created by the Djan'kawu sisters as they birthed the first peoples (on Dhuwa land), then switched to Yirritja diamond designs to show the return of the sisters to the saltwater mangroves (Yirritja country). In between, through the center of the image, fresh and saltwater meet in confluence: brackish, generative.[24] Another example of clan convergence is that of Mutitjpuy Munuŋgurr, who did the freshwater section of the Dhuwa panel of the *Yirrkala Church Panels*. He was also entitled to paint some clan designs of his mother, who was Yirritja. In the "Old Masters" exhibition, he exhibited two paintings, one in the style of each moiety.[25] These instances bring out the interplay of convergence and divergence, of close proximity and respectful distance, which is the whole point of the moiety "system."

Mawalan Marika, Sydney from the air, 1963. Natural ochres on bark, 43.3 x 91.3 cm. National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Copyright: estates of the artists licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd. Photo: National Museum of Australia.

A small painting by Mawalan Marika, modest in size relative to the church panels but painted at the same time, is comparable to them in its speculative ambition. As part of the travel involved in pressing the case against bauxite mining of their lands, in 1963 Marika was required to travel by air, for his first time, from Gove airport, at Nhulunbuy near Yirrkala, to Sydney. Known for some years by a description "Map of painter's travell [*sic*] by plane from Yirrkala to Sydney," the painting is now titled *Sydney from the Air*. Under the first title, it evokes an overview of thousands of square miles of mostly open country, the lands of many peoples. The distinctively jagged coastline along which the city clusters is shown at one side, while in between a plethora of unknown places, doubtless other peoples' lands, are connected by lines. The title *Sydney from the Air*, however, suggests the artist's arrival at a great modern city.[26] Morphy believed Marika was responding to the bright lights of "a shimmering city at night." He remarks: "Aesthetic forms are not limited to a particular content and can be used as a means of



Detail, lower right sections of the Yirritja panel showing major Creation Beings.

conveying experience cross-culturally: the Arnhem Land idea of spiritual power to the Sydney audience, the energy and the electricity of the city to the Arnhem Land one."[27] Morphy is, of course, not speaking literally. He is highlighting the work's capacity as a metaphor, and projecting forward, metaphorically, its metaphorical resonance. He conjures some of its potential audiences, and suggests the kinds of reception that Mawalan might well have anticipated, given the growing interest in his work, and that of some of his fellow artists, by major museums, such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, through the collecting activities of its deputy director, the artist Tony Tuckson.[28]

Marika's composition, at first glance, looks like that of the circles and lines in a Central Desert painting—the Tingari cycle, to take a famous case. But this is misleading. The composition follows directly on from the kind of mapping of clan lands found in some of the colored crayon sketches made onto large sheets of butcher's paper by Marika and other Yolŋu at the invitation of anthropologist Ronald Berndt in 1947. What may be pictured in *Sydney from the Air* are the clans that Marika imagines inhabit this region. He does not know or have the authority to represent their designs, thus they appear as unfilled rectangles or squares, and as dark or light brown in color. Dhuwa hatching, however, grounds the whole, but not as a unity. This is a restless, churning world, its clans unevenly dispersed, differing in size and power, its areas folded into dynamic tension. Unlike Yolŋu land, which is replete with ancestral energy, the movements of ancestor and earth here have not yet generated well-formed figures, at least not ones that Mawalan can see or show. This is, then, not only a rare glimpse into the *subjectile*, the underlying compositional format, upon which Yolŋu representation builds; it may be a rarer revelation of the schemata of the clans in their contestation, *before* moieties, or, even more radically and simply, without them. But they will come … and the dark and light brown shapes, small paintings in themselves, will be ready to receive them.[29]

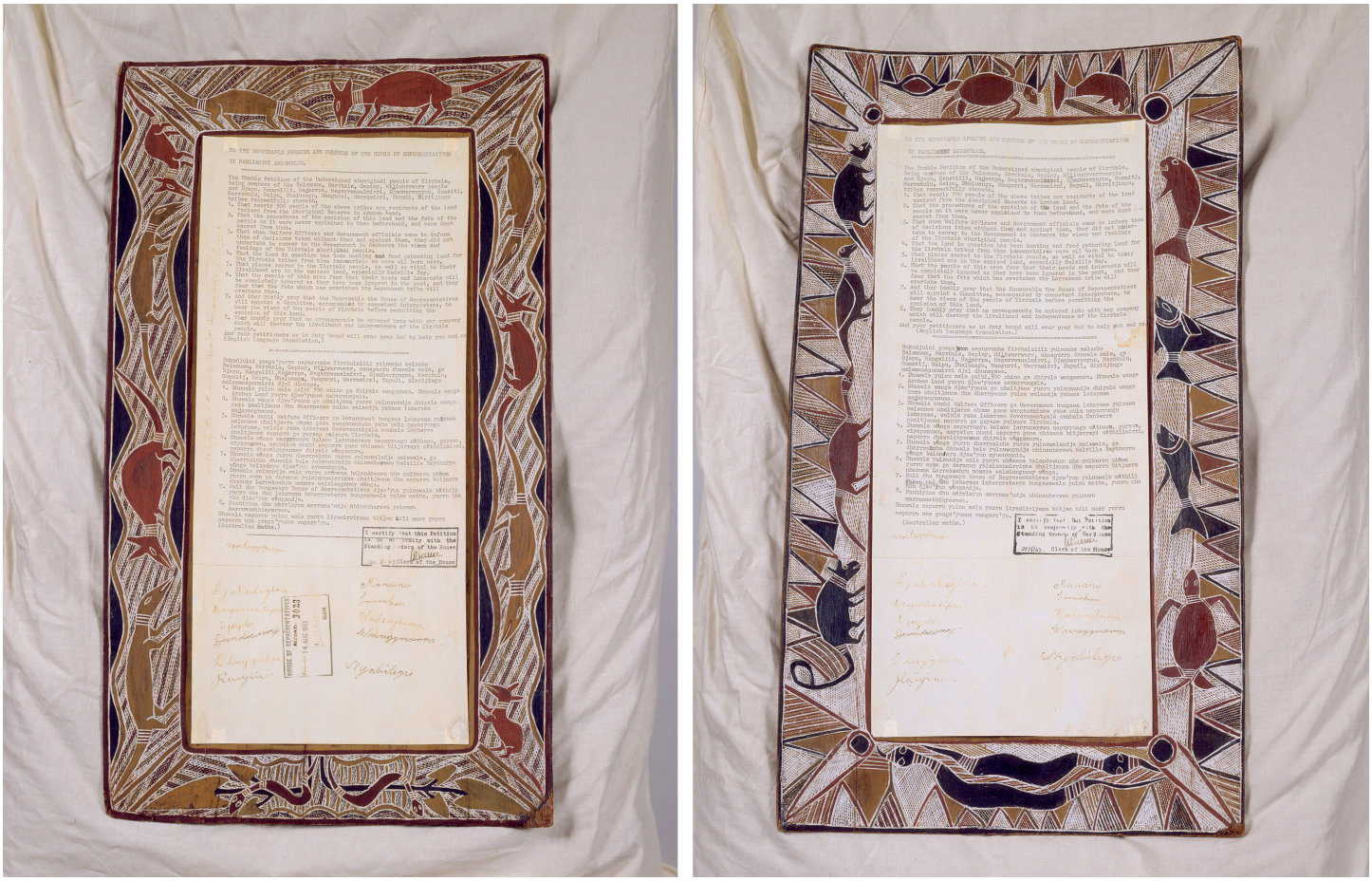
"A new Yolngu politics"

In October 1963, the panels were on prominent display in the Yirrkala church during a visit of parliamentarians charged with making recommendations for or against mining. One of them, Kim Beazley Senior, a Labor Party politician from Western Australia, recommended that the Yolŋu incorporate the concept of the panels into a petition to Parliament opposing the mining. They decided to follow his suggestion, mounting the typed text of the petition on two small bark panels, one Dhuwa and the other Yirritja, each bordered with figures painted by Narritjin with permission from several of the same elders who did the church panels. While unsuccessful in stopping the government's granting of the lease, the court acknowledged that a claim to sovereignty was being made, one impossible to grant under the principle of *terra nullius*, through which British settlers declared the land unoccupied.

Publicity around the case raised public consciousness that Australian indigenous people believed that their relationship to their land was one of primary ownership. It took until 1992, however, in the case brought by Eddie Mabo of the Mer Island in the Torres Strait, for the High Court of Australia to rule that a native title existed. Such a title remains contested, but artworks continue to be recognized by the courts as the basis for the claiming of titles. In 1997 an extensive national tour of the exhibition "Saltwater: Bark Paintings of Sea Country" began, including works depicting many of the same places as on the panels, and many more from the wider region. The exhibition was material to the Blue Mud Bay Case brought by the Yolŋu in 2008 to the High Court of Australia, which recognized that the people's land rights extended into the sea to the extent of the low water mark. Today, the Yirrkala bark petitions are regarded as among the "founding documents" of the Commonwealth of Australia and are displayed in Parliament House, Canberra.[30]

Reverend Wells was dismissed from Yirrkala in 1964 for his role in the petition. A subsequent, more fundamentalist minister discarded the *Yirrkala Church Panels* and they were left to rot. They were recovered in the late 1970s as plans to establish a museum at Yirrkala arose. It opened in 1988. Interest in them has recently been revived by the thriving Buku-Larrŋgay Art Center, arguably the most successful center of its kind in Australia, serving the now five-thousand-strong Yolŋu community, as well as by

Djunmal, The Djan'kawu Cross Back to the Mainland, 1966. Natural ochres on bark, 138 x 53 cm, National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Copyright: estates of the artists, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd. Photo: National Museum of Australia.



Yirrkala Bark Petitions, August 14 and 28, 1963. Typed paper and natural ochres on bark, 46.9 x 21 cm. Parliament House Collection, Canberra. Courtesy Table Office, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra.

national and international interest in their art. Their association with the church a fading memory, the panels are now the centerpiece of a museum space adjacent to the art center. They are fully encased in glass and bolted onto metal sheets in a structure designed to protect them from earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis. As of 2020, the space remains unfinished, but it is planned to serve as an entrance as impactful as the experience of passing through the well-known *Aboriginal Memorial* when one enters the National Gallery of Australia in the nation's capital, Canberra. Until then, they may be seen by the general public only in the black-and-white images that accompany this article.

The panels were a deliberate showing of sacred material, first and foremost, by each clan to members of the other clans. The line between secret and public knowledge is not fixed but is constantly negotiated within and between clans, and always between representatives of the moieties which are cemented in the kin relations of the clan, according to the contexts and needs of the time. Yet to see some of the most sacred images, and to see all of them together, at once, side by side—what else is this if not *revelation*? The fact that all those who painted them are now dead means that the revelation has also become that of the immediate ancestors of living Yolŋu, who experience it as such. The revelation goes right back to the Originary Beings, and returns to all, including non-indigenous peoples, who experience it now. This legacy demonstrates how the revelation of what is usually secret totemic knowledge may be used, if the contemporary situation becomes dire enough to demand it, for a political purpose. As Ian McLean puts it, the panels "embodied the origin of a new Yolngu politics."[31]

It is true, as mentioned above, that the panels' creation might mark the appearance of the clans in an alliance *as Yolŋu*, the historical moment when they came together, for the first time, to declare their shared identity against that of the federal government. Yet "historical," here, perhaps comes too close to implying that only registration in the narrative of European world expansion, colonization, and universalization counts as history. But the Yolŋu, like Aboriginal peoples across the continent, have lived for millennia in their own temporalities, those of the Dreaming and its eternal recurrence in the present. They have also always lived in active relation to the times of those others with whom they interact. The potential productivity of such

temporal doubling is what the panels demonstrated in 1963. They were an affirmation of Yolŋu spirituality in another sacred setting, the Methodist church—it is, after all, located in their place, on their land. In a broader legal context, that of the land rights case against mining, the panels declare a Yolŋu sovereignty, one that challenged the kind claimed by the government and its courts. More broadly, in their address to the earth, the panels manifest each unique clan's specificity and its moiety underpinnings as processes of world-making that keep on making place, despite the scarring and destruction of the lands by extraction. *Balanda* world-making will impede that of the Yolŋu but will not stop it. Similarly, in current circumstances, the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, with its request that a First Nations Voice be enshrined in the Constitution of Australia, continues the many processes of reparation and reconciliation that, despite the resistance of conservative politicians, will not cease the "Makarrata"—that is, the coming together after a struggle between all concerned.[32]

Coeval communality, we might infer, will definitely entail thinking together, feeling together, experiencing together, *after struggle*.[33] It will also entail talking and listening together, having meetings, writing documents, demonstrating, protesting, occupying, painting murals, presenting exhibitions, and the like. Doing these things, Yolŋu tell us, is also, and mainly, about making places, many of them, alongside each other, through processes of world weaving: coming from the earth, moving across it, returning to it. That is, through practices of cross-hatching and shape-making, in concurrence with each other, in what might become, in however fragile a way, our common place.

X

These reflections were triggered by the experience of attending the "Postnational Art Histories Workshop," hosted by Wukun Wanambi at the Baku-Larrŋgay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala, June 10–15, 2019. I am indebted to Wukun and the coordinator of the Centre, Will Stubbs, and to the conveners of the workshop, Ian McLean and Charles Green of the University of Melbourne, my fellow workshop participants, and to the artists who work at and show through the Centre and who made us *balanda* welcome. I especially thank Ian McLean, Howard Morphy, Henry Skerritt, and Will Stubbs for their close and insightful reading of this essay and their many helpful suggestions.

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1
For a discussion of the contemporaneities within Australian indigenous art, see "Country, Indigeneity, Sovereignty: Aboriginal Australian Art," chap. 6 in my *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2019), 156–97. Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon, 1998), and Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (Reaktion Books, 2016) are excellent introductions. See also Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Duke University Press, 2002).

2
"Maḏayin: Eight Decades of Aboriginal Bark Painting from Yirrkala, Australia" is curated by Yolŋu artists from the Buku-Larrŋgay Art Centre, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, and curators from the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia. It will also include a six-screen video installation by Ishmael Marika and the Mulka Project, which is based at Yirrkala. The exhibition will open at the Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, in September 2020, and complete its tour at the Fralin Museum, University of Virginia, in January 2025.

3
In his exhibition "Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia," at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, in 2016, Stephen Gilbert included a painting by Ganambarr, *Mäa ga Dhukurrurru* (1996), which depicts Wandawuy, a place where fresh river water and saltwater from the Arafura Sea converge into a turbulent but vital foam. This concurrence is a major symbolization of the unity-within-difference of the Yolŋu moieties. See *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* , ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Yale University Press, 2016). "Everywhen" is a term coined by anthropologist William Stanner in a 1953 essay "The Dreaming," in Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973* (Australian National University Press Books, 1979), 24.

4
Edgar Wells, *Reward and Punishment in Arnhem Land, 1962–1963* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1982), 58–59; Anne E. Wells, *This is Their Dreaming: Legends of the Panels of Aboriginal Art in the Yirrkala Church* (University of Queensland Press, 1971), 41.

5
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, x. Of course, exactly this was the self-evident purpose of the photograph. Wells was pursuing a policy of "contextualization," of relating Christianity to Aboriginal cultural, social, and political contexts, that was emerging within the Methodist mission to Arnhem Land. It was not, however, fully embraced by the church hierarchy. See John Kadiba, "The Methodist Mission and the Emerging Aboriginal Church in Arnhem Land 1916–1977" (PhD diss., Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University, 1998).

6
See Jeremy Long, "Wells, Edgar Almond (1908–1995)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* , National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2019 http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wells-edgar-almond-27835/text35581 ; Ann E. Wells, *Milingimbi: Ten Years in the Crocodile Islands of Arnhem Land* (Angus & Robertson, 1963); and Wells, *Reward and Punishment* . While at Milingimbi, Wells had arranged for Karel Kupka to design stained-glass windows featuring Yolŋu motifs gathering around a central cross. Aesthetically, a greater contrast to the achievement of the Yirrkala panels is difficult to imagine.

7
See Howard Morphy, *Ancestral C onnections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), chap. 3.

8
Howard Morphy, "Acting in a Community: Art and Social cohesion in Indigenous Australia," *Humanities Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (2009) https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p14881/html/frames.php . See section "The Bite in the Bark."

9
Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 40.

10
It is worth noting that the clans still maintain that they speak different languages (as it is a defining feature of clan difference), whereas the linguists insist they speak different dialects.

11
These are the main Dhuwa clan groups of East Arnhem Land: Rirratjiŋu, Gälpu, Marrakulu, Dhuḏi-Djapu, Djapu, Ḏäṯiwuy, Ŋaymil, Djarrwark, and Golumala. The major Yirritja clan groups of the region are these: Gumatj, Wangurri, Munyuku, Maŋgalili, Maḏarrpa, Warramiri, and Dhalwaŋu.

12
See Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land; Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (Penguin Books Australia, 1989), chap.1, for some such inferences. For a skeptical view, see Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Introduction, chap. 1.

13
Of course, ceremonial exchange had been occurring for millennia. Sociologically speaking, the missions had already concentrated the clans into one large area. There were also some art precedents. In 1942, Wonggu Munuggur and his children made bark paintings for anthropologist Donald Thomson that explained major Dreaming stories, such as that of the Djan'kawu, including a painting of one of the sisters in half-human form. See "Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic," Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2009. Four years later, anthropologist Ronald M. Berndt encouraged Yolŋu to do crayon drawings of their Dreaming stories. The 365 resultant drawings, made in a five-month period by twenty-seven Yolŋu, are held in the Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia. Each of these precedents echo in the panels.

14
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 43.

15
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 41. Written for the general reader, in a story-telling style, this moment has some earmarks of apocrypha.

16
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 7–37, offers a detailed account of each section, as she does for the Yirritja panel, 39–71.

17
"Yirrkala Church Panels, 1962–63," *Saltwater, Paintings of Sea Country, The Recognition of Indigenous Sea Rights* , 2nd ed. (B aku-Larrŋgay Mulka Art Centre, 2014), 25. Sometimes named "The Island of the Dead," Burralku is the place from which the Creator Beings of both moieties came, and to which the spirits of the dead return. Swain speculates that, for the Yirritja in particular, this mythical domain is in some sense coterminous with parts of Indonesia. See Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers* , chap. 4.

18
Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 32. The internal reference is to Nancy Munn, "The Spatial Representation of Cosmic Order in Walbiri Iconography," in *Primitive Art and Society* , ed. Andrew Forge (Oxford University Press, 1973), 197. See also Nancy Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Cornell University Press, 1973).

19
See Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 37. In Central Arnhem Land, a parallel theme, the story of the Wagilag Sisters, is much elaborated in ceremony and in art, by Dawidi Birritjama and Paddy Dhatangu, for example. See *The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story, 1937–1997* , ed. Wally Caruana and Nigel Lendon (National Gallery of Australia, 1997).

20
Saltwater, Paintings of Sea Country , 25.

21
Furthermore, having given the people language, lore, kinship behavior, and the designs for ceremony, "Banatja is a very special name for the Yirritja people. He is said to be the ancestor for the Yirritja as Djankawu is for the Dua, for the senior men say that Banatja and Djankawu are equal in all things." Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, xi.

22
Wells, *This Is Their Dreaming*, 48.

23
In 1948, the Berndts heard a version of this story in which Lany'tun is the father of Banatja, who became in turn a great religious leader and teacher. In this version he is killed by his disciples. See R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, "Sacred Figures of Ancestral beings of Arnhem Land," *Oceania*, vol. 18 (1948):

314. Cited in Swain, *A Place for Strangers* , 199.

24
See https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old-masters/artists/djunmal .

25
See https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old-masters/artists/mutitjpuy_mununggurr .

26
"... as if done by the Dutchman Piet Mondrian." Peter Nauman, "Old Masters: Australia's Great Bark Artists," *reCollections* 9, no. 2 (2013) https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_9_number_2/exhibition_reviews/old_masters .

27
Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon, 1998), 37 and 39.

28
See Natalie Wilson, "(Works of) Paradise and Yet: Stanley Gordon Moriarty, Tony Tuckson and the Collection of Oceanic Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales," in *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australian Museums, Galleries and Archives* . ed Susan Cochrane and Max Quanchi (Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 221–42.

29
For a similar reading of this painting, see Henry Skerritt, "New Lines of Flight: Bark Painting as Contemporary Encounter," *Art Guide Australia* (January–February, 2014): 61–66 https://www.academia.edu/11829758/New_lines_of_flight_Bark_Painting_as_Contemporary_Encounter . There are many resonances across these cross-cultural spaces, the pursuit of which would take us too far off course. Four come to mind immediately, one each for the kinds of spatial and temporal projections we have been considering. A concurrent instance of cross-cultural convergence: Margaret Preston's later works, notably in this case her painting of 1942 *Flying Over the Shoalhaven* (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra). A subsequent Yolŋu collective enterprise, this time out of Ramingining: *The Aboriginal Memorial* 1988 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra). This was at least as ambitious as the church panels, was arguably more monumental, and has been, to date, more consequential. A later compilation of stories across a territory, a chronicle of dispossession, of mourning: *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby Country* , a scroll-like painting made in 2008 by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri for filming by Geoffrey Bardon (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). And a gesture of historical retrospect, in a spirit of coevality: Kunwinjku man Gabriel Maralngurra's series of paintings made in the 2000s, about the visits to Oenpelli made a century earlier by one of the founders of the discipline of anthropology, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer. On this last, see especially, Henry Skerritt, "Seeing Through Spencer: Gabriel Maralngurra's Paintings of Baldwin Spencer," *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* , 14, no. 1–2 (2015): 106–19.

30
See https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-104.html . This does not mean that they were seen and understood by all who saw them. Liberal Party Treasurer Joe Hockey, currently Australia's ambassador to the United States, recently admitted to having never heard of them. See Will Stubbs, "A Short History of Yolgnu Activist Art," *Artlink*, June 1, 2016. The economic future of the Gove Peninsula within the global economy is destined to diminish considerably, as Rio Tinto closed the aluminum mine in 2014 and plans to cease extracting bauxite in 2030. See https://www.riotinto.com/operations/australia/gove .

31
Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (Reaktion Books, 2016), 110.

32
See https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF and https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2791940/Uluru-Statement-from-the-Heart-Information-Booklet.pdf .

33
On this expanded sense of "coevality," involving a shared possession of the same temporality based on an exchange between equals, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

Boris Groys

Trotsky, or Metamorphoses of Engagement

The discussion about politically engaged art tore the art world apart in the twentieth century, and still does today. The advocates of absolute artistic autonomy react to engaged artists in a quite confrontational mode, and vice versa. However, the idea of the autonomy of art is deeply connected to the project of artistic engagement. It is not particularly difficult to show that the radical autonomy of art can only be manifested through radical political engagement. And only the artist who is completely free and autonomous can become engaged.

The word "engagement" has become famous especially through the writings of Sartre. Sartre's existentialism defined itself as consistent humanism—that is, as an assertion of the radical autonomy of the human individual. The individual was thereby understood as pure nothing, as absolute freedom of choice, as an existence that is not predetermined by any essence. Humans, therefore, were allowed to choose their own nature, but at the same time they *had* to choose their nature, for if they were to linger in nothingness, this nothingness would become their nature. According to Sartre, humans are nothing other than their engagement: there is no "hidden" person beyond what the person does in the world.[1] Hence humans, following Sartre's existentialism, can assert their absolute freedom only by its ultimate radicalization—that is, by demonstrating their freedom through a commitment to a certain intra-worldly attitude—which at the same time should have exemplary significance for all of humanity, so that this commitment acquires an "absolute character."[2] In Sartre's engagement one can thus easily recognize Kant's "aesthetic judgment." For Sartre, engagement is determined, as is aesthetic judgment for Kant, by the paradox that although it cannot be legitimized, it nevertheless claims universal validity. Thus, political engagement as an irreducible and at the same time universally valid decision of individual liberty cannot be interpreted as the subjugation of art to the conditions of politics. Rather, it can be interpreted as an extension of aesthetic judgment, in which Kant founded the modern autonomy of art, to the totality of sociopolitical life.

The possibility of political engagement thus excludes above all any philosophical determinism that denies engaged individuals their original freedom and interprets their sociopolitical behavior according to the historical origin of these individuals and not as a consequence of their free choice. Thus, any commitment also indicates the possibility of betraying the cause to which one is committed, because any choice can be revoked. And even more, only by being revoked can a choice be manifested as a choice and not as an effect of causal determination. The possibility of betrayal is part of the nature of engagement. If engagement cannot be betrayed, it is not engagement, but merely the expression of an external or internal necessity to which one passively submits without having control over one's own engagement.

So in order to become engaged, art first had to learn

Leon Trotsky and Natalia Sedova's arrival in Mexico, accompanied by Frida Kahlo, 1937. Photographer unknown. Public domain.

betrayal. Only by breaking with its own tradition does art gain the necessary freedom to become engaged. However, this break should not be understood as dictated by an inner necessity, as Kandinsky, for example, understood it.[3] Rather, the break with tradition is to be understood as a pure act of betrayal that establishes the freedom of the artist and is rooted in pure nothingness. Only an art that is completely founded in nothingness and freed from all causal ties with reality can and must become engaged in order to gain a new access to the world. If art no longer represents or signifies anything, it must become useful.

Historically, the determination of art as having its place in nothingness was stated most radically in the first decades of the twentieth century—especially by Russian suprematism and German and French Dadaism. It is no coincidence that the question of the political engagement of art was posed with extreme radicalism in the wake of these currents. Only when one recognizes that art has no original relationship to reality does one want to produce this relationship artificially. This completes art as art, because its relation to reality also becomes artificially chosen and made. Here artists become engaged because of something that they are not—and thus complete themselves as free artists. It is characteristic that Malevich, for example, who perhaps most radically asserted nothingness as the essence of art, was criticized by artists of the next generation. The criticism was that he was still passively portraying this nothingness instead of engaging in the construction of the new, communist world, thereby manifesting his art as an act of nothingness. Already at that time, Nikolai Tarabukin wrote that the modern society of communist production was in itself a work of nonrepresentational art because it served no particular purpose—in the sense of consumption—and practiced production only for the sake of production.[4]

But this also announces the difficulty that arises the moment aesthetic judgment is transferred to sociopolitical reality in the form of engagement. It is well known that while the choice of engagement in the relevant theories was postulated as free, in reality it was mostly practiced in favor of the various variants of Marxist socialism, especially the Stalinist-style international communist movement. There are at least two key reasons for this. The first reason is that Marxism is a social theory that sees humans as beings completely defined by their social activity. For Marxism, a human is nothing beyond its life practice. And that can be interpreted precisely as this nothingness that is claimed by modern subjectivity, and especially modern art, as freedom and a source of engagement.

Therefore Sartre, who also defined people by their intra-worldly engagement, sympathized with Marxism,

even though he criticized the economic determinism of Marxist theory because this determinism threatened autonomous freedom of choice.[5] Even Bataille, who seems to hold an opposite position, spoke quite positively, in the context of his analysis of the Stalinist Soviet Union, about the reification of the human in Soviet communism, and finds in the self-identification of the individual with the thing a certain form of self-chosen "sovereignty."[6] Heidegger sharply criticized Sartre's existentialism in his famous letter on humanism. This contributed significantly to the decline of Sartre's influence in France, although, or perhaps because, Sartre often refers to Heidegger's existential analysis. However, in his letter Heidegger also praises Marxism for its vision of the alienating character of history:

> What Marx, following Hegel, recognized in an essential and significant sense as the alienation of man, goes back with his roots to the homelessness of modern man ... Because Marx, in thematizing alienation, reaches into an essential dimension of history, therefore, the Marxist view of history is superior in relationship to all other histories.[7]

Here "homelessness" is another word for "freedom": only the history of alienation addressed in Marxism gives the homeless person the opportunity to become engaged in this history.

Radically autonomous artists, who see themselves and their art as a place of nothingness, and Marxism, which sends them into nothingness, seem at first glance to be made for each other. Because art in the twentieth century was understood as an autonomous practice, as the sum of technical devices, and no longer as a spontaneous expression of the inner being of artists, it felt at once omnipotent and completely powerless: art can do anything, but it becomes an autonomous, purely technical object and gets its mandate from outside. In the context of bourgeois society it always has a very limited task.[8] Only Marxist-socialist doctrine gives the artist an external task, which is at the same time a total task. Marxism and modern art seem to complement each other perfectly. But twentieth-century history has shown us that this harmony has never really materialized in practice, and that the relationship between Marxism and modern art was marked above all by mutual rejection, disappointment, and betrayal. So something in the seemingly perfect calculation did not work after all.

This disharmony is related to another important reason for modern art to be engaged in the Marxist, socialist project—the expectation that socialist society will be new. The new is understood here the same way in which modern art itself became new by creating artistic styles that stood in visible contrast to tradition and thus testified to the break with this tradition in a manner obvious to everyone. By betraying tradition and engaging in new forms of art, modern art wanted not only to be free but also to demonstrate its freedom. This, however, set certain limits on the freedom of engagement, for absolute freedom as such does not distinguish between the old and the new.

If free engagement wants to show itself as such, this engagement becomes unfree through this wish alone, because only the new can then become a potential object of engagement. In Sartre, this difficulty becomes noticeable through his condemnation of "false faith" (*mauvais foi*), which reveals itself to Sartre in the choice of what already exists. At the same time, Sartre essentially assumes that all engagements—old and new—are equal. But Heidegger, to whom Sartre refers, wrote: "Thought is not only *l'engagement dans l'action* for and through being in the sense of the real of the present situation. Thought is *l'engagement* through and for the truth of being. Its history has never gone away, it is always waiting in the future."[9] In other words, Heidegger, who already had his own unfortunate experience of engagement behind him, demanded that one become engaged not in what is already there and present, but, rather, in the absolutely new. And much later, Derrida summed up his Marxist engagement in a similar way when he defined Marxism as an apocalyptic waiting for the absolute other.[10] Novelty, unfamiliarity, radical otherness are here the firm criteria of an authentic engagement. Now, however, this expectation of the new in relation to the communist society envisaged by Marxism has never been and cannot be fulfilled, for from the start this society understood itself both as a continuation of tradition and as a break with it. Marxism never defined itself as a new aesthetic-political style, for such a definition would contradict the Marxist dialectic, which seeks to undermine all such determinations.

On the side of artists, it has often been said that the reason for Marxism's sympathy for tradition was that Marxist officials did not understand the new, radical, revolutionary art. That may be so. The question remains why the artists who so often formulated this accusation so stubbornly clung to the new art forms they created. If art is only the sum of technical devices, if it does not "express" anything and is not dictated by any inner necessity, there is just as little reason to insist on the new as on the old. Every engagement, if it is truly free, must, as has been said, also be revisable; not aesthetic consistency but only the usefulness of the artistic process should serve as a criterion. For the Communist Party leadership, it was therefore reasonable to assume that for the artists associated with it, the demonstration of aesthetic freedom and innovative strength was more important than really becoming engaged—that is, than freeing themselves from their own artistic style. Art wants to be visible; it wants to show itself. And if art wants to be free, it also wants to show that it is free. But in politics it is different: one is free

precisely when one does not reveal one's own position. Modern art in most cases proved incapable of appropriating this invisible and more radical freedom of aesthetic-political manipulation. Modern artists merely hoped that the mass influence of the Communist Party would replace the traditional public they had lost as a result of their artistic innovations. Of course, the Communist leadership did not want to be exploited in this way.

Thus, artists and intellectuals repeatedly felt betrayed by the Communist Party and complained about this alleged betrayal. It was perceived as a betrayal that the party proved to be organized in a quite traditional manner: politically repressive, bureaucratic, aesthetically conservative, and economically greedy. However, this betrayal was certainly just imaginary. The Communist Party did not follow tradition, but dealt with it in a purely manipulative way. The political struggle for power that the Communist Party fought was also the struggle for power over tradition, over the past, over the existing archives of cultural forms. The abandonment of tradition preached by the avant-garde was perceived from the Communist Party perspective as an arbitrary limitation of the party's power—a limitation that was perceived as anti-communist. It was not the Communist apparatchiks but the artistic avant-garde that remained deeply rooted in tradition: every aesthetic break with tradition is necessarily also the next step in the continuation of tradition. For tradition itself is nothing other than the history of changing cultural forms, as described for instance by Hegelian dialectics.

But Marxist ideology is an ideology after the end of history, after the conclusion of the Hegelian dialectic, when all opposites and dividing lines have already become conscious and manageable. In this situation, the border crossing that the artistic avant-garde practiced was not a step forward, which would remove old boundaries, but merely a betrayal. For the post-Hegelian, Marxist-socialist self-understanding, no new territory beyond all borders is to be discovered, but only a hostile territory that has long been occupied by enemy forces. The avant-garde artist pretended to be a Columbus who could still discover an unknown continent on the voyage into the unprecedented. But the Marxist ideologue knew that America had already been discovered and had become a citadel of the class enemy. In our world, where all borders are already marked and all territories are occupied, every border crossing is just an emigration, a defection to the enemy. Thus the avant-garde artist, who considered him- or herself a vehicle of the spirit breaking through the borders of the status quo, could merely cross the already marked borders, once in one direction and the next time in the other: the border crosser has become a border traveler—that is, a professional traitor or refugee, as exemplified by Charlie Chaplin in the film in which he runs along the US-Mexico border.

Marxist ideology is of course also a dialectic, but it is a materialistic dialectic. And that means that borders can be eliminated not in spirit but only in material practice. If, for example, the United States and Mexico were simultaneously destroyed by a nuclear strike, the border between them would also be eliminated. But as long as these states exist materially, a purely imaginary, spiritual crossing of their border remains only a change of position in relation to this border, which therefore leaves the border intact; this is, as I've said, betrayal. The late Marxist dialectic, especially in its Stalinist form, is basically a theory of such a betrayal: a betrayal by people and things. For dialectical materialism, the dramaturgy of events develops by virtue of the negation of negation, or by virtue of the betrayal of the traitors. Nothing remains in its familiar place. Everything is constantly repositioned. Friends and enemies are constantly redefined. People and things change their positions with regard to all boundaries, intentionally or unintentionally, but in any case permanently. Every attitude constantly turns into its opposite. What was reactionary and damnable yesterday is progressive and welcome today—and maybe reactionary again tomorrow. But nothing can be neither progressive nor reactionary. Nothing can be merely different: a third way is impossible in a divided reality.

There is a well-established opinion that Soviet dialectical materialism shaped by Stalinism is a dogmatic, immovable doctrine that seeks to theoretically comprehend life in a complete and final way. Nothing is further from the truth. The core of dialectical materialism is the doctrine of reality as the unity and conflict of opposites: for dialectical materialism, life is a paradox that cannot be resolved theoretically, since every theory, if it wants to be consistent and move in a certain direction, sooner or later crosses a certain invisible border and becomes its opposite, just as someone who constantly moves in a certain direction on the face of the earth leaves his country's territory and goes over to the enemy's. So in order to stay with himself he has to turn around and move in the opposite direction—but then one no longer knows whether the person in question will launch an enemy attack on his own country. Here we are dealing with the paradox of a dialectic after the closure of the infinite historical perspective, whereby a new dialectic of the finite or a dialectic of reversibility is instituted. Every thought fails before this paradox, which cannot be overcome dialectically—precisely because it itself is the principle of every inversion. It is only possible to repeat this paradox monotonously in order to surrender before it and clear the way for the inner paradox of Soviet ideology, which Orwell parodied in slogans such as "peace is war." Similarly, one can say "tradition is innovation" or "innovation is tradition." The paradox of official Soviet Marxism is deeper than the political engagement of the avant-garde.

Thus, an intellectual or artist gradually begins to understand that the engagement with a certain position in the context of a post-Hegelian, post-historical dialectical teaching such as Marxism is at the same time an

engagement with the opposite of this position. One engages oneself as a friend and is treated as an enemy. Or one engages oneself as an enemy and is welcomed as a friend. The boundaries are always the same, but the positions are constantly rotating, as if the United States and Mexico were constantly changing places. The difference between difference and identity cannot be stabilized. Thus avant-garde artists who search for the other are seen as traitors, but at the same time they are betrayed if they persist in their belief in the same. Incidentally, it is naive to speak today about the demise or the end of Soviet Marxism. The Soviet Union, the empire of dialectical materialism, wasn't defeated by external enemies or an internal uprising. Rather, this empire changed its political positioning. The system betrayed itself in the person of Gorbachev as its highest representative, because from the beginning it was a system of betrayal. So this change of political positioning was nothing but another victory of the Marxist dialectic.

Now it becomes clear why the Marxist-socialist engagement of intellectuals and artists has generally led to disappointment: this commitment presupposed a certain consistency, be it consistency in the constant search for the other or consistency in the fidelity to one's own choice. But it is precisely this consistency that has proved impossible in the materialistic-dialectical play of total reversibility. The engagement, as a visible choice between positions, loses all its pathos when all positions become interchangeable. And the search for the other becomes treacherous when the supposedly unknown other proves to be the long-known enemy. And so the artist begins to search for someone who shows a certain irreversible consistency in the field of politics in order to engage oneself with this person. For example, one engages oneself with Trotsky after his break with the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Here one finally sees someone who has remained consistent, who wanted a permanent revolution, and who rejected all that exists in every form. Trotsky, of course, did not cross new borders, but only crossed the already existing Russian border to the West, from which he had once returned to Russia, from which he had emigrated even earlier. Thus Trotsky, although by his own fate, also demonstrated the reversibility of the late dialectic and merely passed the same border in both directions several times. But at least he found refuge in Mexico, a country beyond the immediate East-West conflict, in the house of an artist.

In the person of Trotsky, politics itself asked for art's help. The reaction was easy to predict. Most artists and intellectuals rightly interpreted this request as a sign of weakness and rejected it. Because of its historical weakness, many authors, including Sartre and Bataille, saw Trotskyism not as a solution but merely as a Western intellectual current that was not worth the effort to become engaged in. It should not be overlooked: one wanted to engage oneself in the service of the historical winner and not the historical loser. Trotsky's criticism of conditions in the former Soviet Union was known in the West. It definitely shaped the relationship of many Western artists and intellectuals to Stalinist Russia, and even if it did not fully immunize them against Stalinist propaganda, it did raise some doubts. However, the image of the lonely representative of the world spirit who wanders through the world was too familiar to most artists and intellectuals to evoke special enthusiasm.

Perhaps the only prominent exception was Breton's Trotskyist commitment. But this exception confirms the rule, for Breton understood surrealism not as a purely aesthetic style but, rather, as a study of the unconscious by artistic means. From the very beginning, surrealist art thus had its own autonomous content and its own external task for Breton. As a result, more than political engagement—that is, voluntary submission to an effective political force that would allow formalistic art to find a new relation to reality—Breton sought a political ally who could support the goals of the surrealist revolution of the unconscious. The refusal of Breton to see art as pure form and anchor it in nothingness has something old-fashioned about it: the surrealism of Breton reminds us of nineteenth-century realism, with its claim to its own truth and scientific nature—even though the surrealists searched for truth in the unconscious. Thus, Breton committed himself to Trotsky not because he sought a free commitment, but simply followed his belief in the necessity of surrealism.

Therefore, in the 1920s Breton was able to put his surrealism "*au service de la révolution*" and at the same time demand the autonomy of the surrealist work with the unconscious. Only when artists are completely modern—meaning that their art is grounded in nothingness—are they confronted with the alternative of completely abandoning reality or submitting to it. Otherwise, the artist is not free enough to become engaged but is always already determined. And it is precisely this feeling of inner determination that frees the artist from submission to external powers. Here is the point at which Trotsky and Breton met in the 1930s, for Trotsky was a Marxist determinist, trusting in the political freedom of the arts. In their manifesto "Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant" (1938), coauthored by Trotsky but not cosigned for reasons of censorship, Breton and Trotsky insist on the political independence of art, even if they reject reactionary—that is, anti-communist—art.[11] Incidentally, Trotsky's aesthetic views allowed him from the beginning to define the field of art as autonomous.

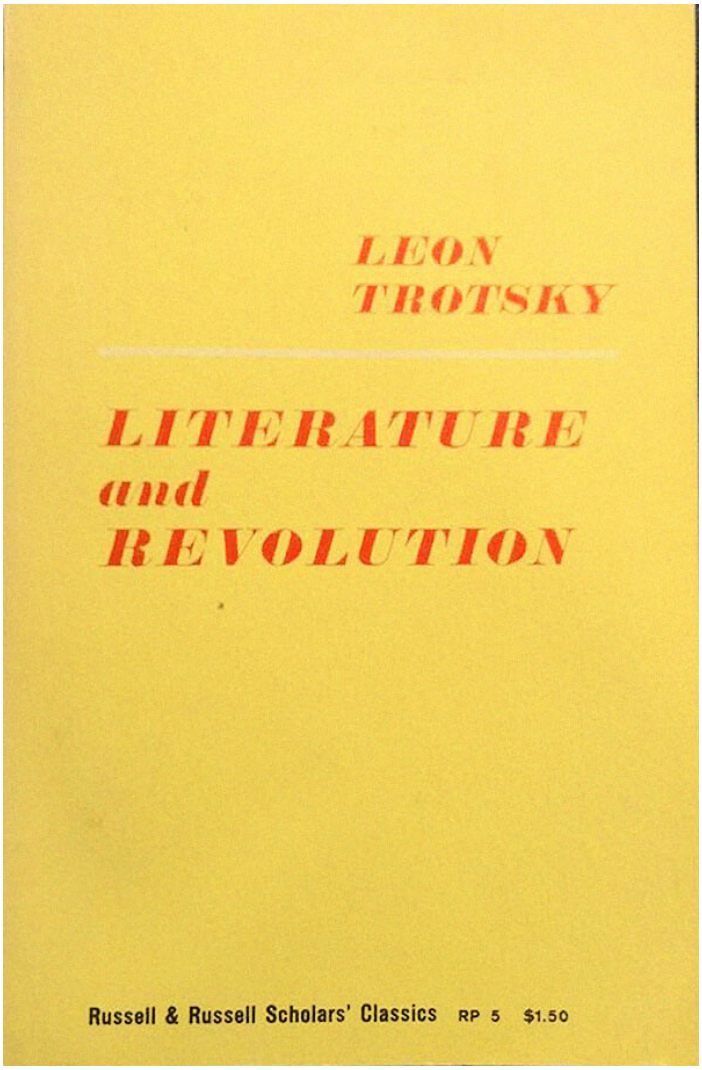
Trotsky's deterministic, traditionally Marxist conception of art had led him even earlier to deny the possibility of socialist or proletarian art under the conditions of his time. Trotsky considered the attitude of the Stalinist dialectic of free choice, which called artists to take on the

standpoint of communist ideology, unrealistic. For Trotsky, the position of the artist was historically conditioned and could not be artificially changed by means of conscious engagement. Thus the choice between Stalinism and Trotskyism becomes, as it were, the choice between inner freedom, which leads to external political submission, and inner determination, which guarantees external political freedom.

In the Soviet Union, Trotsky was long considered the epitome of the traitor to the cause of Soviet communism. At the same time, Trotsky himself spoke of the "revolution betrayed," meaning that the revolution was betrayed by the Stalinist leadership, whose victory for Trotsky meant a "Thermidor"—that is, the beginning of the counterrevolutionary process in Russia. This parallelism shows how far Trotsky distanced himself from Soviet ideology. The idea that a country or a party can betray a person is completely alien to Stalinist ideology because it sees no compelling reason for the individual to refrain from adapting to prevailing circumstances. Every human being has the inner freedom and at the same time the duty to accept historical judgment.

Incidentally, almost all the Bolsheviks condemned in the period of Stalin shared this view, and so they tried constantly, albeit in vain, to prove their loyalty. Trotsky, on the other hand, felt betrayed and insisted on an inner vision of the revolution that was compelling to him and could not be the subject of free choice or dialectical substitution. Sartre, as a philosopher of engagement, rejected the determinism of Marxist doctrine. Trotsky embodies this determinism, which is reminiscent of the Protestant doctrine of divine predestination. Stalin embodies the Catholic side of Marxism with its emphasis on free choice, which not by chance especially fascinated the post-Catholic French intelligentsia. Trotsky is a Protestant, deterministic soul who refuses to decide or let others decide freely about his inner truth. Thus, Trotsky remains attractively conservative—that is, nonstrategic.

This becomes particularly clear if one remembers his earlier polemic against postrevolutionary Russian futurism, which called for an absolute break with the past and the creation of a proletarian culture. In this culture, the radically new avant-garde artistic form was supposed to unite with the equally radical communist content that was meant to be obligatory in the new Russia. For Trotsky, the call for a break with the past merely showed that the futurists, albeit negatively, still defined themselves in the context of bourgeois tradition. Trotsky writes: "The futuristic break with the past is ultimately just a storm in the closed little world of the intelligentsia … The futurists have separated from them—and have done right—but one should not proclaim the technique of separation as a law of world development."[12] The aesthetic separation from the past, according to Trotsky, did not mean a separation from the bourgeoisie. For him, the transition of the futurists to the demand for proletarian culture was merely an effect of an event completely independent of the futurists' activities, namely the October Revolution, which disempowered the bourgeois class and made it impossible for the futurists to return to their traditional role. According to Trotsky, the futurists are not free artists, freed from the burden of tradition, willing to engage themselves for the cause of the proletariat, but rather victims of a change in circumstances to which they, like all others, had to adapt.



Cover of Leon Trotsky's Literature and Revolution (1957).

Trotsky by no means blames the futurists for their bourgeois tradition. Rather, he sees the superiority of his own position in recognizing his own determination through history: "We Marxists have always lived in traditions and have not stopped being revolutionaries just because of them … We who were educated in the context of an organically grown epoch and went into battle, lived in the traditions of the revolution."[13] The futurists' unwillingness to accept that their aesthetic revolution also has a tradition tempts futurism to demand a

proletarian dictatorship in art. But according to Trotsky, proletarian—that is, socialist—art can only emerge within a historically established socialist order: new art does not arise through an individual free decision but as the necessary consequence of a changed social determination.

Moreover, Trotsky denies the possibility of a proletarian culture even in the future because, unlike the bourgeoisie, the proletariat historically had no chance of forming itself culturally. The proletarian dictatorship cannot produce its own art because this dictatorship in essence represents only a transitional period to the future classless society:

> From this it is necessary to draw the general conclusion that not only is there not a proletarian culture, but it will not exist; and there is truly no reason to regret this: the proletariat has just seized the power to put an end once and for all to class culture and pave the way for human culture.[14]

Essentially, Trotsky denies here the usual interpretation of the "permanent revolution," a concept associated with his name and commonly understood precisely as proclaiming the separation from tradition as the law of world evolution. Trotsky understood the permanent revolution merely as a transition from bourgeois to proletarian revolution, which was, however, to introduce a new epoch without historical ruptures. For Trotsky, art represents, first, an autonomous domain of mastery and, second, a representation of reality whose character is decided by the artist's social determination and therefore cannot be dictated from outside:

> The Marxist method offers the possibility to analyze the conditions for development of the new art, to observe all its sources and to support the most progressive among them by a critical examination of its ways—but nothing more. The art has to go its own way on its own feet. The methods of Marxism are not the methods of art. Party directs the proletariat, not the historical process.[15]

These formulations are certainly far removed from the demand for partisanship in arts as it was understood in the Stalinist era: art that is partisan or, if you will, engaged, should shape reality in its entirety rather than simply portray it. For Trotsky, on the other hand, art remains above all the subject of Marxist analysis and diagnosis, which only apply if art follows its own inner logic that necessarily connects it with the historical process, which can only be reflected upon but not directed. In the context of the polemic against futurism, Trotsky writes: "Art—we are told—is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, but transforms … To shave one must have a mirror, and how should one rebuild oneself, one's own life, without looking into the 'mirror' of literature?"[16] This passage shows why Trotsky later so vehemently protested against the control of art and literature in the Stalinist Soviet Union: Stalinist cultural policy adopted and enforced the demand of the radical avant-garde for an art that did not depict the world but rather transform it—however, only under Stalinism's own direction. Thus art was robbed of its diagnostic value and could no longer serve as a mirror of life. Only art that does not become engaged is good art for the Marxist Trotsky, since it is an art suitable for Marxist analysis. On the other hand, a free art beyond any inner necessity becomes only an accomplice in political manipulation. Trotsky's insight has proved itself over time.

At the end of the twentieth century, the story of the engagement of new art for new politics reveals above all the problematic character of the claim to absolute freedom with which this new art emerged at the beginning of the century. If it wished to enforce its inner freedom consistently, it would've had to step out of its own realm, deny its original relationship to reality, and engage itself for external ends; as Mayakovsky said, it would've had "to step on the neck of its own song." Art needed to replace its own with the foreign and be ready to become insincere and unbelievable.

However, the new art was also under pressure to recognize the reversibility of all things, which characterized late dialectics, and to renounce the identifiability of its own engagement. Anyone who decides for the world of politics decides for the whole of this world and submits to the constant exchange between friend and foe. Freedom of choice loses its meaning because the opposite of this choice is also always chosen. But if the new art wanted to be aesthetically consistent, it needed to give up the claim of absolute freedom and legitimize itself through a kind of necessity—be it the inner necessity of the unconscious or the external logic of the development of artistic form. However, such an aesthetically consistent art would've failed to satisfy the expectations of its recipients, who in the twentieth century had long since learned to ignore every kind of inner necessity and, instead, think and act in a purely strategic manner. Thus Trotsky remained alone in his deterministic analysis of Stalinist society, which likewise quickly learned to simulate every inner determination in a purely external way.

X

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Boris Groys is a philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally renowned expert on Soviet-era art and literature, especially the Russian avant-garde. He is a Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, a Senior Research Fellow at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, and a professor of philosophy at the European Graduate School (EGS). His work engages radically different traditions, from French post-structuralism to modern Russian philosophy, yet is firmly situated at the juncture of aesthetics and politics. Theoretically, Groys's work is influenced by a number of modern and postmodern philosophers and theoreticians, including Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Walter Benjamin.

1
Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Editions Nagel, 1970), 58. All quotes from non-English sources translated by the author.

2
Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* , 71.

3
Wassili Kandinsky, *Uber das Geistige in der Kunst* (Benteli, 1952), 78ff.

4
Nikolai Taraboukine, *Le dernier tableau* (Champ Libre, 1972), 69.

5
Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* , 81.

6
Georges Bataille, *Die Aufhebung der Okonomie* (Matthes & Seitz, 1985), 175.

7
Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit, mit einem Brief uber den "Humanismus"* (Francke Verlag, 1947), 87.

8
Peter Burger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Suhrkamp, 1974), 66ff.

9
Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit, mit einem Brief uber den "Humanismus"* , 54.

10
Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Editions Galileé, 1994).

11
See Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (Paragon House, 1988), 146–47.

12
Leo Trotzki, *Literatur und Revolution* (Gerhardt Verlag, 1968), 110.

13
Trotzki, *Literatur und Revolution*, 112.

14
Trotzki, *Literatur und Revolution*, 138.

15
Trotzki, *Literatur und Revolution*, 184.

16
Trotzki, *Literatur und Revolution*, 116.