e-flux journal

issue #104

11 /2019

e-flux Journal is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

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Editorial

On November 7, 1929, the Museum of Modern Art "opened in a five-room rented space with an 'historical' exhibition of (European) Post-Impressionist art, titled 'The First Loan Exhibition: Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh.'"[1] MoMA's founding director, Alfred Barr, had the idea that modern works that passed a test called "Torpedo in Time" would, after some fifty years, be considered historical and transfer to the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[2]At the time, Gertrude Stein also famously quipped that the very idea of a museum of the modern was an oxymoron. In short, MoMA was more of a kunsthalle than what we usually mean by a "museum." This October, the building on West 53rd Street in Manhattan was reopened with half a billion dollars of expansion and renovation on the outside, and an enlarged and reframed collection on the inside. It's been noted that the white, male-dominated canon that has persisted in the museum's eighty-year history has been finally studded conspicuously with certain works by those old masters' contemporaries of color and women. It has also been noted, to the chagrin of certain art historians, that the wall texts explaining the works have been crafted in a way that suggests a dancing away from placing pieces of art within authoritative movements, rather offering looser, descriptive terms to tell of their place and time. Instead of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, we read "In and Around Harlem."

Art institutions, like any small or megalithic enterprise shot through with capital, are inherently political beasts. But the larger of these often try to gloss and shade away certain political lineages or leanings. So, though institutions may develop public strategies offering a new history of modern art that represents the diversity of its protagonists, the vague results are instead an obfuscation of political movements and hidden narratives that would otherwise offer power back to those overlooked and displaced. They continue to be buried deep in the still vast, unseen collection, or, more likely, never collected or touched by the institution in the first place. For example, there is no room in MoMA's now 708,000 square feet for the major contributions to art made by practitioners of socialist realism. Nor for that matter do we see works even tenuously connected to that tradition—there is no section titled "In and Around Socialism."

In the lead essay of this issue of *e-flux journal*, titled "The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism," Boris Groys reveals modern art's mutating role within various factions of the Cold War, which, as we can see today, continues. Well before World War II, Groys demonstrates, Soviet thought decried Western modern art as fascist, and Western criticism denounced Soviet art—socialist realism—as also fascist. How far have we moved from this paradox—this cultural war within a war—a century later? Groys reminds us that in the West, Clement Greenberg declared that avant-garde art was only accessible to those linked to the golden umbilical cord of wealth, while he

dismissed socialist realism as just another brand of kitsch—advertising, propaganda. Groys follows the Cold Art Wars from World War II, through the divided blocs of Germany, up to the 1970s and beyond, ending up with a present return to message over medium.

Soo Hwan Kim looks closely at three figures from two different eras, alongside an examination of the contemporary renewed interest in the factographic movement. Kim first recounts the story of Walter Benjamin's conjuring of Sergei Tretyakov in his 1934 lecture "The Artist as Producer." The two had certain fundamental ideals in common, namely a staunch belief in the right of artists and intellectuals to exist. After establishing this intellectual and artistic commonality, Kim jumps forward to today and examines the deep influence of Tretyakov on the video and written work of Hito Steyerl, noting the appearance of Tretyakov's essay "Biography of an Object" in Steyerl's *In Free Fall*. Kim also links Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image."

Meanwhile, Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber, in contemplating the relationship between the art world and industrialism, pick apart the lingering specter of the individual "genius" in contemporary art narratives. Even though institutional nods to artists from groups that have been historically left out of this classification may appear to signal a return to a collective focus, Dubrovsky and Graeber insist that a preoccupation with individual artists' particular identities and biographies still boils down to a continuation of vertical Romanticism. The two writers look at the larger constellation of mega-exhibitions, pointing out the absurdity in each of these trying to be its own historic event. These "historic events," they contend, aim to expand notions of contemporary art, leaving the whole field a constellation of rules and meta-rules. In another text in this issue, Ariella Aısha Azoulay considers the power of the strike not only as a protest against subjugation, but as "an opportunity to care for a shared world." In a moving consideration of what it means to strike, Azoulay focuses on two types of cultural workers who might amplify these activities: historians and museum workers.

Following their discussion of Victor Klemperer's study of Nazi linguistics in our last issue, Metahaven steps back and considers the logical seriousness in the development of children's language. If an adult says they will "die" if they cannot get something they want, or complains of a waiting period taking "forever," a child may take this literally and correct the adult for their absurd exaggeration. Metahaven traces the concept of *bessmyslitsa* ("meaninglessness") in Russian poetry for children (and open-minded adults). They examine a style of poems called "turnarounds" or "topsy-turvies" (*perevortyshi*), finding in them an absurdism that, paradoxically, manages to seek or tell more truth than more straightforward collections of words.

Returning to the notion of naming and renaming artistic movements, the texts by T. J. Demos and Dena Yago in this issue reflect on the world-shifting importance of what something is or isn't labelled. Demos calls for moving away from the neoliberal-laced language of "climate emergency" to an intersectional, movement-based "emergence." He points out that "the Bolsonaros, Dutertes, Netanyahus, and Trumps are happy to declare emergency"—as long as it's one they created themselves. Demos also notes that "the green nonprofit industrial complex," with its focus on emergency, frames climatic disaster in the same boiled-down terms as the finance and insurance industries. He ultimately concludes that we have to overcome emergency politics and decolonize our future.

Dena Yago zooms in on Los Angeles, simultaneously tracking the city's sidewalk usage—or lack thereof—and the current rise of destination selfie murals. Yago finds historical moments to background these street scenes, ranging from Brecht's 1941 depiction of cars "lighter than their own shadows," to the 1974 staging of a dinner on a traffic island by the art collective Asco, in the same neighborhood where, a few years prior, police violently confronted a peaceful Chicano-led protest against the Vietnam War. Yago relays a still-searing anecdote from the 1970s when a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) told Asco that their work was not suitable for the museum because Chicanos made crafts, not art. But Asco had the last word on the walls of that institution, for a short while. The battles in the city for wall space and street space continue apace, with gentrifying blue-chip galleries selectively whitewashing existing murals, while a city initiative literally whitewashes the blacktop to cool down the streets, deflecting the sun's rays onto those using the adjacent sidewalks, who tend to be working-class people of color in the car-centric city of LA.

Also in this issue, we are pleased to present another excerpt from Franco "Bifo" Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci's *Killing Swarm*, a near-future fiction that finds swarms of young people, their emotions influenced by a special pill, ecstatically doing away with members of the baby-boomer generation that won't die. We learn more about the origins and swirling conspiracy theories around these occurrences, and delve deeper into the lives of the young characters, whose isolation and depression cocoons them even when they find themselves bound together. One of the young women in the story collects her existential screams in a bag, stores them on her device, then literally dumps them out to make room for more each day. "The spoken word," one of the characters says, or thinks, "becomes essential when life stops happening to you."

—Editors

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1
Walter Benjamin, “The Making of Americans,” *e-flux journal* no. 48 (October 2013) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/48/60039/the-making-of-americans/ .

2
Cited in Porter McCray, “American Tutti-Frutti,” *e-flux journal* no. 60 (December 2014). See https://images.e-flux-systems.com/2014_12_Picture-5WEB.jpg,2000 .

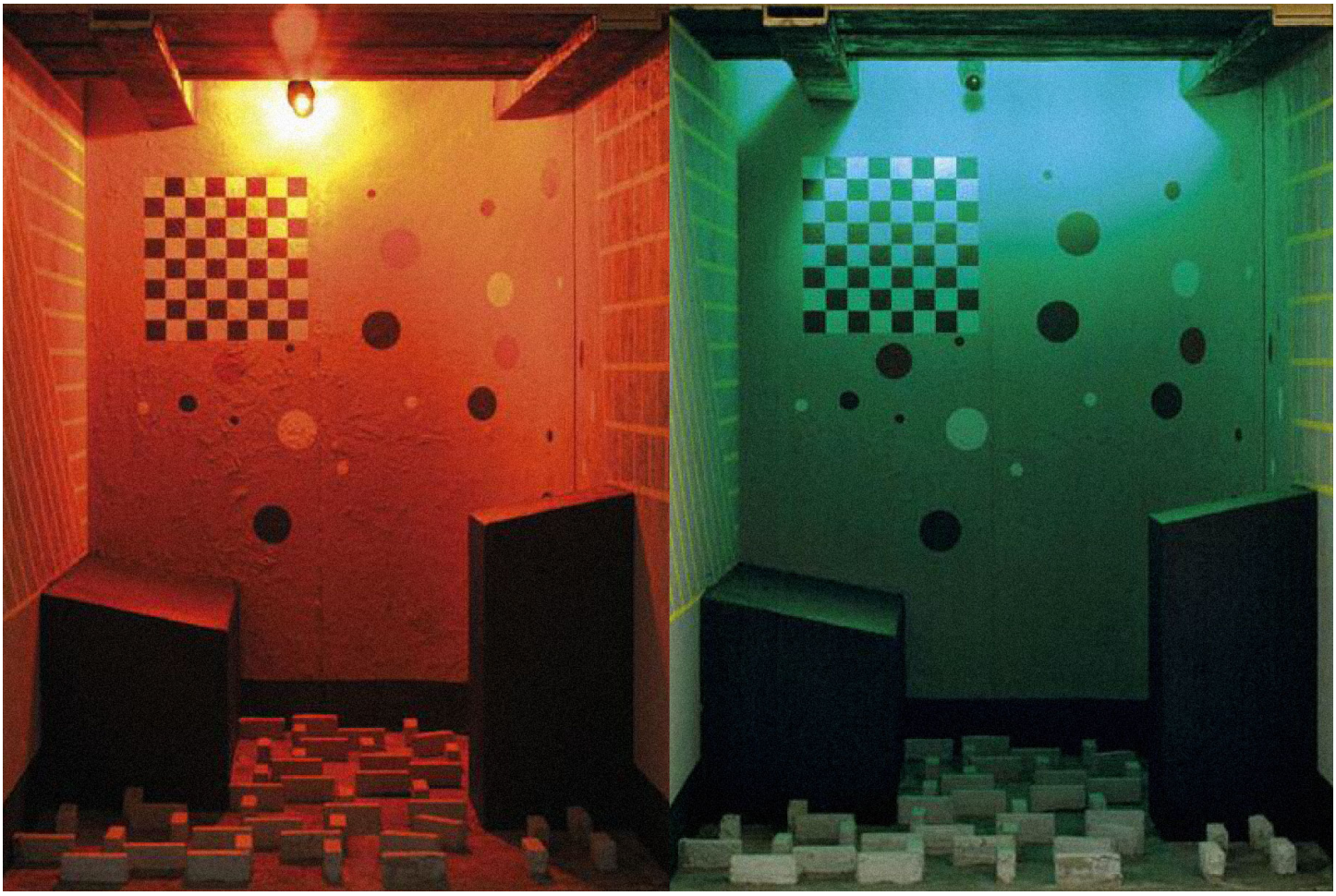
Boris Groys

The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism

It is well known that the Cold War was represented in the context of art by a conflict between modernist—or more precisely, abstract—art on the one hand, and figurative, realist—or rather, socialist realist—art on the other. When we speak about the Cold War, we usually have in mind the period after WWII. However, the ideological conflict between abstract and realist art was formulated before WWII, and all the relevant arguments were merely reiterated later without any substantial changes. This essay will discuss and illustrate the genealogy and development of the conflict between the Western and Soviet concepts of art before and during the Cold War.

From the Western side, the foundational document that formulated and theorized this conflict was Clement Greenberg's famous essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). According to Greenberg, the avant-garde operates mainly by means of abstraction: it removes the "what" of the work of art—its content—to reveal its "how." The avant-garde reveals the materiality of the artworks and the techniques that traditional art used to produce them, whereas kitsch simply uses these techniques to produce certain effects, to make an impression on the primitive, uncritical spectator. Accordingly, the avant-garde is proclaimed to be "high art," and kitsch is deemed low art. This hierarchy within the art system is related to a social hierarchy. Greenberg believes that the connoisseurship that makes a spectator attentive to the purely formal, technical, material aspects of a work of art is accessible only to those who "could command leisure and comfort that always goes hand and hand with cultivation of some sort."[1] For Greenberg this means that avant-garde art can hope to get its financial and social support only from the same "rich and cultivated" people who historically supported traditional art. Thus the avant-garde remains attached to the bourgeois ruling class "by an umbilical cord of gold."[2]

Greenberg believed that the art of socialist realism (but also of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy) was also a version of kitsch. He understood this art as work that addressed the uneducated masses. Thus, socialist realism appears as a low, bad form of art, mere visual propaganda—comparable to Western commercial advertising. Greenberg explains why it is still so difficult to include the art of socialist realism in the Western system of musealized art representation. In recent decades the art system has begun to include everything that used to seem aesthetically different—non-Western local cultures, particular cultural identities, etc. However, if we understand socialist realism as a version of kitsch, then it is not *different* in this sense of reflecting a non-Western cultural identity, such as Soviet identity. It is simply aesthetically low, aesthetically bad. Thus, one cannot treat socialist realism in the usual terms of difference, cultural identity, inclusion, and aesthetic equality. In this sense, we are still living in an artistic situation informed by the Cold War: the war between good and bad, between the dispassionate contemplation of the medium and the use of this medium for the propagation of messages and



In 1938, Alphonse Larencic designed cells for captured Francoists that inspired disorientation, depression, and deep sadness. Photograph: Archivo Fotográfico del Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain. Published in Pedro G. Romero, Silo: Archivo F.X. (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009)

affects—the war between the medium and the message.

However, the interpretation of modernist, and particularly abstract, art as purely autonomous art manifesting human freedom from all utilitarian goals is an ideological illusion that contradicts the real history of the avant-garde and the goals of avant-garde artists. Avant-garde artists also wanted to influence their audience, including an uneducated audience, but they did it in a different way compared to traditional artists. They understood their artworks not as representations of so-called reality, nor as vehicles for ideological messages, but as autonomous things—as real as cars, trains, and planes. Not accidentally, avant-garde artists mostly refrained from using the term "abstract"; rather, they spoke about their art as "real," "objective," "concrete"—in opposition to illusionistic traditional art. The avant-garde returned to the ancient Greek definition of art as techne, as the production of artificial things. Speaking in Marxist terms, the avant-garde operated not on the level of superstructure but directly on the level of the material base. It did not send messages but tried to change the environment in which people lived and worked. And avant-garde artists believed that people would be changed by this new environment when they began to accommodate to it. Thus, the artists of Russian constructivism, German Bauhaus, and Dutch de Stijl hoped that the reduction, simplification, and geometrization of architecture, design, and art would produce rationalistic and egalitarian attitudes in the minds of the people who would populate the new urban environments. This hope was reawakened later through Marshall McLuhan's famous formula "the medium is the message." Here McLuhan professes his belief that the technology of information transmission influences people more than the information itself. One should not forget that McLuhan initially explained and illustrated this formula using examples from cubist paintings.

Thus, avant-garde artists shifted the work of influencing from the conscious to the subconscious level—from content to form. Form influences the psyche of the spectator especially effectively when this spectator is not well trained in aesthetic analysis: the impact of form is at

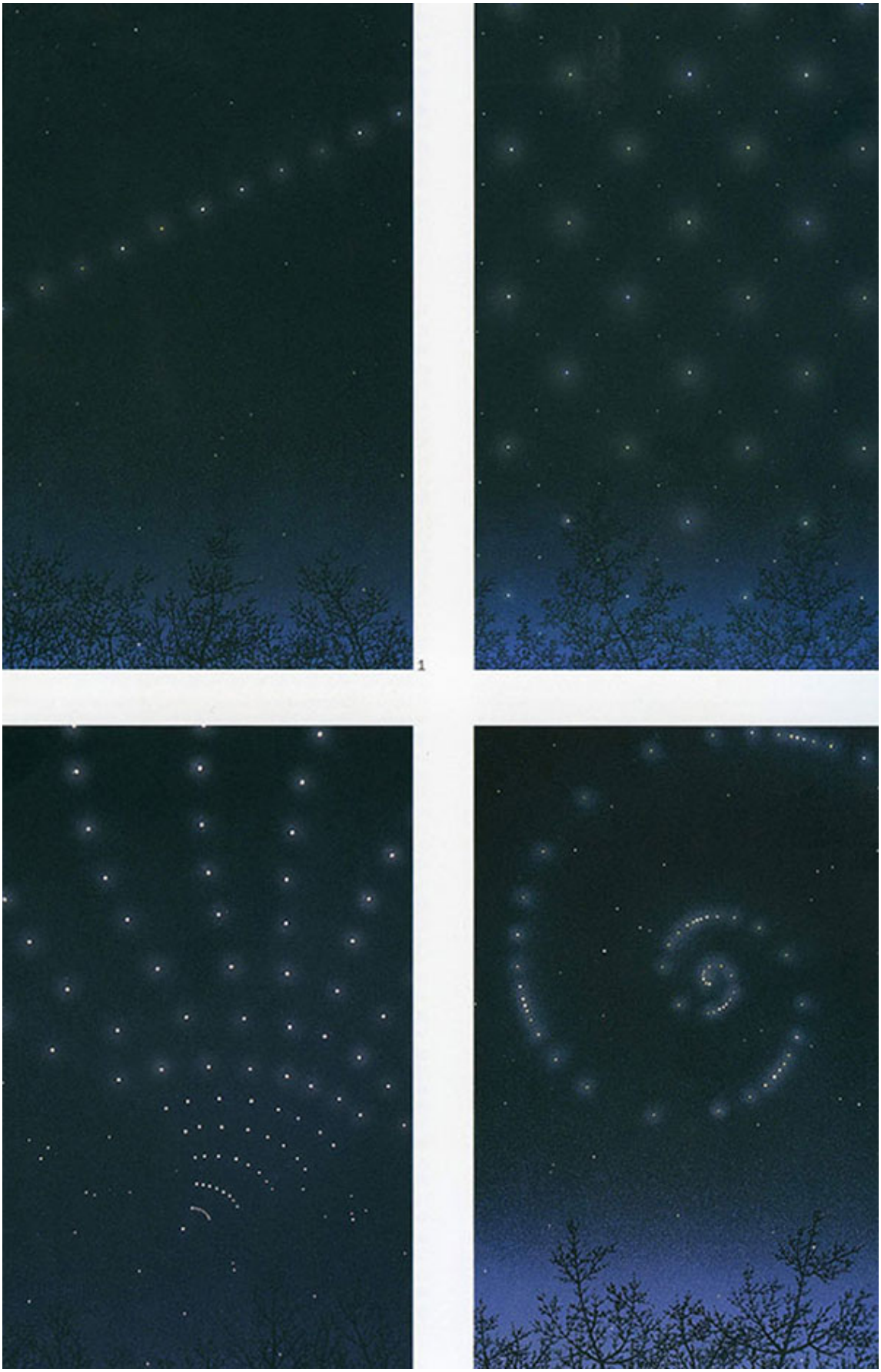
On October 23, 1940, Himmler visits the detention center on calle Vallmajor in Barcelona. Archive of La Vanguardia. Photo: Carlos Pérez de Rozas. Image from Pedro G. Romero, Silo: Archivo F.X. (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009).

its greatest when it remains subconscious. A good example of this strategy is the famous treatise by Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). For Kandinsky, every artwork influences the spectator not through its subject matter but through a certain choice of colors and forms. Later Kandinsky states that "brainwork" needs to "outweigh the intuitive part of creativity," ending, perhaps, with "the total exclusion of 'inspiration,'" so that future artworks are "created by calculation" alone.[3] In other words, Kandinsky sees "high art" not as the thematization of a neutral medium but as having its own operational goal—irrational, subconscious influence on the spectator. The biggest part of the treatise is dedicated to how particular colors and forms can influence the psyche of spectators and produce specific moods in them. That is why Kandinsky was so interested in the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). Here the individual is placed not outside the artwork, or in front of it—but inside the artwork, and totally immersed in it. Such an artificial environment can create a powerful subconscious effect on the spectator, who becomes a visitor to, if not a prisoner of, the artwork.

Let me now cite an interesting historical example of this strategy. In 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, the French-Slovenian poet, artist, and architect Alphonse Laurencic used the ideas in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to decorate cells at a prison in Barcelona where Republicans held captured Francoists. He designed each cell like an avant-garde art installation. The compositions of color and form inside the cells were chosen with the goal of causing the prisoners to experience disorientation, depression, and deep sadness. To achieve this, he relied on Kandinsky's theories of color and form. Indeed, later the prisoners held in these so-called "psychotechnic" cells did report extreme negative moods and psychological suffering due to their visual environment. Here the mood becomes the message—the message that coincides with the medium. The power of this message is shown in Himmler's reaction to the cells. He visited the psychotechnic cells after Barcelona was taken by the fascists (Laurencic was put on trial and executed), and said that the cells showed the "cruelty of Communism." They looked like Bauhaus installations and, thus, Himmler understood them as a manifestation of *Kulturbolschevismus* (cultural Bolshevism). In fact, the military trial against Laurencic took place in 1939, the same year in which Greenberg wrote his seminal text, but it tells a completely different story than a Greenbergian interpretation of the avant-garde.

The story is somehow ironic because it took place after Soviet art and ideology turned towards socialist realism. And it is even more ironic because this turn was caused by the struggle against fascism. Greenberg interpreted this turn as an accommodation of the tastes of the masses. But Soviet power was never hesitant in its will to reeducate the masses if it was deemed necessary from a political standpoint. This standpoint changed after 1933. After the Nazis seized power in Germany that year, Soviet cultural politics came to be guided by the struggle against the fascist, and especially Nazi, revolution. Indeed, the revolutionary attack came now from Germany and not from Russia—from the right and not the left. The success of this revolution was explained by its irrational, subconscious influence on the masses. One spoke about the Nazi meetings, marches, and rituals, as well as the allegedly magnetic, charismatic personality of Hitler, as sources of the power of fascist ideology over European populations. Here the analogy with the avant-garde becomes obvious. One could say that in both cases rational analysis was replaced by subconscious impact; the message was replaced by mobilization through the medium. Walter Benjamin spoke of the aestheticization of politics as being genuinely fascist—referring precisely to the irrational character of the self-staging of fascist movements. Here one should remember that Italian futurism was a movement closely connected to the Italian fascist party and also concentrated on the self-staging and glorification of the irrational forces of vitality and will to power.

In the Soviet Union, the journal *Literaturnyi kritik* (Literary Critic, 1933–40) played a decisive role in formulating the critique of modernist art as fascist. In his famous essay on German expressionism (1934), the most prominent contributor to the journal, Georg Lukács, diagnoses expressionist "activism" as a precursor to National Socialism. Lukács stresses "irrational" aspects of expressionism that later, according to his analysis, culminated in Nazi ideology. In a footnote to the text added in 1953, Lukács states that the persecution of expressionist artists during the Third Reich does not contradict the correctness of his analysis.[4] Instead of irrational influence and manipulation, Lukács and his closest collaborator Mikhail Lifshitz propagated the rational Marxist analysis of society in the tradition of the Enlightenment and great European realist literature and art. Whereas earlier the communists were ready to accept leftist avant-garde artists as their allies in the anti-bourgeois struggle, now revolutionary art was identified by Soviet communists as an ally of the fascist revolutions. Accordingly, after 1933 the belief in a combination of technology and the creativity of the masses as a path to a new proletarian culture began to decrease—after all, fascism was also a combination of a belief in technology and mass enthusiasm. As a result, the human individual and their ideology and political attitude took the central position in Soviet culture. The individual human soul was understood as a place of dramatic struggle between rational, humanist communist ideology and irrational fascist seduction. One should now be able to differentiate between dedicated communists and hidden traitors (*dvurushniki, vrediteli*). This kind of differentiation was basically a psychological one and could be treated only by means of realist literature and art, with their concentration on the deep analysis of individual psychology. Thus, traditional bourgeois realism was equated with humanism, whereas modernist art was



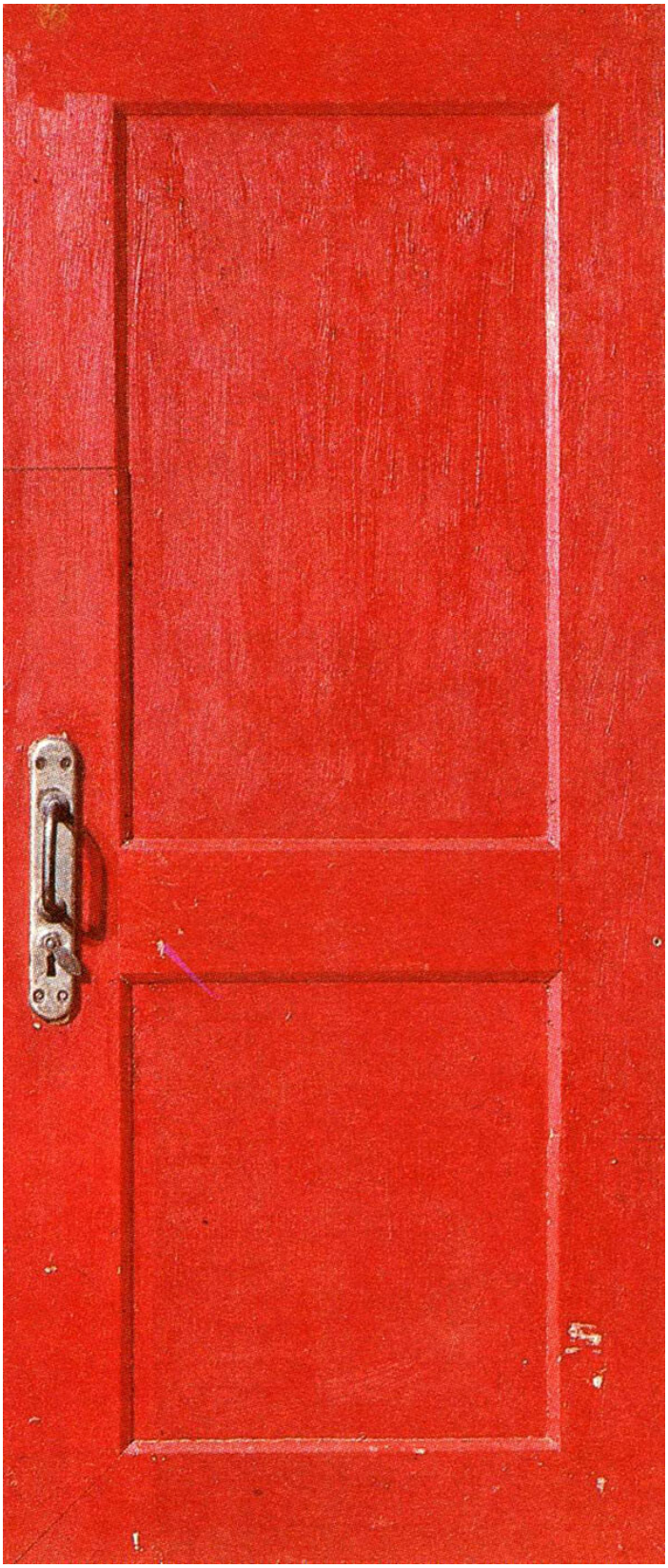
Francisco Infante, Projects of Reconstruction of the Star Sky, 1965–67. Gouache.

understood—together with fascism—as anti-humanist. Soviet culture began the process of its re-humanization, or rather it re-psychologization—after almost two decades of ignoring individual psychology and the tradition of psychological realism.

In these years the Soviet Union, looking for allies in the non-fascist West, began to present itself as a defender of the European humanist tradition against fascist barbarism. The main argument was this: the bourgeoisie had become incapable of defending the heritage of classical art, it had capitulated to fascism and its destruction of culture—so the Soviet Union remained the only true defender of this culture. In his text "On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right" (1935), Andre Breton analyzed precisely this change in cultural politics as manifested through the 1935 "International Congress for the Defense of Culture" in Paris, which was organized by Soviet authorities and political and cultural forces in the West sympathetic to the Soviet Union.[5] Already the title of the conference made clear its defensive, culturally conservative or even reactionary character. Breton relates this cultural turn to a declaration from May 15, 1935 in which Stalin stated his full support for the French national defense policy—thus, according to Breton, betraying the old communist goal of turning the war between nation-states into a civil war. In the same text Breton quotes a series of letters published by the newspaper *Pravda* under the general title "Respect your Parents." This restoration of "family values" had immediate ideological consequences. Breton quotes what Ilya Ehrenburg wrote at that time about the surrealists: "For them a woman means conformism. They preach onanism, pederasty, fetishism, exhibitionism, and even sodomy." At the end of the text Breton notes that the glorification of fatherland and family that Stalinist culture began to practice could easily lead to a restoration of religion and maybe even private property.

So before WWII the fascists saw modern art as an ally of communism, communists saw it as an ally of fascism, and the Western democracies saw it as a symbol of personal freedom and artistic realism—as an ally of both fascism and communism. This constellation defined postwar cultural rhetoric. Western art critique saw Soviet art as a version of fascist art, and Soviet critique saw Western modernism as a continuation of fascist art by other means. For both sides, the other was a fascist. And the struggle against this other was a continuation of WWII in the form of a cultural war.

The main terrain of the cultural Cold War was, of course, Germany divided between the two blocs. After WWII the American administration of Germany started a program to reeducate the German population. Art played an extremely important role in this program. The prewar economic and social structures remained basically intact, and thus commitment to modernist art took on the character of an official religion in West Germany—as a visible sign of a rejection of the Nazi past. But at the same time, this commitment was directed against East Germany's



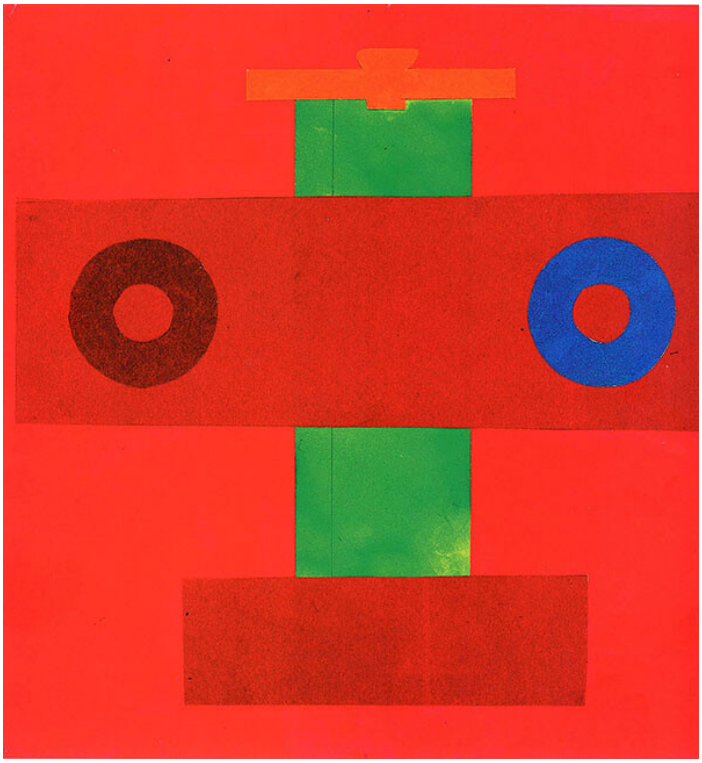
Mikhail Roginsky, Door, 1965. Oil on wood, door handle, 160 x 70 x 10 cm.

socialist realism. This was made obvious by the launching of Documenta in Kassel in 1956—still the greatest

exhibition of contemporary art today. Kassel is a provincial town with no prominent cultural tradition. But it was situated close to the border with East Germany—and thus perceived as a frontier town. In the first period of its existence Documenta was focused on those modernist and especially expressionist trends that had been associated with the exhibition "Degenerate Art"—and served as a kind of rehabilitation of these trends. But the neo-avant-garde wave of the late 1950s and '60s changed the artistic landscape in the East and West.

The death of Stalin in 1953 transformed the cultural situation in the Soviet Union. The most obvious change happened in architecture. Stalinist architecture was historicist; it wanted to be grandiose and spectacular. This desire for grandiosity and spectacularity was subjected to harsh critique and rejected at the beginning of the Khrushchev era. Post-Stalinist Soviet architecture was a somewhat cheap version of Russian avant-garde and Bauhaus architecture. Now one wanted to build not for visitors and tourists, but rather for the masses, for ordinary people, in contrast to the palace architecture of the Stalin period. One began to erect on a mass scale the so-called panel houses that were not "built" in the traditional sense of this word, but constructed from blocks produced at a panel factory. This method suggested the zero-point of tradition—a starting point for a new era. The panel houses of the Khrushchev period aesthetically translated the egalitarian, communist promise; they offered an image of universal equality, bare of any signs of privilege and aesthetic distinction. It is interesting that many critics in the Soviet Union and in the West characterized this architecture as "inhuman" because it was monotonous, standardized, and egalitarian. This reproach of inhumanity was, actually, already directed by the German right-wing press against the first projects of panel houses proposed by Mies van der Rohe in the second half of the 1920s as, in his words, "the final solution to all social questions." However, many Soviet artists of this period manifested the same neo-constructivist, neo-avant-garde will to reduction, minimalism, and geometrical abstraction—combined with faith in technical progress and a desire to conquer cosmic space. At the same time one could also see a growing interest in pop art as it shown by Mikhail Roginsky's *The Door* (1965).

However, the situation of neo-modernist, neo-avant-garde art began to change in December 1962 after Khrushchev's visit to an exhibition of new Soviet art. The exhibition presented a range of styles, including traditional socialist realism, a kind of neo-Cezannism, surrealism, symbolism, and pure abstraction. Enraged, Khrushchev insulted the artists and demanded a return to "normal," healthy, positive art. This very public scene of indignation dashed all hopes for official recognition of an art committed to the heritage of the avant-garde, or even moderate modernism. Again, modernist art became the face of the ideological enemy, namely, Western capitalism culminating in an art market that betrayed traditional humanist values.



Michail Chernyshov, Airplane with Circles, 1961. Gouache, pencil, and collage on paper, 46 x 60 cm.

In a famous pamphlet called *Why I Am Not a Modernist* (1963), Mikhail Lifshitz (who was a close friend and collaborator of Georg Lukács's in the 1930s) reiterated the main points of the standard Soviet critique: modernism is cultural fascism because it celebrates irrationality and anti-humanism. Lifshitz writes:

> So, why am I not a modernist? Why does the slightest hint of such ideas in art and philosophy provoke my innermost protest? Because in my eyes modernism is linked to the darkest psychological facts of our time. Among them are a cult of power, a joy at destruction, a love for brutality, a thirst for a thoughtless life and blind obedience ... The conventional collaborationism of academics and writers with the reactionary policies of imperialist states is nothing compared to the gospel of new barbarity implicit to even the most heartfelt and innocent modernist pursuits. The former is like an official church, based on the observance of traditional rites. The latter is a social movement of voluntary obscurantism and modern mysticism. There can be no two opinions as to which of the two poses a greater public danger.[6]

In a more expanded version of this manifesto published in 1968 under the title *The Crisis of Ugliness*, Lifshitz argues that the goal of avant-garde art was to abolish the artwork

as a space of representation and to make it a mere thing among other things.[7] This analysis is, of course, correct—and Lifshitz has no difficulty in proving its correctness by using examples from French cubism. The strategy that he chooses is, of course, pretty clever. It gives Lifshitz a chance to undermine Picasso and Leger's claims to being communist, Marxist artists—and thus also to criticize Roger Garaudy's book *D'un realisme sans rivages* (*Realism without Borders*, 1963), which was used by Soviet defenders of friendly, pro-communist modernism.

But Lifshitz goes further in his analysis. He compares cubism to pop art, which became influential in the 1960s. Lifshitz argues that pop art followed the road opened by cubism: cubists produced extra-ordinary things that at the time were unlike any other things in our civilization, but pop artists aestheticized the commodities that dominated contemporary mass consumption. Lifshitz concedes that this aestheticization had an ironic character but states that, even so, pop art became a part of contemporary capitalist commodity production. This is, of course, also correct. And one can argue that ultimately it is the seductive power of Western commodities—and the accommodation of the Soviet population to these commodities—that brought down Soviet socialism. In this sense the avant-garde's belief in the superiority of accommodation over propaganda was proven to be true.

Of course, at the time when *Crisis of Ugliness* was published it was perceived not as a prediction of the future but as a symbol of a return to the darkest days of Stalinism. This return, as we know, did not take place. Soviet neo-modernist art of the 1960s disappeared from public view but was not radically suppressed. It survived in the form of the so-called "unofficial art" practiced in private spaces, below the radar of Soviet mass media. One could say that during the late 1960s and '70s the Cold War was internalized by the Soviet art system, for inside the Soviet Union art became divided into official and unofficial ideological camps. Official art was identified as being truly "Soviet." Unofficial art was considered to aesthetically represent the West at a time when political representation of Western positions and attitudes was impossible. That is why Soviet unofficial art was "more than art." It was the West inside the East. And that is why today many contemporary Russian artists sympathize with the Soviet critique of modernism. One reads Lukács again—and even more, Lifshitz. In Moscow a well- known artist named Dmitri Gutov even organized a Lifshitz Club with the goal of struggling against Western modernism.

If at the beginning of the avant-garde, artists saw in the thingness of art a chance to liberate it from the obligations of representation, today one has the feeling that the things produced by an individual artist drown in the mass of contemporary commodity production. Thus, many artists turn back to the content, to the message—in the hope that it still will be heard in our overcrowded and saturated public space.

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This text was originally given as a lecture in the Distinguished Lecture series at the Jordan Center at NYU on October, 10, 2019.

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.

1
Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture* (Beacon Press, 1965), 9.

2
Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 8.

3
Cited in Max Bill, introduction to Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Benteli Verlag, 1952), 10–11.

4
Georg Lukács, *Essays on Realism* (MIT Press, 1980), 112–13.

5
Andre Breton, "On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1977), 243ff.

6
See https://garagemca.org/en/exhibition/i-if-our-soup-can-could-speak-mikhail-lifshitz-and-the-soviet-sixties-i/materials/pochemu-ya-ne-modernist-why-i-am-not-a-modernist .

7
Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness* (Brill, 2018).

Soo Hwan Kim

Sergei Tretyakov Revisited: The Cases of Walter Benjamin and Hito Steyerl

1.

Since 2000, there has emerged a new wave of interest in the factographic movement within the Soviet avant-garde. It is still too early to give the movement, which is associated with Sergei Tretyakov, a definitive historical and aesthetic assessment. The documentary impulse in Soviet culture embodied in factography is still mainly regarded as a mediator between the historical avant-garde and the realist paradigms that played starring roles in the evolution of Stalinist culture and socialist realism.[1] However, a number of scholars have recently claimed that the factographic program was not a "move backwards, following the experimental semioclasm of the early avant-garde" or a "link leading to the apparently more conservative practices of socialist realism," but rather a "radicalization of an earlier avant-garde slogan: art into life."[2]

The duality of views on factography has to do with the transitional nature of the period during which it emerged and flowered. The years between 1927 and 1932, conventionally referred to as the Soviet cultural revolution, coincide not only with the so-called Great Break (*velikii perelom*) and the first Five-Year Plan, but also with other important changes—for example, the transformation of the experimental avant-garde into a socialist-realist project, and the transformation of the revolutionary, montage-driven cinema of the 1920s into the talking pictures "for the millions" of the 1930s. It is quite difficult, of course, to give an unambiguous historical assessment of the time of the great shift. At the same time, this ambivalence partly fuels special interest in the period.[3]

In this article, I will examine the problem of returning to the past on the basis of two examples—one of them old and quite well known, the other relatively new to literary studies. In both cases, I would like to analyze how the work of Sergei Tretyakov was made relevant again and think about what this return means. Both of my examples involve Germany, so you could say we are dealing with a return to Tretyakov's work with a German "accent."

2.

In his famous lecture "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin argues that there is a certain relationship between tendency and technique:

> If, therefore, we stated earlier that the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality, because it includes its literary tendency, we can now formulate this more precisely by saying that this literary tendency can consist either in progress or in regression of literary technique. You will certainly

Hito Steyerl, In Free Fall, 2010. 33' 43''. Video HDV, 32', single-channel video, sound, color. Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Copyright: CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

> approve if I now pass, with only an appearance of arbitrariness, to very concrete literary conditions. Russian conditions. I would like to direct your attention to Sergei [Tretyakov], and to the type (which he defines and embodies) of the "operating" writer.[4]

Although Benjamin adds, "Of course it is only one example: I am keeping others in reserve," there can be no doubt that the overall impression made by this passage on Tretyakov far surpasses a simple example.[5] Indeed, Benjamin devotes nearly the entire first half of his lecture to a man with whom his audience would have been unfamiliar. According to Benjamin, "This operative writer presents the clearest example of the functional relation which always exists, in any circumstances, between correct political tendency and a progressive literary technique."[6]

So why does Benjamin cite the then-obscure Tretyakov in his lecture? Its entertaining backstory has already been studied in considerable detail by Katerina Clark and Maria Gough.[7] Bertolt Brecht's closest Russian friend, Tretyakov, spent nearly six months in Germany, from October 1930 to April 1931, during which time he lectured in several German cities. In Berlin in January 1931, Tretyakov spoke in detail about a special model of cultural behavior he called the type of the "operative" writer, based on his stays at a collective farm over a two-year period from 1928 to 1930. Benjamin relays:

> When, in 1928, at the time of the total collectivization of agriculture, the slogan "Writers to the kolkhoz!" was proclaimed, [Tretyakov] went to the "Communist Lighthouse" commune and there, during two lengthy stays, set about the following tasks: calling mass meetings; collecting funds to pay for tractors; persuading independent peasants to enter the kolkhoz [collective farm]; inspecting the reading rooms; creating wall newspapers and editing the kolkhoz newspaper; reporting for Moscow newspapers; introducing radio and mobile movie houses; and so on. It is not surprising that the book *Commanders of the Field*, which [Tretyakov] wrote following these stays, is said to have had considerable influence on the further development of collective agriculture.[8]

We do not know whether Benjamin heard Tretyakov's lecture. However, given the huge interest in the lecture amongst Berlin's intellectuals (Siegfried Kracauer, among others, wrote a review of it), we can assume Benjamin was well acquainted with its contents.

Walter Benjamin, The Unmaking of Art, 2011. Times Museum, Guangzhou.

Even more interesting, however, is the fact that three years after Tretyakov's lectures, Benjamin, who was in exile in Paris, mentions his model in his writing. Why Tretyakov, and why at that particular time in that particular place? While it is true that concepts such as production and technique were vital components in Tretyakov's model, this also applied to first-generation productivism and constructivism. What, then, does factography have to do with it?

To answer this question, we should recall the historical context of factography's emergence. Dominated by productivism and constructivism, the state of the Soviet art world at the time can perhaps be most vividly captured by the slogan "From composition to construction." Here the word "composition" refers to current art theory and decorative conventions, but above all it has to do with the so-called linguistic (symbolic) method in a broader sense. On the other hand, the word "construction," which has technical nuances, is focused on material itself. Terms such as "texture" and "tectonics," which were vigorously discussed at the time, clearly show a state of affairs in which material was the benchmark. The essence of the transition from composition to construction, however, was that sensual materiality transcends signification, that is, the starting point for all artistic work is matter, not signs.[9]

Because production was understood as the construction of materials, there was no room in it for words and texts. As we know, the first generation of productivists claimed that, in the name of production, utilitarian ("practicable") things to be used in daily life could be designed—from new factory uniforms to folding stools, optimized for communal flats.[10] This, however, did not apply to literature, because it dealt with intangibles, with concepts and values. In this context, what did the emergence of factography, or more precisely, the "literature of fact," signify?

The emergence of factography meant the return of language in a broad sense to art, that is, the deliberate reorientation of art-making towards information and discourse. Benjamin Buchloh, in his groundbreaking article "From Faktura to Factography" (1984), clearly identified the Soviet avant-garde's paradigmatic shift from immersion in physical production (*faktura*) to an emphasis on the informational and communicative factors in art-making (factography).[11] This description of factography enables us to better understand the thread that connected Benjamin in Paris in 1934 to Tretyakov in Moscow in the late 1920s.

What did Benjamin and Tretyakov have in common? The so-called *Existenzrecht*, that is, the right of artists and

intellectuals to exist. In the late 1920s, Tretyakov confronted the question of how artists can justify their existence, just as Benjamin faced the same question in the Weimar Republic's final years. Whereas Tretyakov had approached the issue by asking whether there was a place for literature and language in art during the reign of productivism, Benjamin wondered whether intellectuals and artists could maintain their former social status and roles when faced with the impending threat of fascism.

Benjamin's interest in the Soviet Union, a country where a revolution really had taken place, and more specifically his interest in the new type of intellectuals and writers generated in that other world, arose from his grappling with a similar set of questions.[12] Benjamin wrote that

> nothing will be further from the author who has reflected deeply on the conditions of present-day production than to expect, or desire, such works. His work will never be merely work on products but always, at the same time, work on the means of production. In other words, his products must have, over and above their character as works, an organizing function.[13]

When Benjamin used the word "organizing," did he have in mind such "fathers" of the term as Alexei Gastev, Alexander Bogdanov, and Platon Kerzhentsev? We cannot answer this question. Nevertheless, we can confidently say one thing: when Benjamin listed all the not-very-writerly tasks that had fallen on Tretyakov's shoulders on the collective farm (e.g., producing wall newspapers and collecting money for tractors), along with the need to fight and intervene in circumstances, he had something else in mind—namely, not only a strategy for effectively working with the people but also for successfully surviving in a collective, that is, a technique for living among the masses.[14]

During his two years at the collective farm, Tretyakov really did undergo the "change of functions" (*Umfunktionierung*) of which Benjamin, following Brecht, spoke. We should not forget, however, that while Tretyakov moved away from the functions of a professional in the narrow sense of the word and thus found himself in completely heterogeneous areas, he became a talented organizer who was able to put them all together. In other words, in becoming part of the farm, he proved his right to exist among the people.

Tretyakov's story can thus be considered an exemplary answer to the question of how contemporary artists can justify their existence. The question was first systematically posed by Tretyakov, and later effectively reconfigured by Benjamin. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the question was modified, becoming a universal problem that returned again and again, proving its relevance under capitalism, fascism, and communism.

Given the global trend of a precipitous rise in the number of intellectual workers employed in immaterial labor, resulting in the ever more apparent precaritization of artists and intellectuals, Tretyakov should be regarded as one of the pioneers in raising this general problem. With this in mind, let us turn to the second example of a return to Tretyakov's legacy.

3.

Tretyakov turns up again in the works of contemporary artist, filmmaker, and theorist Hito Steyerl.

Liberally combining documentary and experimental styles, Steyerl's videos and films have provoked heated discussions among critics, curators, and scholars concerned with the politics of images and technology. Instead of treating images as pure quantities, Steyerl has interpreted them in the light of capitalism, changing political circumstances, and their own nature as physical and digital objects. In particular, her works are known for their close, original reading of the economy, production, and consumption of images under capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Steyerl's *In Free Fall*, a thirty-two-minute film released as a single-channel HD video in 2010, is a peculiar take on Tretyakov's innovative ideas. The film reconstructs the life story of a Boeing 707 jet. It opens with an image of the Mojave Air and Space Port in the California desert, a junkyard-cum-cemetery where planes are brought to die. The story of the deceased thing thus begins with its grave.

The story of the Boeing is truly dramatic. After serving in the fleet of TWA, the passenger airline founded by the American business tycoon, pilot, engineer, and film mogul Howard Hughes, who directed the 1930 film *Hell's Angels* and produced such films as the 1932 *Scarface*, the plane was sold to the Israeli air force. They then used it in the famous 1976 raid on Entebbe, the mission mounted to rescue hostages on another passenger airliner, which had been hijacked by Palestinian and German militants from the PLO and commandeered to Uganda.

After the raid on Entebbe, the plane was used as a prop and blown up for the 1994 Hollywood blockbuster *Speed*. This was not the vessel's end, however. After being blown up on the set of *Speed*, the leftover aluminum parts were sold to a Chinese DVD manufacturer, and so the airliner eventually became a laser disc. The plane thus lost its former materiality, becoming another thing, a disc for storing, among other things, footage of the explosion that destroyed it.

Walter Benjamin, The Unmaking of Art, 2013. Le Plateau, Paris.

As we can see, the film is a literal realization of Tretyakov's ideas. In the second of its three parts, Steyerl mentions Tretyakov's "The Biography of the Object" in a voice-over in German that is subtitled in English: "In 1929 Soviet writer Sergej Tretiakov drafts a 'biography of the object.' An object tells us about its producers and users. Its biography represents a profile of social relations. The biography of the object includes its destruction."[15]

As Steyerl reads these lines, we see ticks gnawing at the plane's fuselage and innards, reminding us that we are dealing with physical objects, not made-up metaphors. Next to the wreckage lies a portable DVD player on whose screen we see a subtitle: "The Biography of the Object: 4X-JYI." (4X-JYI is the number of the Boeing 707 blown up in *Speed*.)

Tretyakov's ideas emerged as part of the so-called war with the novel. Novels are always psychological machines in which subjectivity and affect prevail at the expense of objects and objectivity. As Tretyakov writes, "In the novel, the leading hero devours and subjectivizes all reality." However, the biography of the object is a powerful alternative method. "Thus: not the individual person moving through a system of objects, but the object proceeding through the system of people—for literature this is the methodological device that seems to us more progressive than those of classical belles lettres."[16]

There is, however, something more important here than genre and plot, and that is the question of what is enabled by the new object-focused approach. The essence of the approach is that, by telling a thing's story, we come to see the social relations behind its production and consumption. The biography of the object is a new type of narrative in which the story of a thing becomes the story of the people who made it, providing a cross section of the social relations that shaped them. According to Tretyakov:

> The biography of the object is an expedient method for narrative construction that fights against the idealism of the novel … The biography of the object has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material. People approach the object at a cross section of the conveyer belt. Every segment introduces a new group of people. Quantitatively, it can track the development of a large number of people without disrupting the narrative's proportions.

Hito Steyerl, In Free Fall, 2010. 33' 43''. Video HDV, 32', single-channel video, sound, color. Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Copyright: CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

> They come into contact with the object through their social aspects and production skills. The moment of consumption occupies only the final part of the entire conveyer belt. People's individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant here. The tics and epilepsies of the individual go unperceived. Instead, social neuroses and the professional diseases of a given group are foregrounded.[17]

Obviously, the structure of Steyerl's film, which tells us the complicated story of an airplane, is more focused on a fundamental or, if you will, substructural dimension than on superficial biography. The airplane's biography itself demonstrates the social neuroses and professional diseases of twentieth-century capitalism, replete with disasters, economic depression, terror, and globalization.

4.

What is really remarkable, however, is that the connection between Steyerl and Tretyakov is not limited to the essay "The Biography of the Object." In this regard, we should examine Steyerl's essay "In Defense of the Poor Image," which brought her international fame and has been regarded as a kind of manifesto on her part.[18]

The "poor image" of the title refers to visual files—say, in the GIF or AVI formats—that have been obtained after being damaged during their production and previous use. In other words, they are low-quality, low-resolution images.

As copies of original images and films that circulate on the internet, especially on social media, chat sites, and pirate websites, such poor images are easily subjected to various types of reprocessing. Naturally, the "aura" of original, high-quality images and the "unique, disposable being" of watching a movie in a theater vanish during these transformations. Steyerl defines the poor image as follows:

> The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution … The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled … Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores.[19]

Indeed, Steyerl evinces this attitude not only theoretically but also practically. *In Free Fall* is chockablock with cheap derivative images, images that were used in other films, music videos, advertisements, and so on. In some sense, the entire film might seem like a product of recycling, like the remains of the Boeing, which were turned into DVDs.

By referring to such images as lumpen proletarians, trash washed up on the shore of digital economies, and so on, Steyerl not only vigorously defends them but tries to discover in them new cultural meanings and political potential:

> But, simultaneously, a paradoxical reversal happens … In the age of file-sharing, even marginalized content circulates again and reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences. The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy.[20]

As we can surmise, Steyerl's position here echoes that of Benjamin, or rather, the theoretical stance outlined in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which she has updated in keeping with the digital image's ontology. As Steyerl writes, "The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction."[21]

It is worth recalling that Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which went on to become a primary manifesto of twentieth-century art, exactly a year after he wrote "The Author as Producer."

A kind of chain has thus emerged, stretching from Tretyakov to Benjamin to Steyerl. Perhaps we could say that Steyerl, by combining Tretyakov and Benjamin's ideas in her own way, has restored not so much Tretyakov himself as the Tretyakov who made such a decisive impact on Benjamin's famous lecture.

Theodor Adorno once noted that when Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he had wanted to outdo Brecht. If this is true, then perhaps the person who helped him outdo Brecht was Brecht's Russian friend Sergei Tretyakov—although this claim would require a separate, detailed study.

X

Translated from the Russian by Thomas Campbell.

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1
See, for example, Maria Zalambani, *Literatura fakta: Ot avangarda k sotrealizmu* (Literature of the fact: From the avant-garde to socialist realism) (Akademicheskii proekt, 2006); and Elizabeth Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

2
Devin Fore, "Sergei Tret'iakov: 'Fakt'" (Sergei Tretyakov: The fact), in *Formal'nyi metod: Antologiia russkogo modernizma* (The formal method: An anthology of Russian modernism), vol. 2, ed. Serguei Oushakine (Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 184–85.

3
It would be wrong to say, of course, that claims for the significance and relevance of a particular period have only to do with its ambivalence. If a period is recalled over and over again—in other words, if the ideas and issues typical of the period alone resurface in a similar historical context—we can speak of the period's exceptional importance. It is assumed that by reinterpreting the period, which has often been omitted in accounts of the so-called historical avant-garde, we can not only move away from the facile contrast between the 1920s and 1930s but also reevaluate the Soviet art of the cultural revolution in the light of its unexpected modernness. For example, according to the art scholar Ekaterina Degot, "A view not clouded by knee-jerk anti-communism discovers in the art of the cultural revolution a huge similarity with the art practices of the early twenty-first century … Far from representing a return to nineteenth-century realism, Soviet realist art foreshadows the conceptual practices of the late twentieth century." See E. Degot, "Sovetskoe iskusstvo mezhdu avangardom i sotsrealizmom, 1927–1932" (Soviet art between the avant-garde and socialist realism, 1927–1932), *Nashe nasledie* , 2010, 93–94 http://nasledie-rus.ru/podshivka/9412.php . This, however, is a separate topic that is beyond the scope of this article.

4
Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer (Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934)," trans. Edwin Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 1931–34 (Belknap Press, 1999), 770.

5
Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 771.

6
Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 770–71.

7
Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 42–77; Maria Gough, "Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde," *October*, no. 101 (Summer 2002): 53–83.

8
Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 770.

9
"Constructivists abandoned the enervated field of language and signification—which was dismissed as the dominion of illusionism, thought, verisimilitude, and mere secondary effects—in order to commune with systems of physical force. Matter itself, not the sign thereof, was the point of departure for the anthology of INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) writings, *From Representation to Construction* , which was proposed by Brik in September 1921 to be the group's collective opus on the transition from composition to construction." Devin Fore, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography," *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006): 99.

10
Tselesoobraznost' was a keyword in the famous debates that took place at the INKhUK from 1920 to 1922. Usually translated into English as "expediency," the word can be translated literally as "formed in relation to a goal." Not all the artists of the INKhUK were equally enamored of the productivists' utilitarian imperative. There were some groups who were determined to defend artists from what they regarded as productivism's narrow utilitarianism, proclaiming the right of artists themselves to make decisions about the purpose and practicability of things. For a more detailed discussion, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (MIT Press, 2005).

11
Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, no. 30 (Autumn 1984): 82–119.

12
This interest was one of the main things that prompted Benjamin to go to Moscow. He went there in hopes of finding the characteristics of the professional intellectual. However, his hopes were doomed to be crushed, as was his unhappy love affair. See W. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Harvard University Press, 1986).

13
Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 777.

14
Gerald Raunig recalls the Proletkult's previous experiments in organizing collectives, experiments in which Tretyakov was involved: "Tretyakov had also worked together with Eisenstein and Arvatov on the 'Experimental Laboratory of Kinetic Constructions' of the Moscow Proletkult. All possible forms of social assembly were to be experimentally tested in the workshops in the course of training: 'Conference, banquet, tribunal, assembly, meeting, audience space, sport events and competitions, club evenings, foyers, public cantines, mass celebrations, processions, carnival, funerals, parades, demonstrations, flying assemblies, company work, election campaigns, etc. etc.' It almost seems as though Tretyakov seized a long sought opportunity almost a decade later with his work in the kolkhoz to try out the same work on the forms of organization that he had conducted in the meanwhile closed laboratory of the Proletkult, but now decidedly outside the realm of art institutions." G. Raunig, "Changing the Production Apparatus: Anti-Universalist Concepts of Intelligentsia in the Early Soviet Union," trans. Aileen Derieg, *Transversal*, September 2010 https://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/raunig/en/print.html .

15
Hito Steyerl, *In Free Fall*, video (color, sound), 32 min., 2010, 07:20–08:08.

16
Sergei Tret'iakov, "The Biography of the Object," *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006): 59, 62. As Fore notes, "This overhaul was not just a matter of enthroning objects at the center of the novel where the hero once was, for that would still leave the disproportionate and latent humanist structure of the novel intact." D. Fore, "Introduction," *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006).

17
Tret'iakov, "The Biography of the Object," 61.

18
Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" *e-flux journal*, no. 10 (November 2009) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ .

19
Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image." The title of Steyerl's first collection of essays, *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012), which includes the two pieces cited in this article, was inspired by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* .

20
Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image." In this regard, we should pay mind to the ambivalence of the title of the film *In Free Fall*. Historically, of course, it alludes to various events, including the stock market crash of 1929 in the US. In light of the formal and methodological aspect, however, it can also allude to creative destruction, that is, the possibility of generating new horizons and types of visuality. As Steyerl writes, "While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise." See H. Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux journal*, no. 24 (April 2011) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/ . On this subject, see also Paolo Magagnoli, "Capitalism as Creative Destruction: The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall*," *Third Text* 27, no. 6 (2013): 723–34.

21
Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."

Dena Yago

The Wall Stays in the Picture: Destination Murals in Los Angeles

First Supper (After a Major Riot)

Never has anyone dined on a traffic island as intentionally as Asco did on Whittier Boulevard in 1974. Patssi Valdez, Gronk, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie F. Herrón III, and Humberto Sandoval joined each other in the middle of a busy Whittier Boulevard near the intersection of South Arizona Avenue in East Los Angeles. Sitting on cardboard boxes and a ragtag collection of chairs, the five, who collectively created art under the name Asco—translating from Spanish to "nausea"—gathered around a tableclothed folding table for *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*. Other dinner guests included a quadriplegic mannequin painted as a skeleton, a mannequin of a giant baby Jesus, an abstracted black-and-white painting of a body posed in crucifixion, and a large-scale papier-mâché head. The artists wore Mexican death masks and heavy theatrical makeup. Patssi, on stage left, wears a grey top hat, red scarf, blazer, and fur. The others' outfits range from a New York Jets sweatshirt to a fur coat over a vest and jeans. The occasion, more than a shared meal, was a performance and act of political defiance. Four years prior, in 1970, the Chicano Moratorium had marched down Whittier Boulevard in opposition to the Vietnam War—a peaceful protest met with brutal police rioting. In the four years leading up to *First Supper*, the Chicano community in East LA was subject to police brutality and infantilizing punitive measures such as curfews and the forbidding of public gatherings. To experience joy and self-expression, to lament the violence in their communities, to reclaim the street as a site of artistic creation—all of this amounted to a radical act of expression. But then again, for Asco to merely exist in public space was an act of defiance—against both the city and the police that subjugated and excluded them from the dominant social narrative, but also against their own community, which dictated a hegemonically uniform and traditional image of Chicana/o identity. The photograph is not a documentation of a performance, but one of the group's *No Movies*, or still photographs from movies that never existed, which highlight Chicana/os' absence from mainstream media. The photograph is striking not only because of the Jodorowsky-esque costuming and theatricality, but because of the street scene itself. Cars drive past Asco on either side, as the only other person in the image walks behind them on the traffic island. The sidewalks on either side are completely empty.

Walking in LA

As the 1982 Missing Person's song claims, nobody walks in LA This hyperbolic statement only furthers the axiomatic image of Los Angeles as an entangled vine of gridlocked streets and freeways. The song's lyrics are sung from within a moving car, from the perspective of someone who's just seen someone else, a specter, a

Mural in Downtown LA, date unknown. Photo: Allie Smith/Unsplash.

"cheap cinematic trick" or "carboard cutout of a man" on the sidewalk from their window. Dale Bozzio muses in the Los Angeles new wave band's Billboard-topping single: "I don't know, could've been a lame jogger maybe / Or someone just about to do the freeway strangler baby / Shopping cart pusher or maybe someone groovy / One thing's for sure, he isn't starring in the movies." This image of Los Angeles is a familiar one. It relegates activity—from crime, homelessness, and general desperation to recreation—to the fringes, and in LA the fringes are its sidewalks. This characterization of Los Angeles is only furthered by its cinematic self-representation, where the overpopulated infrastructures are as iconic as the desolate, ghost town–like sidewalks. In films such as *Drive* and *Nightcrawler*, or the decades-earlier *Pretty Woman*, the protagonists move throughout the city with ease, speed, and near solitude from within an automobile. In these films, the image of an empty street is only intermittently punctuated with shots of the protagonists looking out from their cars onto the sidewalk, seeing packs of men, sex workers, and ne're-do-wells occupying the street. Cinematic and pop representations of Los Angeles depict sidewalks as hostile, threatening environments. In both song and film, the street is something to be witnessed from within the atomizing privacy of a moving car. These depictions are not only self-cannibalized by Angelenos, but are propagated through global culture by those with no relationship to the city beyond what is seen on screen: this media furthers a notion that to walk in LA from a position of privilege is to put oneself in danger. These ongoing representations of street life as threatening are often propagated by those in positions of power, at the expense of the people who do live part of their lives in Los Angeles's fraught public sphere, in an overt effort to erase and displace their presence in the city. In the Los Angeles ethos, a "desirable" population—according to the myriad players that police the sidewalks, from city agencies and utilities companies to private property owners—are those who can afford privacy. Those who cannot, whether it be people experiencing homelessness, or those engaged in historically gay cruising or drug dealing, or merely those who lack a private third space, are antithetical to the commercial interest and therefore the public interest of the city.

Harry Gamboa Jr., First Supper (After A Major Riot), 1974. Chromogenic Print, 16 in x 20 in. Copyright: 1974, Harry Gamboa Jr.

What is true about walking in LA is that to walk on the streets of LA is to be exposed and visible. To walk in LA is to know that you are being surveilled, either by passing motorists, the police, helicopters, surveillance towers that line public parks, or other fellow citizens on the streets. Los Angeles, a season-less city bathed in sunlight, lacks sufficient shade shelters, leaving those on the street who are waiting for busses, lingering outside of business, or simply taking a moment to rest, exposed to the brutal sun. The shade desert is partially symptomatic of the city's privatization of public space. The sidewalks are policed, not only for commercial over community interest, but also because of racially motivated aesthetic values. For instance, in the 1980s, the first thousand shade shelters were installed by billboard companies in exchange for the right to sell ad space, and at least one adman was quoted at the time saying they wished they could "put every single shelter in West Los Angeles."[1] The "shade police," as journalist Sam Bloch puts it in a piece on shade as a "civic resource, an index of inequality, and a requirement for public health," work towards aesthetic policing over grassroots self-improvements that make the streets of Los Angeles more livable. The city "processes about 16,000 sidewalk obstructions annually, a category which includes informal shelters as well as unruly trees, piles of trash, and other encroachments on the right of way."[2] The sidewalks, and more broadly public space in Los Angeles, are mediated and defined by those who do not occupy them. Parks are not intended as destinations but as pass-through points. In a sun-bleached land, the shadowed threaten the illuminated. During my own time living in Los Angeles, in the daytime, no matter whether I was outside, indoors, or in a car, the sun permeated everything. The glaring overhead light made me feel like a lizard in the desert, constantly seeking shelter, or like a vampire, patiently waiting for nightfall.

The Los Angeles communities that lack shade and exist on the illuminated city streets happen to be those to which exposure and visibility is a direct threat. This includes the nearly fifty-nine thousand residents experiencing homelessness, Latinx and other minority communities such as LGBTQIA, women, and anyone who's presence in a public space may expose them to hostility and violence. In Los Angeles, existing on the street means existing in a state of heightened visibility—and where you are visible, you are vulnerable. A recent municipal initiative proposes painting the roads with a light-grey coating of the product

CoolSeal, made by the company GuardTop, in an effort to abate the formation of heat islands. The lighter roadways are meant to reflect rather than absorb heat. But reflect where and onto whom? These "cool" roads reflect solar radiation back at a rate of 130 watts per square meter—akin to adding 10 percent more direct sunlight for those on the sidewalks. As the human body absorbs this reflected solar radiation, we get tired, hot, sunburned. Our thinking gets foggier; we get dehydrated. And these direct dangers disproportionately affect the city's brown and black populations, because darker skins absorb more solar radiation than white skin.[3]

A to B City

People walk in LA, but they fucking love to drive. Or they might not love it, but they've accepted that driving in Los Angeles is an inevitability—a means to an end. Los Angeles drivers have, on average, annually spent over 102 hours in traffic in peak times—making it the most time drivers spend in rush-hour jams in any city globally. Los Angeles is an infrastructural quagmire by design. Prior to 1961, the city was transversable via a complex network of streetcars and buses, aka "Red Cars," provided by a privately owned mass transit system called the Pacific Electric Railway Company—the fate of which is illustrated in Robert Zemeckis's 1998 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. The Red Cars connected neighborhoods such as downtown Los Angeles with adjacent cities such as Hawthorne and Torrance. This accessible, public transit system was foregone in favor of private auto ownership and a massive freeway system that grafted a sprawling landscape into different neighborhoods and cities-within-cities that are intentionally sequestered along racial and class lines. Boyle Heights residents were eventually traversed by six freeways, resulting in the displacement of over ten thousand Eastside inhabitants. According to urban historian Gilbert Estrada's writing for City Rising, a multimedia documentary program whose mission statement includes "tracing gentrification and displacement through the lens of historical discriminatory laws and practices,"

> In comparison, freeways planned within wealthier and ethnically homogeneous communities never saw the completion of hundreds of miles of freeways, including the Beverly Hills Freeway, the Whitnall Freeway and the Pacific Coast Freeway. By 2001, only about 61 percent of planned freeways were actually built throughout LA County while over 100 percent of originally planned freeways were constructed in the Eastside.[4]

You can almost hear Los Angeles say, in the voice of a voluptuous Jessica Rabbit, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way."

Los Angeles, as Bertolt Brecht described it in 1941, is an "Endless processions of cars / Lighter than their own shadows, faster than / Mad thoughts, gleaming vehicles, in which / Jolly-looking people come from nowhere and are nowhere bound. / And houses, built for happy people, therefore standing empty / even when lived in."[5] As a part of the Weimar flight from Germany to Los Angeles during World War II—alongside exiles such as Arnold Schoenberg, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Thomas Mann—the playwright and poet lived a few brief years in the city. For Brecht, Los Angeles did less to represent the land of milk of honey than fire and brimstone. Having lived in Los Angeles on and off for the majority of my life, with a recent four-year tenure living in East Hollywood, Echo Park, and Rampart Village, I do not have as dark a view of the city as Brecht. I would not call it Hell as he had, in spite of moments when I looked through a cloud of grey smoke from nearby fires up to a blood-red sun. But I can say that my best times in Los Angeles were living amongst a community of humans and animals, friends, collaborators, and lovers—primarily in private spaces—and my worst times were the two hours a day I commuted from my home to a job on the Westside. Because moving in the city is difficult. It is frustrating and isolating. It takes heavy planning, and dedicating thought to your points of ingress and egress. Where will you park? Where is the gas station? Where is the Lyft?

People own cars in LA, but they also carpool and use ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft. While the LA Metro subway system is seemingly ever expanding, it still leaves large swaths of the city functionally inaccessible. Electric scooters such as Lime and Bird litter the sidewalks. The bold and daring bike. But, what unifies this wealth of options is the imperative for a destination. The ride- and vehicle-sharing apps codify time spent in a pay-per-minute or pay-per-mile model, clearly delineating points of check-in and check-out. Many drivers use navigation tools such as Waze or Google Maps, which guide you from pick-up to drop-off. Public transportation functions similarly, codified through specific lines and stops. Los Angeles is an A to B city; it is a city for people who have a high tolerance for logistical planning and recurring frustration. Is not a city built for wanderers or flaneurs. Wandering in Los Angeles is relegated to specific spaces of leisure and commerce—you hike in Griffith Park, Runyon Canyon, Baldwin Hills, you walk around a reservoir, you wander around commercial centers resembling anything from South Park's SoDoSoPa to the Slauson Super Mall. You make your way downtown to participate in the Downtown Art Walk, which occurs on the second Thursday of each month approximately between 6:00 and 10:00 p.m. All of this wandering is clearly delineated with boundaries of space and time. Any activity which falls outside of these parameters—such as staying in the park after dark, or otherwise resisting the imperative for motion, productivity, and

commercialism—becomes illicit activity such as loitering or trespassing. Which leads me to a second contentious aphorism: Los Angeles—the city where spontaneity comes to die.

Painters finish covering up graffiti that read "Go F... Ur Selfie" on the bright pink wall of British fashion designer Paul Smith's flagship store on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles as on Wednesday, September 12, 2018. Photo: Sarah Reingewirtz/Digital First Media/Pasadena Star-News via Getty Images.

Destination Selfie Walls

As an A to B city filled with destinations, people in Los Angeles do what people in most other large American cities do for pleasure—they eat, drink, shop, visit cultural events and institutions, exercise … They see the sites and they live their lives. Over the past few years a new type of public destination has emerged: Selfie Walls. A Selfie Wall is any wall that functions as a physical call to action, where its scale, color, design, or statement of positive affirmation invites a subject to stand in front of it and take a self-portrait. The advent of the Selfie Wall is fueled by mobile technology and social media—primarily Instagram. Whereas *Pokémon Go* temporarily creates new destinations within the city, it does so via augmented reality (AR) technology and gamification. Players flock to various sites across the city to collect their Pokémon and then leave. These destinations have a specific function within game logic. Selfie Walls exist without AR technology or explicit gamification. People are drawn to these sites for the broader function of affirmation via social media, to accrue social and cultural capital by having had an aesthetic experience or moment that can be neatly shared with their audience and the platform at large. The images taken at these Selfie Walls are not limited to mobile devices; people take photos of themselves on DSLRs or, for a bit of throwback tactility, Fujifilm Instax cameras. Regardless of the device, these images are intended to live on in perpetuity as Instagram posts. The walls serve as backdrops for ad hoc photoshoots, where crowds grow and lines extend down the sidewalk while people wait their turn to capture their own image in front of a wall in a solipsistic declaration of one's own presence. It is the declarative statement "I was there," in the form of a social aesthetic moment that also provides the serotonin-boosting likes and engagements of social media.

All of the images produced at these sites together comprise a class of redundant images—as opposed to informative images—which, like any photograph taken over and over in a very similar way, begin to carry no new information to a human viewer. In a pre-iPhone world, philosopher Vilém Flusser characterized people taking redundant images, or "snapshots," as people who do not look for new moves, or new information, but wish to make their functioning simpler and simpler by a means of more perfect automation.[6] Writing in 1983, Flusser likened the "photo-trip," or going to a destination where the sole purpose is to photograph, as a "post-industrial opium den," lulling the photographer into a complacent sense of productivity and having participated in an act of creative expression and authorship. The images produced at Selfie Wall destinations—in the sense that you must drive or otherwise arrive at one of these walls intentionally—are redundant images that, when posted to Instagram, become part of a larger technological memory. Once posted, they are turned into educational tools for machine learning. To update Flusser's language, these images create memories, but also create uniquely indexable information that is legible to artificial-intelligence algorithms. These redundant images are simultaneously informational images, yet this information is of value only to machines, which use it to understand human behavior with ever increasing nuance and specificity.

Beyond serving as rich material for social-media posts, the images produced at these walls also have a more nefarious technological function, which has implications for everything from surveillance to the creation of deep-fake images. The photographers taking photos at Selfie Walls are concentrated on the camera phone, and the camera phone is purely a pretext for the realization of that tool's possibilities in relation to creating images of the self. As Flusser writes on the function of the image: "Human beings forget they created images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination."[7] The images created at these walls, which are tightly cropped and devoid of context, do not orient people in the world. Instead they erase the world, creating a hybrid space that is part physical and part virtual as it circulates on social media. These images are created in order to orient the subject with their projected self-image, while simultaneously making the projected self-image legible to artificial-intelligence programs.

In Los Angeles, one of the most popular walls is a monochrome—the often defaced "Pink Wall" on the exterior of a West Hollywood Paul Smith store. The hashtag #PaulSmithPinkWall currently has 19.6K posts on Instagram. In two "man-on-the-street" interviews conducted at the Pink Wall and posted to YouTube, visitors consistently said that they were there, waiting to capture their moment with the wall, simply because of the color, because it was a unique pink, and ultimately but unsurprisingly, because they were doing it for the gram.

Other destination murals include affirmative statements such as the "Made in LA" wall on the exterior of the furniture company Cisco Home on Melrose, the "You Are A Goddess Living in a City of Angels" wall in Downtown Los Angeles (DTLA), and the "Love Wall" created by street artist JGoldcrown outside of Cafe Gratitude in the Arts District and elsewhere throughout the city (#LoveWall has 65.8K posts on Instragram). There are also interactive walls such as the "Angel Wings Project" walls started by artist Colette Miller throughout the city—though initially installed in a rapidly gentrifying DTLA—where a visitor stands between two large-scale graffitied angel wings. And then there are the more traditionally figurative street-art walls such as "Bloom Wall" located in DTLA, blocks from the blue-chip gallery Hauser and Wirth, by Oakland based artist HUEMAN. Or Royyal Dog's murals at the Container Yard in the Arts District, depicting three women of different races in traditional Korean dress with script-filled angelic halos. These figurative walls are heavily documented on social media but are not specifically used as Selfie Walls in the way that more abstract images are.

In spite of the varied locales and motifs, the images produced at these sites remain the same. A subject is found posing in front of the wall, standing in their most fashionable clothes, looking demurely off to the side or confidently into the camera. Sometimes they are caught jumping in an infinitely looping boomerang video. There are pets. People with their pets. People dancing, in yoga poses, or doing backflips for the camera. The images are most often cropped very tightly on the subject, limiting any view of the surrounding context. You may see a sliver of a sidewalk or parking lot, but most often, these images are of singular subjects divorced from their surroundings, standing in front of a wall that could be essentially anywhere. They are tightly cropped so that you might not see Angelinos waiting at a bus stop beside one of these buildings, or a street vendor, or a tent village for people experiencing homelessness, of which there are many in the vicinity of Selfie Walls in DTLA, or the Arts District near Skid Row. These images decontextualize very physical public—but privately owned or operated—space in Los Angeles, in the interest of circulating them on the dematerialized, virtual public—but similarly privately owned—arena of social media. The success of these walls—success equating to people's willingness to visit these sites, create content, post them to social media and use both location tags and hashtags—has spawned a cottage content industry in the form of listicles with titles such as "12 Instagram-Worthy Walls in Los Angeles," "Los Angeles' 12 Most Instagram-Worthy Walls," "7 Cool Walls In Los Angeles To Take Pics In Front Of, If Your Insta Needs Inspo," and "LA's Most Instagrammable Walls and Street Art." Tellingly, these listicles do not include any of the city's many community-led, identity-focused murals created by artists in the Chicana/o art movement, or even

Judy Baca, the cofounder of SPARC, the Social and Public Art Resource Center. And yet, these Selfie Walls are not just anywhere: they are largely found in highly contested and gentrifying neighborhoods in Los Angeles. This raises the question of what function these Selfie Walls are performing for the businesses, real-estate developers, and citywide cultural initiatives that commission and maintain them.

Walls of Displacement

While the content produced at these sites serves both a personal and technological function, Selfie Walls also play a strategic role in the displacement and replacement for profit that is inherent to gentrification. Many of Los Angeles's Selfie Walls are located in the Fairfax neighborhood, which is riddled with sneaker stores and streetwear boutiques. Their presence there is celebratory and directly linked to commercial activity, playing on the long-standing association between street art and graffiti and streetwear, sneaker head, and hypebeast culture. These murals do not immediately whitewash over existing murals and graffiti in the way that recent murals farther east of Fairfax do. To reach the highest concentration of these murals-as-Selfie-Walls, you take the 101 Freeway to reach DTLA and Boyle Heights, both of which have experienced massive displacement and accelerated gentrification. Boyle Heights specifically is 94 percent Latino, with one third of residents living in poverty and about 17 percent estimated to be undocumented immigrants. It has one of the highest population densities in the city of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County.

In DTLA and Boyle Heights, these murals-as-Selfie-Walls are often brought in by commercial business or real-estate developers to signal the transformation of what they claim were once industrial buildings into cultural centers. As the behavior of taking a selfie when encountering a mural becomes more pervasive, installing one on the exterior of a building has become an attractive tactic amongst real-estate developers. It turns a building's exterior into a destination, encourages pedestrian traffic, and increases the cultural and social capital of an area. The city of Los Angeles now facilitates this practice: in 2013 it lifted a ban from 2002 allowing new murals on private property. The Mural Ordinance established a citywide program permitting new and existing murals (which the city refers to as "Vintage Murals") on a content-neutral basis. Previous to 2013, murals were evaluated similarly to outdoor advertisements, and were not allowed on private property because they were regulated by the same prohibitions. Or they were recognized through a formal process of registration with the LA Department of Cultural Affairs. Under this ordinance, a mural is defined as a "one-of-a-kind, hand-painted, hand-tiled, or digitally printed image on the exterior wall of a building that does not contain any commercial message," with the latter defined as "any message that advertises a business conducted, services rendered, or goods produced or sold."[8]

Many of those who have benefited from the lifting of this ban, including Hauser and Wirth, use destination murals to justify their moves to DTLA and Boyle Heights, claiming that they are establishing a cultural presence in a previously industrial area. Hauser and Wirth inhabits an old flour mill that, in 2011, became known as "The Graffiti Building" due to the previous tenant commissioning a series of invited, sanctioned murals by graffiti and street artists. Once Hauser and Wirth arrived in 2015, after the mural ban was lifted, they conserved a few of the murals, while others were whitewashed and destroyed. This false dichotomy between industrial and cultural space ignores the existing residential and locally owned buildings in the vicinity, while also falsely valorizing predominantly white artists as the "first inhabitants" of the area. Classifying areas such as DTLA and Boyle Heights as previously uninhabited industrial zones has the same violent "disappearing" effect as claiming that "nobody walks in LA"—a narrative that has been actively combated by the anti-gentrification movement Defend Boyle Heights. These neighborhoods have not been historically industrial—but they have been historically unprotected. The LA City Council created zoning laws in 1908 protecting Westside communities, becoming the first city in the nation to reserve areas strictly for residential use. Being outside of these zones set a structural precedent for East LA's vulnerability to the carving, shaping, and displacing enacted by industrial and commercial interests along race and class lines. The images produced at these murals-as-Selfie-Walls erase context. They create a tunnel-vision portrait of virtual non-spaces that exist across social media without any of the contested and rapidly gentrifying physical surroundings of these sites. Many of these murals are attributed to single artists, such as Retna, Matty Mo, or Curtis Kulig. This individual authorship stands in contrast to SPARC's works, which "are never simply individually authored endeavors, but rather a collaboration between artists and communities, resulting in art which rises from within the community, rather than being imposed upon it."[9] SPARC's public murals, including monumental works such as *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, may be designed by a single artist—in this case Judy Baca—but they are authored and executed by community artists and youth. This approach uses "participatory processes" to empower "residents and communities excluded from civic debate."[10]

Place-Making Murals

These Selfie Walls and Walls of Displacement stand in opposition to the driving purpose behind LA's "Vintage Murals," as defined by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. LA has a long and proud history of identity-based murals, arguably beginning with Alfaro Siqueiros's 1932 painting *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los*

Harry Gamboa Jr., Walking Mural, 1972. Chromogenic Print. 16'' x 20''. Copyright: 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. Image from Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Asco era.

Imperialismos (Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialism). Siqueiros's painted the mural after his expulsion from Mexico in 1932 for radical political militancy (he later led the attack and attempted assassination of Leon Trotsky back in Mexico in 1940). The mural, located in public view outside the Italian Hall on commercial Olvera Street, depicted an Indian peon being crucified by American oppression. Only two years later it suffered a partial covering, with a full whitewashing following in 1938. The Getty Center spearheaded the monumental mural's restoration, which began in 1997 and was unveiled in 2012—fifteen years and $8 million later. This tradition of whitewashing identity-based murals continues in Los Angeles. A mural in Fountain Valley by Sergio O'Cadiz depicting two white policemen dragging off a Latino youth was defaced with white paint shortly after the mural was completed in 1976. As recently as April of 2019, Judy Baca's work *Hitting the Wall*, painted alongside the 110 freeway, was whitewashed by the California Department of Transportation. The 1984 mural was painted in commemoration of women's strength, particularly those women who participated in their first Olympic marathon that year, and was ostensibly protected by the 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act, which shelters recognized public art from damage, destruction, or defacement. Moreover, Baca's piece was copyrighted and registered with the LA Department of Cultural Affairs. Defaced murals, including those fully removed and those still standing, often communicate the history or contemporary experience of communities that lack representation in the dominant culture.

Murals pervaded the city's walls as a form of self-representation in the 1960s during the Chicana/o Movement, or El Movimiento. Murals played a central role in the movement, both representing the subjugated Chicana/o communities of Los Angeles and directly depicting the activist struggle. These murals sought to become a more democratic art form through the content they depicted and through the recruitment of community members to paint the murals themselves. The content of these murals was clearly mandated during the First Chicano National Conference in 1969, which in "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" expressed that "we must ensure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture." This mandate came just a year before the Chicano Moratorium staged the

aforementioned peaceful march in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970, which drew over thirty thousand demonstrators and was then violently attacked by police. The police riot resulted in property destruction, injuries, arrests, and four deaths, including the journalist Rubén Salazar, who reported on civil liberties and police brutality.

Artists such as Asco opposed this mandate because it failed to address the daily lived experience of the community and generated a uniform, consensus-based artistic response. As Gronk, the painter, printmaker, performance artist, and member of Asco, pointed out, "A lot of Latino artists went back in history for imagery because they needed an identity … We didn't want to go back, we wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our own sense of displacement."[11] Asco emerged from East Los Angeles, an island within the larger city that is sequestered by infrastructure, isolated by freeways but able to view the Hollywood sign from any rooftop. They were living in the shadow of an industry which refused to represent them, their communities, or their struggles. Making a monument to the past makes less sense when, as artists, your real and present concerns are not being represented in culture, from Hollywood films to the nightly news. The group's practice rejected the readily legible and democratic tropes of social realism in favor of performance, actions, and a mix of cultural, political, and religious—opting for Catholic rather than pre-Colombian—imagery. The group's first mural in 1973, *Moratorium: the Black and White Mural* in the Boyle Heights housing development of Estrada Courts, directly commemorated the 1970 Chicano Moratorium. The mural, a monochromatic painting by Gronk and Willie Herrón, is comprised of a series of cells, beginning with a painting of a chimpanzee, followed by an image of a man. The first row continues on with an image of a policeman, imprisoned Latinos, LA freeways, and a child holding a protest sign decrying police brutality. As the painting progressed, Gronk and Herrón took to painting more than one cell at a time. The second row contains seven cells depicting the demonstration, followed by a screaming woman and a sacred heart. The third row contains an image of a mime from the 1945 film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. The use of this image, according to Gronk, positioned East Los Angeles as an occupied territory similar to Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s. Rather than painting folkloric, pre-Colombian images, the black-and-white mural records a particular moment in a neighborhood experiencing occupation by law enforcement.

Asco's focus on contemporary lived urban experience, specifically in East Los Angeles, with an eye towards global culture and the entertainment industry, fell outside of the parameters of what was deemed appropriate subject matter for Chicana/o art. The notion of a community self-policing and consensus-based imagery, while important in terms of representation and visibility, also creates easily digestible, monolithic images for white and non-Chicana/o audiences. The radicality of Asco's practice was to move beyond representations of history and origin in favor of immanence and confrontation. In 1972, Asco met with a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) to discuss the inclusion of Chicana/o artists in future exhibitions, but they were told that Chicanos were only capable of producing folk art and being in gangs. In response, Asco created their work *Spray Paint LACMA*. Later that night Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, and Willie Herrón returned to the museum and spray-painted their names onto the façade of the building, in the lower left portion, therefore claiming themselves as artists, with the museum itself as the artwork. The next morning, they returned to take a photograph with the work and include Patssi Valdez. The piece was whitewashed within the next day.

Zooming Out

The legacy of murals in Los Angeles is inextricably rooted in both communal identity and conflict, both of which are absent from the destination Selfie Walls that are spreading throughout the city like an algae bloom. What has taken the place of conflict-laden images at these sites are solipsistic declarations of individual identity and the replacement of political speech by universalist positivity. The "content-neutral" mandate of the Mural Ordinance does not honor the function that murals have historically played in the city of Los Angeles, and furthers a tradition of whitewashing and erasure, albeit by disallowing or not approving "non-neutral" mural content. Conflict must be portrayed in public space, because people-led (as opposed to police-led) conflict must be able to occur in public space. Relegating conflict to the private sphere, or to the criminal justice system, or dematerializing it via social media and technology, leads to suffering in isolation and a failure to recognize struggle as collective. Without this, we will live in a neutered and neutral aesthetic sphere that only promotes the decontextualization and depoliticization of contested space. Reintroducing non-neutral content into public space, even when privately owned, will require action on a municipal, communal, and individual level. We need to end mandates that call for "content-neutral" imagery, and challenge consensus-based imagery that comes out of communities and movements, much like Asco did. Rather than plastering walls with statements and symbols of affirmative, optimistic positivity, artists, writers, and citizens, as well as developers, architects, and the city itself, should recognize the need for public space to be a space of public discourse and friction. These walls should reflect current lived experience and the concerns of urban life—whether private or public, passive or confrontational.

While many of LA's historical murals stand for collective identification, and use representation as a path to

Harry Gamboa Jr., Walking Mural, 1972. Chromogenic Print. 16'' x 20''. Copyright: 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. Image from Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Asco era.

emancipation, the new murals tend to represent individuals rather than collectives and use representation as an end in itself. (The aforementioned Royyal Dog murals in the Arts District are a prime example.) Public imagery should not be used to elevate the individual subject to a saintly or martyred status. Selfie backdrops serve the atomized individual rather than the collective struggle. Murals that could serve as sites for social gathering and interaction function instead as portals to the dematerialized realms of social media.

Walking Mural

In 1973, Asco walked down a busy street in East Los Angeles as *Walking Mural*. Valdez personified the Virgin of Guadalupe, cloaked in black. Gronk walked slightly ahead, wrapped in lime green and red tulle, with pink pants and platforms. Behind them was Herrón, who around his head wore a panel with multiple faces that seemed to be breaking through a wall. The photograph of this procession has them somberly walking past a Firestone tire store. In the distance are signs for burger joints and liquor stores. The street is full of cars, the sidewalk is full of people. A women ahead of them stares directly into the camera. This is a walking mural surrounded by the context of a vibrant city street. Today, what feels most radical in Asco's actions and performances—whether they took place on a bustling city street or a barren traffic island—is that they were done together, resisting the mandate of atomization and individuality, opting instead for collective self-representation. This mural has legs, which the artists use to join their community in walking in LA.

X

Dena Yago is an artist who was born in 1988. She has had numerous gallery and museum exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and at Bodega in New York.

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T. J. Demos

Climate Control: From Emergency to Emergence

This image shows Triple Chaser tear gas grenades on the left, and a picture of Warren Kanders, his wife and fellow trustee Allison Kanders, and Whitney director Adam Weinberg together in 2019. Courtesy of Decolonize This Place.

What if we consider tear gas as the exemplary medium of climate emergency, which environmentalist organizations are calling on governments worldwide to urgently recognize? We'd face an entirely different politico-ecological calculus than carbon's, referencing not only a regime of socioeconomic inequality, but explicit repression and violence, too. Compared to greenhouse gases' usual suspects—carbon dioxide, methane (dubbed "freedom gas" recently in the US[1]), nitrous oxide, and hydrofluorocarbons—on which climate emergency groups like Extinction Rebellion (XR) focus, the chemical weapon more directly exposes the nefarious side of global capital and thus leads immediately to an entirely different political analysis. Its toxic environment defines a conflicted war zone where unauthorized challenges to the ruling order—an order that is itself bringing about climate chaos, profound inequality, and systemic violence—are met with the weaponization of air, a formulation that proposes a very different way to consider the reality behind the otherwise banal phraseology of "climate change." As we're now seeing all over the world, counterinsurgency increasingly answers popular sovereignty demands in the age of post-democratic and ecological breakdown, indexed by an authoritarian atmospherics, a militarized ecology, of strategically enforced climate control. At the

same time, these attempts are directed at forces that are ultimately uncontrollable.

The recent mass uprisings in Hong Kong; the anti-colonial rage expressed on the streets of San Juan; uprisings in war-torn Iraq; anti-neoliberal revolts in Chile; Central American migrants fleeing agricultural failure and gang violence crossing the US–Mexico border zone—all have been answered with tear gas, an integral component in the liberal-become-authoritarian state's response to opposition that bypasses conventional routes of negotiation. Its (supposedly) nonlethal crowd control is clearly post-political, maintaining the state's monopoly on violence. Nonetheless, these worldwide revolutions rise up against everything tear gas represents, and it is these struggles that can offer important lessons for the politics of climate emergency, beginning with a necessary expansion of our terminology.

Gezi park, and Gazans opposing Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Safariland's Triple Chaser tear gas grenades—and the institutions that support and enable its use—bear a clearer signature of repressive order than fossil fuels more generally, even while the two remain intimately intertwined, with energy, infrastructure, and security all essential components of the petro-capitalist complex.

Of course, there is also glyphosate, micropolymers, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, neonicotinoids, chlorpyrifos, and more—all enacting untold damage, and for massive profits (Safariland has had annual *revenues* of $500 million in recent years). There are bullets too, the kind that have killed 164 environmentalists this year alone, according to Global Witness.[2] Guns join white-supremacist violence and anti-immigrant racism, as in Christchurch and El Paso, resulting in what Naomi Klein terms "climate barbarism," the repressive state and the lone shooter two

An Extinction Rebellion action in Oxford Circus, London, 2019. Photo: Andrew Davidson/CC BY-SA 4.0.

With atmospheric carbon, conversely, the source is vastly distributed, rendering environmentalist demands and science's politics complex and inarticulate, with causality and culpability hard to ascertain. Sure, there are powerful fossil-fuel corporations, and devious backroom lobbyists, but are we not also all carbon subjects, thoroughly enmeshed in an interconnected web of consumer complicity and guilt? So we often hear, even though we know that the wealthiest emit the largest share by far. With tear gas, the enemy is clear: Safariland CEO Warren B. Kanders, for instance, ousted recently from the Whitney Museum's Board of Trustees after sustained mass protests around the so-called "Teargas Biennial," his weapons profiteering seen as complicit in police actions against Black Lives Matter in Ferguson, migrants at the US–Mexico border, Turkish pro-democracy activists in

distinct positions on its spectrum.[3] One can and should perform a critical analysis of all of them—and their systemic interconnectivity—but tear gas has gained particular visibility as of late as one key element of climate barbarism. Yet for many environmentalists, it remains invisible, and this is a strategic error.

For Extinction Rebellion, climate emergency threatens civilizational collapse, attributed most immediately—and tellingly—to atmospheric carbon. Indeed there are fewer than twelve years to act, we're told (in a recent IPCC science report[4]), before cascading tipping points of multispecies disaster overtake all. The human die-off—a massive population "correction" for a contracting biosphere of habitat destruction, desertification, and

drought—could number *billions* in the next eighty years (the crash owing to shrinking resources, failing agribusiness, and consequent resource wars).[5] This alone legitimates XR's macabre funereal obsessions, a prefigurative aesthetics of emergency overflowing into the streets, a recognition too that institutional containment of the becoming-activist of creative expression, of the structural transformation of collective practice in the era of emergency, is increasingly impossible in these circumstances. The sense of urgency driving multitudes to action all over the world is surely inspiring, but also potentially misdirected. But rather than dismissing the movement, let's contribute to this growing energy so that it foregrounds a just transition—meaning a radical restructuring of our politics and economics by prioritizing equality, social justice, and multispecies flourishing—rather than another depoliticized, single-issue environmental initiative, or worse, part of the growing project of green neoliberalism. To do so, a change of focus is necessary.

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XR demands that governments "tell the truth" about climate emergency, "act now" to decarbonize by 2025, and become "beyond political" by empowering "citizens assemblies" to enact climate justice. "We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame," they claim, completely bypassing the justice-oriented arguments and historical gains of such groups as Black Lives Matter UK, Indigenous Environmental Network, Global Grassroots Justice Alliance, and the Climate Justice Alliance, which have long highlighted the racial and class-based inequalities of differentiated climate disruption.[6] With XR activists blockading intersections, performing mass die-ins, and gluing themselves to government buildings and corporate headquarters to those ends—where collective interventions shut down institutions of normalization denying emergency in the first place—the radical means often miss such a political analysis (what is the "beyond" of the political, if not deluded liberalism?). This situation is made only more difficult by narrowly focusing on carbon as the cause of emergency.

In its gloomy pantomimes, XR performs the death of the future—but it's a funeral without a body. Its macabre forms, reminiscent of Atwoodian dystopian SF, risk surrender to fatalism, even as they riff on ACT UP political funerals in expressing emotions for the loss of more-than-humans and coming environmental catastrophe. With ACT UP, "mourning became militancy" precisely because death (of community members and loved ones) and the dead (sometimes presented in public funerals) were not naturalized through the epidemic and thereby depoliticized (as when 350.org's Bill McKibben explains we're at war with "climate change,"[7] rather than petro-capitalist violence). Rather, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was understood as political insofar as it was seen as the murderous result of politicians' homophobia, media sensationalism, and pharmaceutical profiteering.[8] XR's funerals, by contrast, risk naturalizing climate, mourning a coming abstraction—not because it's not real, but rather because XR fails to identify meaningful causes in Western modernity's political and economic order, consequently emptying activist rituals of any traction. XR universalizes causality in the generalized "we" of "human activities" (as in its statement on "The Emergency"[9]), much like the "beyond political" species-being of neo-humanist Anthropocene discourse. Moreover, by situating emergency in the near future, and by narrowly defining it as carbon caused, it's as if the disaster hasn't already occurred—in past invasions, slaveries, genocides, all perpetuated in ongoing land grabs, displacements, and extractivism, as the traditions of the oppressed have ceaselessly shown. Indeed, indigenous activists remind us that they are already "post-apocalyptic," and have already lived through exactly the socio-environmental breakdown now predicted by climate scientists.[10]

In this regard, XR's mourning resonates with Iceland's recent funeral for Okjökull, the first glacier lost to climate change, memorialized in a site-specific plaque inscribed with "A letter to the future": "Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."[11] Such is only the latest instance where "we" becomes intolerable, hailing "our" complicity in the repression of historical responsibility for glacier-killing climate chaos—a repression, for instance, of the recognition of the hundred or so fossil-fuel companies largely responsible for climate breakdown, funding climate-change denial for decades, disabling governmental regulatory agencies, and refusing to stop the madness.[12] While there's real mourning to be done—for lost species, for historical and ongoing climate violence, for structural injustice—militancy is more than ever necessary, meaning a diversity of tactics dedicated to structural change, but grounded in careful political analysis and organizing.

Which is why it's crucial that XR NYC has added an additional demand to the 2018 British platform, stressing climate justice principles. It clearly informed their mediagenic intervention at Rockefeller Center with a banner stating "Climate Change = Mass Murder," positioned behind a golden statue of Prometheus, allegorical figure of the techno-utopian Anthropocene, at the symbolic headquarters of the US fossil industrial capital.[13] It's this radical political dimension that pins the injustice of uneven climate chaos to institutional culprits that needs amplification—rather than simply opposing the movement of XR, given its naive policy proposals, color-blindness, lack of structural analysis, and basic misunderstanding of the police as a function dedicated to protecting the powerful elite (which tear gas, again, helps to clarify).[14] For, until XR and similar groups sharpen their

analysis, "climate emergency" remains an unstable discourse, potentially only reaffirming the ruling order—an emergency without emergence, one blocking the rise of radical difference—where the "beyond political" framing opens a door to the financial co-optation of green capital, as much as invites the state of exception to take command.

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If climate breakdown appears as the greatest threat to capital—to its logic of infinite growth on a finite planet—then we can only expect the powerful few to defend their outsized interests and claim on resources. Indeed, as 350.org, Climate Emergency Fund, and Climate Mobilization organize for "emergency," at stake are trillions in decarbonization funds (distributed across diverse financial markets, institutional investment, and pension funds), on which the green nonprofit industrial complex has its eyes fixed, as we move from divestment to reinvestment in a renewable economy.[15] Global climate emergency, in this vein, becomes financial insurance, redirecting toward market-friendly solutions what could otherwise be—what might still become—the greatest revolutionary force in history: a multispecies and anti-capitalist insurgency of unprecedented proportions.[16] In this sense, the main liability of XR's "beyond-political" emergency is catastrophe-become-financial-opportunity: fossil divestment brings green reinvestment, net-zero carbon necessitates sequestration and geoengineering technologies, and failing ecosystems stimulate monetizing natural capital and carbon offsetting. Such is clear, for instance, when Brazil's foreign minister claims "opening the rainforest to economic development" is "the only way to protect it"—exemplifying the worn-out logic whereby economic growth masquerades as climate solution.[17] The Bolsonaros, Dutertes, Netanyahus, and Trumps are happy to declare emergency, but only one of their own making, likely shrouded in tear gas.

According to this scenario, climate emergency (as a paradoxical demand to change everything so as to keep things the same) risks consigning us to an endless present of authoritarian capitalism. Anything to distract us from and bypass the real disaster as seen from the perspective of financial elites: a radical Green New Deal, meaning structural decarbonization dedicated to social justice, economic redistribution, smart degrowth, democratization, and decolonization, with the integral participation of historically oppressed and formerly excluded peoples.[18] As the Fanon-inspired climate-justice coalition Wretched of the Earth writes in their open letter to XR, environmentalists' often whitewashed positions tend to forget others' long-term struggles, particularly those of black, brown, and indigenous communities, and the fact that climate emergency really dates to 1492.

For those of us committed to amplifying the insurrectionary potential of movements like XR (and doing the work of political organizing toward those ends), it is clear that we need to refocus on specific justice-oriented, eminently *political* demands—including implementing a just transition, holding corporations accountable, ending militarism, definancializing nature, replacing borders with radical hospitality, and guaranteeing universal health care, free education, healthy food, and adequate income for all (the demands of Wretched of the Earth).[19] Without doing so, one's climate emergency risks erasing others' historical oppression, one's future, another's past, one's privilege, another's misfortune. "In order to envision a future in which we will all be liberated from the root causes of the climate crisis—capitalism, extractivism, racism, sexism, classism, ableism and other systems of oppression—the climate movement must reflect the complex realities of everyone's lives in their narrative."[20] The challenge is to render these complexities proximate and mutually informing, centering them honestly and sensitively, by thinking emergencies together, and collaborating on solutions across difference. If not, then depoliticized emergency claims enable the Green New Deal to turn into a Green New Colonialism, founded on an extractive renewables economy enabling continued violent inequality, and a white futurism without end.[21]

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Tear gas dramatizes these risks. As a cyanocarbon—related to cyanide, itself dependent on methane for its production—it chemically derives from hydrocarbons, the organic component of oil and gas. As such, it expresses the truth of climate breakdown as *climate control*. The weaponized environment—what Peter Sloterdijk terms "atmo-terrorism," joining air to juridico-political and military frameworks[22]—functions as a medium of "humanitarian warfare," rife with contradictions, historically and currently employed to defend power. One might believe tear gas to be more biopolitics than environmental concern. Like preemptive policing, surveillance, kettling, and counterinsurgency armaments, tear gas—as one more technology of crowd management—hypes safety, but enacts repression. As a substance that joins weaponized atmospheres to collective bodily control, tear gas creates biochemical environments that compel behavioral adaptation to regimes of power. As such, it's more than biopolitical: it's climatological, geontopolitical, intersectionalist, socioecological—where biogeophysical relationalities and ontological cuts splitting environments of life and death intersect with sociopolitical and techno-economic orders.[23]

Unlike typical greenhouse gases—say atmospheric carbon—that mostly remain unseen, tear gas is strategically visible and experientially affective: its calculus of impact materializes terrorizing fears of suffocation to catalyze physiological response. As a performative aesthetics of physiological persuasion, it redistributes the sensible according to chemical agents dividing bodies in space. Doing so, police choreograph multitudes,

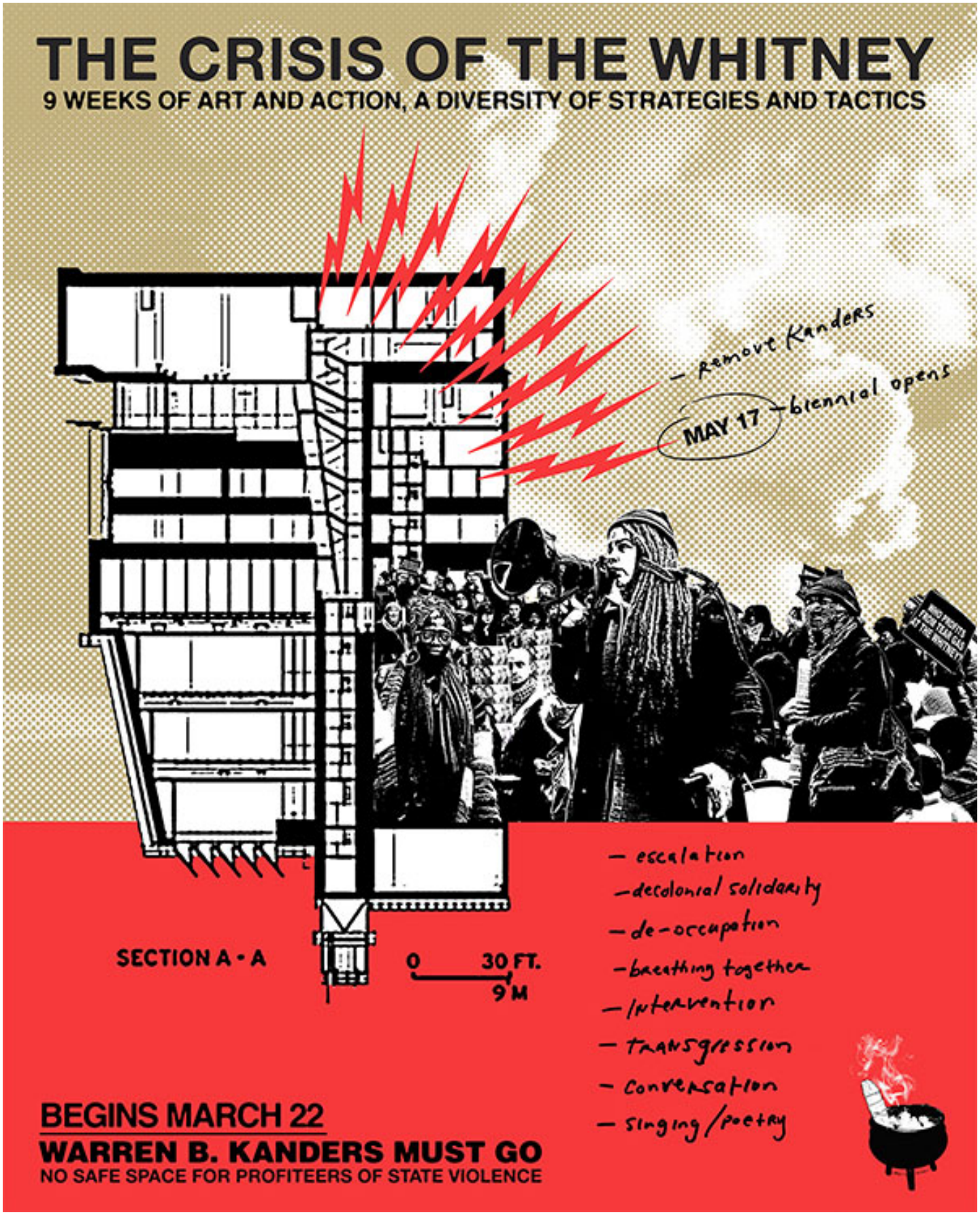
subjecting targets not only to the immediacy of pain, choking, and uncontrollable respiratory breakdown, but also, with chronic victims, to the slow violence of long-term illnesses—some of which is detailed in *Triple Chaser*, Forensic Architecture's video about Safariland's tear gas product presented at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, which was the scene of protests from its opening day. Insofar as Safariland forms part of a global regime of climate control that modulates atmospheres to the detriment of all but a tiny minority (part of a larger system of environmental injustice that sequesters clean air, water, and soil for the benefit of the few, relegating the impoverished to toxic sacrifice zones),[24] the Kanders case elicits urgent concerns about the transformation of contemporary art in the era of climate emergency, especially when expanded to the realm of political ecology.

resulting in a remarkable video sequence of machine learning visuality, containing seemingly infinite variations of colored background tessellations against which to test and improve the classifier's abilities in identifying tear gas grenades, played under a disjunctive musical soundtrack. The commentary explains the selection, noting that in 2016 Kanders gave $2.5 million to the Aspen Music Festival, which renamed its Sunday concert series in his honor, inaugurating it with Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. (More recently, Kanders's sponsorship has supported a program of "music inspired by nature," proposing another potential case study of institutionalized climate injustice.) As with Kanders's Whitney, culture functions as a machine for laundering profiteering militarist brutality into virtuous philanthropy. But FA's audiovisual juxtaposition offers a reverse tactic of de-artwashing, where culture is shockingly reunited with the oppressive technology serving as its condition of

From the Forensic Architecture research project Triple Chaser, 2019. FA states on its website: "Using the Unreal engine, Forensic Architecture generated thousands of photorealistic 'synthetic' images, situating the Triple Chaser in approximations of real-world environments." Photo: Forensic Architecture/Praxis Films.

A central part of FA's project involved training a computer learning algorithm to visually recognize Triple Chaser grenades within large data caches, in order to both counter the manufacturer's own nontransparency regarding its distribution markets, and aid campaigns against police and state violence worldwide. To do so, FA created a synthetic training data set to teach the classifier,

possibility. Over this complex montage, the narration describes Triple Chaser's potential physiological effects—bronchial spasms, anaphylactic shock, pulmonary edema, convulsion, impaired breathing, and so on—based on Safariland's safety guidance in an analytic deadpan (read by David Byrne) worthy of Harun Farocki.



Poster for "9 Weeks of Art and Action," 2019. Courtesy of Decolonize This Place.

Strauss wrote the 1948 composition during the last years of his life, in the apocalyptic wake of the Nazi Holocaust. In the video passage, the tear-worthy sonic pathos sourced in genocide paradoxically confronts the uncanny deathlessness of AI's post-humanist immortality, glimpsed through sequential imaging that combines inhuman speed and seemingly endless repetition—in some ways reminiscent of the evolutionary paradigm shifts and disjunctive temporalities of Kubric's classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, itself combining AI threats to humanity amidst futurist space exploration and transformative encounters with the alien sublime set to another Strauss score, the film concluding with a speculative remainder—post-human? inhuman? cyborg?—beyond all of what's been. *Triple Chaser* is not so sanguine, including extensive consideration of the context of current-day Gaza, which provides further lessons in the necessity of expanding our conception of climate emergency beyond atmospheric carbon. Indeed, if tear gas materializes climate control atmospherics, then Gaza is its limit case, where structural debilitation figures as a mode of disaster capitalism, from which emerges a dystopian future captured by an endless now. When *Triple Chaser* details Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) snipers' use of MatchKing bullets (made by Clarus, where Kanders serves as executive chairman), it connects to what Jasbir Puar critically analyzes as the "right to maim" (gassing or shooting to injure rather than kill). This latter figures as an emergent mode of biopolitics' refusal to let die, a logic made clear in the statistics: during the December 2018 Great March of Return protests, on which FA focuses, the IDF killed 154 civilian protesters, including thirty-five children, but wounded more than six thousand people, evidencing the maiming directive as a grotesque ramification of "humanitarian" war.

Claiming the "right to maim" as a refusal to let die preconditions the "right to repair"—physiologically, infrastructurally, commercially—forming an endless cycle of destruction and production. It thereby reduces life to inhuman conditions, imprisoning a terrain between biopolitics and necropolitics, according to Puar, indicating an extreme modality of climate control where Gaza functions as laboratory for what's to come more globally. Indeed, the Israeli occupation's chronopolitics factors as a strategic aim of the state's extended state of emergency (technically in operation since 1948), where the ongoing production of disaster is far from failure or accident, but an intended outcome, one that inevitablizes endlessness. Puar's term for this is "prehensive futurity," according to which the state makes "the present look exactly the way it needs to"—as catastrophic—"in order to guarantee a very specific and singular outcome in the future"—one dependent on Israeli interests—generating "the permanent debilitation of settler colonialism."[25] When taking into account the ecocidal use of white phosphorous and depleted uranium (the latter with a half-life of 4.5 billion years), both used in IDF operations, we confront a weaponized epigenetics of toxic inhuman futurity, a prehensive mode of climate control extending into incomprehensible time.[26]

Not surprisingly, Gaza's anti-colonial protests are no Extinction Rebellion—and in fact no such formations exist in Palestine, only in Israel, where the group makes no mention of the occupation in its mission statement.[27] Which reveals the selective and oppression-perpetuating privilege of XR's "climate emergency" when the latter is so myopically conceived, when it refuses to connect to the long presence of colonial violence, including very real funerals and mass debilitation.

As an important corrective, *Triple Chaser* documents riot control targeting groups struggling for their very survival. It shows weaponized atmospherics destroying livability for multispecies life. And it unleashes data-crunching cyber-intelligence exceeding all human capability, a politically unstable technology for sure that FA repurposes for its own justice-oriented ends. Doing so, *Triple Chaser* reveals a triple extinction event that, according to my reading, remarkably expands contemporary climate emergency: first, ethnic destruction is enacted through neocolonial violence; second, environmental toxicity exacerbates mass species extinction and biological annihilation already in effect globally; and third, we glimpse the ultimate surpassing of humanity by AI—what Franco Berardi terms a "frozen immortality [that] emerges in the form of the global cognitive automaton" [28]—as it comes to ominously "recognize" weapons of mass destruction. In each of these three endgames, the dying confront tear gas's cruel irony of forcing a lacrymogenic self-mourning, a compelled crying in the act of experiencing one's own annihilation. If, departing from FA's own analysis, we preview in *Triple Chaser* the annihilation of biology by technology according to a speculative scenario wherein environmental catastrophe portends an AI future, then it's because "silicon-based entities … do not need a breathable atmosphere, [and] life on Earth is just the raw matter from which a superior intelligence will emerge, with capitalism as its midwife," as Ana Teixiera Pinto warns.[29] As such, FA's critical intervention, at least according to this speculative reading, dramatizes most broadly an ultimate threat that goes far beyond carbon-induced emergency claims: the post-biological death drive of petro-capitalist techno-utopianism—advanced by everything that tear gas represents.

FA's video concludes by stating: "We shared our findings with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, who served Sierra Bullets with legal notice, warning that the exports of their bullets to Israel may be aiding and abetting war crimes." As much as one might support such justice—as a non-reformist reform—it's striking how such an expansive conceptual analysis of climate control couched in the conditions of settler-colonial violence and warning of an unfolding global triple extinction event ultimately leads to merely a

From the Forensic Architecture research project Triple Chaser, 2019. FA states on it website: "Rendering images of our model against bold, generic patterns, known as 'decontextualised images,' improves the classifier's ability to identify the grenade." Image: Forensic Architecture/Praxis Films, 2019.

liberal grievance claim, a claim hailing conventional juridico-political reason that has led to humanitarian war in the first place (about which FA is well aware[30]). Moreover, by focusing on corporate malpractice abetting allegedly criminal regimes, the grievance neglects to oppose tear gas in any context whatsoever. Of course FA's larger practice comprises a growing list of dozens of case studies that collectively add up to meaningful opposition to structural forms of state and corporate violence, including numerous instances where socio-environmental and biopolitical violence converge in a multiplication of emergency conditions. Yet rather than allowing liberal grievance to neutralize radical social-movement opposition that surpasses the Kanders case, how might the latter offer a platform for considering the more ambitious political horizon of the structural transformation of governance itself? It is here that an additional rupture might emerge from climate emergency, propelled by social-movement energies.

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Although not typically considered within the framework of climate politics, Decolonize This Place's "9 Weeks of Art and Action" (March–May 2019) represented a concerted effort to remove Kanders from the Whitney. It comprised one vector in the group's larger, ongoing project of the decolonization of life initiated through the "liberation of institutions"—"more than a critique of institutions, institutional liberation affirms the productive and creative dimensions of collective struggle."[31] The radical dimension of its collectivity—including such groups as Veterans Against the War, Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network, Comité Boricua En La Diáspora, Mi Casa No Es Su Casa, NYC Solidarity with Palestine, Queer Youth Power, P.A.I.N. Sackler, and many more[32]—drew on and affirms the power of solidarity as the necessary basis for alliance-building, practicing what Angela Davis calls "the indivisibility of justice" (rejecting not only art-world individualism and neoliberal social atomization, but the sway of identity politics into essentialist separatism[33]). Such collective struggle is forged in the materiality of oppression, which tear gas, in its negative cast, enacts by chemically joining multiple bodies and geographies of violence, rendering diverse grievances interconnected. Indeed, in her extensive study of tear gas, Ann Feigenbaum highlights how the chemical weapon historically targets environmentalists, people of color, the poor, LGBTQ activists, refugees and immigrants, the disabled and mentally unwell, young people and dissidents, forging the bonds of solidarity in oppressive climate control.[34] In this regard, we can make sense of DTP's slogan announced in a self-authorized banner drop over the Whitney's façade: "When we breathe, we breathe together"—what we might call an intersectionalist climate justice put to task against the environmental injustice of

violent policing, weaponized toxicity, and structural debility alike.

Following its organizing of an open letter signed by four hundred writers, scholars, and artists in May 2018, itself catalyzed by the movement against Kanders initiated by the Whitney's own staff, DTP unfurled an all-out campaign of tactical media, agitprop design, Instagram feeds, and interventionist collective actions in the museum's spaces. These occurred in coordination with the radical pacifist organization War Resisters League, already engaged in long-term struggle against Safariland, with the action resulting eventually in eight artists (including Forensic Architecture) withdrawing their work from the biennial.[35] DTP's militant media also riffed off the art of the Whitney's temporary exhibitions (partly funded by Kanders), including its ongoing Warhol retrospective, mirroring the Pop artist's appropriation aesthetics, specifically the latter's *Death in America* series, while redirecting the mournful iconography toward their social and environmental justice aims.[36] Moving from Pop art to agitprop, the serial images of museum spectacle—showing Kanders, his wife, and fellow trustee Allison Kanders standing with Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg—explode in representational proximity to tear gas canisters used in oppressive police actions. Revealing the disastrous intertwinement of contemporary power and culture in the era of carceral capitalism, military neoliberalism, and apocalyptic populism, DTP organizes the collective energy to overcome it.[37]

Not that the approaches of FA's humanitarian grievance and DTP's decolonial institutional liberation are mutually exclusive; indeed they are allied. No doubt we need both, and all others that can aid in the process of emancipation from the climate control system governed by war profiteer philanthropists, "beyond political" institutions, and oppressive states claiming the right to maim. These latter propose a matrix of causality driving global climate chaos, which seeks to turn climate emergency into financialized opportunity for the further accumulation of wealth and power, leaving the world destitute and dead in its wake. To escape these conditions, we must move from *emergency* to *emergence*—of radical difference, of the residual and the not-yet—making a just transition into the future, where the not-yet may be glimpsed in the already-here, grounded in the traditions of the oppressed, and generating new emancipatory possibilities on that basis.

Following the coordinated, sustained actions of groups like DTP, Kanders did resign in July 2019, constituting a major success. But, as we've seen, DTP's motivations exceed this goal, forming part of the "ongoing project of decolonization" as "a mode of 'epistemic disobedience,' an immanent practice of testing, questioning, and learning, grounded in the work of movement-building," opposed to "the entire settler-institutional nexus of art, capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy."[38] As such, their example, if operating at a smaller scale, provides an urgent way to massively expand and radicalize XR's climate emergency, where climate justice is inextricable from economic justice, housing justice, migrant justice, democratic justice, and decolonial justice. The goal being not simply to reform neoliberal museum boards, but to catalyze the structural transformation of our political economy as the only way to address the manifold socio-ecological and climate emergencies of our times. It is not at all surprising that DTP's analysis, in the case of Safariland and the Whitney, begins with tear gas, which, as we've seen, immediately repositions ecology and climate as terms inextricably entangled in the politico-economic framework of late-capitalist climate control. It's not that tear gas displaces fossil-fuel causality in this analysis of climate emergency; rather it reveals the latter's truth as thoroughly enmeshed in petro-capitalist governmentality and its attendant forms of violence.

Conversely, depoliticized emergency claims invite instrumentalization toward purposes other than democratic equality and social justice. This is similarly the case with proposals for a Green New Deal, which may very well represent our best global hope at mitigating climate catastrophe; but it too is inadequate if separated from decolonization—for instance, as part of a Red Deal expressive of indigenous climate justice.[39] Just how the Green New Deal transition is implemented—whether ground-up, smartly de-growth-directed, and centering agro-ecological smallholders, working-class labor, indigenous land-protectors, and frontline communities, or as a technocratic, fortress-based, elitist, ethno-nationalist economy—will necessarily be a site of collective struggle. But one thing's for sure: narrowly defined climate emergency propels movement in the opposite direction, investing post-political governance with emergency powers poised to decarbonize in its own interests, or, worse, to resemble something closer to eco-fascism than internationalist eco-socialism.

"In order to envision a future in which we will all be liberated from the root causes of the climate crisis—capitalism, extractivism, racism, sexism, classism, ableism and other systems of oppression—the climate movement must reflect the complex realities of everyone's lives in their narrative," writes Wretched of the Earth in their open letter to XR.[40] Building what might be called a prehensive futurity of justice will, of course, take collective commitment and time, exceeding the event-obsessed convergences of culture-industry social practice, and equally spectacular activist protests, ultimately requiring something like the multiple-generations expansiveness of indigenous time-relations, of creating worlds by living and struggling together, across difference, over the long term. This means a commitment to "long environmentalism," the labor of building solidarity and mutual-aid networks over months, years, generations, as probably the only place where a radical politics of emergency can truly emerge—rooted in the broadly shared concern of collective survival—even if that means rethinking the

temporal immediacy of emergency itself in times of unprecedented uncertainty.[41] It entails committing to building relations of responsibility and accountability that can lend trust in justice, in thinking climate emergencies relationally, beginning with the history of Anthropocene violence stretching back hundreds of years and continuing with current and near-future threats of ongoing climate chaos. As such, those of us bound in solidarity and committed to creating a collective future beyond climate breakdown—where tear gas reveals its expansive entanglements—must certainly decolonize this place, and this and that one too, organizing a transnational network of resistance capable of challenging the transnational power of capital.[42] But we must also decolonize our future, rescuing it from the disaster of green capitalist, and worse eco-fascist, "inevitability" facilitated by an irresponsible emergency politics.

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Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber

Another Art World, Part 2: Utopia of Freedom as a Market Value

Continued from "Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity"

The Endless Cycle of Production

The Romantic legacy has by no means disappeared from the contemporary art world—it's just retained only its most elitist elements. We still worship the individual genius, mad, tortured, or otherwise; what has been purged is any explicit belief that we all begin as artists, and could, in a future society in which forms of institutional violence are rooted out, become artists once again. As a result, that very conception of freedom that once drove the various avant-gardes has come to regulate a logic of commoditization—or even more, it has encouraged us to see that logic of commoditization as the definition of freedom itself.

In the previous installment of this essay, we recalled that the Russian revolutionary avant-garde imagined "people of the future" (*Budetlyans*) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity, they would also enjoy a kind of almost childlike freedom. This was a direct invocation of the original Romantic conception, born together with the concept of "culture" itself, one explicitly formulated in reaction to the logic of commoditization.

It would take a great deal of work to unravel how all this turned around, but the key, it seems to us, is to return to Comte and Saint-Simon's focus on industrialism. The Romantic conception of the artist as isolated genius emerged, of course, at roughly the same time as the Industrial Revolution. This was almost certainly no coincidence. As French sociologist Alain Caillé has suggested, the artistic genius might best be conceived as a kind of structural complement to the factory system.

In effect, the older figure of the craftsman or artisan split in two. Consumers were confronted with two different sorts of commodity: on the one hand, an endless outpouring of consumer goods, produced by a faceless mass of industrial workers, about whose individual biographies consumers knew absolutely nothing (often, not even what countries they lived in, languages they spoke, whether they were men, women, or children ...); on the other, unique works of art, about whose producers, the consumer knew absolutely everything, and whose biographies were an intrinsic part of the value of the objects themselves.

But if the heroic figure of the artist is simply the mirror of industrialism, this would certainly help explain why that figure was so appealing to socialists like Saint-Simon, or Marx (who in his student years tried his hand at German Romantic poetry). It does not explain why this figure is still with us. After all, we live in an age when capitalism is more

Image of the play Victory Over the Sun, Stas Namin's theater, Moscow, 2014. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0.

and more organized around the management not of industrial labor but care work, less about the creation than about the sustaining, maintaining, nurturance, education, and repair of people, things, and the natural environment. Even the main loci of class struggle centers on nurses, cleaners, teachers, and care workers of various sorts.

True, artists too less and less resemble industrial workers, and more and more resemble managers. But they are still heroic, highly individualized managers nonetheless—that is, the successful ones (the lesser figures are now relegated largely to the artistic equivalent of care work). And it's telling that, whatever else may change, and however much the Romantic conception of the artist now seems to us trite, silly, and long-since-abandoned; however much discussion for that matter there is about artistic collectives; at a show like the Venice Biennale, or a museum of contemporary art, almost everything is still treated as if it springs from the brain of a specific named individual. Perhaps one piece in a hundred is an exception. And this is true no matter what the circumstances of a work's actual creation. We may be too delicate nowadays to call these individuals "geniuses." But the entire apparatus of the art world makes no sense unless it's ultimately something very like what used to be called genius—something ineffable, spiritual, creative, and rooted in the individual soul—which creates the value that it celebrates. Even the fascination of the contemporary art scene with promoting works by artists identified with specific disadvantaged groups, Iraqi migrants, queer Latinas, and so forth, is perfectly apiece with this; it might seem to mark a return to something at least a little more like the older idea of collective, cultural creativity, since the artists are being valued as representatives of the creative context from which they emerged, but ultimately, it simply dissolves that horizontal Romanticism back into vertical, heroic Romanticism again, since the value of any given artwork is still seen to derive from the artists entirely individual biography, which quickly takes on a logic and trajectory entirely its own.

(It's easy to see why this would have to be the case. To do otherwise would be to suggest that queer artists, or artists of colour, are somehow less individually responsible for their works than straight white ones. That would be obviously bigoted or racist. The only alternative would be to treat the latter primarily as products of their cultural environment, which is precisely what the art world refuses to do.)

The fact that everyone knows this, and many claim to object, does not make it any less true. Really, it just reveals how difficult this habit is to overcome. Because the overwhelming majority of artworks remain as they have always been, since the Industrial Revolution, seen as making sense only in relation to some unique individual soul. An art world that was *not* organized around the creative vision of named individuals simply would not be an "art world" at all.

Why then the lingering power of industrial categories and industrial-age modes of thought? The ultimate reason, it

seems to us, lies in our inability to detach ourselves from the notion of "production."

We still seem obsessed with the notion that work is necessarily a matter of making things; preferably, through a process that is simultaneously mysterious, and at least a little bit unpleasant. Why, for example, do otherwise intelligent human beings so often insist that the "working class" no longer exists in wealthy countries, simply because not many people are employed in factories—as if it were somehow cyborgs or trained monkeys who were driving their taxis, installing their cable, or changing their bedpans when they're sick? Why do we identify work with "production" in the first place, rather than tending to things, maintaining them, or moving them around?

This habit of thought goes far deeper than Romanticism. It is the product of a very particular theological tradition. The Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God created the world out of nothing (He is in fact somewhat unusual in having created the universe out of nothing; most work with existing materials); the human condition, as the story of the Garden of Eden or for that matter Prometheus make clear, is punishment: those who disobeyed the Creator and tried to play God are cursed to continue to do exactly that, to create the means for their own existence, but to do so in a way that is also a form of pain and suffering. Adam is cursed to grow food by the sweat of his brow. Eve is simultaneously told that God will multiply her pains "in labor"—that is, in giving birth.

We might consider this analogy for a moment. The real process of "producing" children (if you really want to use that word) involves not just an act of sex and nine months of pregnancy, but a web of social relations involving years of nurture, support, education … Yet here that entire process disappears, collapsed into the one moment when a baby seems (especially to male onlookers) to just appear, fully formed, through a mysterious but painful process out of nowhere—much like the universe. This is the very paradigm of "production," a word which literally means "to bring forth" or even "push out." The factory was always conceived as the ultimate black box, a mysterious place of pain and suffering, where steel, saucers, or microchips somehow pop out fully formed through a process we'll never really know and would rather prefer not to have to think about. But so, in the classical conception, is the artist's brain.

In this light, it only makes sense that both the factory worker and the artistic genius must suffer. They simply suffer in opposite (yet complementary) ways. The factory worker suffers because he's alienated from his work, it means nothing to him, and he has no control over it; the artist, because she's hopelessly entangled in it and will never be able to break free.

Obviously, with the decline of the importance of factory labor, and the predominance of finance capital, the notion that work is primarily a matter of producing things (instead of cleaning, moving, maintaining, nurturing, fixing, transforming, or caring for them) becomes ever more difficult to maintain. But in this context, the artist actually plays an increasingly strategic role. Art is still conceived as a factory of endless productivity, and art is still seen as somehow popping, through a painful yet mysterious process, directly from the artist's brain. And with the art world sitting as it does at the peak of the "creative industries," all this works to subtly suggest that the administrators and bureaucrats who increasingly make it up really are somehow "producing" something after all—or, something other than the various social tissues of the hierarchical structures of the art world itself.

The Art World In and Out

Each exhibition, each new biennial or Documenta, strives (and inevitably claims) to be an historic event. Historical events are—by one definition at least (the one we like)—precisely those events that could not have been predicted before they happened. Every artistic event thus sets out to surprise its audience. Something must be formally new, something must be included that was not previously considered to fit in the category of "contemporary art," or even better, that was not considered to be an art at all. It's considered normal, nowadays, for exhibitions to include anything from ethnographic objects and folk art to the description of social practices or items of design. The art world constantly tests and waives its boundaries.

To some degree this is what the art world has actually become: the constant testing and overcoming of its own boundaries. As a result it always *appears* to be moving in the direction foreseen by past avant-gardes, bursting its own bubble in order to ultimately encompass everything. But can it really succeed in blowing itself up? Is it even really trying? When a few years ago someone asked Boris Groys whether the art world, always in crisis, was really on the verge of self-destruction, Groys answered: "I do not see any signs of collapse. Worldwide, the industrial museum complex is growing. The pace of cultural tourism is increasing, new biennials and exhibitions are opening everywhere on a weekly basis. The recent addition of China alone has drastically increased the size of the art world."

Much of what is called the art world consists of an endless speculation on the rules, which are always in flux and under negotiation. No one claims to be responsible for them, everyone claims they are just trying to figure them out. It becomes all the more complicated because exposing, challenging, or breaking the rules is now the main substance of art itself.

This game of making a spectacular show of violating the rules, so as to create even more highly paid work for those

who recalibrate, redistribute, and reevaluate them, is hardly limited to the art world, incidentally. Increasingly, it is the basic substance of politics itself. Consider Brexit. While presented as an outburst of popular rage, of burn-it-all-down revulsion against administrative elites, the class of people who are going to benefit the most from Brexit will obviously be lawyers, who will now have untold thousands of thousand-pound-an-hour work thrown at them reevaluating pretty much every contractual agreement the UK has entered into for the last forty-odd years. In many ways it stands as a parable for our times.

Still, there are always meta-rules, if we can call them that: rules about what sort or rules can and can't be broken. Perhaps the best way to determine these is to determine what's clearly an invalid move. It's commonplace to hear, for example, that there's nothing, nowadays, that cannot be turned into a work of art—if only because the very act of arguing about whether or not something is art will itself tend to constitute it as such. But this isn't really true. Some things can't be turned into works of art. It is, as we've learned from the Venice Biennale, possible to dredge of a ship in which refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean and place it on display, and some will agree that this is an artistic gesture. But the refugees themselves, or the ocean in which they drowned, are quite another matter.

There are always limits.

This is why we believe the image of the individual creative genius is so important. Deny it though we might, it continues to play a role in regulating the rules of the game. To put it another way: the continued embrace of one half of the Romantic ideal is premised on the absolute exclusion of the other one. If there's one absolute rule, one red line that cannot be crossed, it is that *everyone* cannot be an artist. The kind of value art creates must, necessarily, be based on exclusion. To actually realize the vision of Novalis (or for that matter Osip Brik, or even Joseph Beuys) would mean to dissolve away the entire structure which makes "the art world" what it is, because it would destroy the entire mechanism through which it creates value.

This is not just because any market must, as we note, operate on a principle of scarcity, and some sort of conception of spiritual genius seems the only way to justify the levels of scarcity that a market pumped quite so full of the profits of financialized derivatives requires. The art world has, since the Industrial Revolution, always been based on the idea that "real art" is priceless and rare; the way the avant-garde challenge to this principle has been absorbed and recuperated has been to add to this that its definition is also constantly shifting and unstable. But this situation is in fact altogether favorable to the current players of the art market in the same way that market volatility is favorable to bond traders: the rapidly changing values of art objects, the discovery of the new names of artists allow for ever-new opportunities for profit, and especially for the insider traders who have some advance knowledge of how the rules are about to change (in many cases, because they are involved in changing them themselves). This is what the work of gallerists and curators is basically about. The price spikes, the conceptual revolutions, the new discoveries, the constant gladiatorial clashes between artists, galleries, curators, critics—all combine to propose a subtle argument: that the characteristic logic of financial markets, the combination of creative destruction, self-marketing, and speculation, *is* freedom, indeed, freedom on the most refined spiritual level. After all, it is nothing if not exhilerating. It feels like a game where anything goes. But so, often, does the financialized peaks of the business world; and just as in the business world, all this is only possible against the unstated background of that which absolutely cannot be challenged, which are ultimately, structures of exclusion.

We Don't Wish to End Here, However (or, Art Communism II)

Our conclusions might seem bleak. Art remains inseparable from a Romantic notion of freedom; but the pursuit of the individual version of Romantic freedom seems to lead inexorably to validating the logic of finance capital, just as the pursuit of the collective, democratic version of Romantic freedom, in which art is free to all, leads—if Tzvetan Todorov and company are to be believed—inexorably to the gulag.

But we don't think things are really as bad as all that.

In fact, since the logic of finance capital is not, ultimately, particularly inspiring, it only operates because the lure of communism, as the ultimate realization of Novalis's dream of undoing the violence that destroys our sense of play, beauty, and creation, continues to inform it. Here we have to take issue with Todorov's otherwise brilliant essay "Avant-Gardes & Totalitarianism," where he warned that the Romantic element in the avant-garde always turned out to open the way to totalitarianism. Citing numerous quotes from Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, Todorov argues that twentieth-century dictators typically enacted the visions of avant-garde artists, that of radically transforming our common reality in accordance with some master plan. If "poetry could no longer be written after Auschwitz," as Theodor Adorno so famously put it, it was only because poetry was complicit in the crime.

Perhaps it's understandable then that the second half of the twentieth century came to be defined by a determination to entirely eliminate poetry from politics, to turn over power first to bland technocrats, then to even blander managers whose vision, insofar as they had one, was precisely not to have one. But the financial crisis of

2008, and particularly the looming crisis of climate change, which threatens to kill far more humans than all the wars of the twentieth century combined, has demonstrated that the rule of managers and technocrats is likely even more dangerous still.

The themes of the last Venice Biennale were devoted precisely to this sense of impending catastrophe. The two most memorable pieces were a sunken refugee ship, and the small Lithuanian Pavilion, a modestly sung ode to the end of the world. All reveled in the impossibility of establishing a redemptive narrative. What, after all, were we, as spectators, being offered as answers? Or even in the way of participation in the debate? Nothing but endless queues and parties, benefits, tournaments, the prospect of ownership of some fragment of our impending doom.

And in this case, the analysis of expert qualifications of artists and curators, or assessments of the level of complexity and subtlety of any specific work, is quite a meaningless exercise.

We would like to imagine the possibility of a completely different model of the art world. It's sometimes remarked that even if a modest proportion of the mathematicians and software engineers currently engaged in designing technology for high-speed trading were to shift to working on trying to design alternatives to capital, we'd easily have at least the outlines of a dozen viable economic systems laid out in no time. What if we were to apply the same creativity we do to inventing new works of art, or for that matter theories about the nature of art, to imagining different ways the institutional structure itself could be organized? What would art communism actually be like?

We will dedicate the next chapters of our essay to these thoughts.

X

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Ariella Aısha Azoulay

Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers and Historians

In contrast to liberal and social democratic arguments, Alex Gourevitch proposes a radical view of the right to strike. The right to strike, he claims, is derived from the right to resist oppression. In the case of strikes, he argues, oppression "is partly a product of the legal protection of basic economic liberties, which explains why the right to strike has priority over these liberties."[1] However, conceiving of a strike as the last but not the least right of the oppressed against their oppressors doesn't exhaust the potential of the right to strike. Alongside this radical conception of strike, and by no means as its replacement, I propose to consider the strike not in terms of the right to protest against oppression, but rather as an opportunity to care for the shared world, including through questioning one's privileges, withdrawing from them, and using them. For that purpose, one's professional work in each and every domain—even in domains as varied as art, architecture, or medicine—cannot be conceived for itself and unfolded as a progressive history, nor as a distinct productive activity to be assessed by its outcomes, but rather as a worldly activity, a mode of engaging with the world that seeks to impact it while being ready to be impacted in return.

In other words, if one's work is conceived as a form of being-in-the-world, work stoppage cannot be conceived only in terms of the goals of the protest. One should consider the strike a modality of being in the world that takes place precisely by way of renunciation and avoidance, when one's work is perceived as harming the shared world and the condition of sharing it. In a world conditioned by imperial power, a collective strike is an opportunity to unlearn imperialism with and among others even though it has been naturalized into one's professional life. Going on strike is to claim one's right not to engage with destructive practices, not to be an oppressor and perpetrator, not to act according to norms and protocols whose goals were defined to reproduce imperial and racial capitalist structures.

To strike in this context is to consider one's expertise-related privileges, which are at the same time part of one's skills, and use them to generate a collective disruption of existing systems of knowledge and action that are predicated on the triple imperial principle. Imagine artists, photographers, curators, art scholars, newspaper editors, museumgoers, or art connoisseurs going on strike and refusing to pursue their work because the field of art sustains the imperial condition and participates in its reproduction. An analogy may be helpful here. Think about the group of programmers who went on strike and refused to build the technical platform for US immigration services. Being aware that IBM workers have been implicated in assisting the Nazi regime, they opt to avoid finding themselves, simply by doing their job, complicit with similar mechanisms that inflict harm and destroy the

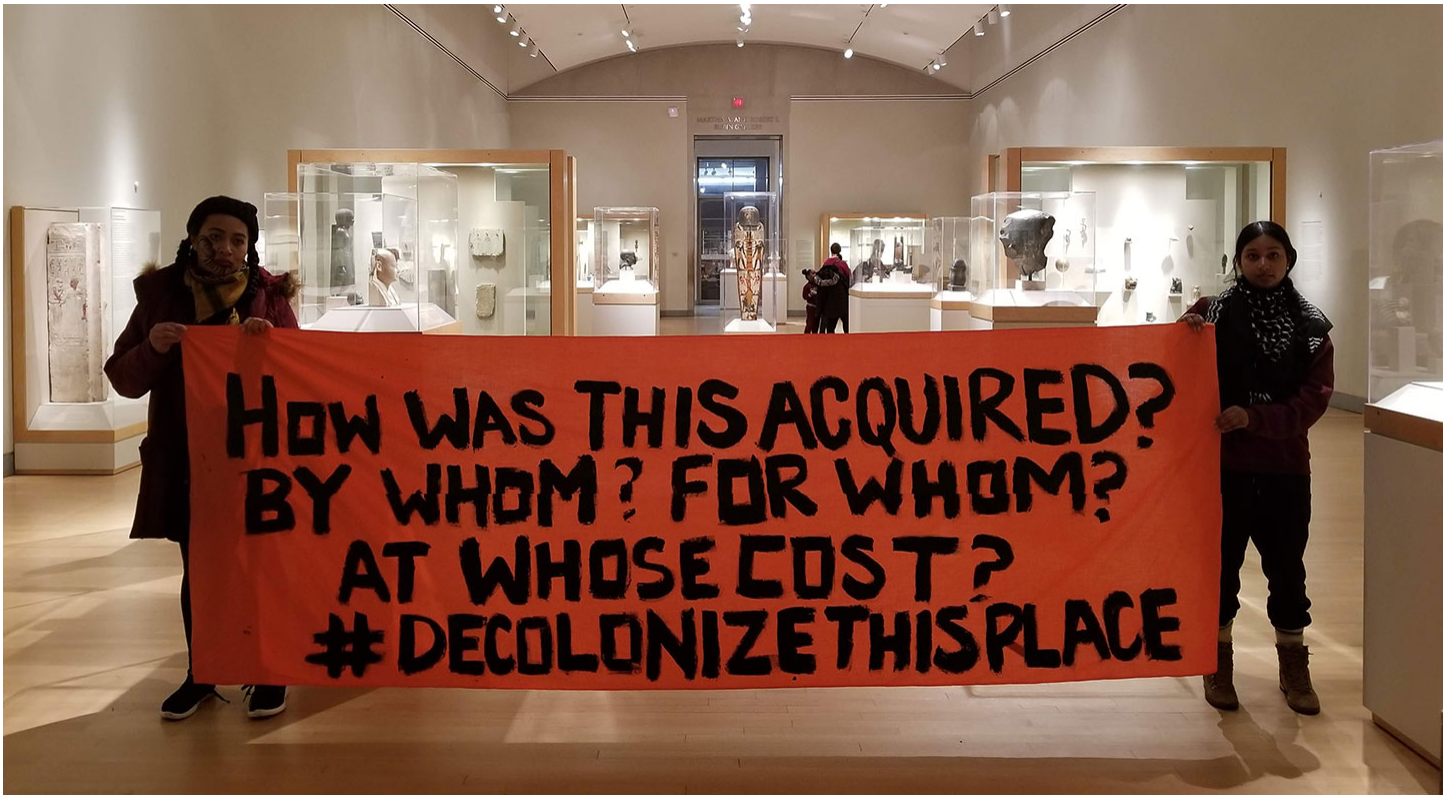
Ariella Aısha Azoulay, Civil Alliances, Palestine 47-48, 2012. Film still. As Azoulay writes: "Between November 1947 (the UN Partition Plan for Palestine) and May 1948 (the creation of the state of Israel), many Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine who cared for their country intensified the negotiations between themselves and initiated urgent encounters during which the participants raised demands, sought compromises, set rules, formulated agreements, made promises, sought forgiveness, and made efforts to compensate and reconcile. The intense civil activity that had taken place throughout the country at that time was ignored and Palestine was destroyed by Jewish militias. By completely ignoring this expanded civil activity, historians endorsed this imperial violence, relating to destroyed Palestine as Israel. The removal of this activity from historical narratives enabled the retroactive depiction of the 1948 war as the culmination of a long-lasting national conflict, rather than as another imperial enterprise of destruction."

shared world.[2]

Imagine a thousand museumgoers who on Indigenous People's Day go on strike and withhold the recognition that they are expected to give the museum exhibits; imagine them screaming that these exhibits are proof of imperial crimes, of genocides, human trafficking, and trade in organs, that these are denigrating statements or racist slurs. This doesn't require an analogy or imagination—this is the strike museumgoers are performing, organized under the loose activist affinity of Decolonize This Place. Imagine the same, but performed not only by museumgoers but also by museum experts.

Imagine. It is not unheard of. On the contrary, professionals in the world of art have been on strike and use their working power to put pressure on the employing institutions or exercise it as "productive withdrawals," to use Kuba Szreder's term.[3] We know little about strikes. We often do know that they did take place, that some of them, mainly those that involved salary demands and working conditions, led to some reforms, and that hardly any of them had an effect on the imperial condition under which the world of art operates. Trying, however, to assemble the pieces, to connect processes of impoverishment, dispossession, exploitation, and the enslavement of people with the destruction of material worlds, looting and denigration of world-building qualities, one finds that the history of anti-imperial strikes within the art world has already been potentialized. Numerous strikes in colonized Africa against tax collectors or companies that hunted workers should be recognized as strikes against the institutionalization of the abyss between people and objects, against the imperial powers that forced people to turn their world-building skills into cheap or slave labor, and their sacred, spiritual, and ecological objects into commodities. Imagine a strike not only against this or that museum but against the very logic of the capital embodied in museums in its ultimate overt deception.

Imagine a strike not as an attempt to improve one's salary alone but rather as a strike against the very raison d'être



Courtesy of Decolonize This Place.

of these institutions. Imagine a strike not out of despair, but as a moment of grace in which a potential history is all of a sudden perceptible, a potential history of a shared world that is not organized by imperial and racial capitalist principles. Imagine the looted objects as the palimpsests in which these potentialities are inscribed.

Imagine experts in the world of art admitting that the entire project of artistic salvation to which they pledged allegiance is insane and that it could not have existed without exercising various forms of violence, attributing spectacular prices to pieces that should not have been acquired in the first place.[4] Imagine that all those experts recognize that the knowledge and skills to create objects the museum violently rendered rare and valuable are not extinct. For these objects to preserve their market value, those people who inherited the knowledge and skills to continue to create them had to be denied the time and conditions to engage in building their world. Imagine museum directors and chief curators taken by a belated awakening—similar to the one that is sometimes experienced by soldiers—on the meaning of the violence they exercise under the guise of the benign and admitting the extent to which their profession is constitutive of differential violence. Imagine them no longer recognizing the exceptional value of looted objects, thus leading to the depreciation of their value in the market and the collapse of the accumulated capital. Imagine these experts going on strike until they are allowed to open the doors of their institutions to asylum seekers from the places from which their institutions hold objects, inviting them to produce objects similar to the looted ones, and letting the "authentic" ones fade among them.

Dare to imagine museum workers going on strike until they are allowed to invite an entire community of "undocumented people," not to attend the opening of exhibitions of objects extracted from their communities, but to stay for a period of several years to help the museum make sense of its collections of objects from their cultures. Imagine the museum workers letting them lead the conversations around what should be done with the looted objects and the destroyed worlds from which they were extracted. Imagine museum workers invested in interpreting the infographics showing asylum seekers from the same countries as the museal objects' provenance and understanding asylum-seeking as a counterexpedition by people in search of their objects and destroyed worlds. Imagine them admitting that they were trained to believe themselves to have been acting on behalf of the public, but that in fact that public was a very specific one, exclusive and hierarchical, and their commitment actually catered to the interests of imperial actors, including museum directors, boards of trustees, gallery owners, collectors, dealers, statesmen, and corporate stakeholders. All these interested actors tied their hands and prevented them from engaging with their museum's debts (its real debt, not the debt incurred due to budgetary deficit) to those people whose worlds were destroyed so that the museum and its stakeholders could

be enriched. A proof of the museal and art experts' service to the imperial actors, if a proof is still needed, can be found in the piles of papers through which the traffic of looted objects has been cleansed so that precious artifacts could be stored in the museum, and particularly in the papers through which donations have been described, stipulating that such objects can be resold only to other museums should the museum decide to deaccession them. Imagine a strike like this.

This makes historians, whose work runs on timelines and narratives, structurally complicit in imperial endeavors.

For historians to go on strike, they have to *recognize themselves* in Saidiya Hartman's dread: "what it means to think historically about matters still contested in the present and about life eradicated by the protocols of intellectual disciplines."[5] As part of their training, historians were taught to believe that their responsibility consists of accounting for the significant, endurable, and

Courtesy of Decolonize This Place.

Imagine Going on Strike: Historians

What would it take for historians to go on strike, to waken into recognizing their structural complicity as members of their discipline in facilitating the violent transition of imperial actions into acknowledged realities, which colonized people have never stopped resisting? Let me clarify. Actions, as Arendt puts it, are never carried out only by those who initiate them, they are continued by others. Many of the imperial actions were continued by the actors' armed peers, but since they were also resisted in so many ways, they have never been brought to completion—except in historical timelines and narratives.

lasting consequences of *their* protagonists' actions, thus implicitly affirming the nothingness of others' shredded lives. Historians should learn to recognize the imperial power that trained them to ignore or belittle what stood in the way of that violence, in the form of resistance, stubborn persistence, or sheer existence. To tell about one event, including about resistance, is to not sustain resistance as a vital force continuing into our present. Historians' crime should not be measured by their individual books, nor can it be absolved by complementary chapters dedicated to people and groups that imperial violence sought to seal in history or experience as ghosts.

It is the crime of a discipline that crafted a worldview for colonized worlds based almost solely on the actions, taxonomies, declarations, and proclamations of imperial agents.

Because they complete imperial violence by situating events on a linear timeline, historians are recognized as experts capable of crystallizing the meaning of others' actions, honored as guardians of the sealed past. Together with other experts, they are trusted to explain the past, transform reparations claims into an esoteric object of study rather than a historical force, justify existing orders, and illuminate current events. Without historians' service, "world history" would have never assumed the mantle of a broad-minded, scholarly pursuit full of cosmopolitan subjects, and the crimes on which "world history" rests would not have been denied, ignored, or presented as accomplished facts. The invention of world history is predicated on a set of premises that enable, encourage, authorize, and justify the imperial penetration into other cultures and the conversion of their modes of life, cultural and religious practices, habits and beliefs to temporal, spatial, and political categories foreign and harmful to their world.

Through maintaining the facticity of archives and timelines, professional historians are guilty of sanctioning the disappearance of people in a way that their lasting presence can only be perceived and theorized as a ghostly haunting or a partial afterlife, not the continuing presence of the whole and the living. Thus, for example, in their glossary of haunting, Eve Tuck and C. Ree capture settler-colonial descendants' astonishment: "Aren't you dead already? Didn't you die out long ago? You can't really be an Indian because all of the Indians are dead."[6] In a historicized world, where imperial crimes were relegated to the past, speaking about the "relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation" makes sense. However, Tuck and Ree disavow this past sustained by historians in their argument about decolonization: "Decolonization is not an exorcism of ghosts, nor is it charity, parity, balance, or forgiveness."[7] This should be spelled out: it is not exorcism and it cannot be appeased, since these are not ghosts but real people who never disappeared. They do not haunt; they exist and do not let go.

If proof is still needed for this crime, it can be found in the persistence of precolonial knowledge about invaded, stolen, and occupied lands, as an existent body of knowledge that nonetheless continues to surprise us at each emergence. This is true for the names of places, peoples, and objects as well as for knowledge of agriculture, medicine, or ecology. This diverse knowledge was protected by native peoples and transmitted to future generations, without losing its incommensurability through the imperial spatio-temporal-political foundations of the discipline of history that sought to shape them into preexisting transcendental forms.[8] Going on strike until this knowledge is no longer denied would mean going on strike until imperial politics is abolished together with the kind of history used for its legitimization.

Historians are guilty of inhabiting the position of judge in the court of history, as if the struggle was over and they themselves are removed from the world. But imperial powers themselves established the court of history. Historians are guilty of translating the incommensurability between precolonial knowledges and imperial categories into theories and practices that render plausible the linear flow of time, sealing into "the past" struggles that persist in our present. Historians' interest in and care for collecting remnants from this past are part of the same crime. They have used the "remnants" to prove the pastness of the cultures and people to which these "remnants" belong.

Imagine historians using the trust given to their profession and expertise to go on strike. Imagine the day when they would cease to provide alternative interpretations and new timelines, new ways of sealing the past. Imagine them ceasing to use their power to assert that in May 1945 a world war was ended, or that in July 4, 1776, a new democratic republic was established, or in May 5, 1948, the state of Israel was created. Imagine historians going on strike until stolen lands are called by their old names, and the Babel Tower of "world history" collapses so imperial extraction, conversion, outsourcing, and other modalities of domination can no longer be disavowed. Imagine that no alternative history is needed, and no history serves any longer as the arbiter of violence.

Imagine historians using their symbolic power, resources, and institutional positions in universities, archives, libraries, and publishing houses to go on strike, ceasing to produce further history books that offer "alternatives" to existing history, thus affirming its plausibility by being merely in need of revisions. Rather, they might use their skills to revise and repair existing books as a mode of intervening in existing narratives and assuming responsibility for what the discipline previously sustained. Imagine them equipped with artisanal tools such as tapes, photos, pens, colors, excerpts of texts, and rubber erasers, and using them to acknowledge that the incommensurable was never the past but was and always is a living force. Imagine them using their power to revoke the sacredness of books kept in libraries and opening up closed university libraries to the public. Imagine historians going on strike until street names, maps, and history books are replaced, appended, or discarded altogether.

Going on strike means no more archival work for a while, at least until existing histories are repaired. No more time should be spent in archives to look for what descendants of people who were destitute were able, against the crimes of the discipline, to protect and transmit in place of imperial documents. Historians should withdraw from

being the judges (or angels) of history and instead support and endorse community-sourced knowledge. They should go on strike whenever they are asked, by their discipline and peers, to affirm what the latter should know by now, that history is and always was a form of violence. When more than one million women were raped in Germany in the spring of 1945, no war was ended; when 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and were not allowed to return, nothing was established; when millions of African Americans were made sharecroppers, they continued to be exposed to regime-made violence; when millions from India, Africa, and China were made "indentured workers" to "solve" the "labor problem" of the plantation system, slavery was not abolished. Evermore, violence has been required to obscure the rape as lost memories to be discovered, events to be painstakingly reconstituted by scholars working in archives. To repair the violence, historians must go on strike to know that the violence still exists and that there is no such thing as the "postwar" world.

Imagine historians ceasing to relate to people they study as primary sources. Imagine them turning their discipline from one that seals destruction in the past to one that tells stories that prepare the ground for the reparation of imperial crimes. Imagine historians rewinding everything made past by their discipline and opening its discourse wide. Imagine historians going on strike, turning accepted imperial facts into criminal evidence and withholding their authority and approval from collecting and recirculating these facts. Imagine historians proclaiming imperial governments (previously thought of as accepted regimes) "null and void" since they were constituted against any body politic that they governed.

Imagine historians who understand that what sounds like a heavy charge against them is rather a charge against their discipline, which they have the power to radically change. Imagine historians who, instead of resisting the charges against their discipline, assume collective responsibility for their discipline's corpus, timelines, facts, narratives, and publications.

For historians to go on strike means to acknowledge their discipline's failure to see the ongoing resistance of destitute people, the stolen status of lands, the silencing of names, the repression of knowledge formations and other ways of naming and telling, and the transmission of that disavowal to further generations. We were wrong, they would say, and we will not continue to consult state and institutional archives until indigenous people and former colonized people are allowed to enter and take leading roles in decisions about the documents stored there. Ceasing to use archives until such a copresence is possible will change the status of the archival document itself. Historians should go on strike until the knowledge of the formerly colonized is allowed to undermine history as it has been practiced and work for the recovery of sustainable worlds.

Imagine historians refusing to use their expertise and knowledge until the precedents used to justify injustice are replaced with worldly and nonimperial rights, guarded and preserved by those who were destitute, beginning with the right to care for the shared world. Imagine historians striking until their work could help repair the world.

X

This text is an excerpt from **Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism** by Ariella Aısha Azoulay, published this month by Verso Books.

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1
Alex Gourevitch, “A Radical Defense of the Right to Strike,” *Jacobin* , July 12, 2018 https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/right-to-strike-freedom-civil-liberties-oppression .

2
See Anthony Cuthbertson, “Amazon Workers ‘Refuse’ to Build Tech for US Immigration, Warning Jeff Bezos of IBM’s Nazi Legacy,” *Independent,* June 22, 2018 https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/amazon-workers-immigration-jeff-bezos-ibm-nazi-protest-a8411601.html .

3
On strikes within the world of art, see Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Verso, 2016); Kuba Szreder, “Productive Withdrawals: Art Strikes, Art Worlds, and Art as a Practice of Freedom,” *e-flux journal* no. 87 (December, 2017) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/168899/productive-withdrawals-art-strikes-art-worlds-and-art-as-a-practice-of-freedom/ ; “Alternative Economies Working Group,” Arts and Labor http://artsandlabor.org/alternative-economies/ ; and Gulf Labor Artists Coalition https://gulflabour.org/ .

4
See the BBC film *Bankers Guide to Art* (2016), in which art is presented as an exceptionally stable asset, worthy of investment https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lzr4Ntws-g .

5
Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 9–10.

6
Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “Glossary of Haunting,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography,* eds. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2013), 643.

7
Tuck and Ree, “Glossary of Haunting,” 643.

8
For examples, see the Native Land map of North America http://native-land.ca/ ; and the Nakba Map by Zochrot http://zochrot.org/en/site/nakbaMap .

Metahaven

Sleep Walks the Street, Part 2

Continued from " **Sleep Walks the Street, Part 1** *"*

A child's first speech acts do not consist of words so much as sounds. We measure the result that these sounds produce by something other than their effectiveness at transacting. While we tend to live by a working agreement that things in the world correspond to their names, we rejoice in a small person voiding that agreement, and allowing us to join in a nascent speech where each word is new. In this way, things in the world are made anew each time through words. While remaking things in the world, the process of play reveals that names, concepts, and their outward purposes are merely under the illusion of our control. Kornei Chukovsky (1882–1969), one of Russia's foremost children's poets, saw young children as linguistic geniuses and effective critics of adult speech. For example, an adult exclaims: "I'm dying to hear that concert!" "Then why don't you die?" the child responds.[1]

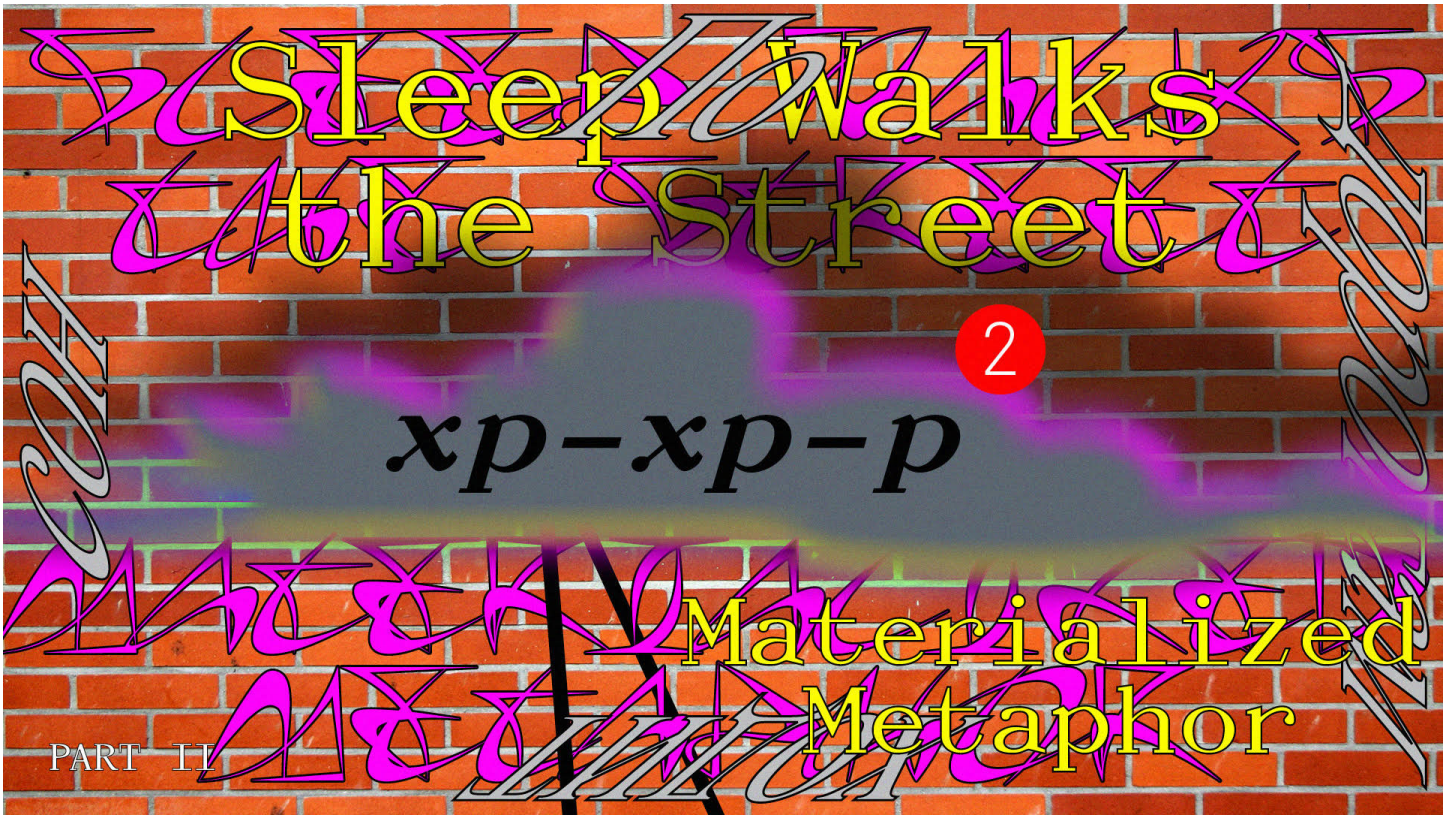
Language in the child's world is always in the making, and children often take language more seriously than adults do. Even when they become aware of the system of (social) rules and contexts that people use to give value to statements, they may ignore it. Adults often manipulate their message to get a point across, and in doing so violate whatever brittle contract existed between language and reality in subtle yet essential ways. For example:

> Y (me, waiting for red traffic light, with X, on bike): "Ah, this takes *forever.*"
> X (six years old): "No, it takes a few minutes."

Chukovsky explains that "adults think in terms of allegories and metaphors, whereas children think in terms of objects perceived in their world of objects."[2] Cluttering our sentences with words like "totally," "always," and "never," adult senders assume that the receiving side will be capable of reading *socially* between the lines of their utterances, and decode these statements into something that they "meant."

So, when I'm using the word "forever" to augment a finite quantity of time into something that is supposed to illustrate the way I feel about that time taking too long, X will correct me. At her age, she appears to act on what I forgot: that by the inflation of something through a likeness of an image of scale, size, or higher-dimensional order, we train ourselves in approaching reality with descriptions that have nothing in common with it.

The often-diagnosed breakdown of objective facts in our society is more related to such happenstance manipulations than we might assume: to say that an event of a finite duration is endless is not entirely dissimilar from saying that an event that happened never did. In young



children we appear to find some kind of cognitive elixir against rhetoric—one that, as several authors have insisted, tends to dissolve when children come of age and get used to speaking "adult" language. Children are specialists of speech play and nonsense, operating adjacently but not identically to the poetic genre known as absurdism.

In his lyrical observations, Chukovsky situated unique linguistic abilities in the young child that he found were missing in most adults. "All around me, without a moment's pause, sounded the melodic speech of children," he writes. "At first it seemed merely diverting. It took me some time to realize that, not only splendid in itself, this speech also had an intrinsically high instructive value. By studying it, it is possible to discover the whimsical and elusive laws of childhood speech."[3]

The absurdists did not glorify children in the same way as Chukovsky did. While at times using childlike motifs, absurdism and *bessmyslitsa* ("meaninglessness") went considerably further than speech play, building from it a philosophical inquiry into epistemology itself: an inquiry into the way in which we may say that we know or don't know something.

Emotional Rollercoaster

In Part 1, we discussed Victor Klemperer's field studies of Nazi language and phraseology, and discussed the scalable political technology that is the metaphor. As an oratory form, metaphor today exceeds its original polity (the city-state) and instead applies to the "cloud polities" that are served by digital platforms and their interfaces (in a complex interplay with their algorithmic push functions, and with audiences united or divided by language and/or time zone). Serving simultaneous processes of amplification and reduction, the political technology of rhetoric, described by the writer and researcher Flavia Dzodan as "the right to name as an interface of the political,"[4] replaces cognitive plurality with "meaning." All language that is—like rhetoric—uttered simply to be believed on the level of "meaning" sooner or later finds its arch nemesis to be the irreverence of play, of which absurdism is the genre name. Yet, absurdism confronts every rhetoric unarmed. It undoes violence. It is not a "weapon." It is a way to resist with words and thus with thought, a method to produce joy, a coping tactic, and a philosophical shelter that's as unsettling as any home can be.

Rarely can absurdism ever be elevated into a scalable model. Rarely can it be separated from personal experience. In the double time of X's blossoming childhood and the mortal sickness of her grandfather, while living through painful personal events and what felt like reality's political unmaking across the planet, we were

Metahaven, Hometown, 2018. Two-channel digital film, 31'', color. Installation view of "Turnarounds," e-flux, New York, October 2019. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.

drawn to absurdist children's poetry. It was a language that seemed to already know this super-versioned reality inside out. Our first encounter with anonymous Russian children's rhymes called "turnarounds" or "topsy-turvies" (*perevortyshi*) happened over the course of this emotional rollercoaster. X was three then. These self-negating verses seemed to us the one thing that made perfect sense of our world:

> In January, on the 5th of April,
> In dry weather—with knee-high puddles.
> On a brick street—made of wooden planks
> Walked a tall man—of short height
> Curly with no hair—thin like a barrel.
> With no children—only a son and a daughter.
> Writes a letter home:
> I'm healthy—in a hospital,
> Fed up—and hungry,
> All come visit me—I don't want to see you.[5]
>
> Дело было в январе, пятого апреля,
> Сухо было на дворе - лужи по колено,
> По кирпичнои мостовои, сделаннои из досок,
> Шел высокии гражданин низенького роста,
> Кучерявыи, без волос; худенькии, как бочка.
> У него детишек нет, только сын да дочка.
> Пишет он домои письмо:
> Жив здоров - лежу в больнице,
> Сыт по горло - есть хочу,
> Приходите все родные - я вас видеть не хочу.

In an email to us, the artist and theorist Alex Anikina said that these kinds of verses are "definitely a genre in itself. You would make them up on the go usually. One that was popular in my childhood was

> По реке плывет кирпич,
> Деревянныи как стекло,
> Ну и пусть себе плывет,
> Нам не нужен пенопласт."

Anikina continued: "It takes well to translation. It's so expressive because the emphasis falls very strongly on the last syllable but at the same time there is no rhyme. I would translate it:

> Down the river floats a brick,
> Wooden like a sheet of glass,
> Let it do its own thing,

> We don't need styrofoam."[6]

In 2017, while working on our film *Hometown*, we began to talk about these poems with the Ukrainian curator, writer, and translator, Lesia Prokopenko. She mentioned that

> the *perevortyshi* concept is very precise. I've been referring to absurdism a lot myself when trying to describe the present atmosphere. And you know of course that these phenomena, especially in their partly anonymous form of nursery rhymes, are very typical of settings that struggle with ideological languages … This is typical both for Russia and for Ukraine at the moment.[7]

We became bothered by the question of who made these *perevortyshi* before they became canonized into literature. There had been absurd children's tales called *nebylitsy*, for example.

Indeed, the very term *perevortyshi* had been Chukovsky's invention. In 1988 Elena Hellberg argued that while a rich set of precursors existed in oral Russian folk culture, their coinage as "turnarounds" had been Chukovsky's way of making anti-normal poetic images easily accessible for kids.[8] But if indeed their poetic techniques had older origins, how might they relate, as Prokopenko had suggested, to struggles with ideological languages? Chukovsky insisted that "these odd poetic creations" had been offered to new generations of children "in the course of … many centuries."[9] He believed that the turnarounds, as well as fiction and fantasy in a broader sense, had a way of teaching children about falsehood and truth. When bringing his own Russian translation of Rudolf Erich Raspe's *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* to a children's sanatorium in Crimea in 1929, Chukovsky found himself confronted by a young man in uniform demanding to know "what right do you have to read this trash to our children?" To which the poet replied that "it is indeed through its fantasy that this fairy tale emphasizes to the children reality."[10]

Sesame Street or Nevsky Prospekt

The title of this essay is a citation from "Lullaby," a verse for children by the Russian poet Alexander Vvedensky, who was a member of OBERIU (*Obedinenie real'nogo iskusstva*, the "Union for Real Art"). OBERIU's members worked in St. Petersburg from the 1920s to the early 1940s. Most of them met their end in prison trains, psychiatric wards, and in front of firing squads; the poet and translator Eugene Ostashevsky notes that "the Russian avant-garde did not die of natural causes."[11] Vvedensky and other OBERIU poets are often grouped under the label of "absurdism," yet they did not use this word themselves. Instead, they used terms such as *bessmyslitsa* and *chin* ("spiritual rank"); the *chinars* ("those of spiritual rank") formed a specific grouping within OBERIU. According to Ostashevsky, the word *chin* appears in OBERIU poetry as a way of recalling the nine ranks of angels designated by a fifth-century Neoplatonic mystic who went by the name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.[12] Though Vvedensky had no known religious affiliations, the influence of mysticism on his work feels all-encompassing. Like other OBERIU members, he also created poems for children, published in magazines such as *Yozh* (еж, "Hedgehog").

In "Lullaby," Vvedensky is persuading the listener to fall asleep, using the word сон (*son*), which can mean both "dream" and "sleep." По дорогам ходит сон (*pa darogam godyt son*) can thus picture a dream walking the street, as well as sleep itself doing the same thing; it is up to the reader to decide. In the poem's Dutch version, the translator had chosen "dream."[13] If a dream walks the street, we may imagine something like a cloud walking on long thin sticks. In this vision, the cloud is hand-drawn or vectorized like a thought bubble; its thin legs are black lines on which the dream probes forward through streets that look, schematically, like 1980s America. In spite of the fact that a cloud doesn't need legs to move about, only wind, the entity proceeds on thin black sticks through a graphic version of a US East Coast downtown alley, more Sesame Street than Nevsky Prospekt.

Yet still it is possible that Vvedensky wanted to materialize the impossible and the unimaginable for child listeners, and had meant "sleep" instead of "dream." The filmmaker Anna Petrova weighs in:

> Yes, it is not a dream definitely (you're right that the translator apparently decided to romanticize it, it is no doubt Sleep in humanized form :) I would say that is also that type of sleep that is pure, like the one kids have, that comes and goes like a cloud, or that covers you on lazy sunny day.[14]

In materialized metaphor, rhetoric becomes literal, and the context in which metaphorical statements once appeared to make sense is now destroyed. In that way, OBERIU is something of a truth-making operation: in absurdism, an adult who says that they are dying to hear that concert *does die* following the strictly literal logic of the child. The poetic application of this approach is one that Vvedensky came to shape to perfection in spite of having relatively little time to do so. In 1930, Vvedensky writes "Snow Lies," a long poem that pictures the resurrection of a dead girl in

Metahaven, Elektra, 2019. Set photo. The image features a "stolen sun" inspired by Chukovsky's children's poetry.

ways that lead from the abyss to joy, and back:

> snow lies
> earth flies
> lights flip
> to pigments night has come
> on a rug of stars it lies
> is it night or a demon?

In a series of hallucinatory twists, Vvedensky takes the listener along alogisms like "black gold cages," the world flying "around the universe," time that is "as poor as a night," and "the universe" being "alone." He offers these images at such breakneck speed that many listeners will feel prompted to ask what this poem is actually about. This is a straightforward question that is unanswerable for a work that attempts to reverse the hierarchy between description and subject, and subvert the constative capacity of almost every sentence to a degree that a listener could, at almost every turn, just surmise (wrongly) that the text is about *nothing* and that its purpose is merely to confuse. What is central to the poem is something called "apophasis," a mode of speech that uses negation and alogism to appreciate the unknowability of reality and God to the human linguistic-cognitive apparatus. In his day and age, Pseudo-Dionysius, the Neoplatonic mysticist, used apophasis to demonstrate this same paradigm. With striking resemblance to Vvedensky's later poetry, Pseudo-Dionysius wrote that "the godhead is no more 'spirit,' 'sonship,' and 'fatherhood' than it is 'intellect' or 'asleep.'"[15] In "Snow Lies," Vvedensky pictures "God languished behind bars / with no eyes no legs no arms," displaying apophasis by expressing what God does not have. However, for those who fear we will from now on be lost in a mess of Hieronymus-Bosch-meets-*Starship*-*Troopers* and H. R.-Giger-meets-Jacques-Tati, the verse has a way of slowly twisting its dark notes towards the light:

> so that maiden in tears
> sees all this in the heavens
> sees sundry eagles
> appear out of night
> and fly sullen
> and flash silent
> this is so depressing
> the dead maiden will say
> serenely amazed
> God will inquire
> what's depressing? what's
> depressing, God, life
> what are you talking about
> what O noon do you know
> you press pleasure and Paris

> to your impetuous breast
> you dress like music
> you undress like a statue

As the poem proceeds towards its protagonist's resurrection, the epic turns brazenly modern. Rested, the maiden rises from the dead and—yawningly—concedes that she had merely been asleep. She had a dream, and dreams are "worse than macaroni," rhyming сон (*son*, sleep) and макарон (*macaron*, macaroni/pasta). She was "not at all dying," she was "undulating and crying," so:

> let's enjoy ourselves really
> let's gallop to the cinema
> she sped off like a she-ass
> to satisfy her innermost
> lights glint[16] in the heaven
> is it night or a demon[17]

OBERIU speaks to the political circumstances of the first half of the twentieth century as much as it does to the beginning of the twenty-first. It is considered distinct from Soviet futurism, with which it differed on at least one crucial point: it lacked any sense of utopian teleology. The work of Vvedensky, Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Nikolai Oleinikov, Leonid Lipavsky, and Yakov Druskin came into being during the transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, and was heavily influenced by the preexisting literary canon. It remained largely lost, and unpublished, through the transition from Lenin to Stalin and into World War II. In order to illustrate the political shifts during OBERIU's inception, translator Yolanda Bloemen produced the following allegory of the life of Daniil Kharms in a manner resembling one of his own humorous theatrical scenes: "A man fell asleep a citizen of St. Petersburg, and woke up the next day a citizen of Petrograd ... Later he went to sleep a citizen of Petrograd, and the next day woke up a citizen of Leningrad."[18]

Why should we talk about absurdism today? The citation about Kharms provides one reason. For readers today, a story like this may bring to mind Brexit, a lived reality in which we do not know which geopolitical constellation we will be waking up in tomorrow, and in which the epistemic indeterminacy of its day-to-day reality is itself an instrument of power. Absurdism was an art form that emerged in the context of a similarly explicit sense of political uncertainty. And yet, absurdism is not parody. Indeed, absurdism is not a category that itself belongs to the absurd. Eugene Ostashevsky emphasizes that absurdism is a way of trying to speak about the things that matter while at the same time trying not to commodify them. Whilst today some may feel tempted to equate this or that bizarre internet meme or Trump quote with a form of contemporary "online" absurdism, these digital objects or utterances aren't absurdism just because they're absurd. Absurdism ultimately comprises literacy about meaninglessness and a ruthless criticism of language. Ostashevsky confirms that in the work of the *chinars* "narrative, simile, and metaphor fall by the wayside," subsequently "destroying protocols of semantic coherence and linguistic realism."[19] Conversely, from the vantage point of literacy about meaninglessness, any lack of a trustworthy episteme is unsurprising, and the upside-down world of Chukovsky's *perevortyshi* an everyday reality.

There exist several interpretative frameworks around the overlaps between children's speech play, "nonsense," and the artistic genre of absurdism and its reliance on apophasis, which links it to mysticism. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Scherzer contend that "nonsense and speech play ... represent a radical alternative to the tyranny of propositional meaning and instrumentality,"[20] a reasoning that seems in tune with Ostashevsky's assessment of the work of the *chinars*. Susan Stewart attests to the cognitive aspect of speech play when she proposes that it manifests "epistemological paradoxes in which the mind, by its own operation, says something about its own operation, or the way in which language speaks in metalanguage or fictions through metafictions."[21] In Stewart's understanding, it does not suffice for turnaround language to criticize constative statements or the tyranny of propositional meaning; it matters whether or not the turnaround narrator is actually speaking the truth. Since in a phrase like "In January, on the 5th of April" we are being given two different points in time that, in everyday language and everyday understandings of temporality, cannot correspond or refer to the same moment, one of them has to be the "wrong" time. The phrase raises questions about the reliability of its narrator. In this manner, turnarounds are connected to a paradox attributed to a Cretan named Epiminides. The Epiminides paradox goes: "All Cretans are liars, said the Cretan."[22]

The core element of this statement is its self-referentiality, which arises because the narrator is included. The cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, taking on the paradox in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, called such self-referentiality a "strange loop." Hofstadter mused:

> "This statement is false" ... It is a statement that rudely violates the usually assumed dichotomy of statements into true and false, because if you tentatively think it is true, then it immediately backfires on you and makes you think it is false. But once you've decided it is false, a similar backfiring returns you to the idea that it must be true. Try it![23]

Metahaven, Hometown, 2018. Film still.

Stewart proposed that "both play and the Epiminides paradox involve negative statements containing implicit negative metastatements, the negative metastatements having to do with a different domain of reality."[24] Yet—interestingly—the Epiminides paradox is not a negative statement but an undecidable proposition. The paradox disappears when the the statement is inverted: "No Cretans are liars, said the Cretan," which is effectively the same as "All Cretans speak the truth, said the Cretan." The statement is no longer undecidable, but merely unverifiable. Another way of disarming the Epiminides paradox is by folding it into itself as hearsay. If the Epiminides paradox was once, indeed, uttered by a Cretan, there's no reason why another Cretan can't cite it too: "A Cretan once said that all Cretans are liars, said the Cretan."

There's also a nice variation of the Epiminides paradox in the rhetorical technique of the conclusion which denies premises. It is hilariously easy to debunk:

> "Son, because nothing is certain in this world we have to hold on to what experience tells us."
> "Are you sure, Dad?"
> "Yes, son. I'm certain."[25]

Susan Stewart called a turnaround rhyme "ironic." She argued that the conflicting statements in it precipitate a dividuation of their narrator into sub-entities, "talking in two contradictory voices at the same time. The narrator splits into two contradictory narrators, each denying each other's discourse."[26] But she also argues that "for children, play and fictions hold the fascination of something that is both a lie and not a lie. Thus they are as powerful as a taboo in an anomalous position—a taboo that attracts."[27]

For Chukovsky, all this was just part of a (not just Russian, but still very Russian) passion for poetry. He recalls a letter sent to the poet Agnia Barto by the parents of a four-month-old kid asking when would be a good time for them to start with Pushkin.[28] In spite of his defenses of the Soviet model of education, in 1928 the regime's campaign against "lack of message" targeted Chukovsky personally with an article in *Pravda* by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, titled "Chukovitis," likening the poet's name to an infectious disease. She targeted his epic "The Crocodile" for allegedly being "bourgeois fog"[29] and "'incredible rubbish' that says nothing about the real life of crocodiles."[30] While Chukovsky managed to escape further scrutiny, three years later Vvedensky and Kharms were jailed for writing children's poetry. Unlike Chukovsky, they had almost no powerful allies to protect them.

X so loves "The Crocodile." Its protagonist, a crocodile, is

Metahaven, Elektra, 2019. Set photo.

an endearing, chain-smoking gangster, a brutal yet polite shapeshifter who eventually uses the latter quality to pacify his adversaries, who in turn pacify him. The poem's child hero Vanya nonetheless saves St. Petersburg from the reptile and gets rewarded with abundant chocolate and ice cream. At six, X knows much of this long poem by heart. I wonder if there will be a time when she rejects it and discards the book as rubbish. Is the gift of absurdism subject to an age limit, or can it indeed be more of a philosophy?

For Vvedensky, *bessmyslitsa* ("meaninglessness") had nothing to do with irony or parody, let alone with dividuation of the narrator. His materialized metaphors and alogisms were meant as "the end of poetic utterance and not as a means to convey content more effectively."[31] The cycle "The Gray Notebook" (1932–33) contains both poems and short essays. In some of the poems, Vvedensky displays outright humor, for example when he performs analogical fallacies in "The Song of the Notebook." But no matter how much fun is being had in these lines, there's always a thoughtful, deeper turn at hand:

> Sea, O sea, you're the homeland of waves,
> the waves are sea-children.
> The sea is their mother
> and their sister's the notebook,
> it's been that way now for many a century.
> And they lived very well.
> And they prayed often.
> The sea to God
> and the children to God.
> And later they resettled in the sky
> from where they sprayed rain,
> and on that rainy spot a house grew.
> The house lived well.
> It taught the doors and windows to play
> shore, immortality, dream, and notebook.
> Once upon a time.[32]

Vvedensky developed a way of writing that undermined the constative capacity of rhetorical expression, yet he was increasingly reaping the fruits of radiant poetics: a strong mode of lyricality achieved through a radical method of thinking and writing. The wilder the poem, the more clear the undermining; the less wild, the more foregrounded the poetics. The short essays in "The Gray Notebook" provide for an intermediate stage between both, calling into question the way we qualify and quantify things by giving names to units that then "stand for" what we can no longer encounter because of the interface that was provided by the name. These essays are entirely personal in character and we need to think of the fact that Vvedensky never saw any of this material appear in print in

Metahaven, Eurasia (Questions on Happiness), 2018. Film still. In the film, the dark gray keyboard scene, covered with industrial waste, initiates a rendition of Alexander Vvedensky's "Snow Lies."

his lifetime. This is quite the opposite of a tweet or Facebook or Medium post that offers forms of immediate reward. Vvedensky writes,

> Let us think about simple things. We say: tomorrow, today, evening. Thursday, month, year, during the course of the week. We count the hours in a day. We point to their increase. Earlier, we saw only half the day, now we have noticed the movement within the whole of the day. But when the next day comes, we begin counting the hours anew.

Strikingly, he seems to feel no need to point the reader to any of his previous work. Every encounter with language is a fresh demonstration of the point. He continues:

> In the case of time, its addition differs from all other addition. You can't compare three months you lived through to three trees that have grown again. The trees are right there, their leaves glimmer dimly. Of months you can't say the same with confidence. The names of minutes, seconds, hours, days, weeks, and months distract us from even our superficial understanding of time. All these names are analogous either to objects, or to concepts and measures of space. As a result, a week gone by lies before us like a killed deer.[33]

This is so Vvedensky. He destroys the illusion of epistemic control offered by metaphor and analogy, and yet offers a "killed deer" in return, with all of its poetic potentiality and logical fallacy. He exposes the fallacy and uses it. He catches us red-handed in picturing the metaphor that he's prepared, which he also deeply criticizes at the same time. Yes: our phone calendars are now like killed deer.

Verses Like Drugs

With absurdism as a method of non-commodification of the things that matter, and turnarounds as a linguistic rendering of disbelief paying a kind of mystic tribute to reality, we are back at our earlier question about the links between these poetic forms, their origins, and the ideological and political environments that gave rise to them. Denis the Carthusian, a fifteenth-century mystic scholar from present-day Belgium, had written in turnaround language when he pictured God's "super-light darkness."[34] Surely, Denis was building on the work of his main intellectual source and namesake,

Pseudo-Dionysius. By contrast, in Europe and the US in the twentieth century, these poetic forms are interpreted in relative isolation from their cultural networks. While still collected as folklore, they are now seen as belonging to play behavior, and indexed according to aspects of phonology, rhyme, and meter that supposedly determine their attractiveness to children. For example, the researchers Iona and Peter Opie in the late 1950s recorded a turnaround poem in the UK, as created by a twelve-year-old girl:

> 'Twas in the month of Liverpool
> In the city of July,
> The snow was raining heavily,
> The streets were very dry.
> The flowers were sweetly singing,
> The birds were in full bloom,
> As I went down the cellar
> To sweep an upstairs room.[35]

The verse contains the same patterns as some of the earlier examples, but it is contextualized by the researchers as an example of play, or "tangletalk," denoting "'the deliberate display of incongruities' in children's ditties and rhymes."[36] Indeed, when looked at as playful experimentation, a turnaround may appear as harmless yet virtuoso, to the extent that its inventiveness risks becoming a measure of linguistic virtue, a kind of school grade for the child that invented it. But this was never actually the point of these poems.

Political questions press themselves to the foreground once again when absurdist speech acts, merging lyricality and critique, are considered in relation to speech acts carrying authority and power. The Russian writer Aleksei Salnikov, in his 2019 novel *Oposredovanno* ("Indirectly"), pictures a world in which one distinguishes between "literature" and *stishki*, a diminutive of *stikhi* ("verses"). In this world—which is otherwise a replica of contemporary Russia—literature is legal, official, and boring, while verses are an illegal drug.

X

This ongoing series would not be possible without the invaluable help, guidance, and direction provided, in various forms, by Anna Petrova, Alex Anikina, Lesia Prokopenko, Eugene Ostashevsky, Flavia Dzodan, Anastassia Smirnova, Natasha Tyshkevych, and Anastasia Kubrak. We thank the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and especially Richard Birkett, for hosting the poetry seminar "The Way of Comets," which we organized with them in early 2019 as part of our exhibition "Version History," and which greatly influenced this work. An earlier version of "Sleep Walks the Street" was presented, at the invitation of Slavs & Tatars, at the 2019 Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, which they curated. We also thank Strelka Institute, Moscow, which hosted our seminar on Alexander Vvedensky as part of "The New Normal." We extend special thanks to Tatiana Efrussi as our research collaborator on this series.

The work of **Metahaven** consists of filmmaking, writing, and design. Films by Metahaven include *The Sprawl: Propaganda About Propaganda* (2015), *Information Skies* (2016), *Hometown* (2018), and *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* (2018). Recent solo exhibitions include "Version History" at the ICA London (2018), and "Earth" at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2018). Recent group exhibitions include "Ghost:2651" Bangkok (2018), the Sharjah Biennial (2017), and the Gwangju Biennale (2016). Recent publications by Metahaven include *PSYOP* (2018, edited with Karen Archey), and *Digital Tarkovsky* (2018).

1
Kornei Chukovsky, *From Two to Five* , trans. Miriam Morton (University of California Press, 1968), 11.

2
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 12.

3
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, xv.

4
See https://twitter.com/redlightvoices/status/1182596992981180422 .

5
Translated from the Russian by Alex Anikina, email to author, January 2017.

6
Alex Anikina, email to author, January 2017.

7
Lesia Prokopenko, email to author, January 2017.

8
See Elena F. Hellberg, "Folkloristic Puns" (фольклорные перевертыши), *Russian Linguistics* 12, no. 3 (1988): 293–301.

9
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 96.

10
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 115.

11
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Alexander Vvedensky, An Invitation for Us to Think," in Alexander Vvedensky, *An Invitation for Me to Think* , ed. and trans. Eugene Ostashevsky (NYRB Poets, 2013), vii.

12
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism* , ed. E. Ostashevsky (Northwestern University Press, 2006), xv.

13
See Alexander Vvedensky, "Slaapliedje," in *Bij mij op de maan: Russische kindergedichten* , trans. Robbert-Jan Henkes (Van Oorschot, 2016), 420.

14
Anna Petrova, message to author, 2019.

15
"Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/ .

16
Vvedensky writes "сияние" (*siyaniye*), literally meaning "shine." During our class session on Vvedensky at Strelka Institute, Moscow, in 2019, the philosopher Natasha Tyshkevych suggested that an English translation should follow the literal meaning "shine" instead of "glint," thus emphasizing the religious thematic of the poem.

17
Vvedensky, "Snow Lies" (1930), in *An Invitation for Me to Think*, 13–15.

18
Yolanda Bloemen, "Ik ben net als iedereen, alleen beter," afterword to *Charms: Werken* (Van Oorschot, 2019), 619. Translation of this fragment by Metahaven.

19
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xv.

20
Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Scherzer, "Introduction," in *Speech Play: Research and Resources for Studying Linguistic Creativity* , ed. B. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 10.

21
Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 29.

22
We have previously written about the Epiminides paradox in *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* (Strelka Press, 2013). That essay also referenced Susan Stewart's *Nonsense* . However, our take on the Epiminides paradox in this essay is distinct from its earlier treatment in the context of (political) internet memes.

23
Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Basic Books, 1999), 17.

24
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 29.

25
See Madsen Pirie, *How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic* (Continuum, 2006), 36.

26
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 73.

27
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 72.

28
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 57.

29
See https://reddomino.typepad.com/newfirstunexpected/2009/04/ive-just-been-told-about-the-krupskaya-article-poor-me-poor-me-so-its-poverty-again-im-writing-a-response-to-kr.html .

30
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xviii.

31
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xvi.

32
Vvedensky, "The Song of the Notebook" (1932–33), in *An Invitation for Me to Think* , 69.

33
Vvedensky, "Simple Things" (1932–33), in *An Invitation for Me to Think* , 74.

34
Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages,* trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 257.

35
Mary Sanches and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Children's Traditional Speech Play and Child Language," in *Speech Play*, 93.

36
See Karen Gallas, *Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender, and Identity in a Primary Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 1997), 67.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi and
Massimiliano Geraci

Killing Swarm, Part 2

We would like to present some excerpts from our novel KS, *, translated from the Italian* Morte ai Vecchi *(Baldini & Castoldi, 2016), that will soon be published in a full English translation.*

Why are frantic swarms of teenagers killing old women and men all around the territory of the Union? Do the mega techno-delic corporations (Maya Unlimited, Happiness Inside Corporation) have something to do with the explosions of slaughters?

What is the role of Lucifer, the young genius of intimate software? And what is the responsibility of Federica, the expert in psycho-morphogenesis who has sold her soul to the ambiguous Mister Mehta? Her old father, obsessed by her inexplicable death, is in search of an answer to these questions, together with the young journalist Alex Turri, whose mind-boggling interpretation you can read in the following excerpt from the novel.

—FB & MG

(See also “Killing Swarm, Part 1.”)

Tom and Lola

Tom dragged himself out of the unmade bed. He wasn’t exactly sure how old he was. Or rather, he knew he was sixteen, but he could have just as well been fifteen, or worse, seventeen. It took him a few seconds to be sure. He had spent the day, another day, shoveling anxiety. He threw it over the fence of his existence, into the yard of his fellow persons, who were doing the same with *their* fellow persons in a perpetual motion of foolishness in which each one found themselves buried, just like the day before and just like the one to come … and each day, just a little more worn out.

The controller hanging from his neck tapped his hairless chest. He decided, after looking at the amber display of the decoder, that it was time for some sex. The device contained pirated keys to decrypt transmissions bouncing across the ether illegally from one satellite to the next. After calling Lola he went into the bathroom. He hesitated for a moment in front of the shower and pirouetted ninety degrees towards the medicine cabinet above the sink. Forced to confront his reflection in the mirror, he couldn’t help but notice that his eyebrows were already starting to grow back in. He stretched the skin out with his left thumb and shaved off the hated hairs with the first razor in the world that had six implacable blades. For the hair on his head, the depilatory shampoo had worked so egregiously well that it didn’t need any further upkeep. He loved it. He threw away the razor cartridge (even though it promised ten impeccable shaves, he knew that the second one was always less smooth than the first). Then he opened the cabinet and took out the box of Viagra. In truth, it was

Image: Istubalz

illegally produced sildenafil citrate from China, sold on the internet at an unbeatable price. On the box was a tiger with a thick coat revealing its four curved canines, but its feral majesty was inadvertently made clumsy and ridiculous by a pair of fake dark-brown horns just behind its ears. Tiger's teeth, and their horns, are symbols of virility in China, as well as ingredients found in ancient medicines.

Back in his bedroom, he realized he didn't have enough time to swallow the two 100 mg pills. He hated the forty-five minutes it took for their blue promise of pleasure to inundate his corpora cavernosa, constricting the blood vessels to hold back that bit of anemic excitement which made the generally flat line of his penogram jump. He placed the rhomboid pills on a piece of paper that he folded in half, and with the bottom of a beer bottle, he crushed them. He put the powder on a burnt spoon, added 2 ml of saline, and diluted it with the flame of his trusty lighter. He sucked the bluish liquid up in a hypodermic syringe, removed the needle, spat on it, and slipped it into his anus. It was an infallible system, suitable for almost all drugs (except coke, because the burning was unbearable), and helped the heart pump the desired effects through the body in ten minutes or less. In her usual timely way, his friend rang the bell before Tom had time to roll a joint and smoke it alone to avoid the hassle of swapping saliva with her.

They almost never spoke, yet he knew he loved her. They had known each other since middle school, when he was still able to stand hugs. Now, he had learned to inflate a bubble of impermeability around himself, which he could expand or contract depending on the circumstances, varying his distance from the rest of the animate world and trying, as much as possible, never to have any part of it touch his skin. He hated any form of contact. He worried that some particle of himself might escape his control, or slip onto a body that didn't belong to him—or worse, that a heat particle from a strange body might infiltrate his pores

or his mucous membranes, like an insidious and allergy-inducing grain of pollen.

She knew him well, so without being asked, she sat on the other end of the couch where Tom was sprawled.

"How are you?" she asked, not expecting a reply. She would have liked to hold out her hand, but it was useless to take that risk: it would have unleashed an angry tirade on how depressing it was for him to mix his body's scents with those of whomever, or to change the pH of his own skin and risk an itching attack.

Tom got up and put the key in the decoder. He switched on the monitor and the room started trembling with the votive cathode light. Two bleeding figures kneeling, one gripping the other, forehead to forehead, in a singular, supreme defeat. Frenzied cries of exhortation. The bars raised up in the air. The sky an X-ray, scratched by uncertain stars, with a rip down the middle. And an otherworldly night, blacker than the night outside, boiling pitch pouring over the frozen dance, quilted with red flashes and the sparking heat of eyes. The Erostek ET232 droned quietly, unleashing its electric gallop on the tensed-relaxed-tensed body of the boy who had, in the meantime, unzipped his fly. "Clear! Again! 1 … 2 … 3 … Clear!" That image had never left him, nor the sizzling sound of the defibrillator, the crazed hands, the tense body in an arch of hysteria. It suffocated him, fascinated him, excited him. Electrodes connected, one at the base of his member, around the scrotum, the other just under his gland, and an anal plug that jumped with every involuntary muscle contraction.

Lola was motionless, fixated on Tom's pleasure, which flew out in liquefied aquamarine sparks, edged with crackling Antarctic blue and sprays of magenta, like a Kirlian photograph.

He started touching his chest. He lay his head back, clenched his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut. Until he felt himself flowing out of himself in a dense lake of unconsciousness.

At that point, on his right cheekbone, a sideways eight began to glow—the infinity symbol.

With his pants around his ankles, he turned to look at Lola, stretching out to her an index finger dripping with tepid mother-of-pearl. Lola stretched out her arm and her hand, pleased at the organic contact. It seemed to her that Tom's sperm, like a conductive paste, was transmitting everything he was feeling to her. They smiled at each other for a few interminable seconds, index finger against index finger, until the seed thickened and on Lola's left cheekbone, the same infinity sign appeared, but red like a Mogok ruby, and preceded by a minus sign.

The Turri Hypothesis

Something happened that Alex Turri couldn't have expected. After the massacre at the bookstore, the editor in chief sent for him. He seemed shaken. He had spiked the article on the beer warehouse, because it was too fanciful. But now he wanted to get back to the subject.

As soon as Alex sat in the armchair in front of his desk, Biagetti said to him in a menacing yet tender way, "Look, Turri. I don't subscribe to your bullshit. But our readers deserve to hear all the sides of this story. I'll tell you, this whole business is weird. It's not your usual crime reporting. You know well that there is pressure on us, on all the papers, not to shine too much of a spotlight on these reports of old people getting killed in the street. The fact is, the police don't know what's going on, and they actually don't care too much. They can't find the head of this, they don't understand what group is behind it. And the few arrests they've made didn't help solve the mystery: it was just kids, glassy-eyed kids who didn't even know what they were doing there. So, I want to ask you to rewrite the story you gave me yesterday. Try to be less fanciful. Leave out all those stories about the birds and the bees. Get right to the point."

So Turri wrote something like this:

For the past few months, in many places on the planet, groups of young people have been murdering old people without any apparent motive, and in widely different circumstances.

Generally, these are actions committed by a group that forms on the spot. After the atrocities are committed, the group disbands in a matter of seconds.

To explain these crimes, authorities have been formulating a hypothesis of an international conspiracy that aims to eliminate the elderly. No declaration has accompanied these actions, and no group has offered any explanation, but officials say the wave of violence may be connected to a demographic shift in recent decades, which has led to a sharp increase in the elderly population.

Those born in the middle of the twentieth century do not seem to have any intention of giving in. They are physically strong, well-nourished, and vaccinated against maladies that at one time eliminated humans. They are clever and competent, and they don't give up their work, their salaries, or their power.

To be sure, there are many reasons to hate this unwieldy generation: the senile disillusionment of those who once were rebellious hippies has now become a stone around the neck of all humanity. Their ravenous will to live has consumed everything that was consumable. Nothing new seems possible any longer, because they have already done it.

It seems as though the stage has been set for an intergenerational war.

A new form of terrorism? A spreading civil war to claim space in the job market and on the social scene? From the moment this phenomenon gained attention, this has been the only explanation put forth. It seems easy to understand—obvious, even.

Authorities have questioned hundreds of people, especially militants from Uncertainty International, the organization founded in the last century by fanatical Marxist anarchists. But this line of questioning has yet to bear fruit. There has been no evidence of a terrorist organization, there are no heads or militants or claims of responsibility. And now the investigation has stalled.

Try to imagine, for a moment, that the demographic question has nothing to do with this. That there is no conscious plot, no intent to commit organized geronticide. Let's try to hypothesize that the phenomenon exists for other reasons—deeper and more mysterious ones.

As a reporter, I can attest that I witnessed one of these executions. I happened to be casually strolling in an area on the outskirts of town that was mostly deserted, when I heard a noise behind me. I took cover and watched a dance. There was a group of about twenty young men and women. Their movements were coordinated and very elaborate, and they seemed to be in a sort of hyper-lucid trance-like state. They attacked a dusty old man who was dozing at the entrance of an abandoned warehouse. They reduced him to a bleeding pulp. In less than a minute, the action was over, and the assassins flew off, still dancing, in a luminous witches' sabbath.

I had the impression that the participants in this macabre ritual were not conscious of what they were doing, although they were wide awake. This was how it seemed to me, but I couldn't swear to it. Their dance was accompanied by music I had never heard before. What I saw does not at all resemble the political vendettas of the past, nor terrorist violence. It looked more like a religious ritual of purification.

Like the vibration of a many-bodied organism in search of harmony.

Just Another Ordinary Day

It would happen to her in the street, in the hustle and bustle of the crowd, or else in her bedroom or at school. It always ended with a restorative shower to recover everything she had screamed out without anyone turning to look at her or offer an opinion as to what was happening to her.

Image: Flavio Marziano.

A bag slung across her body was embroidered with the logo of Happiness Inside Corporation. Not one hiss escaped her screaming fits, not one resonant wind gust. She spat out all her rage and disgust, her hatred and her love for Tom, and entrusted it to that discrete and bottomless bag. Then, every evening, she literally emptied the bag. She connected a fiber optic cable to her laptop and transferred all the data, all the breath she had squeezed out of her chest—with tensed neck, lips almost at the point of shredding, and eyes red—and she could listen to her screams again and catalogue them, memorize the day and hour and location, the reason for each one, and the thought that had slipped under her skin when she had started screaming at the top of her lungs, without anyone hearing her.

Her father was only rarely around, so there was no danger of him asking where she had been all night and why her purple tights were ripped up. He wouldn't have even asked her about the drops of blood on her canvas shoes. He wouldn't have noticed them. He would have placed them in that anonymous spot in the backdrop across which his life slid.

A backdrop where blood is dry ink, a dead language.

No one would have ever asked her about the screams. What does it matter whether a scream is nearby or far away? If it rises from the ground or slices like a razor? Defend his partner pissing himself from fear or from gulping down too much beer and now the foam fills his mouth it trickles out boils over consumes bit by bit the asphalt a primordial soup from which something is about to be born immersed in seething silence no scream the helicopters that tremble hung from the sky the white invades the night cracks it flays your back and makes you bleed and your skin screams no one can hear it no one can touch my skin no one can touch my orgasm the lightning the electronic magnesium that explodes and everything is

white suddenly white. Hysterical fingertips tap the eyes. OPEN!!! The crazed phosphenes hurt the brain that splatters everywhere keep your distance 1-2-3 clear! Again! 1-2-3 clear! His father's chest thick with disgustingly curled white hairs has stopped it has slipped just next to the manhole cover in front of its dusty hole yellowed stinking pages.

He would never forget the smell of his father. It was what he hated the most. Right as he was dying, while the doctors tried to resuscitate him—body arched and flogged by electric shocks—Tom locked himself in the bathroom and buried his father beneath the hot spurts of his hatred.

From that moment, Tom didn't let anyone touch him.

Daniel's room is sunk in a semi-darkness invaded from time to time by the shimmer of a plasma screen. Veronica just sent him a clip on her phone of the two of them at the rave the other night.

[...]

When Veronica, wearing her usual T-shirt that said "Narcotrafficking" on it, tried waking up that morning, a dizzy spell threw her back on the bed. A wash of thoughts in her head. Aside from perhaps the remains of some landscape to keep her afloat, her eyes lacked anything to latch onto and were drowning in themselves. A sense of estrangement rolled through her body, clamping shut her teeth and her fingers. Now that she was no longer seven years old, now that she was more than twice that age, she used to put a Remembrant tablet under her tongue and those memories that she recognized as hers burst forth before her, they collapsed ruinously and were scattered in a disordered mess on the floor.

She didn't recognize them, yet they agitated her muscles, tendons, and synapses, which all resonated with the celluloid unspooling in freefall: gloomy days spent hiding under the bed; turning impromptu somersaults, so full of joy you had to yell to keep from bursting; very hot baths; water overflowing the edge of the tub, her face dappled with quivering suds when resurfing from underwater explorations; and above all, the room for hugs, where you could throw your arms around the neck of whomever, whenever you felt like it, without a moment's hesitation.

It had been years since she'd hugged anyone, since anyone had really hugged her. She was weighed down by a heap of question marks, commas, and parentheses, by merciless punctuation that kept her words and actions from flowing freely.

She was flattened at the bottom of an aquarium, in a constant free dive that made her ears explode, and she saw life going on around her as though it were deformed. It lengthened and contracted with every ripple she made. She couldn't move, and this quickly distorted every perspective, collapsing the vanishing points. She transmitted her instability to the surroundings, a fluctuation that made it impossible for her to grab on to something. To grab on to anything. All her memories had dissolved into that uncontrollable fluctuation. This was why she took Remembrant, so she could see them scroll by as though on a roll of celluloid. She knew they were hers, those memories, but she didn't recognize them. Her memories from ten years earlier when she threw her arms around her mother's neck, and her memories from two nights ago—which she felt in her muscles and tendons, but didn't recognize—when she had come across the two old corpses, like buoys tossed around by a stormy sea, by a storm which had its origin in herself. She had bludgeoned them repeatedly in order to finally attain a bit of calm.

[...]

Veronica slips off her T-shirt and turns to Lola, who doesn't take her eyes off the texts that seem to appear on the reflective surface of water. Tom is curled up in a ball. Cocooned. His arms around his knees, which touch his hairless chest and chin. He keeps his eyes down and looks up from time to time to make sure no one is approaching his sphere of safety. Daniele stares at Veronica's tits, which are pointed, in spite of all the rumors circulating in class. Veronica slides over to his feet, a big cat swinging her haunches. She grips Daniele's knees to climb up and with her eyes on his, she stretches her legs. With her hand she unbuttons him without their eyes breaking contact. Not a blink. Their irises overlap like incandescent circles of twin planets.

[...]

"We should get going," Tom mumbles, throwing his cigarette butt in an empty bottle. Daniele looks at him as he strokes Veronica's head in his lap. On her lips, warm glassy filaments reflect the changing colors of his T-shirt.

Lola hasn't opened her mouth. She's the first to get up to go to school.

Our Lady of Forgetfulness

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I just need to stay calm.

I'm restrained in this hospital bed, and I can't feel my body anymore. My feet are many leagues away, they are beyond the range of the most powerful telescope. Everything blurs together. I am the crazed center, the unstable nucleus of an imminent catastrophe. The subject falls far from the verb and the object lands somewhere in the void.

Matter is an aggregate of syllables. Exploding phonemes. I

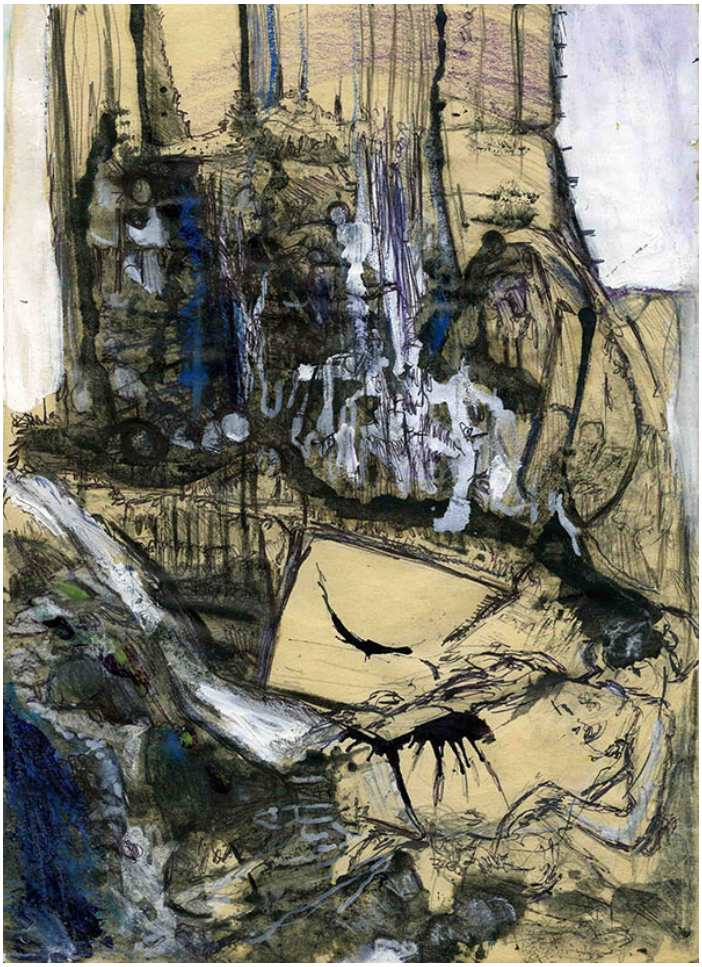


Image: Barbara Gaddi

am forced to speak. So I won't vanish. So I won't die. Or keep dying. And I can't finish. I'll keep leaving a trail of verbal dust behind me. A deadly wake. The spoken word becomes essential when life stops happening to you. Loghost. The ghost word that lingers around us even after death. But I am not dead.

Time runs backwards before the mattress the white sheets and the echo of the drops through the IV and then the accident that scrambled your memory in an explosion of glass glistening in the sun. *Back to the stars. Running in circles.* It's not easy to go back to what we are.

A river is all of its molecules, with no beginning and no end, no descending, no rising, every moment conscious of its entire self. You swallow air and someone else suffocates.

Sitting up, knees against chest, wrapped in a wool blanket that covers your head like a hood.

Isolated and lost in thought, heart hidden in darkness.

Calm and strong as a mountain.

I take refuge in you.

A blue quiet warms my body. It nestles by my side, slides down my legs.

All the magic of that first time in a tepee. The rhythm of the drum—the secure breath of the universe—and the great fire at the center.

I am the smoke that rises to the sky. We are anywhere.

I smell the flesh loosen and fall off the bones towards you, a suffocating red tide that pulls me forward. I press my lips to your hand. I hit the road, immobile: a wind-foal on the grass. I could trace a map of your scent.

A violet tension stirs in my groin, burns my forehead with infinite golden flames.

I know the pain of an oar that dare not row.

My life as a pulp. Spread everywhere. In the inescapable ocean of suspended interrogations. From the non-answers. Present and past indistinguishable. Nothing unfolds. For me everything is significant, I never throw anything away. Everything can be used to hold things together.

It was their last summer sitting around a fire under the most incredible blue sky that they had ever seen. Beyond the forest. Three young people in a tent, under a cold rain. That morning the sun had disappeared, swallowed by three thousand *om* s resounding in unison across the valley. The young people embraced, jumped, yelled, rolled on the ground with their dogs. It had gotten cold. Suddenly, in the sky a cobalt ring appeared that illuminated the leaves in an emerald light, that ignited erections in coral. The smell was still that of stars crumbled under ash. Dancing in the nude to the djembe rhythms, sitting in concentric circles, putting your hands on the shoulders of the brother in front of you … converging in the exact center, where a boy whom you saw a few days earlier is thrashing around (with a book in his hand and a whirlwind of words in his head that shot out at random), while drums roll under hundreds of fingers projecting out from the minds of all the brothers who are focused on healing.

Luca squirms on the bed.

Worried, the nurses murmur in unison:

Our Lady of Forgetfulness

Scatter a handful of forgetting

Over the eyes of this young man.

Milena calls Doctor Sibelius to hurry to the aid of the fallen

young angel.

Wrists and ankles bound to the bed, he wanders the corridors of his mind.

Valérie stretched out on the grass, or floating on her back, aquatic confusion in the sea her nose her chin her breasts imitate the profile of the mountain. Federica also has green eyes deeply encrusted with exhaustion and her heart is a soft pulsing emerald. Valérie, cigarette in hand, leans on the blue wooden table in the kitchen and smiles at Mel, her eleven-year-old son, who stands nude with his back towards the window warmed by the sun. In the enchanted light of evening, Valérie and Mel hug and there is something maternal and something dark, something poised to strike, and calm breathes slowly in their embrace. And there is a polestar behind Valérie's closed eyes and a delirious grace in the hand that cradles her son's shoulder blade and a shiver in the hand that slides to his hip and Mel gives himself over to it with only a towel slung just below his waist that lets us see the pale swell of a buttock.

The light is waning and a cold wind presses its lips against Luca's back, rolling a thought down his spine with a shiver.

Gilles's skinny arm is stretched between the aluminum bars of the bed. His skin is translucent and withered, suddenly devoid of the muscles it was wrapped around. The needle is fixed in place with adhesive tape. Life precipitates drop by drop with a terrible rumble from the glass bottle that hangs from a hook like a sad animal. A skinned one.

There is no horizon here. There is no continuity of action, there's no path, no model, no past and no future. Only a desperate fragmented present taking over.

A turquoise towel on your head. Body semi-clothed in a red tunic with black embroidered edging. The knurled black plastic recording device with a red record button is on the floor, to record the throngs of voices escaping your head the notebooks the dirty mattress, the crumpled Kleenex with all the numbers that surface in your head scribbled frantically in lipstick before it's too late, before they are lost. The little bottles of dried-out nail polish on the nightstand, a plywood board nailed to a worn-out chair, the aluminum hospital bed. Everything in your entropic room infinitely expands and inexorably slides and you try to keep it on a magnetic track, to stop the galaxies that fray before your limitless eyes that hang in the void.

I remember those years always changing to red; a shot of amphetamine right to the brain; a sun blocked at the edge of sunset; the forehead beaded with cold sweat and the tattoo needle that injects tigers at the base of the spine, and for God's sake these were the years of Op art, the years without a center, the years of gravity gone mad, it crushed us, reducing us to immobility or to indecorous creeping and a moment later sent us up in the air to float with a feeling of nausea under our feet and Luca next to Federica's body, asleep with his head in his hands lost in the few dark stains on the bloody bedspread after a ceremony of psychic dismemberment, his brain is numb and it smashes in his hands with a gelatinous sound while he positions it on his cock as on a warm nest.

And the boy finally stopped thrashing while that crazy woman outside the tepee kept spitting and cursing the moon making herself a mask of spit and dirt. His heart is at the point of bursting, his back stretches out and words rest at the bottom of his head, finally at peace, while Luca loses himself with thousands of fingers that rap on the taut skin of his conscience. This was how the boy died, a blue smoke that exhales to the mouth of the sky crammed with masticated stars.

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I just need to stay calm.

Pico Della Mirandola

The headmaster swallowed and then continued: "In the Oration on the Dignity of Man, written in 1492, Pico della Mirandola proclaimed that our Heavenly Father, when He created Adam, realized He was running short of archetypes. Don't you see?! He didn't have any more ontological essences available to Him, and He could no longer essentialistically define the creations he had before him. Problem? No problem. For God, no problem is a problem, you see? And sure enough, how was the matter settled? Simple. Adam was defined by no essence, no archetype, by no motherfucking definition. He *was* not—he simply existed, so he was free to define himself. This, for Pico, was Man: a free existence with no predetermined objectives and no intrinsic ontological determinations—the undisputed author of his own adventure. This is Pico's Man. And this is the man who put the 'human' in 'Humanism,' Lorenzo Valla. The man who truly deserves to be called Man."

The headmaster slumped forward at that point. For a few moments, perhaps even a minute, he kept his head bowed forwards. Then he sat back up, as though someone had given an invisible metal key behind his back a few turns, and looked Alex straight in the eye. He looked gloomy, agitated, shaken.

He continued, enunciating every syllable: "But God returned to set things straight. Perhaps the liberty of humankind no longer suited Him. He decided to complete the work He had left half-undone with Adam. Man needs to be defined, completed, concluded. The freedom of man had become a mortal danger to God. He realized, the old Fool, that the freedom of man was erasing Him. So, He returned to take control of the situation. Don't you get it?! God has decided to complete His work by blocking

synaptic pathways that had been left undefined and malleable, and introducing deterministic automatisms where before there had been only free will. And this adjustment does not take place on the level of the archetypal ideal, but that of the neural-telematic one. Don't you get it?!"

While the small device in his jacket pocket recorded everything, Alex listened to the speech, fascinated.

"The interconnected system of digital teletransmission is already penetrating the biological heritage of the current generation. There is a widespread process that is wiring young minds. Can you understand what the problem is with these people? The problem is that we can no longer decode the signals. And they have the same problem. They can no longer read signals that are transparent to us. They see through a totally different cognitive grid. Their grid has deterministic aspects to it: a sign is a stimulus which excites preset neural pathways and predicts prewired responses. Their first objective is to get rid of the unwired. That's why they're killing us."

The headmaster interrupted his train of thought and looked at Alex, furrowing his brow, as though he had all of a sudden been assailed by a doubt. "Exactly how old are you?" he asked.

blueFitness

The day arrived for Isidoro's departure for the blueFitness Residence, a thermal resort and spa run by Happiness Inside Corporation, in the bluest scenic setting of the Gulf. Martina had packed his suitcase. Isidoro had let her pull him along and his resistance had finally crumbled. The residence was part of a chain of spa resorts conceived for the senior market—a market that Inside was looking at with increasing interest.

Though Inside still dominated the sectors of Entertainment and Collective Mind Time Management, it fell short of a total monopoly.

A threatening new competitor had emerged on the horizon, Maya Unlimited, a mysterious company headed by Sri Radhakrishnan that had established itself in the market with the launch of an anti-panic bracelet that could erase the feeling of agoraphobic anxiety that was growing among adolescents.

Maya had unleashed its legal department on Inside's monopolistic tendencies, and had even funded an aggressive media campaign against the leading company, accusing Inside of encouraging addiction and dependency in the minds of its customers. Sri Radhakrishnan had publicly denounced Inside. According to his claims, the world's first psychoengineering company was trying to control the minds of its users. Maya's philosophy ran in the opposite direction: it supported mental decontamination, care rather than control, relaxation in place of excitement.

In spite of this offensive, which had culminated in a hearing in front of the Union Parliament, Inside had maintained its supremacy on the market. Thanks to the tight protective web of clientelism that it had woven over the years, Inside still held 58 percent of the youth market in the Entertainment and Happiness sectors. It was now poised to invade the Senior segment, which was steadily becoming the most populous and well-to-do. With this in mind, Inside had launched a new campaign, centered on a single word: LIMITLESS.

Happiness should never end, screamed the new advertising philosophy, which aimed at erasing all awareness of human decay. There would be no trace of anything that hinted at the intrinsic perishability of the organic matter that bodies and minds are made of.

Sri Radhakrishnan refused to speak to the press, and had painstakingly avoided being photographed for twenty years—from the moment he had abandoned a glittering film career to become a reclusive guru to a community of mystical bioengineers. He interrupted his media blackout to appear in a two-minute spot in which he warned humanity against the totalitarianism of happiness. This legendary appearance across all global media led to a 12 percent increase in Maya Unlimited's stock price. The old actor with a marvelous face that could still seduce female audiences worldwide revealed that at age sixty he could be even more charming and handsome than his admirers remembered. He shook his long silvery hair and, smiling with his green-violet eyes, he proclaimed that the beauty of a face depends on the soul that it expresses, not on chemicals that are injected subcutaneously.

But Inside reacted to this with nonchalance. Unnamed officials from the company read a brief statement in front of television cameras, which stated that the ravings of fanatics nostalgic for the past would not stop the progress of the human race.

Having tamped down the political outcry and the media attention, Boundless Inside, the spinoff that focused on senior products, had opened a number of blueFitness centers with the slogan "Happiness has no age limit." And crowds of oldsters with scaly skin and large beige liver spots on their necks had hurried to sign up for electrofitness classes to rejuvenate themselves, while thousands of rich pre-corpses, who yearned to be revitalized, reserved rooms in one of the thermal spas where high-tech therapies hid behind a completely natural façade.

Isidoro left in the morning, after turning in his grades to the school office. He didn't even want to think about what the headmaster had said to him the day before. Retaliation

against the students seemed like such an absurd idea to him that he didn't take it seriously. Forza often tried to impress others by making highly combative proposals. He took pleasure in provocation. Isidoro had no time to concern himself with that folly. He needed to escape, heal, and forget. He needed to steer clear of the ravings of the unbalanced old man.

Image: Barbara Gaddi

Babylonia Is Sad

The Valla Institute was buzzing with police officers and journalists in the days following the incident. The discovery of their classmate hanged in the john summoned the students back, even though classes were over. Alex tried to slip into their lives. He transcribed stolen interviews, monitored their chat rooms, and sent questions to their smartphones. "School of Horrors," it had come to be called. "Babylonia is sad" was written on a wall behind the school. He reread his notes.

"Laroxyl, Anafranil, Tofranil, Vividyl, Surmontil. I know the tricyclics well. I could write a book about them. I also know their generic names: amitriptyline, clomipramine, imipramine, nortriptyline, desipramine. And I know how they work. My father is a psychiatrist. He explained to me what neurotransmitters are and that deficiencies in them can cause mood swings. 'It can make you lose your sparkle,' Mom says. I know that Tofranil or Vividyl mostly act on the noradrenergic neurons, while Laroxyl and Anafranil work on the serotonergic system. Not all tricyclics are the same. I can tell you because I know about them. Some of them calm you down so you don't feel fear roiling in your belly, churning like the centrifuge in a washer. Others don't calm you down at all, they give you a need to do things, to pace around in the house, bedroom-kitchen-living room-kitchen-bedroom. You don't feel like doing anything in particular—it's enough to just roam around the house. But tricyclics do have one thing in common. They dry out your mouth and leave your tongue feeling like a rough piece of cardboard, like if you smoked ten joints in a row. I went around with my little bottle of Xerotin mouth spray, and that jerk Claudio, my youngest brother, would always say, 'If you want I can spit in your mouth.' He's a moron, like all twelve-year-olds. And then your hands shake. And your legs, but it's hard to explain about the legs. If you stretch out your arm and you're holding something, everyone can see you shaking. But your legs, even if you stretch them out, it's not like they're shaking a lot. It's more of an internal tremor, like a deep tingling feeling, like when your leg falls asleep and it hurts. It has nothing to do with circulation. Sometimes the tingling feels good, maybe too good. It's a pleasant feeling that you can't stand, you want it to stop. My dad said this is an important lesson to learn. Can too much pleasure hurt you? I dunno. I'm not sure I understand. You?"

"But with Seroxat you can't come. You feel a melting feeling in the pit of your stomach, you move faster and you feel yourself throbbing, you give it your all and you break out in sweat. You lose your senses a little and you feel like you're about to shoot your load … and then nothing. You're still inside Veronica, the redhead with the 'Narcotrafficking' T-shirt, but you can't come. It feels like you'll never come again, at least not this time. But not even the next time. And then, after a few fucks like that, or a few non-fucks like that, you stop thinking about sex. You stop seeing sex scenes in your head. You can always watch them on the internet but it's not the same. In place of sex there is nothing, just a sort of luminous darkness, a half-darkness, a contradiction stuck inside your eyes. And you don't think about sex even if you force yourself to, when before you thought about it at least 1500 times a day. That's what Seroxat does."

"I was five years old the first time I wanted to die with all my might. Then again at age eight. The only way to do it was to jump off the balcony. I wasn't sure life would end once I was shattered on the ground. I would look down and think maybe a gate would swing out and get in the way. My body might be stopped, but something else would have kept falling forever. That terrorized me to the point that I am still here. The most I've done is go up on tiptoe and swing a leg over the other side to get a little taste of

the void."

"I'm beautiful. Everyone says so. I let people touch me hoping that someone will find me ..."

A moment. Alex had to stop to catch his breath. Then he got a grip on himself and said, Poor me! What kind of mess did I burrow into? Elusive young people, persistence of vision, human stains, traces of breath on a mirror, fragments, leftovers, a vitreous dust that sparkles as it swirls. I hear them talking all at the same time, a tangle of chatter. They are talking alone, for the most part, near others who also talk alone. I never stop writing to them. Writing at this point means dirtying a few more pages, nothing more, writing that veers off course but cannot be stopped.

In the City of Judges

The city on the hill was perfectly tidy. This guaranteed the existence of legal order. They investigated, they evaluated, justice was served. The aim of punishment was to bring offenders back to integrity, never succumbing to excess. There they knew, there they willed, and what was willed must be—it was not ours to ask what it might mean. This established the law. And that city on the hill was the city of law. When Isidoro arrived there, he was dizzy from the trip, and sleepy. The weather was cooler at that altitude. He took a taxi and asked to go to the Hall of Investigations. He climbed the long white marble staircase that led to the atrium where Justice Marè was waiting. She had begun looking into the unstoppable slaughter of the elderly, the first of her colleagues to do so, back when it was still thought possible to trace it back to guilty parties.

X

Excerpted from *Morte ai Vecchi* (Baldini & Castoldi, 2016). This excerpt is translated from the Italian by Deborah Wassertzug.

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