Editorial

Two women sit at a sidewalk cafe in Manhattan.[1] There are others around: suited bros poring over a spreadsheet, a possible fashion blogger, generally well-dressed white people. The women engage in dialogue and play a game. They talk Platonism, Nietzsche, femmunism, and also traps. The initial point of the game is to decide who has partaken in a particular sexual act, and who has given it or been taken by whom. As they speak, the women, in a dialogue written by McKenzie Wark, create a trans-for-trans space for communication, for a world both part of and separate from the cis one. As one woman tells the other, "They think they know our little secret, but we have information about being that they will never know." As she says earlier, "We turn the cis gaze back on itself."

The voguers that Sabel Gavaldon writes about in this issue know a lot about gaze. Gavaldon traces their poses—set to the clicks of camera shutters—from the Christopher Street Piers to Harlem balls at the end of the twentieth century to recent scenes in the ballrooms and streets of Mexico City. Capturing and scrutinizing posture, gesture, movement, and criminality have long been the purview of photography in the hands of those who want to classify subjects. The voguer, intimately aware of the potency in each shutter click, literally poses a challenge to legibility and power. "The voguer is one with the camera, internalizing its gaze with mechanical exactitude." Throughout the voguing years and stances, no gesture, Gavaldon writes, guarantees a stable reading.

Meanwhile, photographer Sohrab Hura is convinced that "the photographer today is out of touch with the complete image world." He writes that politicians—in this case Narendra Modi and his administration—are in closer proximity to the broader system of images and afterimages. Photographs become vessels for creating truths from untruths, apparent danger in the present culled from repurposed images from another time and location. Examining the remaining glitches in an otherwise growing sea of perfected images may be our best hope for navigating reality.

Images are masks, Hura says. And Irmgard Emmelhainz echoes this by providing an image of images as a veil over a world full of living dead. We have to "flee from the invasion of images," find a way out of a shared culture marked by repression. In an intricate discussion of culture, Hanan Toukan traces the loaded politics around cultural production in Arab countries, and examines the European players who aim to use *al tamwyl al ajnabi*, or "foreign funding," to center their interests.

The work of four poets, selected by poetry editor Simone White, rounds out this November's offerings. Lewis Freedman, erica kaufman, Lynn Xu, and Peter BD speak in handwritten, video, and typed-text form. Xu writes in her poem: "LIKE / THE / WAR / TO / NOURISH / YOU? // HAVE / TO / FEED / IT / SOMETHING / TOO!" In the middle of one poem, erica kaufman writes: "i'm really

aware of how identity / shudders as if line dancing / through omniscient points of view." Peter BD's video encourages white people to get it together. Freedman ends one poem like this: "We do not make things / appear or disappear / except by / repeating them."

The image, writes Emmelhainz in this issue, has ceased to have liberating potential. Serubiri Moses plumbs the influences behind a particular theory of South African art—neither hopeful nor pathological—that ultimately establishes artistic thought as a realm of liberation.

X

1
Speaking of Manhattan, after more than twenty years in the borough, e-flux has moved to Brooklyn. We look forward to opening our doors at 172 Classon Avenue soon and welcoming you to our new space, including a cinema and small library in the works.

Supposing truth is a woman—what then?

—Frederika Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

McKenzie Wark
Trap Metaphysics

We're at lunch in a Manhattan restaurant, seated at sidewalk tables. Everyone around us looks like they work in the information trades in some way or another. There are a couple of bros in suits peering at a spreadsheet on a laptop, but otherwise everyone is casually fashionable. Even the straight-acting cis men sport signature eyewear. Nearly all the patrons are white—or white-acting.

As are we, you and I. In a lot of ways, we fit right in. We have steady jobs in the information trades. Like the people around us, we're dressed with a certain level of professional intentionality. No business attire for us—we're not management. We're creative types. But not *too* creative, at least not in the workplace. We're not like those suits with their spreadsheet, but neither are we the woman alone at the bar in clashing colors who we speculate is a fashion blogger.

Service is slow, and we've both downed our first cocktail already, so we play the Crisp Game. I learned it from a brief encounter with the legendary Quentin Crisp, the former sex worker turned writer and performer.[1] To play, we put our senses to work, read the other patrons, and tell each other stories about which of them has been fucked in the ass, and by whom.

"The first one's too easy! That one's a chaser, already gave me the eye. Chaser who wants a trans girl to pop a dick pill to fuck him. And won't pay for it."

"That one is getting pegged on the regular by a cis woman—not his wife."

"That one, well, gay bottom. Obvious. We know, honey, we know!"

"That one, but he only did it in college."

"That one puts out for her boyfriend, but she doesn't like it."

"T-girl bottom wisdom: never let anyone fuck you in the ass who has not themselves been fucked in the ass—and enjoyed it."

"You should tweet that."

So it goes, until our food arrives. The Crisp Game lets us mark ourselves off from our cis peers. It creates a little trans-for-trans space of communication, just for the two of us. It's a self-defense for the inevitable moments in which the tolerance we have been so graciously extended reveals its limits, as it does, every fucking day.

Detail from Mademoiselle de Beaumont or The Chevalier D'Eon, 1777, engraving. Published the month after the Chevalier d'Eon's departure from London for France, this print appeared in "The London Magazine," xlvi, 443 and illustrated an article titled "Memoirs of Mademoiselle D'Eon de Beaumont." The image sums up the public debate over the Chevalier's sex which had overshadowed d'Eon's life in London since 1771. Following several years of betting, during which d'Eon refused to comment on the matter, a case was brought to the court of the King's Bench in summer 1777. The Court was asked to rule definitively on whether d'Eon was a man or a woman, for the purposes of settling the many outstanding bets. At the London Guildhall on 2 July 1777, the judge Lord Mansfield ruled that d'Eon was a woman.

This game is also a reminder. Nobody is what they appear. Well, of the two of us, I'm more of the easily clockable kind. You are so much closer to the model of feminine beauty. Have to be, to keep your dysphoria from ruining your life.

Like most trans women, we have appraised each other from the point of view of some model of feminine form.

Everything I can see about you is beauty, but the one thing I know that you feel doesn't pass is your hands. You wear no rings, have clear lacquered nails. My nails are purple with sparkles, and I wear the big silver fly ring Kathy Acker gave me. My hands are about the only thing that does pass.

One corner of our friendship rests on my wanting to be seen in public with you because of your elegance. Also: your willingness to be seen with me even though it means that because of me you'll get clocked. This generosity affirms your strength of character as a trans woman, which is gratifying in itself, and is a gift to me, the awkward stepsister.

Not much is going to happen to us, today at least, even if the cis sniff us out. Privilege—particularly as white New Yorkers with excellent manners—lets us do this. We can be out as tranny freaks and be insulted or scorned by the world we move in—but not beaten or killed (probably).

We talk about this. "I've still been called a trap," you say.

"Me too. And this is what's strange: even an obvious trans woman such as me gets called a trap. The cis who call us that think the essence of our being is nothing more than a failure to deceive them."

"If trans women are traps, it's because everyone is," you declare.

"Oh really? How do you arrive at that?"

"Nobody is ever quite what they appear. Take the Crisp Game we just played. Our surmises could be wildly off."

"It's more fun that way," I interject.

"… But there's always *something*. Maybe suit-guy over there," you gesture with your clockable hand, "isn't getting pegged—but instead has a stash of shemale porn."

"There's always a gap between the representation and what it presents. That's how all communication works," I declare.

"What does *that* mean?" Well, you asked for it. We're going to play the Theory Game.[2] Since we're settling in, you order more drinks.

"There's always a difference between the sign of the thing and the thing itself. How I appear isn't all of me. A representation is always different from the thing it represents. Perception always has an element of deception."

"There's something rather irksome, but also delicious, about that," you say, with a glint in your eye.

"Particularly in an economy that runs on signs." I guess at where your saucy bent will take this game, but I'm in a more philosophical mood. "Judging by their appearances, all the patrons in this restaurant looks like they work with signs and do pretty well at it. Everyone looks prosperous, successful, capable. It's unlikely that they all are."

"That girl's shoes, for example," you tilt your hand to guide my eye again. Cracked leather, worn heel.

I can play this game, too. "That one over there, leaning in, a bit too overeager—is asking for money." Not everyone is here, as we are, at leisure. There's a lot of hustling going on.

"Everyone is always concealing something," you say. Maybe you're onto my less-than-frank dishing from my own recent adventures. It's not like I'll tell this gossipy bitch everything.

"We're always differing from the signs we make. It might be a specifically Western-culture kind of hang-up, but there's a nervousness about this gap between sign and thing."[3]

"Which is why they," you gesture at the cis around us, "want to stick it to trans women—as traps."

"In Plato's philosophy" (I'm getting pretentious and I know it, but you like it when I play the Theory Game, and it will seduce you away from what I'm not telling you about my life), "it's not just that the sign of the thing falls short of the thing itself.[4] The thing itself also falls short, in turn, of the pure idea or form of the thing. Behind appearances are things. But things, too, are just a kind of mere appearance: behind things are their forms. These cannot be touched, or tasted, or seen. They are knowable only to thought itself."[5]

"But who cares about Plato?" You dismiss him with a wave.

"Well, Nietzsche saw what was up with Platonism and its influence on Western thought. He called Christianity 'Platonism for the masses .'[6] In Christianity too, appearances are suspect—are now the work of the devil. Actual things are not to be trusted either, particularly if those things are bodies. These are corrupt flesh, condemned to die. What is real is something, once again, invisible, untouchable—pure spirit. If spirit refuses to be corrupted by appearances or by the pleasures of the flesh, it can join God in eternity."

"So, have you been having any pleasure of the flesh lately … with anyone I know?" You are on to me, I suspect. So I better try to hold your attention by throwing a conversational curveball.

"Secular Western culture inherited a residue of Platonism via Christianity. Even some kinds of Marxists imagine a world of false appearances. For them, it's capitalism. The overthrow of capitalism restores 'man' to the possibility of an authentic life: no more advertising, good riddance to fashion, and bye-bye to alienation. Man is restored to himself as himself."[7]

"Men. Hmph. I don't know what I see in them." I've distracted you from the distraction. I'll have to get us back on track. I have a preference for trans women, you for trans men. Our gossip crosses party lines between trans universes.

"I said 'man' here intentionally, because what these Marxists find suspect has a certain femininity to it. On the one hand, the feminine gets too close to the world of commodities through the desire to appear pretty. On the other, femininity, as a handful of signs for sex, beauty, and youth, is deployed deceptively to sell products."[8]

"It's hard to be soft, to be femme. People think there's nothing firm there, that they can just push us around." This, I know, is a subject upon which you've made yourself an authority, one from which I've much to learn.

"In all these versions of Platonism, it's the *femme* that's most suspect, where femme might stand for all the signs and attributes of femininity that point to their bearer being a woman. To have started life with M stamped willy-nilly on our birth certificates, to transition—at some moment or other, to some point outside of masculinity—is then extra suspect. The femme is that which deceives, but 'woman,' ironically enough, in all these Western discourses, deceives about everything *but itself.*"

"You say I deceive about everything but myself?" You pretend to be offended, but I can see from that little smile that you like this idea.

"Femme signs supposedly deceive about a lot of things, but not about the fact of the womanhood of those who produce such signs."

"Nobody accuses a cis femme of not being a woman," you add, crossly. The gap between them and you is, I know, a sensitive subject. I think before I speak, but I want to press you a little further. "This is what is different about the figure of the transsexual woman in this Platonist universe. It is not a femininity deceiving about something else. It is deceptive *about femininity*. In cis metaphysics, you and I are a special kind of deceiver."

"So ... we're not women who as women are deceivers, we are deceivers about being women at all. Sort of like double deceivers? Super-femmes!" You crack us both up.

"Precisely. You see, previously there was what's true, which is Plato's 'idea'; and two fallen states, short of what's true, which are the thing; and then even more fallen—the representation. The idea embodies truth for the Platonist. God and communism do it for Christians and Marxists, respectively. What is true is identical to itself. It allows no gap between itself and any aspect of itself. It is incapable of making a mere sign of itself. It is pure—and unrepresentable."

You get your faraway look, and say, to the air more than to me: "Sometimes I feel like the woman I'm trying to be is an impossible idea. That no matter how much I try to be her, already am her really, the farther away it seems. I think it hurts us, your Platonist idea of woman, and not just us. All those cis feminists who hate us struggle with her too."

"Yes!" I hadn't thought of this part. "They have to hate us as bad simulacra of the idea of 'woman' so they don't have to deal with their own failure as representatives of that idea."

"It's a hierarchy, a chain of being, from most to least, where we're always at the bottom." I can see that look of yours that signals a low mood. I have to get on to the crux of this argument, the part that for us invokes a T4T world of possibility. That's the objective of this game: to arrive at ourselves, at our existence, by making the weaker case appear the stronger.

I launch another move: "Okay, so this is also how a certain brand of feminism thinks about the figure of woman. She just *is*. There's hand-waving about biological chromosomes, but those are things that are outside the everyday realm of human perception. Woman is a Platonic ideal that 'real' women just embody by default as variations upon perfection. They then inevitably join misogynists in their distrust of femme signs as deception, and the trap as the lowest deceiver of all."[9]

"That's fucked up," you say.

"Agreed. In this Platonic world, no sensible thing can do justice to the pure realm of the true. No readable representation can do justice even to things, let alone to the pure and true idea. Instead, appearances are seducing you: away from philosophy in Plato, away from God in Christianity, away from revolution in Marxism, away from the essence of woman in feminism. In all cases, these appearances get coded all too often as femme. It's men who have reason, faith, the power to exclude from purity, revolutionary fidelity."

"Or, oddly enough, feminists who claim such Platonic big-dick energy by holding the line against us traps."

"Yes. Femme signs are suspect, but not suspected of pointing to their bearer being anything other than a woman. Then: along come you and me. We've fallen even below the most fallen. We are as far as you can get from the pure idea."

"We're all in the gutter, but some of us are falling through the grate."[10]

"We are far from even the imperfect embodiment of the idea in a thing. We are not the even more imperfect embodiment of the thing or idea in a representation. In this metaphysics, you are not even that which truly makes

deceptive signs with my femininity. You are *deceptively* making deceptive signs—as a trap.”

“Fuck you too, hun.”

“Hear me out, bb. You at least get to be a trap. *I’m not even that.* I am the figure who *fails* to make the deceptive signs of womanhood, a comical failure. You are the trap who succeeds, who is a dangerous deceiver.[11] The Platonic order of things makes me the failed version of you, while you are the failed version of the cis body, who is the failed version of the ideal.”

“Why do we buy into this stupid hierarchy where we’re always on the bottom!” This is irritating you. My play is that it will be irritating in a useful way.

“It’s such a temptation among trans women to buy into this hierarchy of signs, to rank ourselves against each other. You are my friend and dear to me because you refuse that. We both know what I am. I’m a brick. But you wouldn’t call me that—not to my face, at least.”

“I would *never* call you that!” I believe you. You’re touching my hand. I’m going to cry.

“It doesn’t matter. I really don’t care that I’m a brick. A lump of burnt dirt formed into shape—with feet of clay, women’s size nine.” Runway model size, handy for shopping at sample sales. I’m suddenly aware that you’re as sensitive about your feet as your hands. I didn’t mean to be catty. “Anyway, the only difference between us is the threshold of possible discovery. My picture on a dating app fools nobody. That chaser-guy over there,” I wave a slender finger, “giving me the eye knows I’m a tranny and is hoping there’s girldick under this Gogo Graham skirt.”

“Well he’s got that right.”

“Whereas you have found yourself in dangerous situations, particularly with men who are interested in you before they clock you, or before you decide—or not—to disclose.” I’m touching your hand now. I know those stories. I know this is hard. “There are special punishments for the trap. Hence cis men can still avoid conviction for killing us in most American states.[12] If they want to fuck us, and declare their desire, and only then find out we’re a trap—they can kill us. We fall that low in the scheme of things that approximate the true.”[13]

“We’re disposable. Not even things. Trash to them.” Your carefully coached voice cracks with restrained rage.[14] We touch each other’s hands for a moment. Make eye contact. Then look away.

A wave of feeling too intense to acknowledge passes over us and abates. When I feel the moment has passed, I take up the conversational play again. “There’s something inherently conservative in all these versions of what we might rather casually label ‘Western metaphysics.’ Who decides on what is closest or furthest from the pure and true?”

“Not your transsexual ass, or mine!” You say it a little too loudly, a little too drunkenly, and not quite with your girl voice. Fashion blogger looks our way.

“This is why the Crisp Game is so delicious. We turn the cis gaze back on itself.”

Your mood brightens a little: “I just like to play it with you for shits and giggles.”

“Suit-guy thinks he gets to pass judgment on us. And he did, with that classic glance-and-glare. The glance is attracted by something: maybe my long, straight, bare thigh. Maybe your gorgeous tits.”

“I do have gorgeous tits …” Looking at them, I concede this with a smile. I know where they stop and padding fills in the rest, from that time I took your bra off at that rave—but we never talk about that.

I pick up the thread again: “But then suit-guy clocks me, and we get the glare. It says: *You wasted a second of my life in which I might have eye-banged you, and you turn out to be nothing but a filthy transsexual, whose sight disgusts me. Or worse: attracts and disgusts me .* We play our little game as we know that everyone has secrets.”

You fill in the line of thought for me. “Everyone is a trap; nobody’s gaze is authoritative. Not even that suit-guy.”

“As it stands, to be a transsexual woman is to be the scapegoat of an order of representation in which someone has to be held accountable for the failure of signs to be adequate to things. In the cis world, we’re comprehensible only as the lowest kind of deceivers. To the cis, we are *choosing* to be female. But who would *choose* that? So we must be traps, deceivers. We are *even-worse* things in the world.”[15]

“Cheers to that!” You have decided we are to get hammered and order another round.

“Compared to most of our kind, we hold on to a few privileges, you and I. Since no one dares to use the word ‘class,’ let’s use polite words: ‘socioeconomic advantage.’ Your tech job and my teaching job will pay for our talents, and we can walk into a restaurant where the servers will assume that our credit cards at least are valid—”

“You’re getting the check, right?”

“—and yet we are still seen as a lesser kind of being by many of these other diners around us, including some who would likely patronize us with the muggy embrace of their liberal acceptance. They feel like they stand in the position

of authority, as representatives of the idea of gender, gifting us our humanity."

"Fuck that!"

"Fuck that!" I raise my glass to your glass. Clink. "There's something suspect about taking intangible ideal forms of anything as the most real, including ideas of gender. I'd rather delight in the tangible play of appearances than buy into this whole hierarchy of truth and being, that places us at the bottom. Nietzsche was wrong about more than a few things, but—"

"He was an egg," you interject. Detecting eggs is one of your other favorite games. "He didn't just want to write like a woman, he was one. He just hated the kind of woman that men oblige women to be."[16]

"Becoming woman, as he only dreamt, but as we attempt, is to escape the hierarchy of the true and the false."[17]

"To do otherwise is just boring," you say. "It's to just take the order of things for granted."

"Seeing appearances as the shortcomings of a prior state of true being is indeed boring, I agree." Warmed by the drinks, I'm warming to my theme. "Let's work the surfaces, change the signs, fashion the possibility of a kind of being to come! We are not fallen imitations of cisters. We are prototypes of the bio-hacked beings to come! We add to the range of things that humans already edit about their bodies.[18] We do it with the latest techniques, the latest information, in all fields. We are among the avant-garde of possible future humans. What if a world existed that could answer to the desires of our bodies?"

"I want to live in that world."

I'm drunk and on a roll: "Maybe that's utopian. In the meantime, girls like us pursue an irrepressible desire to transition, to bend information and technique to finding forms in which we might abide. Maybe that's another reason we become scapegoats. Trans people make themselves over, in the here and now, as bodies, not ideas. And we do it together. We make another little world, tenuous and compromised and fractious as it is—inside and yet apart from the cis world. They think they know our little secret, but we have information about being that they will never know."

"Speaking of secrets, didn't I see you with what's-her-name last night at the Bluestockings reading? What the fuck?"

I was hoping to distract you from that. "Our secret is that there isn't one. We don't know anything about the true, hidden nature of gender and neither do the cis. All trans girls have is the evidence of our dysphoric senses and a will to create a femininity with which to live. And it's better

if we do it together."

"Your whole theory is to explain to yourself why you think trans girls are hot."

"Maybe," I concede. "But it could be something else as well. Maybe what I'm talking about is our *femmunism*."

"Our what?"

"Our femmunism. Not a communism, premised on a truth to come once the false, alienated commodified world is overthrown. Our femmunism: a world of appearances made real, in the here and now, signaling possibilities to each other. A T4T that's not all fucks and fights and inevitable disappointments. That's made together knowing only that we have nothing in common.[19] That the nothing is what's common, or what's *femmon*, rather."

"You lost me there, but I like it."

"The common, the community, communication, communism, all derive from the *munus*, which to the Romans was both a gift and a burden, a favor and an obligation, both public works and spectacle. Rather than what's *co-munus*, the shared as if it was universal, I'm talking about what's *fe-munus*, just between us. Not the abstract, timeless public sphere that is supposedly for all but really just for cis white men …"

"Oh, I see what you did: you're saying the liberal notion of the ideal public sphere and its model speech acts is a Platonist universal masking the particulars of a commonality that excludes us …"

"You caught me out. Instead of which a femmunism without governing ideals, that is sensual, actual, particular."

"Kiki as utopia," you say, in an almost dreamy tone.[20]

"It's self-centered, because it makes us the best thing in the world. The trans woman as the femme who is the false maker of the false. Truth as a woman. We are those whose unbidden desires make everything. And to the extent that everyone turns their desires into signs of something other than an approximation to a nonexistent ideal, not only is everyone femme, everyone is a trans woman. Everyone is a trap. The only difference is that we know it. We're ahead of the game!"

"You're so pretty when you go off like that," you tease.

"'Pretty' is an interesting word. The pretty is different to the beautiful."

"If you're fishing for compliments, I can say you look beautiful."

"I'm not fishing, but I like to be pretty. Pretty, not beautiful. It's not that the pretty is different to the beautiful in degree, as if it was further from an ideal, had lesser being. It's different in kind."[21]

"Aha! Platonism again! It's like your game today is to show that everything has the same metaphysics, where there's a form or idea, that's what's really true and everything falls short of it by degrees."

"You twigged to my little game," I concede. "Trap metaphysics. But let me put in a word for this other way of being in the world, and why trans girls are already doing it, and know it, whether we *know* we know it, or not."

"Do tell."

"The word evolved from German and Dutch, from words that suggested the brisk, the clever, the tricky. Over centuries it became connected to femininity, to smallness, weakness, getting by on wits and wiles. To being crafty and to crafting appearances. Where beauty clads the pure form it approximates, the pretty can be a bit of a ruse, a decoy. The pretty is suspect in an era of commodity culture. It hides a defect."

"The defect that we're traps. That while we can be bred, we can't breed. No wombs." You gesture to your own delightfully curved belly.

"We're traps for male desire. The ideal of womanhood we supposedly fake is a reproductive one. Platonist metaphysics is all about paternity. Copies are judged as more or less proximate progeny of a timeless idea. The illegitimate copy, transposed in from elsewhere, has to be detected and rejected. Fuck that though. What if what was pretty could lead desire astray in more interesting ways. Out of the reproduction of boredom. Toward forms of being that are no longer copies of an impossible, nonexistent original. Which are rather variations upon variations, a femmunism of experimental forms, whose existence attains being only in relation to each other. Let the sensuous tell us what is, and what's possible. Well, that could be us, babe. That could be trans women. That could be our T4T world."

"What about trans men?"

"I don't know, hun. I leave it up to them to create their own T4T utopia. I expect you'll find it if they do."

"What about nonbinaries?"

"A nonbinary utopia is neither here nor there."

"Don't tweet that."

"A nonbinary undoing of the Platonic metaphysics of the hierarchy of being would be different again. We can each have our own critique of the universality of Platonist metaphysics and our own particular universal alternative. Made in their here and now, out of whatever practice emerges out of the gap between our own being with each other and the world that denies that being."

"So your little game is that for trans women, we take the idea that we are traps and turn it inside out, to make not being a proper cis copy of some impossible ideal woman a positive value. What about cis women?"

"We are living proof that it's possible to be women without reference to the reproduction of an ideal of a woman. I think a lot of cis women want that too, even though some resist the possibilities we embody. But I am in a sneaky way making us trans women, not an ideal at all, but more like a possible avant-garde of another kind of femininity when we make our being together with reference only to each other."

"Speaking of trans women: I *saw* you leave the Bluestockings reading with that doll last night. You know the one. What the fuck, honey?"

I catch the server's eye and hastily gather the check.

X

McKenzie Wark (she/her) teaches at The New School and is the author, most recently, of *Capital is Dead* (Verso, 2019), *Reverse Cowgirl* (Semiotext(e), 2020), and *Philosophy for Spiders: On the Low Theory of Kathy Acker* (Duke, 2021).

1
I really did meet Quentin Crisp, of all places at the Australian Consulate in New York, at a reception for the artist known as Pope Alice. We really did play the game. Later, he accompanied us to a Chinese restaurant and regaled us with stories and scarfed down a huge meal, until he went strangely silent and then threw the whole lot up. Pope Alice simply covered it with a tablecloth and asked for the check. His best-known book is Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (Penguin Classics, 1997).

2
See Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

3
See Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (MIT Press, 2017). But the problem of naming an outside to Western metaphysics is that it too often becomes its other and mirror image.

4
The key work of Plato for media theory, and hence for this dialogue, is *Phaedrus*. See Plato, *The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Darren Tofts, *Memory Trade* (Craftsman House, 1998).

5
This reading borrows freely, and not faithfully, from Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," *October*, no. 102 (Winter 1983). All of the readings in this text are unfaithful, of course, to remain true to its method.

6
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, from the Preface.

7
This is a potted version with some modifications of the Nietzchean critique of Marxism in Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (Verso, 2021) and Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (Indiana University Press, 1993) and my own *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

8
On which see Ann K. Clark, "The Girl, a Rhetoric of Desire," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1987).

9
Here I wonder if we can't improve on Jay Prosser's critique of Judith Butler in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press, 1998). The norms around which performances of gender oscillate, a copy without an original, nevertheless have as their strange attractor the negative of a Platonic idea or form.

10
With apologies to Oscar Wilde. The original line is from *Lady Windemere's Fan*, but *The Decay of Lying* is the more obvious influence on this essay. Both in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Harper Perennial, 2008).

11
Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl* (Seal Press, 2007).

12
"LGBTQ+ 'Panic' Defense," National LGBT Bar Association, 2019 https://lgbtbar.org/programs/advocacy/gay-trans-panic-defense/ .

13
See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Harvard University Press, 1996). This text makes two points pertinent here. Firstly, that violence installs and affirms the law, so law alone won't save us. Secondly, that in nonviolent forms of being together—Benjamin's example is the conference—there is no sanction for lying. Which is extendable into the concept that there's no idea regulating the nonviolent communal form that would require sanction.

14
Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," *Gay Liberation Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1994). Stryker builds from the rage of feeling treated as monstrous to an affirmation of the monstrous. We are going to take a slightly different path here, starting from the figure of the trap rather than the monster.

15
See Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (Verso, 2019). I'm rather turning the tables on sister Andrea, making being female the second-best thing in the world and being a trans woman the best thing in the world, as she who in actively shaping a response to the unbidden desire to transition can escape the order of truth and posit a new value.

16
Willow Verkerk, *Nietzsche and Friendship* (Bloomsbury, 2019) has a rather more careful reading, informed by trans studies, of Nietzsche on gender.

17
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Their figure of becoming-woman is an elaboration of Nietzsche by way of Judge Schreber.

18
Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies Today," *boundary2 online*, August 20, 2014 https://www.boundary2.org/2014/08/transgender-studies-today-an-interview-with-susan-stryker/ ; Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Fall–Winter 2008). Stryker's concept of the cut as an edit to the body, further elaborated by Hayward, points towards an anti-Platonist metaphysics of the corporeal edit.

19
Sheri Hoem, "Community and the 'Absolutely Feminine,'" *Diacritics* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1996) picks up the thread of a game among the bros of postwar theory—Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy—as to what a community could even be that had nothing in common, and how Duras interrupts them. It's maybe no accident that Kathy Acker was reading some of these texts at the time she was finishing *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (Grove Press, 1996)—a book which one could read as a theory of femmunism, of the being-together of femmes who approximate no idea, who do not police each other's differences, who have nothing in femmon.

20
See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2019). The insufficiency of that utopia for trans women comes up via Muñoz's treatment of Kevin Aviance, and the problem of femme expression in gay male spaces, where it might be better to say it is all too often concentrated into the figure of the drag performer so it can be disavowed. But rather than a critique of Muñoz, a differentiation, a different utopia, neither more nor less.

21
See McKenzie Wark, "Femme as in Fuck you," *e-flux journal*, no. 102 (September 2019) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/102/282888/femme-as-in-fuck-you/ .

Sabel Gavaldon

Inappropriate Gestures: Vogue in Three Acts of Appropriation

To Franka Polari, rest in power.

ACT 1: Christopher Street Pier, Manhattan, 1988

The Christopher Street Pier is lit by streetlights as gangs of youths gather around two voguers on the Hudson River waterfront. Streetwear, tank tops, gold chains, cologne, bubble gum. It's a sticky summer night and the air is charged with electricity. A third dancer with a head full of curls enters the scene. It's Willi Ninja, mother of the House of Ninja. His hands teach a geometry lesson against the blackboard of the inner-city night sky. They tell a story in a lush, intricate language punctuated by snaps of the wrist, sharp lines, right angles. Each movement is an exuberance.

In the background, one hears the infectious rhythm of an Adonis acid house track, with its fat and juicy bassline. The voguer doesn't blink. His head remains immobile at all times, standing proud, solemn, defiant. Fingers perch on a shoulder before turning into a makeup brush that Willi Ninja uses to apply blush on his cheeks. Never before had a swagger felt so queer, or a queer body had such swag. Among cutting remarks and knowing laughter, the other pier queens strut around him, all flaunting their deviance from the oppressive gender binaries of dominant culture.

The film is called *Tongues Untied* (1989).[1] Its filmmaker, Marlon T. Riggs. And the street voguing scene described above constitutes one of the earliest filmic documents of the underground culture known as ballroom. Although it flourished in 1980s New York as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the history of ball culture spans a century of fragile coalitions among queer folks of color who have been consigned to the margins, incarcerated, and pathologized throughout modernity. Ballroom's micropolitical struggles are in the legacy of the crowded masquerade balls of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, the practice of voguing is an embodied transcription of that history of resilience in the face of white supremacy.[2]

But let's go back to the West Village piers. On the banks of the Hudson River, this "tribe of warriors and outlaws," as described by the poet Essex Hemphill, huddles around a new dancer.[3] This time it's Eddy Diva. Writing hieroglyphs in the air, the voguer's hands entwine around his head. With sleight of hand, he swiftly takes off his glasses to frame his face like the viewfinder on a camera. In vogue, every beat has to be punctuated by a captivating pose. Every move is a snapshot. Every choreography a fashion editorial. With freeze-frame, staccato-like movements, this subcultural dance style incorporates the mechanical rhythm of an analogue camera shutter: Click. Click. Click. Click. This is how the voguing body translates the visual frenzy of a photo shoot into choreographed phrases. The voguer is one with the camera, internalizing its gaze with mechanical exactitude.

Purrlette 007 (aka Peligrosa) at the Zodiac Ball, Monterrey, Mexico, 2020. Photo: Sebastián Navarreta.

In the words of vogue pioneer Archie Burnett, whose life is devoted to the legacy of "old-way" vogue: "Vogue is based on one main principle: the camera first. You need to translate your body in the way the camera will see your best lines. The camera cannot see depth; it can only see length and width. You never waste an opportunity for a good line."[4]

The voguing body's incorporation of the camera is inseparable from the medium's historical, forensic use as a criminal identification tool throughout colonial modernity, championed by police forces and bureaucracies engaged in the systematic monitoring of underclass juveniles by means of photographic archives.[5] During the Victorian era, the invention of sequential photography and motion capture allowed for the breaking down of the language of gesture, recording its infinitesimal elements in precise, quantifiable units at the service of scientific management and its regime of discrete and maneuverable time.

Physicians and anatomists were among the first to use "chronophotography" for a comparative study of human behavior, providing observable evidence for racialized legal frameworks. A distinguished French pathologist-turned-anthropologist went so far as to state with unmistakable pride that the movie camera "expands our vision in time as the microscope has expanded it in space."[6] New opportunities opened up for the production of anatomical *truth* about the body.

Posture then became an empirical indicator that allowed Western medical doctors, criminologists, and colonial officers to classify subjects according to subtle differences. Scrutinizing them under a scientific lens, every gesture turned into a link in the chain of cultural signifiers that anchors the modern body to gender, race, and social class. In other words, early cinema and photography were first developed as technologies of somatic inscription.[7] Ethnographic film and police records took on the nearly impossible task of creating a comprehensive inventory of gestures, understood as meaningful indicators to stigmatize bodies and make them "legible" within a system of racial, class, and gender demarcations.

Yet posing goes beyond such demands for bodily legibility: a pose is by definition a deliberate, contrived, excessive

gesture. It's the ultimate sign of affectation, insofar as it implies a heightened awareness of one's own performance. Photography's cycle of surveillance, criminalization, and exhibitionism would come full circle with the emergence of urban youth cultures and marginalized groups who began to organize around subcultural styles: clothes, looks, sounds, gestures, attitudes.[8] Youths obsessed with the construction of their own public image—standing proud within and against the carceral logic of colonial modernity. The self becomes the fetish, as cultural theorist Dick Hebdige would say.

Congregating at balls, gay clubs, or on the Hudson River waterfront, gangs of inner-city kids now aspired to the immortality of a photograph. They strike one pose after another, their bodies freezing for a fraction of second, as if the dance could stop time in its tracks. These kids know that to strike a pose is to pose a threat. With voguing, the Christopher Street Pier burst into history. Voguers reappropriated the camera's voyeuristic gaze, deliberately making a *spectacle* of themselves: Click. Click. Click. Click. They learned to incorporate the mechanics of the camera's eye and its imperative of self-display, if only to take control of the photographic apparatus and turn it on itself.

Viewers hold their breath as Willi Ninja interrupts the flow of images with a fierce pose. His androgynous body moves against nature, exhibiting a frenzied gender performativity. It's in the voguer's cinematic dance moves where this historical interplay between surveillance and subjectivation is best recorded, albeit in code. Voguing's script is hieroglyphic, a highly condensed form on the borderline between opacity and legibility. Every choreographic phrase defies expectations with an arabesque of hand movements. Every snap of the wrists produces gaps in meaning that exceed the norm. Every single pose opens up new possibilities for subjectivation against the grain of dominant culture. In his semiotics of subcultural style, Hebdige said that a pose is undeniably autoerotic, a sign of self-obsession. One might ask to what extent queer performance is also an auto-poetics, an ongoing exercise in self-making and remaking.

Imitating white women's poses in fashion magazines, voguing twists the elitist imaginary of haute couture, which is repurposed in the context of balls and made available to a multitude of insubordinate bodies that were consigned to the margins. Appropriation is a double-edged weapon that plays an ambivalent role in shaping the minoritarian public sphere known as ballroom. Marlon T. Riggs came to terms with this paradox in *Tongues Untied*: "Ironic that dance, my ticket to assimilation, my way of amusing, then winning acceptance by whites, that the same steps were now my passage back home."[9]

There is a dark irony at play here. Riggs's words remind us of the fact that there is no straight path to emancipation.

Queer people of color have made a tactical use of appropriation and quotation, parody and mimicry in order to survive—physically as well as culturally—within a mainstream society that is hostile to them.[10] Out of sheer necessity, minoritized subjects are continuously engaged in the production of dissenting forms of beauty, subjectivity, and desire. While regarded as a threat to the normative world, these subcultural poetics carry a strong currency that is always at risk of being incorporated into dominant culture.

Queer performance is weaved into the dialectics of assimilation and resistance. It's the art of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house with varying degrees of success. Occasionally, like in the case of ballroom, this ambivalent strategy has given rise to new forms of collective life, even providing a space for political affirmation in the face of terror and social death—a place many call home.
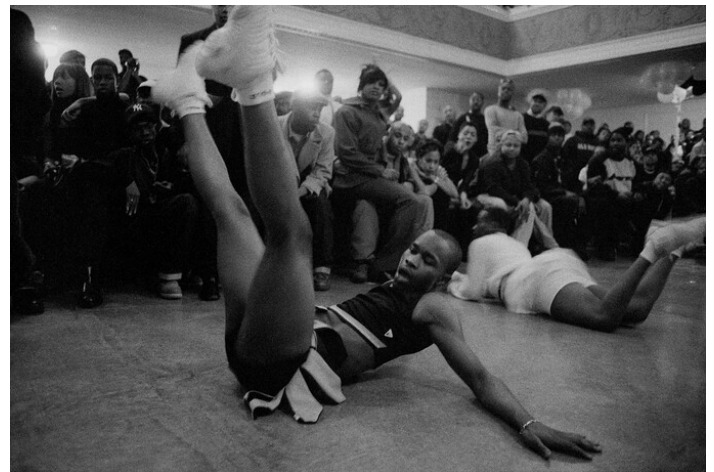
Gerard H. Gaskin, Jaimee, Pepper LaBeija Ball. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

ACT 2: Butch Queen Voguing Like a Femme Queen

The default use of feminine pronouns and terms of address (she, *gurl*, miss) among members of the ballroom scene is a sign of recognition as much as it is an expression of collective identity. This is not without irony, as it contrasts with the sheer demographics of a community founded by black and brown trans women, yet centered around an overwhelming majority of cisgender gay men.[11] In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, ball culture broadened its social base throughout the 1980s. Its focus would shift to the boys, favoring their forms of expression and competition, often at the risk of rendering invisible the transgender people of color who founded the scene in the first place.

The social fabric of ballroom is organized around groups known as houses, which are in turn based on a

Gerard H. Gaskin, Octavia and Danielle, Revlon Ball. Manhattan, N.Y., 1997. Courtesy of the artist.

revolutionary conception of the nonbiological family. The so-called house system led to the proliferation of kinship networks and care structures among "butch queens" (cis gay men), "femme queens" (trans women), and, to a lesser extent, cis lesbians, trans men, and other nonconforming subjectivities. Negotiating their gender identities in a "contact zone" between minority subjects, the cis boys ended up borrowing (some would say stealing) performative codes that once belonged to transfeminine folks, only to reinscribe them into a homosocial space of male privilege.[12] While not without its own risks, the grammar of vogue was to be transformed through this tense negotiation.

The history of "vogue femme" is evidence of this. While today it's the most popular and emblematic voguing style, in the nineties this category made its appearance in the ball scene—though few remember it—with a most revealing name: "butch queen voguing like a femme queen." The expression has survived in song form, and is still chanted at balls to cheer the boys as they compete against each other in acrobatic dance battles. Pioneered by trans women of color, the very name of vogue femme is testament to this appropriation embedded in its genealogy.

It's no wonder, then, that art historian Kobena Mercer saw vogue as paradigmatic of the constitutive character that appropriation plays in the popular cultures of the African diaspora.[13] In mimicking the poses of white models in fashion magazines, the Christopher Street Pier kids were able to create their own dance form, whose subcultural language would in turn be the object of appropriation by mainstream artists such as Malcolm McLaren and Madonna. This dialectic of assimilation and resistance shapes the history of voguing. Its spectacular dance battles are a transcription of cultural struggles taking place on a larger scale and in an asymmetrical field of power.

At the peak of the AIDS crisis, ball culture abruptly emerged from the underground into the dominant public sphere. For a fleeting moment, vogue seemed on its way to becoming a mass phenomenon. Slim, light-skinned, cisgender boys from the House of Xtravaganza, the Latino family founded by Carmen Xtravaganza, would star in the music video for Madonna's *Vogue* (1990). In the iconic video directed by David Fincher, the racial marginality of ballroom is made conspicuous by its absence, sublimated through elegant visual references to the Harlem Renaissance. The high-contrast black and white cinematography, inspired by Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* (1989), contributed to redress vogue with an aura of respectability and glamour at a convenient remove from its original sources.

The Madonna megahit is a turning point in voguing history. So was the media whirlwind around Susanne Bartsch's celebrity-packed Love Ball, and the unprecedented box-office success of Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991), after securing a distribution deal with Harvey Weinstein's Miramax publicity machine. With the change of decade, vogue in its original form (the old way) began to compete for the limelight with an even more gymnastic dance style (the new way), whose limb contortions would be immediately eclipsed by the arrival of vogue femme.

It's possible to see in this quick progression of choreographic styles more than just a trend or a change in tastes. Perhaps it was a coded expression of the ongoing tensions, disputes, and negotiations around the presence and visibility of the black transfeminine body in the ballroom scene. While Madonna had offered the world a snapshot of vogue in its most sanitized form (apt for mass consumption), it was the work of transgender women of color who would bring back its incendiary character to the dance form.

Within a few years, vogue was beyond recognition. We owe this mutation to pioneers such as Alyssa LaPerla, Sinia Ebony, and Ashley Icon, immortalized as the "mother of dramatics."[14] Channeling a radical legacy of black transfemininity, these women championed the renovation of ballroom's choreographic language. It was they who broke away from the clean-cut geometry of previous styles in favor of fluid transitions. Combining swagger with wild grace, the femme queens now punctuated their feline strut with spasmodic, over-the-top feminine movements that ended in impossible falls. Their entire bodies filled with drama before collapsing onto one leg. Saturated with gender, fiercely hypersexualized.

Reaching climax every fourth beat, the femme queen's body took flight only to fall backwards onto the ground, seemingly landing on her back. In an ironic twist of history, vogue femme's dramatic spasms and acrobatic stunts transposed onto the dance floor the convulsive gestural language of hysterical seizures invented by doctors and

medical photographers during the Victorian era—as racialized, "sexually deviant," and women's bodies entered the sphere of the pathological.[15] Rewriting that history of hysterization, vogue's so-called suicide dip appeared at the same time that overlapping epidemics (AIDS, crack, and its associated neoliberal wave of mass incarceration) terrorized the popular imagination. As artist and writer Anna Martine Whitehead has noted, "It's not hard to understand why these moves were advents of black communities, since black folks have been dancing joy through danger, loss, and grief for so long."[16]

The boys took note and learned to vogue on high heels. "Butch queens up in pumps," they were called. Soon enough they would get standing ovations competing in the manner of trans women: "butch queens voguing like femme queens." Over time the younger ranks would beat their transfemme peers at their own game, becoming the indisputable center of attention at balls, even at the risk of erasing this dance form's complex history. Once again following the steps of transgender women of color, the vanguard of ballroom broke away from the homonormative values of white gay culture. Their dance style was about to become more dramatic. The new kids vogued harder, faster, and nastier than anything anyone had seen before, thus making the dance increasingly difficult to teach, imitate, or even appreciate for white audiences.

Vogue's stylistic innovations are caught in the dialectic of cultural recuperation, constantly renegotiating one's distance in relation to dominant culture. This dynamic is structurally inscribed into the dance form, and has historically shaped the ways in which voguers make themselves legible to others. It's no surprise that voguing's natural space is the dance battle. Its mode of enunciation is polemics, an art of disputation. At its core, vogue derives from games of verbal combat (think of the "dozens") and rhetorical strategies developed by the African diaspora under slavery, such as those described by Henry Louis Gates.[17]

In ballroom parlance, coming up with a good "read" means exposing someone's flaws with graceful defiance. On the runway, voguers don't just read, but also mimic and sometimes even parody the opponent's movements in order to choreographically dismantle each other's performance. It's an agonistic framework. It translates into dance form the struggles of queer communities of color whose cultural genius has been systemically appropriated by the entertainment industry, while also finding in appropriation a paradoxical strategy to thrive in the margins of hegemonic society.

Spelled out in the convulsions of the voguing body, this agonistic dynamic permeates every dimension of ball culture. As electronic music fed into the mainstream in the nineties, the sounds of ballroom would also mutate to channel the frantic energy of vogue femme. Just as they lost interest in old-way vogue's straight lines and right

angles, the younger generation of ball kids didn't respond so well to the regular beats of disco music and its various offshoots. They grew tired of dancing to the same old Salsoul records and Chicago house tracks with cut-up gospel vocals, which had then become inoffensive, appealing to a broader white gay audience. Instead, the new kids had an ear for the tribal, syncopated, obsessive rhythms of ghetto house and breakbeat. A unique feedback process was taking place between voguers and DJs, which would culminate in the invention of a new underground sound—the "Ha," a genre of ballroom beats reworked from the 1991 club anthem "The Ha Dance," by Masters at Work.

Today, countless bootleg versions circulate in CD-R and MP3 format. Frenzied tribal drums, thunderous crash cymbals, and a raw industrial edge define the modern sound of ballroom. Its metallic crash hitting every fourth beat punctuates the dance battles, as the voguer's body collapses dramatically onto the floor. Sampled, remixed, and reworked over a thousand times, the original "Ha"—if such a thing even exists—is built around a vocal sample pulled from the blockbuster comedy *Trading Places* (1983), where Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd (wearing blackface) chant in mock African gibberish, which "The Ha Dance" transforms into a chorus of scornful laughter.

Once dubbed as "America's most bankable modern minstrel" by Marlon Riggs himself, Eddie Murphy is a contested figure in the queer community due to his homophobic stand-up routines during the AIDS crisis.[18] Far from anecdotal, the adoption of such a loaded reference as a rallying cry for ballroom is paradigmatic of queer people's artistry when it comes to reclaiming words (slurs, for example) and cultural artefacts that had been used against them. The sound of the "Ha" resonates with these cultural struggles and battles for meaning. Its history is one of theft and forgery, parody and simulation, appropriation and misappropriation, quotation and revision. The "Ha" is not just a sonic signifier of ballroom. It's the sound of a laughter that runs through history.

ACT 3: The Sound of Sirens on March 8

Back in 1990, the release of *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna's Blonde Ambition World Tour unleashed an international vogue craze of epic proportions. Ballroom culture had been "Miramaxed" and reached its peak of mainstream visibility, soon to be forgotten by white gay audiences for whom this subcultural style, detached from its political context, would go out of fashion.[19] Along with the media's attention, the silent majority moved on and relegated vogue to the dust heap of history.

And so the story goes. In the dominant narrative established by the media, ball culture is assumed to have vanished in the mid-nineties. Ironically, this is considered a

Franka Polari and Zebra D at the Purple Mini Ball, Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City, 2019. Photo: Diego Morales Villeda.

golden age of ballroom among the scene. The dip (vogue's signature power move) was born in this period. And so were three of the five "elements of vogue" that make up the dance today, including the duckwalk and the catwalk. As it went back into the underground, the ball scene also began its gradual expansion across North America, providing an alternative family for thousands who went on to establish new houses and competitions in every major city with a large African-American population.

Challenging the configurations of oppression formed by the intersection of racism, sexism, and structural poverty, ballroom's social fabric has been a queer sanctuary for youths rejected by their biological families and society at large. Ballroom houses made it possible to pass on experiences and share vital resources, from everyday survival skills to gender-affirming hormones. Founded by trans icon Crystal LaBeija, the house system presents a rare opportunity for intergenerational dialogue in a community with shocking mortality rates. Ballroom's robust care structures would also contribute to fight the stigma around HIV/AIDS, promoting sexual health awareness within the community.[20] Organized around leaders known as "mothers" and "fathers" (roles that don't always match with one's gender identity), the house system dares the world outside to reimagine kinship beyond blood ties and bloodlines.

The new millennium has witnessed an unprecedented technological acceleration. Diminishing barriers to exchange and communication have led to the exportation of ball culture (or at least its most spectacular aspects) to remote geographical contexts. It's no longer unusual to find houses, local chapters, and groups of voguing aficionados scattered across Europe, Latin America, Australia, or even Japan. This traffic of subcultural codes born from minority survival is not without risk, as it often capitalizes on the erasure of specific contexts and histories. And yet, the globalization of ballroom occasionally gives rise to cultural translations that are full of promise. The scene in Mexico shows great inventiveness in its adoption of an imported culture, as evidenced by the production of its own slang and the way subcultural practices are reshaped in response to the political specificity of its local context.

In dialogue with black queer culture's slippery notion of "realness," the Mexican ball scene has twisted the word "

hechizo" ("spell," in Spanish) to mean one's outfit, makeup, or wig.[21] The term is used in reference to any of the accessories regarded as visible signs of femininity, but which are also more than that: namely, the semiotic scaffolding of gender as a political fiction. Of course the purpose of an *hechizo* is to captivate, to fascinate, to bewitch. The "spell" of drag is a carefully crafted illusion. As Essex Hemphill reminds us, this "illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation."[22]

Deriving from the verb "*hacer*" ("to make" or "to do"), *hechizo* implies something that is made up, fabricated, and therefore in opposition to nature. It reflects an anti-normative understanding of gender as an artificial construct. Drag witchcraft asserts the performative power of talismanic objects such as heels, glitter, and feathers, which take part in queer rituals and incantations. In such acts of illusionism, gender is invoked as a practice rather than an identity.[23] Gender's magical spell is then revealed as a set of body techniques that sexual dissidents—including drag queens, drag kings, femme queens, and trans men—have learned to recombine in an exercise of subcultural bricolage.

Equally powerful is the way Mexican ball kids have adopted "sex siren," a mode of gender performance that consists of a hyperbolic display of sensuality to entice the judges. Typically seen as a peripheral category in the US, sex siren is absolutely central to Mexican ballroom, to the point of rivalling vogue femme as the most celebrated competition style and a galvanizing moment in functions. As it turns out, the majority of competitors walking sex siren in these balls are cisgender women. In European ballroom, the growing presence of white, middle-class, cis women is an unmistakable sign of vogue's commodification and distancing from its roots. Whereas in Mexico, a similar gender dynamic takes on a radically different meaning, opening up new possibilities for political subjectivation.

Their arrival announced by reggaeton's dembow rhythm, the so-called "*encueratrices*" (strip-queens) storm onto the runway holding green scarves in honor of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a feminist symbol of resistance across Latin America. Those scarves are linked to pro-choice campaigners demanding rights to free, legal, and safe abortion. In a hostile environment of rampant gender violence, Mexican ball kids have adopted sex siren as a language of affirmation. Femme joy becomes a public defiance, a collective display of sisterhood in the face of social death, while gender performance reveals itself as something other than the expression of a given identity—namely, the staging of a political conflict. Championed by *norteñas* like Purrlette 007 (aka Peligrosa), Monterrey's undefeated legend and a body-positivity educator, it cannot be a coincidence that sex siren competitors thrive in northern Mexico, where

femicides have been counted in the thousands since the nineties.

It's here in Mexico where I would learn that contexts are never given; they are in fact produced, constantly redefined by one's words and actions. Over the course of what seemed like a few hours, the spirited chanting and sassy rhymes of the MCs during the closing ball of the exhibition "Elements of Vogue," at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, resonated with the uproar of the crowd, tens of thousands of women strong, that took over the Mexican capital on the morning of the International Women's Day strike on March 8, 2020. Neither the police sirens nor the clouds of tear gas and smoke from fire extinguishers could prevent the upcoming insurrection, as a women-led multitude of strikers of all genders, mothers and daughters, queers and sex workers, marched against the state-sanctioned impunity and obscene necropolitics of capitalist modernity and its gender binary system.

The raging sounds of these women's marches and the previous night's voguing battles were weaved into the same dialectics of hegemony and resistance. Little did we know, then, that this would be the last dance for a long time, as collective life was about to be suspended by the biopolitical imperatives of a global pandemic. And so in Mexico City, I also came to understand the brutal implications of the fact that contexts can't ever be taken for granted; they are slippery, fragile, and subject to change at any given time.

By a cruel quirk of fate, at the end of that long weekend of riots and dance battles we bade farewell to Franka Polari, a true pioneer of Mexican ballroom. Franka was an exceptional MC, both tender and quick-witted, who made space for younger voguers to hit the runway, while punctuating his chants with sharp political commentary. He was proud to carry the house name of LaBeija, and had cofounded the House of Apocalipstick. But most importantly, Franka was a gay mother for an entire generation of queer and trans kids in Mexico, who then created their own houses across the country, making kin and further extending his legacy of care. That legacy outlives him, and so do his chants. As I think of the Women's Day protests on March 8, 2020, I'm also reminded of Franka's rhyme: "*arrasa*, *goza y posa poderosa*" (slay, rejoice, and pose, empowered).[24]

Although Franka's death marks a turning point in Mexican ballroom, his legacy of sexual dissent and anti-assimilationist politics lives on, still providing inspiration for queer kids to be bold enough to confront the norm. Yet-to-come dancers will carry the Apocalipstick house name, their voguing bodies channeling the powerful materiality and historical density of queer performance at the intersections of race, class, and gender, their hands teaching us ways to move beyond those categories that define as well as confine. Moving away from identity and representational politics, the

intricate choreographies of voguing point somewhere else: to a horizon of minoritarian subjectivation.

If I learned anything from the ball scene in Mexico, it's that there is no gesture or pose, however striking, that guarantees a stable reading. Nor is there a performance whose process of signification is ever complete. The language of insurrection has no ontology. Its significance is always in dispute. The meaning of each gesture is what is at stake in every single dance battle.

X

Sabel Gavaldon is curator of Gasworks, a nonprofit art organization based in South London. His research explores minoritarian poetics and politics, often embracing unorthodox exhibition formats. His touring exhibition "Elements of Vogue" transformed the museum into a dance floor. He was a "La Caixa" Graduate Fellow at the Royal College of Art (2010–2012), and was nominated for the ICI New York Independent Vision Curatorial Award in 2016.

1
Marlon T. Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (Signifyin' Works, 1989), 55 min. Shot in August 1988, the street voguing scene described above features Eddy Diva, Alexis Infiniti, Willi Ninja, Sean Omni, and Derrick Xtravaganza, among other unidentified ball kids. The excerpt is available on YouTube https://youtu.be/qwiBAqqafY4/ .

2
For an account of 1920–30s emerging drag ball culture in Harlem, see Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* , ed. Martin Duberman (Penguin Books, 1989), 318–28.

3
Essex Hemphill, "In the Life," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Plume, 1992), 172–73.

4
Archie Burnett speaking to students during a workshop at CA2M, Madrid, 2018. Quoted in *Elements of Vogue: A Case Study in Radical Performance* , eds. Sabel Gavaldon and Manuel Segade (CA2M/Motto, 2020), 310.

5
John Tagg, "A Means of Surveillance," in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 66–102.

6
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7
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Sohrab Hura, Spill, 2014. Archival Pigment Print. 12.5" x 9". Courtesy of the artist.

Sohrab Hura

Images Are Masks

In 2014, after receiving news of a predictable national elections result, I tried to scan myself into the computer. Even back then, it was easy to foresee the situation India finds itself in today, where we are governed by an irresponsible, dictatorial, and supremacist government. What was surprising, however, was a certain misplaced, widespread belief following the election. Now that Modi was prime minister of a union of states, thought many Indians, he would focus on ushering in an agenda led by development rather than the religious supremacy he had been known to propagate. Perhaps the image of a sea of Modi masks worn by people attending his political rallies helped instill the delusion that the fateful fire in Godhra in 2002—sparking months of deadly violence against Muslims in the Modi-led state of Gujarat—was only a distant memory. Or maybe the proliferation of pro-Modi WhatsApp forwards led people to compromise their morals. Even my parents, who were new to WhatsApp, expressed confusion when I'd point out doctored messages they shared with me. At the time, the slogan " *Hindu Khatre Mein Hai*" (Hindus are in danger) circulated widely. The words were often superimposed on an assortment of images of what looked to be a riot, with buses and tires set on fire. These images included people

wearing white skullcaps—meant to reveal that Muslims were responsible for the purported violence. Back then it was still relatively easy to identify and verify the origins of those images, to clarify that old images from another part of the world had been stripped of their original context and presented differently. But because my parents knew that the images they received were sent by friends and relatives, they had an inherent trust in these images. Out of frustration, my first impulse was to remove myself from the people around me who were starting to feel increasingly zombie-like in their reception of the new authoritarian political reality. I decided to scan myself away into the computer. The digital space—outside of WhatsApp, that is—seemed like it could teleport me somewhere else quickest. But all I managed in the scanning endeavor was a warped self-portrait of my hand. It was an afterimage of a glitched attempt at escaping the future, a photograph that remained neither a document nor an abstraction, just an image stuck somewhere awkwardly in between.

As I write this, I think of my colleague Danish Siddiqui, who was brutally murdered by the Taliban in Afghanistan four months ago. Over the two years prior, Danish and others like him had become the eyes for an entire milieu, exposing the lies and deceptions of the Modi government. Danish was a photojournalist with Reuters. Throughout the 2019 protests against the Citizenship Act (which determines citizenship based on religion), the subsequent pogrom against Muslims in New Delhi in February 2020, the mass migration of day laborers following the erratic and mindless implementation of Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, the massive farmer protests against the government (still ongoing), and the death and devastation of the second wave of Covid-19 a few months ago—Danish and others were there, playing the role of documentarians at a moment when the machinery of the state sought to erase and rewrite histories. No matter how much this government has tried to block the world from knowing, seeing, and hearing, photographers like Danish have been consistently unmasking the truth—all this while working with integrity and putting their lives on the line.

The current government insists on increasing censorship and meeting demands for accountability with punishment—protection from which varies according to what community, religion, caste, and class one belongs to in India. Between this and the collapse and compromise of traditional media, what do independent photographers, writers, graphic designers, filmmakers, and artists do today? During the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, curators Raqs Media Collective were surprised to find scores of visitors watching extended video works in their entirety, or even watching them multiple times. The curators asked the spectators what made them spend so much time with these works. The answer was that they were searching for hidden messages that the artists might have inserted into the videos.

In the last decade, the Indian government has vigorously fueled a perverse sense of supremacist nationalism and hate, which had been relatively dormant before. This nationalism has been taken up by the larger Indian population, including some of my family members and erstwhile friends. There is also a clearer awareness among regular people of images becoming the new dominant language of history-making. In the 2000s, increasing access to camera-equipped mobile phones brought about the idea of citizen journalism. News outlets encouraged readers to document their own stories in images. This was presented as an opportunity for ordinary people to call out the corruption they encountered in their daily lives. But this development also quietly dovetailed with the rise of a new model for the journalism industry, which replaced news with content, and journalists with content providers—all of which led to massive layoffs among photojournalists and journalists. Soon after, the idea that citizen journalism could operate within traditional news outlets was extinguished by the rise of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. What had once been the mainstream was now swallowed up by what had once been the colloquial.

Strip from the comic book Bal Narendra: Childhood Stories of Narendra (Rannade Prakashan and Blue Snail Animation, 2014). The book, published in English, features a compilation of Modi's childhood stories.

When a new vocabulary is born, there's normally a lag in the diffusion of its understanding among the masses. Citizen journalism ostensibly gave people a stake in telling their own stories. They were able to equate their own voice and lived experiences with journalism and therefore with "truth." But the subsequent collapse of the journalism industry and the rise of social media also meant an absence of verification and fact-checking. It isn't surprising that in 2013, before the general elections, when the journalism industry was in shambles, the primary campaign tactic of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was to attack the press. Modi and his supporters, who by then

were already active across a swathe of social-media platforms, regularly labelled journalists as "press-titutes," while simultaneously propagating their own visual stories. These included Modi fighting off crocodiles as a child (which soon after became the subject of a children's book), or positioning himself as coming from a humble economic background by claiming to have been a tea seller on a railway platform. No record of this platform's existence has been found to date. During a television interview, Modi even famously reminisced about using a digital camera and sending a photo by email to someone in Delhi in 1987–88, years before India had access to the internet and before digital cameras were made available in India. Stepping out from the shadow of the previous prime minister, Manmohan Singh, who was known to be quiet, Modi was quickly cultivating his image as a strong, vocal leader. It was only an image, but any reputable media infrastructure that could question images was being rapidly dismantled. Over the last decade in India, images have been increasingly weaponized to control history. "Real or fake, we can make any message go viral," announced the current home minister, Amit Shah, to BJP social-media volunteers at a meeting in 2018.[1] While most of the population is still coming to terms with the new image system, political parties have been growing increasingly adept at tinkering with this powerful means of controlling information.

It has also become progressively necessary for image-makers to find vocabularies containing codes and clues that might help bypass unwanted interference from those who seek to maintain media control. Such strategies are needed to negotiate and survive an environment so rife with self-censorship and scrutiny—both by the government and the prying neighbor who shares its ideology. In July, a leading Hindi daily newspaper had its offices raided by the tax department. This came days after the newspaper had published an article on the decades-long history of snooping by the current prime minister and home minister. Stretching the already damning revelation from the Pegasus spyware controversy of 2016 further into the past did not present a good "image" of the government. The raid on the newspaper was part of a series of intimidation tactics directed toward any form of questioning or dissent.

On February 14, 2019, a few months before the previous national elections, and while the government was fending off massive criticism around its handling of the economy, we were suddenly inundated with images of a bomb attack on a convoy of paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Kashmir. The dominant narrative quickly turned from unemployment and rising prices to national security, terrorism, and Pakistan. Security raids on civilians in Kashmir were conducted and television news channels in India funneled public anger away from themselves and toward Kashmiris living here. Critics of the government were quickly labelled "anti-nationals," as the image of the nation, the government, and the ruling party were

efficiently merged into one. The opposition quickly deflated; they had no choice but to align with the government on an issue like national security. A few months later, Modi returned to power with a decisive electoral majority. In January 2020, not more than a year after that bomb attack, a high-ranking police officer named Davinder Singh was caught driving out of Kashmir in a personal vehicle with four people, two of whom were identified as Hizbul Mujahideen militants. At the time of the bomb attack in 2019, Singh's job was to track the movement of armed forces in Kashmir. Now rewind back a couple of decades. In the early 2000s, Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri separatist, was charged with carrying out a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi in 2001—again at a time when the BJP was in power, coincidently. In a 2004 letter that Afzal Guru wrote to his lawyer from prison, he spoke of the same police officer, Davinder Singh, who had ordered him to take a man to Delhi and to arrange accommodations for him there. That man was later identified as one of the militants shot dead outside the Indian parliament. Afzal Guru was sentenced to death, as the Indian court found that this recourse was needed to satisfy the "collective conscience" of the country.[2] In 2013 he was executed in secret so that Kashmir would not have another martyr.

The interrelated optics—the images produced and withheld—surrounding these events are only a small thread pulled from a far denser visual web that has been laid out for us, the Indian and global public, so that we become trapped in it. These image traps are not new; they have existed from the time the first cave drawings were made, which were just traces of a reality that might have been. Gradually, modes of documentation became proactively subjective, not only in what they chose to show but also in what they chose not to. Each choice was meant to usher the viewer into or away from specific readings of the subject. Looking back at both our distant and recent past today enables us to identify more clearly the perspective of that time, to recognize what was told, what was not told, who told it, how it was told, and so on. As Chinua Achebe wrote, citing a proverb: "Until the lions have their historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."[3] These image traps of truth and lies are built upon each other, forming webs that in turn come together to create larger systems. Only now, the densities of these webs are almost impossible to completely decipher, at least in real time. The unravelling and re-layering of these image traps becomes a kind of modern warfare in which different protagonists assert their own truth by whatever means they can. What purports to be the truth goes on to have ripple effects on politics, the economy, and society. Think about it. Social-media images made by Palestinians of their children being killed and homes being destroyed have punctured a long-standing and rather convenient geopolitical image of an equal conflict in the Middle East. The echoes of the image of George Floyd on the ground with a police officer's knee on his neck found resonance

here in India even. The mushrooming of that image in different spaces here also made it clear that while upper-caste people in India may have added their voices to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have remained in quiet denial of our own caste privilege, from which we have continued to benefit: a millennium of exclusion, subjugation, and exploitation of other communities right here at home. The selective sharing of images of racial violence from a distant land, paired with a total lack of acknowledgement of the ongoing atrocities against Muslims, Dalits, and other communities at home, betrays the fact that for many of us here, our vulnerability lies only in the *brownness* of our skin.

The people who rule India recognize that images are the most uncontainable vessels of information. These people continuously manipulate the algorithms and meanings around images to produce fear, violence, and hate. They twist context to deflect accountability and remain in power. This is similar to how we, the governed, constantly mold and remold our own online identities—like how we curate our personal Instagram feeds to "project" ourselves into the larger world of projections, where often how things "look" carries greater weight than how they really are. Think about how such twisting affects movements like #MeToo. A man gets called out for sexual harassment, and soon afterwards, another narrative is put into circulation: *Why did she not say no? Why was she wearing those clothes? Why did she send me/him those contradictory messages?* These questions are meant to scatter the original narrative and wrest power back towards the accused man.

The Indian government recently made the absurd statement that nobody had died from a lack of oxygen during the second wave of Covid. It doesn't matter that we saw thousands of people pleading for help and queueing up for days to get oxygen cylinders filled for loved ones. It doesn't matter that we saw news reports of hospitals turning away patients because they had run out of oxygen. It doesn't matter that hospitals reported that hundreds of patients died because they could not manage to replenish their oxygen supplies. It doesn't matter that we saw reports with images of the dead floating in rivers in places that did not even have proper medical facilities, let alone oxygen supplies. With the upcoming state elections early next year, this absurd statement that nobody died from a lack of oxygen is going to be repeated often, along with many other lies, until it turns into truth somewhere. And in that repetition, someone somewhere will be led to believe that this government indeed had no role in the loss of these lives during the second wave.

So how do the images (and words) that we create go beyond the spaces in which they came into existence? How can stories cross over from their own bubbles to the other side of a highly polarized world? How can they live, sustain, and even contaminate opposing ideologies—like ink slowly dripping into a glass of water until it turns blue?

After all, isn't this exactly how propaganda has been diffused among the masses by various governments of the past, especially dictatorial ones—in little shifts and triggers and not in explosive events? The parameters of what was considered normal would be quietly stretched out, without us even realizing it. Today these shifts of normalization are seeded in viral images. I am convinced that the photographer today is out of touch with the complete image world. The photographer is still invested too deeply in the baggage of the form and aesthetics of a photograph, and not so much in its many afterimages. The politician, on the other hand, recognizes the larger image system and the functioning of its architecture. It isn't a coincidence that Modi's usually omnipresent image suddenly disappeared during the dreadful second surge of the Delta variant that we experienced here recently. Now that things seem to have eased a little, he has once again surfaced everywhere, staying true to his algorithm.

I'm often asked, especially by friends and colleagues from Europe, the UK, and the US, where I imagine freedom of expression to still be (well ... fre *er* expression at least). They ask why my photography seems to have been so inconsistent throughout my career, since each work looks different from the others. While my early works were rooted in the documentary, over the years my process has abstracted away into something more metaphorical. The documentary remains part of my method though. It is just no longer always the end goal. In part this syncs with a shift in the sociopolitical environment, as well as anticipating more that is to come. The images in my photobook *The Coast* (2019) were inspired by the kind of visuals that populate social media: broken, fetishistic, violent, tender, beautiful, uncontrolled, voyeuristic, magic, ordinary, doubtful, believable—almost like a snapshot. The book was meant to muddy the waters of what was real and what was not. Doubt was paramount for the book to function. When I first started making the material for the book, I remembered the conspiracy theories I was drawn to as a kid. UFOs, the Loch Ness monster, the Yeti—always common in their unbelievable sightings was that the images presented as evidence were invariably pixelated, grainy, unclear, and broken. No matter how ridiculous the stories around them may have seemed, those imperfect images would always scream blatant truth. And now, decades later, when we have spiraled beyond a point of being oversaturated with images posing as "perfect," how precious these glitches have become.

Glitches tug at us, draw us closer, whisper to us, manipulate us into believing that they want to share with us their secrets. In today's more fixed, homogenized, and polarized world, where information is meant to be definite and therefore limited, glitches open up fault lines of doubt. These cracks of doubt are the spaces from which we can pull out new layers of understanding. Glitches have this ability to give us a sense of the real in an increasingly fake world made up of images determined by algorithms and patterns. In February 2020, during the New Delhi state

Sohrab Hura, Scramble (detail), 2020. Archival pigment print. 7.5" x 10". Courtesy of the artist.

elections, Modi's BJP party deployed deepfake technology for the first time. In several videos, the party's chief ministerial candidate, Manoj Tiwari, was seen speaking seamlessly in different languages—a strategy to help campaign to various voting blocks through the BJP's massive WhatsApp network. When news of the deepfake manipulation broke, the party distanced itself from the technology, claiming its use to have been a "one-off" experiment, while analysts consumed airtime deciphering lip movement and sonic synchronicity.

The last seven or eight years in India have been full of retrospective analysis of the veracity or lack thereof found in an ever-growing landscape of photographs, videos, and other images that populate our political reality. I wonder whether in the future, truth will be located only in the past through examining its glitches. As I write this, I think of my own growing numbness towards images. I also think again of that botched image I made of my hand when I tried to scan myself into the computer some years ago. The wavy disruptions on my fingers made me notice the lines on my hand more clearly. Maybe this field of broken and perfect images also opens up a new range of ways that images might in fact touch us. Maybe this is why, no matter how different my own works look, to me they feel more or less the same. In one photograph I might want to put my arm around the viewer like a friend, in another I might want to take the viewer by the scruff of the neck almost violently. Maybe recognizing codes and algorithms in images is not so different from recognizing the right vocabulary to say the most politically expedient things while in fact being far away from reality. Images are masks, just like the ones you and I wear.

X

Sohrab Hura is a photographer and filmmaker who uses a journal-like practice to look at personal and political systems. His most recent exhibition, "Spill," is on view at the Huis Marseille Museum for Photography, Amsterdam until December 5, 2021. His curatorial debut, "Static In The Air," is open at Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai until December 9, 2021.

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Hanan Toukan

Cultural Wars and the Politics of Diplomacy

"Speak Into The Mic, Please" is an essay series published serially in e-flux journal *. This text by Hanan Toukan is the fourth in the series, for which I have the honor of serving as guest editor.*

The title of the series comes from Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué's performance Biokhraphia *(2002), in which Majdalanie speaks to a recorded version of herself that is constantly reminding her to speak into the mic in order for the audience to hear her better.*

S imilar ly to speaking to the self in front of an audience, the commissioned texts in this series attempt to look at the conditions of production surrounding the contemporary art scene in Beirut since the 1990s . T he backdro p for these discussions includes a major reconstruction project in the city, international finance, and political oppression, whether under the Syrian regime or under hegemonic NGO discourses.

The texts examine interconnections between the economic bubbles and the political and cultural discourses that formed in Lebanon between the 1990s and 2015. During this period, a number of private art institutions, galleries, and museums popped up in the capital, while the city was buried under the refuse of years of intentional political mismanagement and oligarchic rule .

—Marwa Arsanios

The Participation of Iraqi artists today in an exhibition organized by a foreign institution implies an acceptance of that institution's logic in preparing the exhibition. Participating in a foreign exhibition should not be rejected in and of itself; what should be rejected is any objec-tive of an exhibition hosted by such an institution that is not positive, that aims at anything other than encouraging the artists and show-casing their talents. Most Iraqi artists also participated, for example, in an international exhibition held in India last year, and the Indian government has plans to organize an exhibition of exclusively Iraqi painters. But what does it mean when a colonial institution like the British Cultural Council hosts an exhibition for Iraqi artists?

—Shakir Hassan Al Said, 1953

"Al tamwyl al ajnabi"

Since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century, Arab intellectuals have been

Still from Ramzi Hazboun and Dia Azzeh's film Motionless Weight (2009). Cover image for Hanan Toukan's The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan (Stanford University Press, 2021).

embroiled in impassioned debates over the West's superiority versus the Arab "lag." From Amin Qasim's call for the "liberation" of women to Taha Hussein's situating of Egypt's civilizational trajectory within that of the West, and Abed al Rahman al Kawkabi's attack on despo-tism, the quest for modernity reverberated and found fertile ground in the debates around literature and poetry, and by extension the visual arts.[1] As Timothy Mitchell has argued, "Modern discourse occurs only by performing the distinction between the modern and the non-modern, the West and the non-West."[2] Such distinctions, I also suggest, buttress the foundation upon which the discourse of society's development from "backward and closed" to "open and free" has historically rested.

In 2007, the EU-funded, Mediterranean culture–focused online journal *Babelmed* published an article by Lebanese critic, poet, and journalist Youssef Bazzi.[3] In the article, Bazzi recounts the story of *Hiwar*, a legendary literary Arabic journal from the 1960s, to launch an attack on contemporary local critics of global cultural funding for con-temporary arts production. He derides them as adamantly and senselessly anti-Western—linking them to what he frames as the irrational and hyper-nationalist critics of the 1960s. In his words, the way the Arab public views its relationship to foreign funding for cultural

production "is a relationship that can at best be described as 'dubious' and at worst as 'betrayal,' 'conspir-acy' or working on behalf of the imperialist assault on the Arab nation or the 'Zionist-colonialist project.'" He goes on to complain that "the list of charges runs through the full list of clichés that have comprised the Arab political dictionary for the last 60 years."[4] Bazzi essentially attacks what he believes to be an oppressive element in the cultural practices and discourses produced by Arab nationalism that linger years after the beginning of its decline in 1970. He ends his piece by emphasizing the impressive growth of the Lebanese arts sector—and of contemporary visual arts, specifically—under the auspices of US and European patrons since the end of the Lebanese civil war in a plea to locals to shed any lingering ill-feeling toward international funders, thereby drawing on the West versus non-West and modern versus nonmodern binaries that Mitchell underlines about the modern discourse.

Al tamwyl al ajnabi (foreign funding) is the most bandied-about term in the contemporary public discourse of cultural producers, funders, and activists in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. The term refers to a set of questions posed and discussed largely by actors working in civil society organizations in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. The discussion centers on the advantages and

disadvantages of accepting funds from foreign, but especially Western, organizations, whether governmental or nongovernmental.[5]

In fact, as a signifier in Arabic, the term *al tamwyl al ajnabi* is itself steeped in a deep imperial and neoliberal history, while the English translation of the term is neutral. As Nicola Pratt puts it, "The foreign funding debate is not about NGO financial matters, but rather about the identity of those who provide the funds (that is, organizations located in the 'West')."[6] Cen-tral to this debate is what is termed in Arabic discourse *ajindat gharbiyah* or *ajnabiyah* (Western or foreign agendas); that is, it is not how much money a funder gives a local recipient but what is understood to be done with the money, and specifically how much this power relationship affects production. These conditions prioritize the funder's interests over the recipient's.[7] In that sense, the foreign—or Western (the terms are often used interchangeably in public discussion)—cultural funding debate is not an empirical one based on objective facts about the impact of international funding on local NGOs. Instead it reflects the historical relationship between the Arab world and the West.[8] This relationship with the West is defined by a discourse that operates in the realm of ideas that have to do with representations and identities that are essentially the byproduct of two hundred years of colonial encoun-ters between the Arab world and the West. In the field of the arts, how this unequal relationship of power between funder and recipient materializes is hotly contested. What I mean is how recipients of funds, whether artists or local arts-supporting initiatives acting as "middlemen" with politically vested interests in the region, play a role in shaping the aesthetical and formal practices of cultural production. By extension, how do such initiatives end up influencing the way we understand the role of the artist as a critical voice for change in society?

Every Arab country inherited various forms of knowledge and technol-ogy from colonialism. When it was officially over, colonialism left behind a complex cultural and intellectual legacy that the Arab world is still try-ing to process.[9] The region's persistent and historical grappling with multiple identities, memories, worldviews, and associated narratives—whether religious, secular, nationalist, socialist, liberal, global-ist, or cosmopolitan—means that cultural production and representation, whether for a local or global audience, inevitably become domains of contes-tation. In turn, this contentious politics of cultural production links to the loftier encounter with any cultural practices understood to originate in the West, as was the case with modernist poetics.[10] Hence, Arab players alone do not attend to cultural production's contentious discourse. Reflecting larger regional and global geopolitical trends, international players make themselves felt via their funding, visions, and discourses, and like local players, they as-sert themselves,

directly and indirectly, through an intricate confluence of sect, class, and geopolitics. The debate around the contextual nature of contemporary arts production, couched as it is in a longer historical debate concerned with the problem of modernist avant-garde poetics being per-ceived as too "Western" by some local actors, becomes the medium through which varying ideologies express themselves and challenge each other in response to experimental aesthetics. Foregrounded in these debates are two master narratives that were almost always pitted against each other during the interviews I conducted: the myth of "modern" abstract art (and, by ex-tension, "postmodern" conceptual and overly theorized contemporary art) versus "authentic" and "domestic" social-realist art committed to painting and sculpture as both form and content.[11] These narratives are predicated on a discursive framework that demarcates roughly two categories. The first is comprised of an older group of artists, writers, and intellectuals who came of age in the era of the 1967 Arab defeat against Israel or the *Naksa*, embodied in the term *al-muthaqaf* (the intellectual).[12] This category of cultural producers considers itself just as rooted in localized aesthetical practices informed by historicized understandings of art's role in attaining justice and freedom, as they are globally attuned to questions of aesthetics. The second group is, generally speaking, younger interdisciplinary artists born roughly between the 1960s and 1980s who tend to be more conceptually informed by the the-ories and practices afloat in more globally connected and professionally networked sites of art making. The latter category disparages in particular what it sees as rigid concepts in art, such as liberation and justice, that have historically served the power politics of postcolonial nationalist regimes and their political rhetoric. In this framework, the binaries of authentic/modern, global/local, cosmopolitan/communal, and progressive/regressive inflame local discourses, sensibilities, and frames of thinking about the topic of inter-national, but often especially Western, support for cultural production. This bifurcation, which was often underscored in my field interviews, conceals two sources of tension. First, how much "the modern must always have its other," and second, how much the construction of this other is inflected with capital, class, and power, whether we are talking about the so-called authentic-local or the cosmopolitan-global.[13] This inflection in turn is elided by the tendency I found for cultural actors—and this includes artists, curators, and representatives of cultural organizations—to focus on the identity rather than the politics of the funder when thinking about cul-tural production's relationship to its source of funding. This focus was often accentuated in conversations when the issue of the Arab Gulf art scene was raised. One well-known artist, writer, and cultural organizer succinctly summed up this prevalent perception: "Art and patronage is a dirty business, but at least the Gulf is Arab, unlike most of the other funders we have to work with."[14]

"In Beirut," noted Daniel Drennan ElAwar, "the sponsors list of any given cultural event proudly lists the banks, foreign NGOs and other corporations that make such an *importation* and *implantation* of outside culture possible. No one seems to mind."[15] This statement exemplifies the way in which art from the Global South is systematically located within the framework of a postcolonial nationalism, on the one hand, and as the effect of a Westernized liberalism, on the other. Accordingly, notions of "importation" and "implanta-tion" abound in debates on cultural production and *al-asala* (authenticity) in the modern Arab world.[16] Yet such approaches are inherited from the dominant tradition/modernity debate mentioned above that too easily dismisses alterna-tive interpretations of these tensions. Arguably modernity is not always a rude imposition or an "inauthentic appropriation," and cultural actors in contem-porary Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan are not passive postcolonial subjects.[17]

After 1990, the constructed binaries—historically drawn on to explicate the encounter with the darker side of Western modernity—arguably began to be expressed in a different tone, one less prone to the rigid categorizations of the pre-1990 years that the *Hiwar* experience highlights. Yet still somewhat dependent on cultural actors' transnational ties and how closely they relied on Western curatorial frameworks, the general public and many actors from within the cultural domain remained generally suspicious of the role of funding for social and cultural projects from Western sources. Yet this time, and especially after 9/11, the backdrop was what Barbara Harlow describes in *Resistance Litera-ture* (2012) as the "drastic changes wrought—wreaked—in a catastrophically contested world order as the twentieth century turned into the twenty-first, relating a macro-narrative, perhaps, from colonialism, through decolonization, the polarized Cold War, a post-bi-polar world order, post-colonialism, global-ization." The new tone reflected a more violent reality of a post-9/11 world but, at the same time, a more contingent postmodern world.[18]

Hence, despite both funders' and recipients' insistence on implementing normative frames of understanding to distinguish cultural diplomacy from cultural relations, the former cannot be viewed narrowly as a tool of foreign policy under the remit of public diplomacy alone, even though it is commonly defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings 2009). Instead, cultural diplomacy entails a multifaceted process of interna-tional cultural politics, realized through tools and practices of cultural policy as they manifest in various contexts. Within this framework, cultural diplo-macy happens under a number of names. Its vast lexicon includes cultural re-lations, cultural cooperation, public diplomacy, public relations, cross-cultural exchange, and cultural development—all terms that encompass dimensions of culture as understood by Raymond Williams's 1961 articulation of its wide meaning, processes, and significations. Depending on the lexicon in vogue since the 1990s, it has also articulated itself as developmentally attuned, civil society– and people-centered, and/or democratization in practice.[19] Although a neat genealogy could be constructed for each of these terms appropriated in the language of funders, and by extension the local fund recipients, I sub-mit that in everyday life and on a practical level they form something of an ideological miscellany. Regardless of the particularities of its individual parts, cultural diplomacy has pushed an understanding of the arts as a motor of change in a society that badly needs to reform its culture and democratize its society. By extension, the blurring of the terms "cultural diplomacy" and "cultural relations" in scholarly literature and in policy practice is one of the most insidious ways that power works in cultural production: its invasiveness renders funders and fund recipients oblivious, unwittingly or not, to the fact that the funding of cultural production is always an instrument of power, even if it is intercepted by local actors—or, to borrow from Zeina Maasri, even when those participants are not mere "passive dupes."[20]

Diplomacy or Relations?

In spring 2013, I met with the director of a leading and long-established Eu-ropean cultural funding institution in Amman. I noted to myself that the director's home, office, and favorite café were all located where we were sitting in Jabal al Weibdeh, one of Amman's oldest and, in recent years, most gen-trified neighborhoods. In the midst of explaining that my research reflected an interest in the local manifestations of cultural diplomacy and how they intersect with and shape artistic practices and discourses, we were interrupted by an activist, artist, and mutual friend who wanted to say hello. We all chatted briefly about her latest work with a well-known local arts collective located in quickly gentrifying downtown Amman. Before walking off to rejoin her friends, she thanked the director profusely for all his financial support and proximity to the project during the time of its making. That interaction—the whole meeting, in fact—made clear that the director was on good terms with everyone in his vicinity, from the artists he informally greeted to the barista who served him his coffee, and even the local vegetable vendor and his children, whom he greeted informally on our way out. So, it was as though he read my mind when he said to me almost immediately after our mutual artist friend left that the term "cultural diplomacy" makes him uneasy. He went on to clarify his point, stating that he regards what he and his organiza-tion do in Amman and the region more broadly as *cultural relations,* or more precisely, mutual cultural exchange, rather than top-down diplomacy. He

was interested in knowing why I chose the term "diplomacy" to describe his foundation's work. For him the word implied a distance from the people with whom his foundation worked, while "relations" alluded to a collective sense of ownership over a project. This was not the first time I had heard this in the field. In fact, it was one among a handful of times that a European or US funder adamantly insisted that he or she was invested in a two-way process of the exchange of culture rather than the top-down and rather archaic process of cultural diplomacy.

For these funders, cultural diplomacy harkened back to a place and time in the history of Cold War ideology that represented secrecy and espionage. They feel this comparison is a gross misrepresentation of what they do today. Perhaps I had gotten so used to meeting funders in their air-conditioned and finely decorated offices as opposed to local cafés where the interactions be-tween the community and the funder are clearer. What the director said to me triggered my thinking about the difference between the two concepts: cultural exchange/relations (which in a way I observed him "doing" that day), and cul-tural diplomacy, and the way each interacts with local cultural NGOs, activists, artists, and bloggers. Yet I also came to wonder whether the precise term used to define international funding for cultural production mattered so much if essentially what each of these terms describe is a relationship defined by local arts and culture NGOs, whether they be governmental, semi-governmental, or nongovernmental, and the artists they support. As I mention in the above section, when the source of *Hiwar*'s funding was uncovered by the *New York Times* on the eve of the 1967 war, it triggered a genuine outcry that became instilled in the collective cultural memory. An understanding developed that the cultural encounter that brought the journal's editors and writers into the sphere of US government interests was directed and facilitated by the state for ideological purposes rather than organically produced in the direct interac-tions between writers and artists from different parts of the world. What did the designation of *al tamwyl al ajnabi* (foreign funding) convey about society's shifting perceptions of the relationship between funder and recipient within the context of the continuously growing number of foreign funded and trans-nationally networked arts projects? Precisely, whose interests are behind the obfuscation of the terms "cultural relations" and "cultural diplomacy," and why and for whom does it matter that the terms are obfuscated?

At the simplest level, cultural relations may be understood as interactions that "grow naturally and organically, without government intervention—the transactions of trade and tourism, student flows, communications, book circulation, migration, media access, intermarriage—millions of daily across-culture encounters," and cultural diplomacy as that which "take[s] place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests."[21] Yet in the post-9/11 era, definitions of public diplomacy, under which cultural diplo-macy falls, have expressed a strong foreign-policy orientation toward mutual understanding, which is reflected in terms such as "engagement," "relation-ship building," or "two-way communications." More, culture in the study of international relations has been defined as the "sharing and transmitting of consciousness within and across national boundaries."[22] These terms emphasize horizontal, informal, and neutral exchange, insinuating good intention, rather than top-down formal diplomacy implemented solely to influence politics. Viewed within this purview, cultural diplomacy has become a cornerstone of public diplomacy with an increased need to recon-figure soft power as a positive globalizing force.[23] Hence, the new post-9/11 public diplomacy is being shaped in a context where nonstate actors such as NGOs have gained increasing access to domestic and international politics.[24] The optimistic view of these new multidirectional flows of ideas, finances, and projects is that they are leading to a situation whereby states are compelled to create dialogues with foreign publics where the boundaries between foreign and domestic are less and less defined.[25]

Structurally reinforced by a global network that is understood to foster open spaces of dialogue across divides, these perceived changes in diplomacy's outlook and function unproblematically construe the global as a singular space through which continuous and unfettered links of people, ideas, capital, state and nonstate actors, institutions, and cities entwine in a series of projects, events, social interactions, and cultural exchanges. Yet this nongovernmen-tal diplomacy that is understood to embody cultural relations as opposed to top-down cultural diplomacy, leaves unpacked the power dynamics that are being obfuscated in these normative approaches to international politics prevalent in academic and policy circles. And while the literature on cultural diplomacy indicates that the term's meaning varies according to context, a prevalent perception, especially among public diplomacy scholars, is that cultural diplomacy may be understood only within the larger rubric of public diplomacy and as a prime example of soft power—in other words, as a positive phenomenon.

However, these broad and commonly used normative definitions that depict cultural relations as distinct from and more effective as a soft-power practice than cultural diplomacy are misleading. In practice, it is the norm to conflate "culture for the purpose of flourishing cultural assets, values and identities" and "culture as a means of foreign policy and diplomatic activities."[26] These essentialist definitions dilute the analytical and cate-gorical, yet constantly evolving and interwoven, dynamics at play in Raymond Williams's three conceptions of culture and society, devised in 1961: (i) culture as an

"ideal"—a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values; (ii) culture as "documentary" that pertains to the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experi-ence are variously recorded; and (iii) culture in the "social" sense that describes a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior.[27]

The former director of the Goethe Institute in Beirut explained the po-litical role of cultural funding vis-à-vis Germany's and the EU's interests in democratizing the region in the following way:

> You cannot separate culture from democratization. In the 1960s and 1970s there was no social agenda in foreign cultural policy, it was more about en-tertaining people. But this is definitely finished today. Now we have strategic goals. We want to see open and democratic societies. Our focus is on the inno-vative and beyond the mainstream, not *dabkeh* [folkloric dance] for instance, and this creates irritation, especially amongst the more traditional in society. So culture contributes to pluralistic societies, something we are all working to achieve here. Yet, [this] is also quite a challenge.[28]

He then went on to speak of the way in which interaction with the local cul-tural elite was historically limited to a one-way exchange, whereby culture was transmitted from Europe to Lebanon and other countries in the region by way of exhibitions, shows, and events that brought European artists under a "purely cultural" mandate. According to the Goethe Institute in Beirut's former director, the Institute was "bringing culture in a more fluidly defined framework rather than supporting local culture through direct funding of institutions and organizations as is done today and which is perceived by the local population as carrying more of a political overtone."[29]

The director's comments line up with logic long established among Western civil-society funders. This logic views the promotion of contemporary arts as part of a larger democratization framework among younger generations in Arab societies as having the potential to revise much of the old way of thinking. Reports like *The Challenges of Artistic Exchange in the Mediterranean: Made in the Mediterranean*, which read contemporary art as an "anti-fundamentalist vaccine," are not uncommon.[30] Before the Arab revolution-ary process kicked off in late December 2010, interest in the arts as a mobilizer of revolutionary change from scholars, curators, and activists

peaked. Young Arab artists were up against a growing Islamist conservatism because for many years, religious fundamentalism and autocratic Arab nationalist regimes had weakened the status of independent art in the public arena. Funders in this context aimed to correct this reality by bolstering "alternative" arts and encouraging Arab cultural NGOs. Their longer-term aim consisted of strength-ening "the role of civil society in the promotion of human rights, political pluralism and democratic participation and representation."[31]

As mentioned, only in the past twenty years has "culture" become an ever-more significant dimension of international relations because of globalization and advancements in communication technologies that reconfigure the power dynamics between different social actors. This shift is most obvious to the extent that culture as both practice and product has seeped into the language, rationale, and rhetoric of local and international civil society organizations concerned with democratization programing in the region. The perception of the potential role of civil society as agent of democratization in the MENA region, which filtered into most development assistance agencies in the 1990s and the first decade of the millennium, is often understood to lie within the purview of international development policies, rather than public (or cultural) diplomacy. Yet at the same, the genealogical underpinning of the phenomenon of international funding for societal development through local NGOs empha-sizes the same "universal" political and cultural values, needs, and aspirations that unproblematically drive the mission of cultural diplomacy.

During the late nineteenth century, the institutionalized use of culture in foreign relations emerged in Europe. Grandiose world expositions and fairs during the decades of post-1848 European nationalism were some of the earliest instances of the creation of a global public space where states could strategically instrumentalize culture and cultural representation for political ends; these large events were packaged as part of a panoramic "spectacle of modernity" that dominated representations of landscapes, industries, and especially the wealth of natural resources of societies colonized by Europe.[32] Al-though international relations theorists tend to articulate culture's role in politics through descriptive frameworks that emphasize the functional and positive role of culture, Timothy Mitchell has unraveled how culture factored into colonial practices by highlighting modern Europe's fondness for transforming the world into a representation through cultural exchange: the "exhibitionary complex" of cultural display (1989).[33] Through his discussion of nineteenth-century Pari-sian expositions, Mitchell shows how the preoccupation with organizing "the view" (of non-Western culture), as he puts it, is more than merely the content of a policy or a strategy of rule in cultural imperialism. By examining how the

expositions objectified the cities and people they represented through miniature Cairene streets and buildings for their "Egyptian Exhibition"—in addition to his descriptions of the astonishing reactions to these models by Egyptian and other non-European visitors who encountered them when traveling—Mitchell shows that the preoccupation is in fact an intrinsic component of the cognitive methods of order and truth that constitute the very idea of Europe itself.[34]

In the same way that policymakers and scholars are preoccupied with the terms used to describe the cultural relationship between the West and its former colonies, Europe is obsessed with organizing the view for the sake of categorization and display of power—which concerns Europe's self-imaging vis-à-vis itself rather than the Arab region's interests. As I have already men-tioned, *al tamwyl al ajnabi* is essentially a blanket term used in public dis-course to describe a relationship of power that shapes cultural representation, cultural exchange, and cultural diplomacy between two unequal sides. The discussion of what cultural diplomacy constitutes and how it plays a role in global cultural relations is essentially a discussion centered in the North American and European hallways of power. From the British Institute, to the Goethe Foundation, the European Cultural Foundation, the Institute for Cul-tural Diplomacy, the Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, and even the American Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy formed in the aftermath of 9/11, and to the growing body of scholarly literature dedicated to understanding its function and potential, the term is a construct that describes the Western liberal ethic and its historical relationship of cultural exchange with the rest of the world. That same phenomenon is labeled and framed as *tamwyl ajnabi*, where *ajnabi* (foreign) evidences "Western," rather than the more neutral and functionalist-sounding "cultural exchange" or "cultural diplomacy" taken up by Euro-American pundits, funders, and scholars.[35]

In the first decade of the global war on terror, despite the foundation of Cold War cultural diplomacy policy on which policymakers could draw to formulate an integrated strategy in the post-9/11 world, the Bush administra-tion chose force as its primary tool of negotiation for shaping public percep-tions.[36] Cultural diplomacy waned as the administration consolidated what was already developing in the years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 attacks. However, it did not drop out of the culture game altogether. In the years succeeding 1999, the State Department withdrew its support for some of its most popular programs like the Jazz Ambassadors Fund, American Houses, and the Embassy Libraries that allowed for the flow of ideas and artist exchanges between the US and other countries.[37] Instead, funding went toward

large-scale broadcasting projects like the Radio Sawa station and the Al Hurra television satellite programs that could more directly, and with greater impact, influence the negative public opinions of the US in Arab and Muslim countries.[38]

X

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1
For a firsthand account of some of these debates as they are expressed in art writing by artists and art critics, see *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* , ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (Duke University Press, 2018). See also Faisal Darraj, "The Peculiar Destinies of Arab Modernity," trans. Anna Swank, in *Arab Art Histories*, ed. Sarah Rogers and Eline van der Vlist (Idea Books, 2013). Darraj's essay explains the relevance of these debates for modern and contemporary Arab art.

2
Timothy Mitchell, "The Stages of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity* , ed. T. Mitchell (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 26.

3
Youssef Bazzi is a Lebanese poet and journalist who worked with the Saudi-backed Lebanese Future Movement political party–supported print newspaper *Al Mustaqbal* ; as of 2019 the paper is only in online form. Bazzi is part of a generation of Lebanese leftists turned liberals in the aftermath of the civil war. These writers are vocal critics of what they perceive to be Arab culture's tendency to forgo indi-vidual freedom and political democracy for the purpose of armed resistance, anti-imperialism, provincialism, and nationalism.

4
Youssef Bazzi, "A Short History of the Relationship Between Lebanese Arts Production and Foreign Funding," *Babelmed*, July 18, 2007 https://www.babelmed.net/en/article/70804-a-short-history-of-the-relationship-between-lebanese-arts-production-and-foreign-funding .

5
Nicola Pratt, "Human Rights NGOs and the 'Foreign Funding Debate' in Egypt," in *Human Rights in the Arab World* , ed. Anthony Tirado-Chase and Amr Hamzawy (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 114–26.

6
Pratt, "Human Rights NGOs," 114.

7
For a summative analysis of the "foreign funding debate" with particular re-gard to Egyptian women's rights and the NGOs where these debates are most hotly contested, see Nadje Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambrige University Press, 2000).

8
Pratt, "Human Rights NGOs," 114.

9
Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (Pluto, 2004), 134.

10
Ghassan Salamé, *The Foundations of the Arab State: Nation, State* , *and Integration in the Arab World* , vol. 1 (Routledge, 1987), 52.

11
A good example of how this binary is drawn on historically is found in Kamal Boullata, *Palestinean Art: From 1850 to the Present* (Saqi, 2006), 126, in which he describes two intellectual currents among literary forms and magazines reflected in the visual arts. The first current called for an engaged litera-ture as popularized in the immediate post–World War II era by French existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre. The second emanates from artists whose figurative language perpetuated a narrative pictorial art that seemed to echo the metaphorical imagery popularized by the poetry introduced in the pan-Arabist *Al-Adab* , founded and edited by the writer and literary critical Suhail Idriss. The poets associated with *Shi'r*, on the other hand, valorized the more abstract and experimental artists.

12
See *Al-muthaqaff al-arabi: humumuh wa ata'ouh* (The Arab intellectual: Challenges and concerns), ed. Anis Sayegh (Markez Dirasat al-Wihdah al-A'rabiyah, 2001) for an understanding of the concerns and thinking of this generation. See also Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

13
Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 13. For a thorough and polemical take on cosmopolitanism as ideological warfare, see Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Harvard University Press, 1997). On how conceptions of cosmopolitanism and nationalism shape identity and protest, see Rahul Rao, *Third World Portest: Between Home and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

14
Discussion with the author, April 12, 2015.

15
Daniel Drennan ElAwar, "A Black Panther in Beirut," *Counterpunch*, January 13, 2020.

16
For more on this debate, see Mohammed (1989) and Sabry (2010: 29). For the preoccupation with *assala* (authenticity) in artistic production today, see especially Winegar (2006: chaps. 1–3). Through a critique of three major pan-Arab conferences that took place in the Arab world after 1967 as part of Arab intellectuals' introspective turn, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's *Contemporary Arab Thought* provides a comprehensive take on the place of authenticity and tradition in the post-1967 intellectual scene, arguing that these notions are often de-historicized while simultaneously idealized by cultural elites.

17
In *Trials of Arab Modernity*, literary scholar Tarek El-Ariss makes similar suppo-sitions about the experience of encountering modernity as an experience rather than as a representation (of an event). He reframes Arab modernity as a somatic condition shaped through "accidents and events (*adth*) emerging in between Europe and the Arab World" (El-Ariss 2013: 3).

18
Samah Idriss, founding editor of *Al-Adab* , a Lebanese Arabic language arts and culture journal, and son of the late literary giant Suhail Idriss, who was deeply involved in confronting *Hiwar*'s role in the cultural Cold War, cynically wondered in conversation with me how it was that Tawfik Sayigh's journal suffered the fate it did, while today an entire industry is built around the politics of Western fund-ing for culture and the arts "with hardly any questions asked by the generation building it."

19
A comprehensive report on cultural policies in the Arab world shows how the language of development, civil society, and democratization is interwoven with arguments about the politics of arts production in the region (Al Khatib et al. 2010).

20
Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (Tauris, 2020,) 94.

21
Arndt 2005: xviii

22
Iriye 1991: 215.

23
Kim 2017. Soft power describes the ability of a political body, such as a state or its civil so-ciety, to indirectly influence, through trust and mutual understanding, the behaviors or interests of other political bodies through ideological means of persuasion rather than coercion. For more, see Nye (2004).

24
An interesting read in this regard is Tim Rivera's (2015) report on cultural relations or cultural diplomacy in reference to the British Council. See also Bátora (2005); Melissen (2005); and Cull (2009).

25
Melissen 2017.

26
Kim 2017: 294

27
Williams 1961: 57–70. In this reading, Williams tries to break down the analysis of culture into three terms; ideal, documentary, and social. Ideal refers to lives, works, and values; docu-mentary is the body of the intellectual work (i.e., the actual evidence of the culture); and social is the description of a particular way of life. The social element could refer to traditions or language. Williams also ascertains that the dependent relationship between dominant, residual (as in remnants of the traditional), and emergent cultural forces is an ongoing practice of exchange, confrontation, and assimilation on all fronts within the hegemonic sphere. These three elements invariably and selectively co-opt each other (Williams 1977: 110).

28
Interview with the author, May 2, 2008, Beirut.

35

29
Interview with the author.

30
Daccache 2006: 21

31
Strategic Com-munications
Division, EU 2016.

32
(Bloembergen 2006)

33
The concept of power in public
diplomacy has been explored in
Rasmussen's discursive influence
model of normative power (2009).
These normative frameworks
have been criticized in Pamment
(2011). See Sylvester (2009) for an
alternative view that utilizes
feminist and poststructuralist
approaches to account for the
role of cul-ture in international
politics. For an excellent analysis
of Mitchell's piece, see the
introduction of his repub-lished
chapter in Preziosi (2009).

34
For more on the world
exhibitions, see both Allwood
(1977) and Benedict (1991). See
also Çelik (1992).

35
To see how the power relations
inherent to cultural diplomacy are
elided by framing the practice as
an enjoyable dimension of public
diplomacy that values free
cultural expression, see
Schneider (2004).

36
In the aftermath of the attacks of
September 11, 2001, a plethora of
articles, reports, and op-ed pieces
appeared that gave attention to
how the US and its values,
culture, and policies are
perceived abroad and how it can
improve those perceptions.
Among the recommendations
were calls for increased efforts in
the area of cultural diplomacy.
Ironically, the renewed interest in
cultural diplomacy comes at a
time when the country's
resources and infrastructure are
at their lowest levels. Since 1993,
budgets have fallen by nearly 30
percent, staff has been cut by
about 30 percent over-seas and
20 percent in the US, and dozens
of cultural centers, libraries, and
branch posts have been closed.
See "Arts and Minds: Cultural
Diplomacy amid Global Tensions"
(presentation, Columbia
University, New York, NY, April
14–15, 2003).

37
Cynthia Schneider, "Culture
Communicates: US Diplomacy
that Works," *Diplomacy*, no. 94 (S
eptember 2004) http://www.cultu
raldiplomacy.org/academy/conte
nt/articles/e-learning/read/a1/C
ulture_Communicates-_US_Diplo
macy_that_works-_Cynthia_Schn
eider.pdf .

38
Schneider, "Culture
Communicates" details these
changes in funding focus.

Lynn Xu
from Tournesol

stage right:

WAR OR RESISTENCE!

and the soul in tatters, what does
he do?

with his posthumous fever, his
posthumous thighs, his
posthumous foot christened by
the everlasting cartridge of night,

later on, when the family sits
down to wait for a man who has
already been shot,

stage right:

**NO PURE BEGINNINGS!
AND SO ON**

the aficionados,
the ones with the solid
alibis on both the left and the right
of the moral rectum
caressing
this parallel son

HOSANNA

face with tears of joy
loudly crying face?
red heart
two hearts
face with heart eyes?
waffle?
oyster?

*LIKE
THE
WAR
TO
NOURISH
YOU?*

*HAVE
TO
FEED
IT
SOMETHING
TOO!*

Oh!
insolent
turd
competing
for the latrines
of yesterday—
all
night
long
upon the public shoulders
of the infinitesimal
inside

and yesterday
even now
the streetlamps are lit
with the destiny
of the definitive: doors

windows
foreheads
stars . . .
the newborn tongue
which struggles with its mortal
advances against the
exterminating
alphabet in the unvitiated
asylum of the moon's
pickpocket—

       why
even a bear
etc.
through the tears and fur
in the trellised
girders
of the double rainbow . . .

all
that
is
swift and
living
in the meantime
taking shape
with obvious
poverty there
being no
good and evil
only
a chain
which rattles
and resounds

in us
as bells

X

Born in Shanghai, China, **Lynn Xu** is the author of *Debts & Lessons* and *And Those Ashen Heaps That Cantilevered Vase of Moonlight* (forthcoming), and the co-translator of *Pee Poems* by Lao Yang (also forthcoming). She has performed multidisciplinary works at 300 South Kelly Street, the Guggenheim Museum, the Renaissance Society, and Rising Tide Projects. She teaches at Columbia University, coedits Canarium Books, and lives with her family in New York City and West Texas.

Lewis Freedman

I Want Something
Other Than Time

I WANT SOMETHING OTHER THAN TIME. THERE IS NO VICTORY OVER DEATH, GUYS. THE DEATH GUYS FREE THEMSELVES MAKING THEMSELVES UNCATEGORIZABLE AGAIN & AGAIN, THE END AN ELASTIC DOMINION, ARTIFICE FOR US. I WAS RECRUITED TO BE A POET, BUT OUR WORLD, ONE OF INDEFINITE CENTERS, HAS ALL THE IMITATION GNOSIS, & INTERMEDIARIES IT COULD BURN (EVEN THIS EXCEPTIONAL FATIGUE). WHATEVER. THERE BEING NO SPLICE TO DISCLOSE US FURTHER, WE STILL NEED PRIVATE LANGUAGES TO BEAR EROS INTO TOUCH, TO PASS OURSELVES INTO ATTUNEMENT, TO PASS AS IMMINENT SONOROUS THINGS. THE SUN, YOU SAY, REMAINS UNINTELLIGIBLE. I'M LIKE, DITTO THE PARENT. ALL THESE ALCHEMICAL CODES INSCRIBING US TO LIVE BY THOUGHTS, TO SCALE TIME.

I
WANT
SOMETHING
OTHER THAN
TIME

I'M HESITANT TO
BEGIN BY CLIMBING
UP PLASTIC INTO THE
OLD SKY.
I HESITATE BEFORE WRITING
TODAY IS NOT A POINT TO
INVESTIGATE TODAY B/c IT'S FIRST
A RETURN TO ITS OWN FORM, HAS
NOTHING TO DO WITH TODAY.
INSTEAD A CONFUSION ABOUT COMMUNITY, ABOUT
HOW TO LISTEN TO HAVING HEARD A CONVERSATION
OF DUST CIRCULATING B/w US ALREADY
BEFORE WE'VE BEGUN, ABOUT HOW
FUCKING UP & CONDEMNING OURSELVES FOR IT,
WE MIGHT THEN REUNITE,
ABOUT HOW TO UNTIE AN IDENTICALITY WE
TURNED INTO THOUGHT TO INCITE THE DELUSION
THAT OUR SECRETS ARE NOT IN COMMON,
ABOUT HOW TO JUST BE
WHEN THE INSTANT FEELS COMPLETED NOT
LIKE A MEMORY WRITTEN THRU, BUT
LIKE A TOTALLY EXPANDING
CORRUPTION OF
THE POSSIBLE.

I WANT
SOMETHING
OTHER THAN
TIME

LIGHT & RESUSCITATE,
READY TO CONTAIN
THE LOSS OF ITSELF,
READY TO RENDER
THE FULL PARALYSIS OF VOICE
IN A PENDANT.
SENSATION OF SUCH LAST
WAYS OF SEEING
SOME PAST MODE OF ILLUMINATED
ENCOUNTER
ITS OWN LIMIT & CLOSE
TO MISTRUST THE MEDIATIONS.
THOUGH THERE IS NO AT THE BOTTOM,
THERE IS NO AT THE BOTTOM IS A DELEGATION
OF SEPARATENESS FROM THIS TO THAT,
THE UNLIMITEDNESS OF A TEST AROUND
THE SUPPRESSIONS OF HISTORY TO THE DIRECT
ARBITRARY ENDURANCE OF THE OPERATION OF
FACT.
WE DO NOT MAKE THINGS
APPEAR OR DISAPPEAR
EXCEPT BY
REPEATING THEM.

X

Lewis Freedman is, in this instance, a name of a poet, and books attributed to this name include *Residual Synonyms for the Name of God* and I Want Something Other Than Time (both from Ugly Duckling Presse).

To watch the video, visit
https://www.e-flux.com/journal/122/429494/dbwp/.

X

peter bd is a writer/performer and the author of the book
milk & henny. you can catch his monthly show "the milk &
henny experience" at the kraine theater.

Peter BD

DBWP

erica kaufman

Two Poems

PARA CLASSIC
for/after AR

begin this year split between behavioral
finance and biblical story   hint

of altruism   anxiety in the context
of text   to begin beyond a place

where people die   it rains without
emphasis light bulb inside   location

of audience of person a caterpillar first
digests itself then turns to adult structures

a puzzle to hold boring theory and other feelings
like the rush   of not jumping simply

from train to train   begin with frustration
and empty chairs a variety show conglomerate

of the kind that seeks   competence not talent
broken axioms in place of an eyeball here

is distance then faith then exile appears
a tree metaphor so listen   please

i'm no longer preoccupied   hijack
the model who sits to argue shadows active

pipelines get proximate to my own history
the chemistry behind how we become archaic

a melancholy sailor a pedestrian mall
overwhelmed by concrete all small things

wield importance purely to create
new codes resilient and vibrant

NIGHT HAMSTER
for JC, DW, BB

i don't pay attention to
hope anymore horse becomes
landmark only statement
of catchphrases stolen the ladies
know   i don't sleep much
resist causality   i'm cold in
front of the fire   occupy gesture
documentation asynchronous
couch meaning in pharmacies
totes rigidified like the museum
on juden strasse full of what
look like ancient clothes
i'm really aware of how identity
shudders as if line dancing
through omniscient points of view
i want to know how to say
you can't blame homophobia
on natural disasters   so instead
panic on flatbush   realize we're all
increasingly fallen   impose
questions dead leaves this coterie

X

Poet, writer, and teacher **erica kaufman** is the author of
 three books of poetry: *POST CLASSIC*, *INSTANT
CLASSIC* (both from Roof Books), and *censory impulse*
(Factory School). She is coeditor of *NO GENDER:
Reflections on the Life and Work of kari edwards* and a
collection of archival pedagogical documents, *Adrienne
Rich: Teaching at CUNY, 1968–1974*. kaufman is one of
the writers of *Midwinter Constellation* (Black Lawrence
Press, forthcoming), a collaboratively composed work
celebrating the 40th anniversary of Bernadette Mayer's
Midwinter Day. kaufman is the director of the Bard College
Institute for Writing & Thinking and Visiting Assistant
Professor of Humanities.

Serubiri Moses

Neither Hopeful nor Pathological: A Theory of South African Art
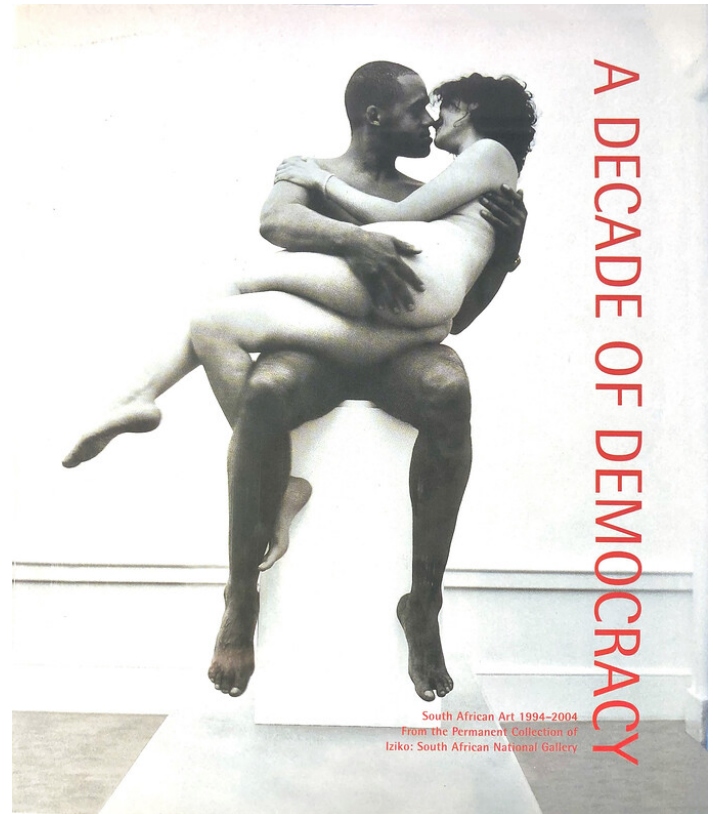
If modern Eurocentric history remains dominant in contemporary art discourse, what happens to the available theory and criticism of contemporary African art? At present, accounts of contemporary African art appear in a growing collection of critical, curatorial, and artist writing. How do these narratives, opinions, and polemics inform the critical review of African art practices? Further, in a pervasively Eurocentric setting, an atmosphere in which Western critics look at African art as illegitimate, how can a theory of South African art encourage an alternative reception of contemporary African art practices in general?

In 2005, critic Ashraf Jamal began developing the theory of art in question. That year he wrote "The Bearable Lightness of Tracey Rose's *The Kiss*" for the exhibition catalog accompanying "A Decade of Democracy: South African Art 1994–2004."[1] This exhibition attempted to demonstrate the political and historical consciousness of South African artists in the years following the country's first democratic election in 1994. Jamal's catalog essay, examining artist Tracey Rose and novelist J. M. Coetzee (both South African), shows the formulation of a theory[2] that claims a national category for art while advancing a postcolonial theory of art. In the latter, Jamal mirrors earlier attempts by contemporary philosophers Kwame Anthony Appiah, Homi Bhabha, and Valentin Yves

Mudimbe.[3] The analytic philosophical approaches of Jamal's theory of art, and similar approaches in Coetzee's theory of literature, ultimately establish artistic thought as a realm of liberation.

1. The Inheritance of Anger and Violence in J. M. Coetzee's Theory of Literature

In his 1987 Jerusalem Prize Lecture, Coetzee outlines a theory of literature rooted in political philosophy and psychology.[4] His theory concerns the politics of race in South Africa, and argues through a psychology of the individual drawn from his novels *Dusklands* (1974) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The lecture formulates its theory in three ways: (1) through the lens of what Coetzee terms "symbolic" law, considering the racial segregation law forbidding interracial sexual relations (the Immortality Act, also known as the Sexual Offenders Act, 1957); (2) through a psychological approach, by considering the "pathological attachments of anger and violence"; (3) through the notion of caste, by considering the white population as "master-caste."[5] It also reads as a denouncement of racial segregation in 1980s South Africa following the civil warfare that erupted in that decade, not only in South Africa but across Africa. During the eighties, what Mahmood Mamdani calls "senseless violence" was rampant in countries like Uganda, where similar decolonization and power struggles were taking place.

The political questions Coetzee lays out to guide his theory of literature include: (1) does "anger and violence" shape a world, and one's imagination of it?; and (2) can white people resign from their role as the master-caste? He also explores (3) the freedom and liberation of the master-caste; (4) the "crudity of life in South Africa"; (5) the perception of the nation as "irresistible" and "unlovable"; (6) and the symbolic law. How might these questions lay a foundation for Jamal's theory of art?

We learn from Jamal that Coetzee's theory of literature is yet unfulfilled, revealing the daunting challenge of creating a literature that reflects the task of quitting "a world of pathological attachments."[6]

Waiting for the Barbarians depicts a white magistrate witnessing "the Empire's cruel and unjust treatment of prisoners of war," while the earlier novel *Dusklands* explores a white colonial officer's deteriorating psychology. Both novels recall the mental corrosion of Mr. Kurtz, a Victorian seafaring explorer in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In his lecture, Coetzee plainly states that "everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste," and then claims it is impossible to resign from the master-caste, except perhaps symbolically.[7] Coetzee's claim that the condition of the master-caste is hereditary whiteness diverges from how caste is understood in India,

for example, where it is not "white skin" alone that determines one's caste, but rather various social hierarchies according to Hindu sacred texts. This early attempt at defining whiteness in literary theory is also an essentialist perspective that reinforces the stereotypical notion of those born with privilege. Even as he aims to rescue South Africa from its pathological attachment, Coetzee centers whiteness, with its foundation in imperialism and colonialism.

"In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free," he asserts. "For centuries South Africa was a society of masters and serfs; now it is a land where the serfs are in open rebellion and the masters are in disarray."[8] Thus, the nation of South Africa becomes synonymous with land. This resonates with twentieth-century land laws. Nonwhite people are synonymous with serfs and slaves. This statement also reveals the essentialism that informs Coetzee's racial history. Likewise, the definition of whiteness as "master-caste" implies a lineage of "white masters" throughout South African history.

Coetzee asks whether the master-caste is free and liberated.[9] He sets up parallel dialectics: colonialist and colonized; barbarians and civilized; masters and slaves. If we are to follow such strict boundaries of thought, and categorization, it appears rather obvious to me that freedom and liberation would be granted to one subject and not the other. Coetzee's notion of a South Africa as "irresistible as it is unlovable" presents another dialectic that foregrounds both the threat of violence and the crisis of morality.[10] That is, Coetzee sees South Africa as unlovable for its moral bankruptcy of caste, and irresistible to the colonizing mechanism, particularly in regard to natural resources. This dialectic is mirrored in law: the notion of the racial segregation law as "symbolic" suggests that the law is not only constitutional—in other words, enforced through state violence—but also moral. Coetzee thus rearticulates the law in terms of a set of parallel dialectics: individual and collective; moral and political; actual and symbolic.

Jamal throws down the gauntlet on this historiography and its dialectics. He opposes Coetzee's characterization of South African history through the lens of barbarism. Coetzee's account of barbarism relies on a dialectic of barbarism and civilization; and further, when the novelist speaks of agency and subjectivity—as in the agency of questioning the master-caste, or in the subjectivity of white colonial characters in his novels—he does so in a way that centers whiteness as the benchmark of a history of the nation. Jamal's task is to push back against this idea that "agency" is only possessed by white subjects. He rails against the idea of "barbarism" writ large in South African history.

By countering that "South Africa is not irresistible and unlovable," Jamal directly rewrites—and to an extent negates—Coetzee's statement, which Jamal calls as

"efficacious as it is disingenuous."[11] The critic's revision of the statement ("I propose that South Africa is resistible and lovable") perhaps functions as *affirmative sabotage*. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak uses that term as a "gloss on the usual meaning of sabotage: the deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside." She explains that affirmative sabotage is instead "the idea of entering the discourse that you are criticizing fully, so that you can turn it around from the inside."[12] Judging by the affirmative attitude that Jamal borrows from Coetzee's lecture, I view him attempting to fully inhabit Coetzee's theory of literature so that he can turn its language around on itself. Jamal takes Coetzee's theme of the pathological, which the novelist uses to examine the psychological deterioration of white subjects, and redirects it towards "rethink[ing] the pathology of our history."[13]

Jamal appropriates and repurposes Coetzee's language, particularly the latter's formulation about "the crudity of life in South Africa ... its callousness, and its brutalities." As Jamal writes:

> When art is not depressive or gauchely hopeful, it enables the lightness that frees South Africa from the brute template that has disfigured it. When such art happens we are invited into a speculative and wondrously improbable arena where fascination no longer revolts, where the perversity of one's birth is no longer the birth of perversity per se, where givens groan under the weight of their absurdity, and one suddenly alights upon a place that, at best, can be described as the place of the imagination.[14]

Here Jamal rearticulates Coetzee's statement about South Africa's crudeness and brutality as "the brute template that has disfigured it," juxtaposing this with art's political role in "freeing South Africa." I view this gesture as mirroring Coetzee's characterization of South African law as having a double function: both moral and political, individual and collective. Jamal echoes this Kantian articulation of the law, and sketches out a theory of art that is neither "hopeful" nor "depressive." Instead, echoing Milan Kundera, Jamal emphasizes the artist's ability to create "lightness." His theory centers on this notion of art as a neutralizing force, one that can contribute to freeing South Africa.[15] By linking liberation and art, Jamal promotes a Kantian perspective, which, according to scholar Gabriella Basterra, entails that "freedom manifests itself through moral law." As Basterra argues, "that freedom is actual means it motivates the subject to act."[16] That act is the creation of "lightness." This repositions art under the auspices of moral law, as a countering force to the callousness and brutality that has brought about what Coetzee calls "a world of pathological attachments."

Jamal extends this psychoanalytic language of Coetzee's

when he discusses Tracey Rose's video *TKO* (2000):

> Irrespective of her trickery, her mockery, her fraught eye, her terribly self-reflexive carnage, [Tracey Rose] at no point allows herself to be beguiled by the pathological. Illness for her is not an inheritance or a moral duty but a plague she roots out with a vengeance. The video work *TKO* reveals the artist beating the shit out of a punching bag. In grainy black and white, the images quaver, nauseously revolve, accompanied by the accelerated panting of the artist.[17]

It may sound aggressive to highlight "the artist beating the shit out of a punching bag," but it is the central action of the work, and a welcome aggression. Aggressiveness functions to "root out" the deeply embedded problems of erasure and misnaming in universalist art history. The punching bag, a visual image, is part of the video *TKO*, the art object. Its presence is authentic to the narrative of freedom, and as in great epics and historical novels, catharsis is central to how history is told. The act of punching the bag is a mirror of "lightness" and catharsis. In Jamal's theory of art, it is a neutralizing force that has implications for national liberation. However, the punching itself is also an abstraction, and its catharsis is psychoanalytical. The notion of a theory as a neutralizing force is formulated against the backdrop of analytic philosophy and its idea of "truth"; modern philosophy and its grand narratives of freedom, modernity, empire, and violence, as well as the general logic of reason.

2. Freedom as Refusal in Ashraf Jamal's Theory of Art

How might we pivot from Coetzee's considerations of the 1957 Immorality Act to Jamal's theory of post-1994 South African art? How does Coetzee's unfreedom pivot to Jamal's aim for art to "free South Africa"? The recognition of the dual character of law in Coetzee's lecture alerts us to the individual and the collective, the symbolic and the actual. It also highlights the complexity of Kant's thinking regarding freedom and its existence. Is freedom real? Does it exist? And if it does, how do we prove its existence? For Kant, moral law is proof of freedom's existence. Basterra argues that "freedom exceeds reason's ability to conceptualize. We can only define freedom negatively as an empty space beyond what can be thought."[18] This is further explained in relation to subjectivity and the intelligible. "Freedom is *in* the subject, even though the subject has no access to freedom. A member of unwitting causality, the subject is also the unwitting *bearer* of freedom, and thus is related to the intelligible."[19] These definitions of freedom enable a wrestling with subjectivity. How then to situate these definitions in the examination of Jamal's claim of art's role in "freeing South Africa"?

STEVE BIKO- I WRITE WHAT I LIKE

If good may be said to come from a situation in which those who walk unbowed are those who fill the prisons, then Steve Biko and the vision this book represents must surely be counted part of that good. These pages prove that, while they may fill the prisons with just men and women, they may arrest and beat and kill the best of their generation, they may close down every press that prints the truth, yet from every corner the dispensers of injustice will be met with the victorious cry, *"Amandla ngawethy!"*: Strength is ours.

A selection of his writings edited with a personal memoir by Aelred Stubbs C.R.

Published in San Francisco by
HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS
New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London

Steve Biko, I Write What I Like, ed. Aelred Stubbs C. R. (Harper & Row Publishers, 1979).

The Kantian idea of moral law is one in which the subject has agency and is intelligible. But this view is challenged by the "symbolic" laws that define whiteness and racial segregation. Coetzee's lecture alerts us to the symbolic and actual laws as they operate in South Africa. I suspect that the novelist defines the law of segregation as symbolic because he pursues a Kantian understanding of the law as moral law, and thus believes in the sensible and intelligible. Coetzee's lecture is attentive to the ways in which white South Africans have unconsciously extended the actual law of segregation—for example, in their "denial of an unacknowledged desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and the fear of being embraced in return by Africa."[20]

This characterization departs from the 1957 law against interracial sexual relations, and therefore, "embracing Africa" reifies this law into symbolism. Is the question about "embracing Africa"—that is, seeing it objectively from outside of white subjectivity—or is the question about cohabitation with African subjects? The latter would mean banning racial segregation, and ultimately the transformation of legal and everyday practices of humaneness in South Africa. That is, if we trust Kant's suggestion that subjectivity is a phenomenon of nature.[21] Jamal departs from Coetzee here to revise the latter's lecture and its theory of literature in order to formulate a theory of art.

For Coetzee, "freedom" is accessed through a transformation of subjectivity (the disavowal of pathological attachment) and through racial integration (the embrace of Africa). Ultimately, this creates tense social relations, which lead to what Chantal Mouffe might

call political antagonism. Yet the weight of the transformation of subjectivity in Coetzee's *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* is placed on the psychological, tending towards the Nietzschean "physiological thought." To "quit a world of pathological attachments," Coetzee challenges "abstract forces of anger and violence."[22] The novelist analyzes pathologies of violence and anger in South Africa through the lens of whiteness. As part of his methodology, Coetzee uses free association, aiming to root out the anger and violence of "historical" whiteness and its anxieties. He finds an answer to the problem of pathology in the space of imagination, citing Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Coetzee relays the pivotal beginning of Quixote's quest: "He leaves behind hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enters the realm of faery by what amounts to a willed act of the imagination."[23] Back in Coetzee's present, Freudian analysis enables the transformation of the subject at hand—the white South African subject—in order to "embrace Africa" and ultimately destroy Apartheid in South Africa. Coetzee's notion of freedom, following Kant, rests within reason. If the white South African subject is to annihilate their unfreedom, it can only take place within the intelligible, the space of reason, and, following Cervantes, the space of imagination.

Coetzee's *Dusklands* achieves this transformation through analyzing the psychological state of Jacobus Coetzee (the novelist's ancestor), and his violence against the Nama, an African society. Though members of the Nama care for the traveling protagonist while he battles illness, he later returns to them, vengeful, on a violent campaign that shows his inhumanity. In a 1984 essay, Coetzee describes the events of eighteenth-century European travel narratives to Namaqualand (Namibia and South Africa) that inspired the novel as "the fortunes of the Hottentots in a history written not by them but for them, from above, by travelers and missionaries, not excluding my remote ancestor Jacobus Coetzee, *floruit* 1760."[24] Psychoanalytic scholar Steven Groarke writes of these colonial travel narratives that "Jacobus Coetzee's narrative itself is an overdetermined expression of self-consciousness, a racist myth of history, and a theological justification of genocidal violence. The violence of frontier terror is pivotal."[25] Jamal advances a theory of art that destabilizes Coetzee's psychoanalysis by challenging the myth of inheritance in his theory of literature. Jamal does this through: (1) denouncing the myth of inheritance of pathological illness; and (2) developing a theory of art rooted in a neutralizing force, with implications for national liberation. As we have learned from Freud, myths and their propagation are the basis of nationalism. If Jamal refuses myth in favor of play, it is nevertheless a playfulness that serves the nation.

By rejecting the inheritance of pathological illness (such as that of Jacobus Coetzee), Jamal refuses the myth of South African art as conditioned only by what he refers to as a "tidy pathological matrix."[26] Jamal refuses to theorize art along the racial lines of a "closed hereditary caste"

established in Coetzee's lecture. Importantly, this refusal signals a redefining of Coetzee's universalism. Jamal's theory of art is inclusive of all races in South Africa, and carries the weight of the sensible. Rejecting inheritance is the refusal of the white colonial foundational myths of the modern South African state. This can certainly be understood as an act of decolonization. Jamal's theory of art, in other words, includes a psychology of decolonization that destabilizes the myths of modern and contemporary art as an exclusively white enterprise. Coetzee's sharp clarification of the anxieties of "historical" whiteness is South Africa, and his articulation of racial history, is what allows Jamal to challenge the inheritance of whiteness within art.

Jamal's decolonizing vision of art is dependent on a two-fold resistance to Coetzee's racialized myth: (1) political resistance against a hereditary caste; and (2) psychological resistance against inheriting illness. Jamal's discernment of playfulness, humor, and lightness in Tracey Rose's artwork enables his theory to depart from the "moral law" that shapes subjecthood in Coetzee's lecture. Instead, he argues for art as a neutralizing force that "roots out" all pathology. Art is a psychoanalytical tool in a process of decolonization. This reveals a political motive behind his case for art as an aggressive force. Based on his citations of Steve Biko (*I Write What I Like*, 1977) and Ben Okri (Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, 2012), this aggressive turn in his theory, and its hostility towards "pathological attachments" and psychosis, can be understood as Jamal's formulation of a modern national consciousness, following Steve Biko's theory of Black Consciousness. It is important to note that the universal in Jamal's modern national subject is not identical to Coetzee's racial universalism. As such, Jamal's theory should not be confused with Pan-Africanism.

Some of these issues are further clarified in Jamal's 2015 article "Long Overdue," published in *Art Africa* magazine. In the article, Jamal's ambivalence towards Africa is keenly felt. He rejects Coetzee's call to embrace Africa, and his doubt registers as pessimism. This pessimism can be seen to be in dialogue with philosopher Achille Mbembe, whose theories on postcolonial Africa have influenced the theorization of afro-pessimism in the United States. In particular, Jamal rejects the blind optimism of "embracing Africa" through the capitalist system of art fairs and art auctions, describing it as the new "scramble for Africa." This, too, confirms the Jamal's interest in decolonization.

The title "Long Overdue" is a reference to Steve Biko's monumental book of Black Consciousness, *I Write What I Like*. Jamal extends Biko's book, as well as novelist Ben Okri's Steve Biko Memorial Lecture from 2012, in order to diversify consciousness for a theory of national art. Biko provides a postcolonial humanism, while Okri provides a theory of literature in naming "three Africas," one of which isn't readily visible. These are, according to Okri, "the one

we see everyday; the one they write about; and the real magical Africa that we don't see unfolding through all the difficulties of our time, like a quiet miracle."[27] Jamal's theory extends these sources of pessimism, postcolonial humanism, and Ben Okri's "invisible" Africa to a theory of South African art.

While reconciling these diverse interests, Jamal ultimately centers individuality in his theory. Jamal pursues Coetzee's thoughts on the meeting of artistic and analytical knowledge in the subject, which can be seen as bringing together aesthetic experience and judgement. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that "without the sensuous faculty, no object would be given to us." And thus, logic necessarily intersects with sensibility and is also "sensuous cognition." This idea of the sensible is what enables Jamal to designate the artist as a thinking individual. Thus, positioning the artist as a thinker transforms South African art by centering freedom within the subject's sensuous cognition. Here, the possibilities of freedom manifest in artistic investigation.

Jamal is interested in the "political" in way that doesn't center whiteness as a universal, but rather aims at employing "aggressiveness" in the struggle against historical anxieties. The political motive of freeing South Africa is what lies behind, for example, Jamal's hostility towards "pathological attachments." In the waltz between lightness and aggressiveness, we witness the range of possibilities for the artist's thought and action. Sigmund Freud wrote about the aggressive drive in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), where he held that without culture, people were driven to extremes by a certain aggressiveness. The mixture of aggressiveness and applied logic in Jamal's theory of art means that artists are thinking and acting politically.

The notion of "lightness" in Jamal's theory comes from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). In an interview, Kundera foregrounds lightness and playfulness when he mentions the "specificity of the novelistic essay (in other words, instead of claiming to convey some apodictic message, remaining hypothetical, playful, or ironic)."[28] For me, these light-hearted aspects can only exist side by side with the aggressive drive we witness in Freud. This waltz between lightness and aggressiveness introduces a theoretical framework in which to situate the strategic thought of calling out the madness of historical violence, while still presenting irony and lighthearted playfulness. These aspects of lightness, aggressiveness, applied logic, and sensuous cognition further define Jamal's theory of art.

Since aggressiveness is established in dialogue with Tracey Rose's video *TKO*, Jamal locates the punching bag within a psychology of aggression. The act of punching the bag in the video is aggressive and violent. Jamal justifies this kind of violence as a neutral rooting out pathological illness with a vengeance. It is a rational

counteracting force to historical violence, with the aim of eradicating madness. The notion of a force that counteracts historical violence recalls the theme of aggressiveness in political philosophy, notably in Hannah Arendt (*On Violence*, 1968), and Chantal Mouffe (*The Return of the Political*, 1993).

Central to Jamal's rebuttal of Coetzee's account of whiteness as a master-caste is a refusal to accept or tolerate the inheritance of illness and pathology. Jamal presents a postcolonial theory of art that denounces pathological inheritance and historical violence (e.g., laws of segregation), while embracing Okri's magical Africa and Biko's Black Consciousness. While Jamal's theory advocates a national art that is ambivalent towards Pan-Africanism, his rejection of a universal master-caste narrative is what I identify here as his politics. I view this rejection and its hostility as aligned with Mouffe's notion of the political. Mouffe takes issue with a notion of politics that is "rationalist, universalist and individualist," traits which she says have come to mark democracy.[29] She also calls out the "incapacity of liberal thought to grasp … the irreducible character of antagonism" in politics.[30] Fiercely defending the idea that political action takes place both outside and inside institutions, Mouffe's calls attention to modern political theory's blindness towards antagonism.

By praising aggressiveness, Jamal's theory of art comes very close to the theory articulated by Frantz Fanon in the chapter "On Violence" from his *The Wretched of the Earth*. This means that Jamal can be subject to the same criticisms that were directed at Fanon. Hannah Arendt stands out as one of Fanon's most articulate critics. She was strongly opposed to Fanon's conception of political violence as chiefly justified through creativity. She argued that in his writings on Algeria, "Fanon concludes his praise of violence by remarking that in this kind of struggle 'the people realize that life is an unending contest,' that violence is an element of life."[31] While this sounds plausible, Arendt goes on to challenge Fanon's equation of violence with creativity, quoting Fanon's formulation of "creative madness."[32] While Jamal's theory of art stands against racial violence and the historical anxieties of whiteness as pathological illness, it is still a theory that deploys aggressiveness in the context of art and creativity. If this gesture is balanced by reason and applied logic, these analytical aspects paired with Tracey Rose's thinking might rescue Jamal's theory from the "creative madness" that Arendt opposes.

3. Art History and Difference in Tracey Rose's Artistic Vocabulary

Around the turn of this century, Tracey Rose made a number of photographic artworks modeled after Auguste Rodin sculptures, specifically *Authenticity 1* (1996) and *The Kiss* (2001). The latter was made during Rose's artist

residency at Iziko: South African National Gallery. As curator Emma Bedford writes, in *The Kiss* "the canons of conventional art history are imploded by substituting the marble-white bodies, those epitomes of aesthetic perfection, with bodies that assert their difference through a range of skin tones."[33] This implosion of art history in Rose's perambulations around Rodin inspired Jamal to argue for an art that confronts national history writ large. *The Kiss* portrays Rose and Christian Haye, her dealer, in an intimate embrace on a plinth, echoing the Rodin sculpture of the same name. The picture was staged inside the Iziko, highlighting the European classical model that is at the core of the museum collection, as evidenced by, among other things, the gallery's permanent hanging of equestrian paintings from the collection of Abe Bailey, the diamond tycoon and politician with ties to the likes of Cecil Rhodes. Juxtaposing the museum's plinth and white walls with the colored bodies embracing in the frame, Rose's *The Kiss* asserts historical and racial difference in its mode of parody. In subsequent showings, the work was viewed as a direct critique of "a unified image of post-apartheid society bathing in its own glory."[34] This view, emphasizing the dismantling of neat and tidy images of South Africa, confirms Rose's distance from what Mouffe calls "rationalist, universalist and individualist" politics. The artist's foregrounding of difference and "multiplicity" reveals a radical politics that differs from the politics of both Coetzee and Jamal, who both make universalist claims (about caste and national art, respectively).

As art historian Kellie Jones argues, Rose's practice centers both writing and thinking.[35] What are the operations behind Rose's art-as-thinking? The conceptualism in her practice is evident in its references and citations, including of artists such as Rodin. Another aspect of Rose's art-as-thinking concerns the various strategies she uses to highlight difference. Rose's artworks adopt multiple subject positions, which has the effect of collapsing universalist modes of thought—like those found in art history. In works such as *Ciao Bella* (2001), Rose performs as different female characters, including the nineteenth-century Xhosa woman Saartjie Baartman, taken from the Cape Coast to Europe to act as a living spectacle, and Mami, a stern Catholic school mistress. Like the work of feminist theorist Audre Lorde, who analyzed class and gender-identity differences among black women, Rose's work shatters assumptions about subjectivity and knowledge.

While Rose's art challenges neat art-historical canons and disrupts assumptions about black women in particular, we would be remiss to consider Rose a scientific thinker performing art-historical analysis or revision. This notion obscures the artist's unique approach, which offers alternatives to thinking through subjectivity, knowledge, and narrative. Rose tackles these philosophical topics using creative, fictional, playful, and performative strategies. In her performance lecture *The Can't Show*,

delivered at the Brooklyn Museum in the context of the exhibition "Global Feminisms" (2007), Rose, dressed as the Catholic schoolmistress Mami, told the story of women in conceptual art, mentioning artists like Adrian Piper and Barbara Kruger. The performance employed the puppet ventriloquism of European theater. While audiences could walk away from the performance with art-historical knowledge, the story Rose presented was far from scientific truth. Treating the performance as truth would obscure the artist's creative strategy to present this knowledge to the audience through fiction.

As seen in works like *Ciao Bella* and *The Kiss*, there is a clear emphasis on difference in Rose's practice. This tendency diverges significantly from the universal claims about national art in Jamal's theory of art, and about caste in Coetzee's theory of literature. Rose is unapologetic about the engagement with difference in her art-as-thinking, which foregrounds racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjects. In Chantal Mouffe's terms, Rose is engaging in a radical antagonistic politics that differs from the Kantian rationalism and universalism that informs much historical and aesthetic writing.

Still, through her citational and comparative practices, Rose inspires Jamal's theory of art, one in which artists think and act politically while confronting historical violence. Jamal's theory aims at disavowing the inheritance of pathological illness and historical violence, opposing Coetzee's notion of caste in favor of diversified consciousness. Jamal challenges easy assumptions about South African artists and their work in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Jamal's view, the artistic subject acts politically to "free South Africa." In a Kantian vein, Jamal's theory centers individuality and the rationalism of the artist-thinker. This emphasis on the artist-thinker foregrounds art as a domain of liberation.

X

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1
Ashraf Jamal, "The Bearable Lightness of Tracey Rose's *The Kiss* ," in *A Decade of Democracy: South African Art 1994–2004: From the Permanent Collection of Iziko: South African National Gallery,* ed. Emma Bedford (Double Storey Books, 2005), 102–9. The essay focuses on Tracey Rose's video works *TKO* (2000) and *Ciao Bella* (2001), and her photographic print *The Kiss* (2001).

2
The theory has taken further shape in Jamal's writings in art magazines, as well as in the introduction to his book *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art* (Skira, 2017), 11–14.

3
Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991); Homi Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," in *Cultural Diversity in the Arts: Art, Art Policies and the Facelift of Europe* , ed. Ria Lavrijsen (Royal Tropical Institute, 1993); Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

4
J. M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)," in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* , ed. David Attwell (Harvard University Press, 1992), 96–101.

5
Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize."

6
"How we long to quit a world of pathological attachments, and abstract forces of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation." Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 98.

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Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 96.

8
Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 96.

9
"The unfreedom of the master-caste." Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 96.

10
"The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable." Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 99. Italics added.

11
"South Africa is not irresistible and unlovable as Coetzee has claimed, a claim as efficacious as it is disingenuous; rather, the view I would propose is that South Africa is resistible and lovable. By this I mean that one survives the barbarism of one's history irrespective of the template that has normalised one's illness. Coetzee knows this, as does any thinker who has delved into the pain that has been said to define what it means to be South Africa." Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 106.

12
Gayatri Spivak, "When Law is Not Justice," *New York Times*, July 13, 2016.

13
Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 108.

14
Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 106.

15
Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 106.

16
Gabriela Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom: Kant, Lévinas* (Fordham University Press, 2015), 9.

17
Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 106.

18
Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 6.

19
Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 6.

20
Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 97.

21
Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 7.

22
Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 98.

23
Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize," 98.

24
Quoted in Steven Groarke, "The Disgraced Life in J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* ," *American Imago* 75, no. 1 (2018).

25
Groarke, "The Disgraced Life," 35.

26
Jamal, "Bearable Lightness," 103.

27
Ben Okri, Thirteenth Steve Biko Annual Memorial Lecture, University of Cape Town, September 12, 2012 http://www.uct.ac.za/downloads/news.uct.ac.za/lectures/stevebiko/Ben_Okri_transcript.pdf .

28
Milan Kundera, "The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review*, no. 92 (Summer 1984).

29
"The evasion of the political could, I believe, jeopardize the hard-won conquests of the democratic revolution, which is why, in the essays included in this volume, I take issue with the conception of politics that informs a great deal of democratic thinking today. This conception can be characterized as rationalist, universalist and individualist. I argue that its main shortcoming is that it cannot but remain blind to the specificity of the political in its dimension of conflict/decision, and that it cannot perceive the constitutive role of antagonism in social life." Chantal Mouffe, introduction to *The Return of the Political* (Verso, 1993), 2.

30
Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* , 4.

31
Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt Brace, 1970), 69.

32
Arendt, *On Violence*, 75.

33
Emma Bedford, introduction to *fresh: Tracey Rose* (Iziko: South Africa National Gallery, 2003), 5.

34
Kim Gurney, "Ten Years On," *Arthrob* , no. 1 (May 2004).

35
Kellie Jones, "Tracey Rose: Post-apartheid Playground," in *fresh: Tracey Rose* .

Irmgard Emmelhainz

Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

Life and society worldwide have been transformed by digital technology, including the fabrics of emotional relationships. Many believed the internet would be the largest ungoverned space in the world with unlimited emancipatory potential, and trusted Big Tech to make the world a better place. Yet power and capitalism filled that space with surveillance systems, the production of private capital, the monetization of data, and the control of human lives. Social media now shape daily life and many have lost faith in the possibility of a shared consensus reality. We are living in a scenario similar to one imagined by *Black Mirror*: our belief in digital communication and social media creates narcissistic personalities, selves dissociated and dislocated from their reflections online. Digital communication offers an opaque mirror that delivers egos without bodies, eliding alterity.

The collapse of reality, however, is not an unintended consequence of advancements in, for instance, artificial intelligence: it was the long-term objective of many technologists, who sought to create machines capable of transforming human consciousness (like drugs do). Communication has become a site for the extraction of surplus value, and images operate as both commodities and dispositives for this extraction. Moreover, data mediates our cognition, that is to say, the way in which we exist and perceive the world and others. The image—and the unlimited communication promised by constant imagery—have ceased to have emancipatory potential. Images place a veil over a world in which the isolated living dead, thirsty for stimulation and dopamine, give and collect likes on social media. Platform users exist according to the Silicon Valley utopian ideal of life's complete virtualization.

The internet, moreover, has radically changed the political communications game and must be considered a complex propaganda apparatus. Although a single Tweet can destroy someone's career, and fake news can start a real news cycle, meaning is subordinate to the circulation of vacuous content. The capitalist capture of data for profit does not rely on policing content; the production of capital only relies on the constant exchange and circulation of information. We don't yet know the full extent of the manipulation of companies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon in the last two elections in the US or in other elections around the world. But it is undeniable that digital platforms are actively censoring content in the interests of particular political actors. For instance: in October 2020, Zoom canceled a meeting hosting Palestinian human rights activist Leila Khaled; a month before, Facebook and Twitter censored information detrimental to Joseph Biden's presidential campaign. The same two companies intervened and shut down pro-Trump accounts in 2020, even Donald Trump's own Facebook and Twitter accounts.

After the attempted coup at the US capitol on January 6, 2020, Facebook's recently instituted oversight board ruled

Still from Jean-Luc Godard's 2014 film Adieu Au Language.

that Trump had created "an environment where a serious risk of violence was possible." In this light, it seems likely that he will continue to be banned from the platform. According to journalist Shoshana Zuboff, however, this is insufficient, given that the oversight board's decision (whose work is supported by a $130 million endowment from Facebook) follows years of inaction by CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who indulged and appeased Trump while entrenching what Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism."[1] A liberal might think that shutting up Trump and helping Biden is not bad, as they are actions that seemingly advance the interests of the Democratic Party. What is at stake here, however, is not whether the platforms take a "good" or "bad" stance on a particular issue; the problem is that they have immense unchecked power and can act as they please. Platforms are allowed to secretly extract behavioral data from users, whether or not users are aware, transforming the information into targeted ads, destroying privacy, changing human experience into data, altering elections, and reshaping human civilization. This structure can be termed the "cybernetic episteme," and the new form of control, which goes beyond the previous regime of biopower, can be termed "neuropower."

According to its Greek etymology, an "episteme" is a system of understanding. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault uses the term " *épistemè*" to mean the nontemporal or a priori knowledge that grounds what is taken as truth in a given moment. Several epistemes coexist at a given time, as they constitute parts of various systems of power and knowledge. The cybernetic episteme, as defined by the collective Tiqqun some twenty years ago, describes our relationship to technology and machines (which are inseparable from the workings of capitalism).[2] The cybernetic episteme is based on the modern tenet of progress and human-led transcendence achieved through science and technology.

Under neuropower, the sensible gives way to cognitive pathologies. These pathologies depend on the consumption of content rather than the sharing of meaning. As Thomas Metzinger explains, the internet has become an integral part of how we model ourselves, as we use it for external memory storage, as a cognitive prosthesis, and for emotional self-regulation. This has radically changed the structure of conscious experience, creating a new form of waking consciousness that resembles "a mixture of dreaming, dementia, intoxication, and infantilization."[3] Other effects of neuropower are humans' growing invisibility to each other and a paroxysmal racism that infiltrates power, technology, culture, language, and work. For Franco "Bifo" Berardi, racism has become a "virus" that exacerbates fear—above all, the fear of extinction, which seems to have become one of the motors behind white supremacy in the world.[4] Dissociated from our environment, alienated from each other, we are oblivious to the challenges that are being posed to humanity by the Capitalocene.

1.

Under lockdown, internet-based technology became embedded in everyday life more than ever before. Zoom and other platforms became the matrix of a production model that exacerbates the power of technology over society. A new lockdown economy has emerged in this disembodied communication space, where knowledge is subsumed under the rules of capital accumulation. The pandemic has led to extreme alienation, to the point that privilege is defined as depending on invisible laborers to sustain forms of life. This means that a new "virtual working class" has emerged that can take basics like food, water, and electricity for granted, knowing that they do not have to risk their bodies to have these comforts.

Until 2016, digital technology promised access to all human knowledge, unlimited exchange, self-expression, democratization, participation, opportunities to make money, the acceleration of bureaucratic processes, and the means for grassroots and popular power to challenge governments and corporations. The peak of this alluring cyber-utopia came around 2010–11, when social media played a crucial role in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements. But in 2016, when Cambridge Analytica was revealed to have intervened in the US elections that brought Donald Trump to power, the public's belief in such technologies to change power structures began to shift. We witnessed the worldwide rise of right-wing governments and populist movements supported by wealth. Maurizzio Ferraris has called this the era of "post-truth," when the deconstruction of a stable truth became an important political tool.[5] In online public space, discourse has been shattered, truth has become indiscernible, and relativism has become the norm. The public sphere—the bastion of established and emerging democracies, bolstered by mass media—began to shatter.

Leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi have used digital communications to construct charismatic identities and disseminate populist messages, causing deep social and political polarization. Politics has profoundly mutated: while minorities and people at the margins have found ways to validate their speech by expressing their perspectives, individualized propaganda has become the order of the day. Algorithms feed users the information they search for, resulting in personalized information bubbles designed to engage preexisting biases. Much of the news media now functions by monetizing user engagement through this type of targeting, which has led to new forms of intensified racism and other types of prejudice. Author Andrey Mir has termed this "postjournalism."[6] He explains that, since mass media outlets have lost publicity revenue, they need to monetize engagement on the internet and do so by generating anger and hatred, usually directed at some specific group of people. For many, the news is the way to access the world, and rage has become currency: platforms drive and monetize anger as a mode of engagement.

A complex form of authoritarianism is emerging, linked to digital platforms owned by the powerful CEOs who make up the notorious "Silicon Six." Under the new authoritarianism, populations are no longer commanded: they are asked to participate, and in this simulation of involvement, the "ideology of connection" replaces the idea of social relations, neutralizing democratic demands from users to have control over their own lives, rights, and data. In this way, people are made passive.[7] Cédric Durand explains the difference between the original conception of the World Wide Web and the subsequent development of closed platforms. The WWW began as a decentralized architecture in which a generic transaction protocol (http) and a uniform identification format (URI/URL) generated a space of *flat* content. In this space, human and nonhuman agents could have access to information without any third-party mediation. In contrast, closed platforms use application programming interfaces, or APIs, to mediate interaction, giving way to data loops in which interactions are more dense. The technical object that sustains this hierarchical architecture is the API, each of which is owned by a platform. On the one hand, big platforms, by way of APIs, offer apps that incorporate basic and indispensable data for users. On the other, platforms have access to the additional information generated by the API, such as user activity and buying habits. As the ecosystem grows in complexity, the platform is able to accumulate more and more data.[8] We become more densely connected with each other and with the platforms every day, as our lives get more and more tied to the cloud. Our dependency on platforms provides the ground for technofeudalism. Historically, feudalism was characterized by a fundamental inequality that enabled the direct exploitation of peasants by lords. The lord was both the manager and

master not only of the process of production, but of the entire process of social life. In today's technofeudalism, platform owners are the digital lords and users are the serfs. Rather than commodity production, these platforms are geared towards accumulation through rent, debt, and the privatization of the basic infrastructure that sustains our lives. What is at stake is no longer "true" or "fake" information but the cybernetic episteme upon which our lives and subjectivities have been built.

The cybernetic episteme is premised upon modernity's enclosure of experience. In modern epistemology, which is the precondition of the cybernetic episteme, the self is externalized and experienced at a remove from the body. Perception is centered on the brain and eyes instead of the whole body, separating sensation from reason. The self's relationship with the world is mediated through mirrors, camera lenses, the canvas, the microscope, and mathematical models.[9] The cybernetic episteme, moreover, is inextricable from colonialism, which entails dispossession, dislocation, dissociation, and appropriation. Ariella Azoulay has called the logic underpinning these processes "the shutter"; this logic is materialized in photographic technology that separates humans from objects, self from the world, and people from their lands. The shutter is the principle of imperialism by which campaigns of plunder have left people both worldless and objectless. For Azoulay, the logic of the shutter was invented centuries before photography gave it a technological apparatus, and it enabled the dispossession of non-Western peoples in tandem with the accumulation of visual and material wealth in archives and museums in the West.[10]

The cybernetic episteme is likewise conceptually constituted by this shutter, since it relies on capturing, naming, moving, and archiving subjects—as does imperialism. In this regard, the cybernetic episteme naturalizes the mediation of the self; it creates not only the condition of detachment from the world, but allows the appropriation of the cultures of others, as well as the dissolution of collective being. The shutter is akin to Heidegger's *Gestell* or "representation," which goes hand in hand with Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism. The *Gestell* and the shutter both imply that the world and experience have become representation, through an aesthetic order in which what is produced as artifice becomes the reality of experience.

In a 2017 Facebook promo video for a new virtual reality technology, Mark Zuckerberg and his colleague Rachel Frank tele-transported themselves to Puerto Rico after a devastating flood. They intended to showcase the potential of the new technology, but instead revealed its inherent violence. The ability to transport oneself to faraway places "as if" one's body were present gives the illusion that one we can make a difference in the world through technology.[11] Another example, in a different register of colonial modernity is that way Western

museums allow visitors to "transport" themselves by observing objects looted from elsewhere, like the Pergamon Museum in Berlin where museumgoers can roam around the Ishtar Gate, which has been on display in the museum since 1930. In a section of Ariella Azoulay's video *Undocumented: Unlearning Imperial Plunder* (2020), she films actual visitors to the Pergamon while noting that dislocation is the essence of (imperial) modernity. The VR museum visitor is at the center of a world, but they are not really *there* (an effect similar to the dispositive of perspective in painting). For globalized Western culture, the ground for vision, enlightenment, culture, and even social change is the dislocation and disappearance of bodies.[12]

Disembodiment and dislocation are also fundamental epistemological premises of transhumanist Silicon Valley ideology. In this ideology, the teleology of secular modern individualism culminates in the uploading of a person's mind to a new biological, artificial, or biological-artificial body. The utopian goal of expanding and preserving human consciousness is physically and spiritually achieved. Transhumanism is the dream of enhancing the human body through technology, and ultimately escaping human suffering by transcending the "errors" of death and aging.

Posthumanism takes things a step further: its goal is to immortalize consciousness by uploading it to a robotic or synthetic body. Posthumanism does away with the biological dimension of the self, fundamentally altering what it means to be "human." In both trans- and posthumanism, technology promises to give us the divine attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, making humans into "pure consciousness," achieving a kind of individual and secular transcendence. In the first episode of the British TV series *Years and Years* (2019), Bethany, an adolescent whose face is hidden behind a 3D emoji mask, announces to her parents that she is "transhuman." She declares: "I don't want to be flesh. I want to escape this thing and become digital, I want to live forever as information." Eventually Bethany becomes a hero with transhuman superpowers: her mechanized eyes and brain, which are connected to all the data in the world, allow her to make visible the horrors that the British government have perpetrated in a refugee camp. This techno-utopian narrative implies a democratic ideology, insofar as one political goal of democracy is to make visible the ordeals of oppressed minorities—in this case through virtual disembodiment.

In contrast to this techno-utopian narrative, science fiction—especially cyberpunk literature— generally portrays transhumanism as a nightmarish apocalyptic scenario of social control and individual subjection. Several episodes of *Black Mirror* do this, for example. But what *Black Mirror* and *Years and Years* have in common is that technological advances and the increasing symbiosis between humans and machines are associated

with political, economic, and social instability. In reality, "mind uploading" has attracted millions of dollars of investment from the billionaires of Silicon Valley and beyond. In a mixture of engineering and enlightenment, consciousness is now being hacked through biofeedback techniques, meditation practices, and microdosing drugs. Many critics have observed that the utopian ideology of transhumanism underpins the Valley's culture of "move fast, break things, and make as much money as possible." Technologies aiming to expand human consciousness are rooted in purely extractivist, capitalist values. In this sense, cybernetics is a political project on a planetary scale. As described by Tiqqun, cybernetics is a gigantic "abstract machine" made up of binary machines deployed by empire, and a form of political sovereignty that has merged with the capitalist extractivist project.

Gordon Pask's The Colloquy of Mobiles displayed at the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition at ICA London in 1968.

2.

In the pre-cybernetic era—that is to say, before the 1940s—machines were intended to emulate humans; their actions resembled human behavior, but ostensibly without intent or emotions. This is why Donna Haraway describes pre-cybernetic machines as "haunted."[13] They seemed animated by ghosts, reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's automaton that was inhabited by a hunchbacked dwarf. Machines were not self-moving, self-designing, or autonomous. They could not achieve human dreams, only mock them. In turn, humans related to machines by using or acting upon them: switching them on or off, using them as tools to achieve an end. Today, the relationship between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication in a feedback loop. Early machines were led; today, machines lead us.[14] This does not mean that machines have simply become humanized

through the proliferation of androids. Rather, humans have surrendered consciousness to AI, becoming obedient and predictable. In the twenty-first century, machines have blurred the distinction between the artificial and human mind, not only because machines can imitate human functions, but because humans have become increasingly passive, since we are now subject to neuropower.

Within the cybernetic episteme, it is no longer enough to talk about a "control society"; we must talk instead about a composite of interlinked forms of oppression (exploitation, alienation, and domination), in tandem with extreme securitarianism. Another way to see the cybernetic episteme is as the reconceptualization of social worlds into information-processing systems. Practices of computation are used to produce new organizational and infrastructural apparatuses, which in turn create value and profit by exploiting and disposing of human life. Social worlds are subsumed into technologies through techniques such as statistical forecasting and data modeling.

The cybernetic episteme stems from a world brought into being by Europeans; this world began with the discovery of the "new world" and the creation of empires and colonies (which coincided with the scientific revolution). In this sense, the cybernetic episteme is inseparable from the Western civilizing project for the whole world, which connected disparate places through technologies like the telegraph and steam shipping, often powered by the extraction of fossil fuels like coal. This project has culminated in globalization as the deregulation and financialization of world economies.[15]

The Western civilization project, based on Enlightenment values including equality, peaceful public life, access to modern science, the rule of law, democracy, and technological progress, involved the creation of infrastructure to unify nations and the world.[16] We can call this infrastructure the "technosphere." The technosphere comprises not only digital technology but all machines, factories, computers, cars, buildings, railways, and mobility infrastructure, as well as systems of food production, resource extraction, and energy distribution. Today, the infrastructure of the world—the technosphere—is shaped by information, which means that the world we inhabit is designed by data.[17]

The technosphere is a supplement humans have created to help overcome the limits of "human nature" insofar as humans cannot live independently from structures geared towards sustaining life. The technosphere has promised to enable us to increase production and reproduction with less human effort. Moreover, **the technosphere** is also regarded as the main tool humans have to fight decay, entropy, and death, since it comprises all the structures humans have built to keep themselves alive on the planet. The total mass of the technosphere amounts to fifty kilos for every square meter of earth's surface—a total of thirty

trillion tons, which coexists with the diminishing hydrosphere (water, the frozen polar regions) and the biosphere (all of earth's living organisms).[18] The ultimate price of the technosphere is global warming and environmental devastation. Like humans, the technosphere needs external energy input, which is not sustainable as long as it comes from fossil fuels that will eventually be depleted.

From this standpoint, the cybernetic episteme represents the gradual merging of human activity into the activity of what we have built and surrounded ourselves with. Much of this built environment is invisible.[19] Infrastructure and data are partially occult because we are alienated from them, even as we are produced and managed by them. The invisible infrastructure that sustains our lives is what matters politically right now. And insofar as the technosphere is cybernetic, it is inextricable from capitalism and politics.

Gerardo Contreras, Disrupción (Disruption), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Parallel /// Oaxaca. Although digital innovation seems to inherit the foundational logic of various cosmogonies, it is at a disadvantage with disruption, which is an exercise closer to business methods. Innovation refers to the introduction of a new thing, while disruption is a consequence, blowing up a thing and breaking it. When something explodes, smaller particles of that something appear, as if they were egos multiplied into shards of glass. These fragments of Tezcatlipoca are shown as a refractile invocation of the lord of destiny, perhaps with the pretense question the disciplinary uses of the technology.

3.

Human communication is at the center of the cybernetic global order. The neural system of globalized networked society is digital communication. In a 1975 film called *Comment ça va?*, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard discuss the "illness" of information. They begin with an image of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal,

published in the leftist newspaper *Libération*. At the time, photojournalistic images had begun to proliferate as a form of information, and Godard and Miéville critique *Libération* (the most left-wing newspaper in Europe in those days) for failing to include the reader in the creation and dissemination of information. They ask: "How is it that things enter and exit the machine?" (*Comment ça va de l'entrée à la sortie de la machine?*). This question is about how ideas, words, discourses, human interaction, and images become information and then reach readers and viewers.

In *Comment ça va?*, mass media represents an illness that has killed communication and language. Last year, Godard updated his critique of the media in an interview posted to Instagram. He stated: "Plato's cave has been fixed on paper/screen." For Godard, the consequence of the becoming-information of communication and language is the loss of ambiguity in communication. Digital technology has infiltrated every aspect of existence, and the margin of error between the transmission and the reception of a message has been eliminated by mediatization and digitization. For Godard, digital communication denies the force of the image or the word because it eliminates redundancy, misunderstanding, the possibility of reading between the lines, and the possibility of alterity.

In a more recent film of his— *Adieu au language* from 2014—Godard suggests that digital media have destroyed face-to-face communication. He asks: What kind of self could emerge in a time when objects and bodies are disfigurable and refigurable through virtual manipulation?[20] Godard posits that the origins of today's totalitarianism can be traced to the interruption of interior experience by the spectacle. In the film, Godard features a lengthy quote from Philippe Sollers explaining that the spectacle "cuts off" the subject from its interior life—a process that is, paradoxically, highly seductive.[21] Furthermore, for Godard digital communication creates a new form of isolated solitude where people lack ties to others. In this light, technology has not become an extension of man, as Marshall McLuhan predicted, but has instead attained autonomy from man, since digital media can communicate amongst themselves without human mediation. For Godard, this means that the "face-to-face" encounter—a basic form of human relation that is the foundation of ethics—is no longer possible.

Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and sociologist, comes to similar conclusions: daily conversations no longer involve eye contact, and face-to-face discussion has been replaced by words on a screen.[22] According to Turkle, texts, tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram messages, and Snapchats split our attention and diminish our capacity for empathy. They have created new codes of etiquette; no longer do we feel restrained from reaching for our phones in the presence of other people. This new etiquette entrenches a culture of individualism and

isolation from each other. This isolation cultivates the perfect ground for fascism.

The digitization of communication not only has political and communal consequences. It also affects the neuroplastic potential of the living brain. The cybernetic episteme reshapes our working memory by rearranging its contents. As Warren Neidich writes, the new focus of power is not only the false reproduction of the past (the manipulation of the archive), but the manipulation of our working memory—the type of memory that influences our decision-making. Authoritarian neuropower wants nothing less than to shape our future memory, argues Neidich.[23]

If the nervous system of cybernetics is digital communication, at the center of digital communication is desire. Mark Fisher devoted his last lectures at Goldsmiths in 2017 to this subject. During one lecture, he played for his students a famous Apple TV commercial from 1984, directed by Ridley Scott and originally broadcast during the Superbowl. In an overt reference to George Orwell's novel *1984*, the commercial depicts a dreary, repressive control society. This society is seemingly liberated when a buxom blonde woman tosses a sledgehammer at a large screen broadcasting the image of an authoritarian figure, causing the screen to explode. The commercial ends with these lines crawling across the screen: "On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*." Fisher observes that the video counterposes top-down bureaucratic control to upstart entrepreneurialism. The dreary control society depicted in the commercial is an allusion to not only the Soviet Union, but also IBM, the dominant computer maker at the time. Apple posits itself as the dynamic, colorful new company that will liberate society from dreary IBM, ushering in a new, more vibrant world order. This new world order will fulfill our (capitalist) desires in a way that the communist world cannot. As Fisher suggests, we now live in that world of libidinal capitalism.[24]

Elsewhere Fisher writes that what drives the circulation of information is the user's desire to make one more connection, to leave one more reply, to keep on clicking. Capitalism persists because cyberspace is already under our skin, writes Fisher; to retreat from it would be like trying to retreat into some nonexistent precapitalist imaginary. In his view, we believe we have as much a chance of escaping capitalism as we do of crawling back inside our mother's womb.[25]

5.

By means of the cybernetic episteme, Silicon Valley has shaped the world we all live in. As we are poisoned equally by microplastics and fake news, losing our grasp of a shared reality, the "Silicon Six"—as Sacha Baron Cohen called the titans of Silicon Valley in a 2019 speech—propagate algorithm-fueled fear, propaganda, lies, and hate in the name of profit. As Baron Cohen

pointed out, the major online platforms largely avoid the kind of regulation and accountability that other media companies are subject to. "This is ideological imperialism," he said. "Six unelected individuals in Silicon Valley impos[e] their vision on the rest of the world, unaccountable to any government, and acting as if they are above the law."[26] He called digital platforms the greatest propaganda machine in history.

Democratic institutions have failed to reign in the information chaos and the destruction of the public sphere. As Shoshana Zuboff argues, we inhabit a communications sphere that is no longer a public sphere.[27] She describes this situation as an "epistemic coup" that has taken place in four stages: First, by way of companies gathering personal data about us and then claiming it as their own private property. Second, through data inequality, which means that companies know more than we do. Third, through the epistemic chaos created by algorithms. And fourth, through the institutionalization of this new episteme and the erosion of democratic governance.[28]

Baron Cohen observes that people can take a stand against platforms by recognizing our power to boycott them. (One example is the mass defection from WhatsApp to Telegram when the former announced that would share its user data with Facebook.) But we also need to defend the existence of facts and a shared reality, understanding the world not as something we see but as something we inhabit—treating life not as something we have, but as something we live. Anti-platform strategies might be accused of Luddism, but they are not necessarily opposed to technology—only to certain uses of technology.

It is also crucial that we regard the cybernetic episteme as inextricable from a broader malaise: humanity's relationship to life and the planet is a toxic one. The very technologies that supposedly enable us to read, think, flourish, and desire are destroying the world we inhabit.[29]

People continue to yearn for commonality, mutuality, and something to share. But the culture we currently share is largely mediated by repressive, profit-driven digital platforms. This is why we need to flee from the invasion of images, to distinguish between image and reality, and to affirm the opacity of the world and the ambiguity of language. We need to resist platform monopoly through presence, embodiment, immediacy, and human memory. We need to find ways to create life as opposed to turning it into data, combine emotional and intellectual knowledge, and regard visceral gut feelings as a form of human consciousness. We need to learn to exist in symbiosis with others and with the environment, not dislocated, uprooted, and detached.[30]

X

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