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Editorial

Revolutionaries are people who need to run around in circles. Revolution is a cycle of toppling and replacing, of killing God and building a Church, as Camus says. It is nothing if not intense.

In "The Intense Life," Tristan Garcia presents intensity as an ethical ideal peculiar to modernity. The pursuit of intensity moves through stages, from variation, to acceleration, to what Garcia calls "primaverism," or the obsession with first experiences.

In "Notes on Blacceleration," Aria Dean locates an absence in the text of accelerationism: a decided failure to come to grips with the first experiences of accumulation, and in particular with the way "the black" divides, and has always divided, capital from the human. In "'This Is a Story About Nerds and Cops': PredPol and Algorithmic Policing," Jackie Wang considers predictive policing and shows how algorithmic crime zones can intensify the violence at work in this process.

If revolution doesn't mean Haiti and doesn't mean intensity, it might mean apocalypse. Irmgard Emmelhainz examines the tendency towards apocalyptic imagery in recent political photography and film, as a symptom of modernism's lingering Christian mission. Is the end of history ever anything more than a kind of top-down resignation to disaster? Is there such a thing as an authentically bottom-up apocalypse?

Antonio Negri deepens and extends the distinction between change directed from above and from below, presenting a new reading of the major episodes of the twentieth century in the process. Kuba Szreder provides an invaluable theoretical account of how these movements from below have manifested recently in the art world as strikes, occupations, and boycotts—all examples of what he calls "productive withdrawals."

A lecture from Theodor W. Adorno on the concept of beauty reminds us that beauty is often nothing other than a kind of experience of intensity, a necessary moment in the process of fashioning divine madness into objective truth.

In "The Glory Hole," Karen Sherman considers a different kind of productive withdrawal in tracing the fate of language, the body, and touch in between dance-making and glassblowing. This kind of movement work shows the limits of describing everything in terms of the performative.

Performance as a genre has its own history. Wayne Koestenbaum transcribes a performance of his talk-sung soliloquies over piano miniatures by the likes of Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Alexander Scriabin, and David Diamond, improvising his incantations specifically for the occasion, twelve days after the 2016 US presidential election, and dedicated to the memory of the late poet

David Antin.

What if intensive performance is all that separates the avant-garde from a furniture catalog? What if the necessary changes require that we stay loose, chill out, and perform? Tadashi Suzuki once said that the only emotion an actor should feel onstage is the exhilaration of concentration. Is this intensity sufficient? Even if it looks like indifference? We might be capable, but are we interested?

X

Tristan Garcia

The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal

Against the Gentrification of Intensities

As a moral ideal, the intense outlook of the libertine or the romantic could still be opposed to the non-intense. However, when intensity became an ethical ideal for all, even what was least intense began to be experienced, perceived, and represented in an electrifying fashion. Even a feeble person could exist strongly.

For a long time, the ideal of intensity had been bolstered by its opposition to figures epitomizing the negation of vital intensity. The libertine, the romantic, the electric youth braved social norms and challenged pillars of the established order such as the priest, the magistrate, or the professor. These establishment figures, serving as foils to the intense person, were regularly the butt of satire in the margins of official culture, in the poems of Bohemian society or the fantasies of the Cercle des Poètes Zutiques.[1] They were fodder for the tracts, pamphlets, and insolent manifestoes of Russian or German avant-gardes, surrealism, and situationism. Visceral opposition to the non-intensity of the social order was the engine of the daring avant-gardist spirit. Artists and revolutionaries excoriated the predictable life that was not grounded in the elemental intensity of the world.

As long as they remained attached to a particular moral content, the intense person could find anything worthwhile, except the ennui of people who are not fully alive. To be more precise, even this ennui could be of interest, provided it was strongly felt, a kind of fabulous ennui, the extraordinary neurasthenia of a Bartleby or Oblomov, the idleness portrayed by the aesthetics of "incommunicability" of the 1960s, in the novels of Moravia or the films of Antonioni.

The opposite of the intense person is not primarily a life of low intensity, for such an experience can give rise to an intense transmutation, through an alchemy characteristic of modernity, transforming weak into strong, small into big, the existential void into aesthetic depth, and idleness into an oeuvre. No, the opposite of the intense person is above all the *dimly feeble*, that is to say the average. The tepid person.

In lovers', poetic, or political discourse, tepidity is virtually always considered unworthy. Often, the language of joyous exaltation is reserved for those on our side. To describe our worst enemies, we draw on an abusive but spirited vocabulary. Yet only terms expressing disgust and disgrace are used to label those who do not choose, who are a *little bit of everything* but *nothing very intensely*. "What is one to make of the paucity of desire, the paucity of convictions and appetites that define tepidity," Philippe Garnier asks in his essay *La Tiédeur*. The tepid is also the neutral. Scorned for his lack of engagement, a byword for cowardice, the person perched midstream maintains affinities with everyone, waiting for history to make a

Michael Haneke, The Seventh Continent [Der siebente Kontinent], 1989. 1h 44 min.

decision. A potential traitor to all sides, the neutral evades contradictions. The neutral therefore pretends not to be charged with a high intensity towards either side. Discharged, it is not pure but low energy. It is what it is in a mediocre fashion.

Far from embodying the *aurea mediocratis* (the "middle ground") celebrated by the Latin poet Horace, mediocrity has come to designate in modern poetry, novels, and films the irremediable flaw of average man, the "flat" human being. A high intensity of anything, including suffering, is better than a mediocre truth, beauty, or life.

Perhaps this conviction is a remnant of an aristocratic ethic in democratic times: one no longer judges the substance of a behavior, instead preferring to accentuate the excellence of its style and to evaluate its intensity. True nobility resides in the manner, not the name. Whether a fascist, a revolutionary, a conservative, a petty bourgeois, a dandy, a good man, a crook, or a gangster, be it with panache. What matters is not to be *the* intense human being, but to be who you are with intensity. The term has taken a democratic turn.

Thus, the ideal of intensity is capacious enough to wrap itself around its opposite. More and more often, triteness, neutrality, and depression are rendered with unusual force. In this case, the intense person duly acknowledges the potential value of mediocrity. Separate mediocrity from the lackluster, and triteness from the uninspired, and both can be turned into stimulating experiences. Houellebecq's first novels provide a good example. Modernity has cherished powerful evocations of existential weariness, dull moments, low-intensity feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. Captivating accounts that probe the mystery of the ordinary life and the emotional profundity of existences—often mistakenly read surfaces reminiscent of still water—can be found in the novellas of Chekhov, Carver, or Munro. As literature advanced into zones previously cast into the darkness of democratic everyday life, everything that had proved resistant to intensity henceforth fell under its sway. Ennui, mediocrity, and provincial existence have been enlivened by a kind of aesthetic electricity, a drab flamboyance, the seeds for which were planted in Flaubert's novels.

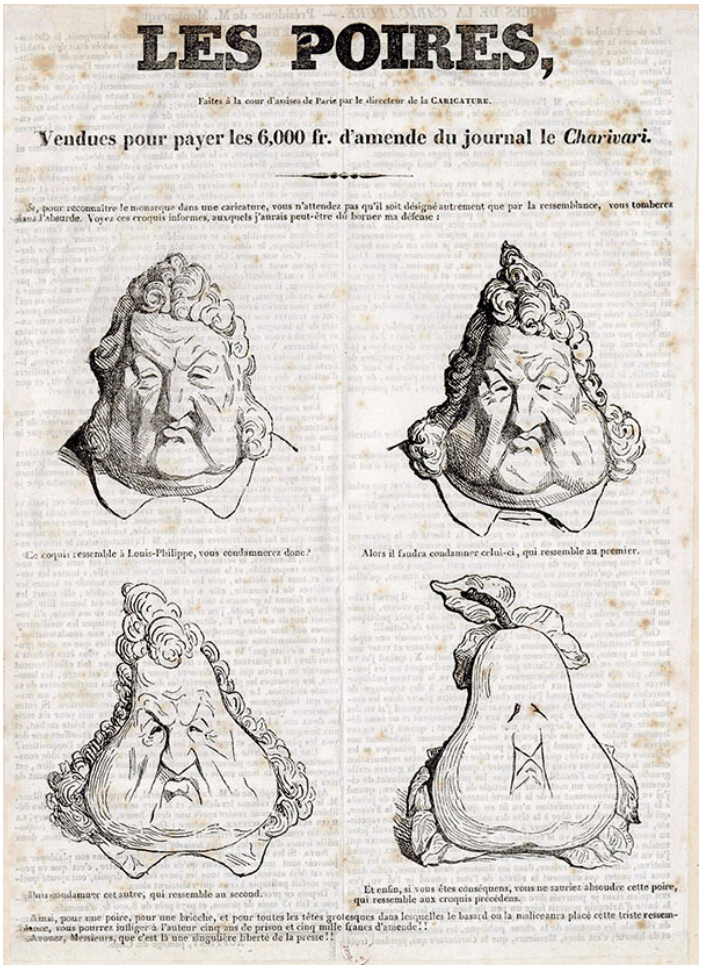
What was left to withstand this aesthetic intensity? The social incarnation of the *middling mediocrity*. The name given to this incarnation—the bourgeois—greatly exercised the modern mind. "Mediocrity is bourgeois," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. All those who, for more than a century, desperately desired intensity in life and thought hated this intermediate social class, which was neither the aristocracy—the custodian of the past—nor the proletariat to which the future seemed to belong. There is no worse insult to modern individuals than being called a bourgeois. What does it mean? It means you are without intensity. As

Honoré Daumier's caricature depicting the French king Louis-Philippe as a pear intimated, to be bourgeois is to be languid. Pleased with himself, the bourgeois eats when he is hungry, and not only then. Flaubert immortalized him in the figure of Homais, Rimbaud's sarcasm took aim at him, and the young people in Jacques Brel's songs insult him ("the bourgeois are like pigs"). He is "a young man of means, a botanist, potbellied," Verlaine writes in an amusing verse of "Monsieur Prudhomme." From Borel, Baudelaire, Daumier, and Courbet to Bob Dylan (think of the figure of Mr. Jones in "Ballad of a Thin Man"), the bourgeois is the person that passively resists the intensification of their senses. Sitting in the light of their living room lamp, their inner life is anything but electric.

They are well established, settled, married, their life course charted in advance. They are concerned with material security, endowed with a narrow and formatted mind, appreciative of love—but within limits—and know what they must about science. Calculating and business-savvy, they are a stabilizing force for society. Yet the bourgeois was also the last to put up social resistance against ethical intensity. This resistance paradoxically allowed intensity to persist. Faced with bourgeois adversity, the idea of living intensely retained a transgressive and electrifying meaning. Even more so than the priest or the pontificating philosopher, the bourgeois undoubtedly represented the last *antipode* of intensity. The bourgeois is a person of neither danger nor wagers, a stranger to thrills unless they have been assured of their safety. Gentrification designates the risk for the mind of an absence of risks: "The annihilation in the soul of all transcendent anguish paves the way for bourgeois banality," Nikolai Berdyaev wrote in 1934 in *The Fate of Man in the Modern Age*.

But the bourgeois, too, intensely wanted what they were: to be comfortable and to feel a frisson in their lounge chair, experiencing minor stimulations in their everyday life. [...] The spectacle and the consumption of intensities coalesced in the promise of a leisure society, with the arrival of the nickelodeon, the movie theater, and the theme park. Everywhere merchandise enticed those making a living to spend their money in order to feel alive. The last moral bulwark resisting the universalization of ethical intensity fell.

This leads us back to the shared condition described at the beginning of our inquiry. Since intensity is no longer determined as a substance but only as a way of being, each and every one can search out the means to spice up their insipid life: receiving a kind of minor electric shock provides stimulation and jolts us out of our day-to-day routine. Nevertheless, as the ethical principle of intensity becomes generalized, the intense person is condemned to invent *ruses* in order to avoid the gentrification that incessantly imperils the feeling of being alive.



Le Charivari magazine's caricature of the French King Louis Philippe, as drawn by Honoré Daumier and published on 27 February 1834.

First Ruse: Variation

The first of these stratagems to foil the bourgeois normalization of life is to interpret intensity as *variation*. Overthrowing the values of classical thought, the intense person realizes that their sensations allow them a better grasp, not of what remains in the same state, but of the passage from one state to another. The principles of variation can therefore be regarded as a way of rejecting the domestication of feeling: exclusively and faithfully loving only one person is tantamount to blunting the sharp edge of love. Change is necessary to arouse and galvanize our desire: explore various passions, experiment with all sorts of love, find out what distinguishes them, venture into the unknown; genuine human experience takes shape only when its object varies permanently. From this vantage point, the identical tends to weaken the sentiment, whereas difference reinforces it.

To avoid gentrification we must *modulate* our experiences. The intense person is caught in a race against every form of identification with what they are, what they know, and what they feel. Insofar as perception

is essentially about understanding relations, the intense person never perceives the thing itself, apprehending rather what differentiates one thing from another, the invisible link between two moments, two beings. What a sentient being can do can only be done in contact with others, and in passing from one relation to the next all the potentialities of its nature can be actualized. The intense person, it should be added, tires quickly. They always want to be someone else. Fearing gentrification, they grow bored. Anything thought might hold up as a definitive ideal is quickly spoilt, and the intense person feels the urgent need to move on. What is invariable might embody truth, but it is not alive. What remains simple, certain, and immutable might surely satisfy the intellect—the "dead" part of our body—but it degrades the feeling of being alive, which is only really exalted in us when its affective variations can shine and sparkle, as if vitality was water or changing skies, following a rhythm of its own. Distrustful of thought, knowledge, and language, which make the world unlivable by reducing living variations to stable entities and quantities, the intense person uses cunning and seeks to confront their own thinking with an original metaphor for what escapes its grasp. It seems preferable to offer both the mind and perception a glistening object, a perpetual variation of being, a movement without motif. Since it is imperative to combat the settling down and the petrification of vitality, this ruse frequently proceeds by comparing real life to music. From romanticism to rock, music has furnished the most faithful representation of everything in us that refuses to bow to language, concepts, and immobility. "Movement without support," according to the composer André Boucourechliev's felicitous formula, music underpins a free ethics, for "nothing in the musical process can stand still and remain identical; simply lengthening a note in time, let alone repeating it, is already a production of differences," as Bernard Sève, a specialist of aesthetics, has argued in *L'altération musicale*.

Infused with an adverbial ideal of acting, feeling, and thinking modeled on the experience of an electric shock, the modern individual who struggles to escape gentrification is indeed no longer moved by what remains the same. They have lost their interest in fixed identities; what does not vary receives scant notice: an indefinitely repeated act, typical of the standardized world of work, seems intolerable to them. The very idea of eternity makes them yawn; marble leaves them cold. Everything that denies life and the musical variations that compose it breeds impatience: perfection and the absolute appear to them like an ontological flaw, an inability to become something else, the result of a serious intensity deficiency. The supreme objects of religious contemplation and wisdom strike them as extraordinarily flimsy. They love music for the changes, with repetition a taste of hell to come. Like Kierkegaard's hero, they demand the possible or else they suffocate, and not only then; as soon as they are forced to *recognize* what they *know*, they gasp for air. What stays the same makes no difference to them. They need either *less* or *more*. They would rather change their mind even if the outcome is uncertain than stick to established certainties. Endlessly curious, they are ready to taste pain just as much as pleasure, as long as there is some change and movement, and the sound of being alive—melodious or dissonant—can be heard.

Second Ruse: Acceleration

Yet a way of being can rapidly turn into substantial content; every ethics is at risk of being little more than a form of morality: to do everything out of a desire for *variation* amounts to doing nothing but *varying*. Variation as immutability. The troubling result is well known: those who live by subversion and insolence end up converting transgression into a norm, becoming bourgeois despite themselves. No matter how vague, this prospect haunts the intense creatures of the modern age hoping to maintain their own intensity while simultaneously preventing it from collapsing into a norm.

They have to devise a new ruse of thought to thwart the onset of gentrification. Refusing to become ensconced within their own sensations, modern individuals conceive of intensity not just in terms of *variation* but also as continuously *increasing*: it is not enough for intensities to vary; they should also expand. In order not to stall, everything must become stronger and stronger. I get accustomed to the change of the internal seasons, from pain to pleasure, joy to sadness, and darkness to light: it is yet another established order, reassuring and procuring tranquility. The calm comes after the storm, as they say. Against this familiarization of intensities, pain must hit harder and strike like lightning, enjoyment must take possession of every single limb, provocations must produce unimaginable shock, guiding principles must be radicalized; even the night must appear darker, noise shriller, and love all-conquering. The intense person will seek to enhance all the signs and effects of their vitality, in the hope that this might keep the looming comfortable existential settlement at bay and stave off the entropy of desire. There can be no end to this necessary increase in intensity. The infinite intensification merges into a vital effort informing various hopes, whether it is the progress of science, the forward march of history, the growth of economic prosperity—all of them spur on intense individuals who know that they can maintain their own intensity only on the condition of making everything else brisk and fast-paced. The intense libertine or romantic soon morphed into the exaltation of avant-garde movements such as surrealism, futurism, and constructivism, which announced the arrival of a new humanity. "Hold to the step you have gained," as Rimbaud famously put it. Each generation is to accomplish an advance, a decisive breakthrough in poetry, thought, the visual arts, politics, or social mentalities. Forward and onward! What accelerates continuously, moving forward with the velocity of cars, trains, and planes, takes us far

away from a prehistoric and mythical world where repetition was one of the highest cultural values.

Exhibiting a pronounced lassitude vis-à-vis the old world, poets including Apollinaire, Marinetti, and Pessoa longed for a modern life that would amplify our perceptions to tear us away from our old ideas and the routine of studying the classical texts. As far as the mind is concerned, modernism is the hardest drug: it holds out the promise of an unimaginable over-excitation of a humanity stripped of all banality. It cannot be denied that even this drug produces habituation. But this is not a problem: just increase the dose, put your mind to work, and accelerate the process.

As soon as we have discerned the outlines of the historical process, Jean Baudrillard once remarked, our minds will try to get ahead of history. "And this mutation is due to an acceleration: trying to go faster and faster, one has already arrived at the end. Virtually! But you're still there." Both the singularity theories and the accelerationist movement associated with Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have taken up this modernist ruse. The high-speed modernity beloved by poets no longer suffices, and half a century later, the old cars seem pretty slow. The speed at which cars travel today surely is exciting, but it is safe to guess that they are slower than the automobiles of the future. It is a bad idea to stop halfway. Instead, we must go *faster* than we currently do. The singularity represents an acceleration of technological progress to the point when machine thinking will overtake human intelligence. The *Accelerationist Manifesto* published in 2013 has no truck with a timorous critique of neoliberalism and repudiates the critique of technological progress put forward by the old left. The text calls on progressive forces to accelerate: emancipation does not mean to lessen the intensity of progress, but to overtake progress itself with the help of thought and to imagine a "future that is more modern." Giving new sense to modernity requires outperforming a version that has become all too familiar. This is no time to acquiesce into conservative fatigue; instead, we must invent more and lay the foundations for genuine emancipation. If we pursue progress as we did before, we will stand still and regress in the near future. In other words, we will become reactionaries. We must step up the pace; it is very much necessary to *get ahead of ourselves*. Accelerating "the process of technological evolution" is the price to pay for progress.

The pleasure of acceleration obviously follows a logic of addiction. This affirmation of progress can be likened to the heightened contentment induced my morphine. "Every organism which has received morphine for some time feels the need to receive it at increasing doses: it is a somatic necessity," the physician Georges Pichon wrote in *Le morphinisme* (1889). "There is no man, we believe, regardless of how well tempered he is, and no matter how literate or energetic he may be, who stands as an exception to this rule." The effects of morphine and opium, which Thomas de Quincey extolled as "angelic poison" as early as 1822, are paradoxical: the increase (in pleasure) diminishes if it endures, and it only endures if it is increased. De Quincey, in particular in Baudelaire's French translation, was among the first to intuit this paradox: what remains equal decreases, so that a regular increase eventually feels like stagnation. With every progress, the intense person realizes that their thirst for intensification can only be slated by doubling the effect. They have a confused inkling that the stronger their feeling grows, the more difficult it will be to heighten it in the future. Then a third and last ruse comes into view.

"'When is the last time you did something for the first time?' the rapper Drake wondered."

Third Ruse: "Primaverism"

As a sense of progress becomes harder to sustain, the intense person conjures an experience that will remain memorable and does not need to be heightened in order to endure. "It is because it is the first time, Madam, and the best," a verse by the French author Paul-Jean Toulet reads. In "Morning of Drunkenness," Rimbaud exclaims, "Hurrah for the wonderful work and the marvelous body, for the first time!" Unlike De Quincey's "angelic poison," the effect of which diminishes as doses are increased, the first time is, according to Rimbaud, a poison that "will remain in all our veins even when, the fanfare turning, we shall be given back to the old disharmony." With age, the sheer promise inherent in experiencing something for the first time gives way to repetition, habit, and the erosion of sensations. In the struggle against gentrification, the intense person pictures treasured innocence as maximum intensity and the source of experience. This image offers respite from an addiction to progress that becomes increasingly painful to maintain. Nostalgia is the balm that alleviates the pain of breakneck progress. However, nostalgia is an ancient disposition, whereas the intense person of modernity, who wants to obviate the difficulties of having to abide by an accelerating progress, has invented perhaps a more

subtle but any rate deeply paradoxical ruse: a state of mind yearning for innocence. The intense experience leads to the recognition that there is nothing more intense than the first time.

"When is the last time you did something for the first time?" the rapper Drake wondered. The intense person covets variation, progress, acceleration, but also holds out for all these first times—gestures and encounters—convinced that ever more intense experiences inexorably pull them away from the point where these experiences made their initial impact on their sensibility and the intensity coefficient was highest. Roberta Flack conveyed this feeling in her song "The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face," with the lyrics enumerating various other instances: "The first time ever I kissed your mouth," "The first time ever I lay with you." The singer, to be sure, hopes this love will last forever but she also makes apparent that the first time will leave the deepest mark and an emotional trace that undergirds everything that follows. The first time I drank, the first time I smoked, the first time I loved, the first time I kissed, the first time I had a child. The second time certainly allows for enhancements, refinement, adjustment, a deepening of the first-time experience. Yet only during the first time does the feeling disclose itself *in its entirety*. Everything that occurs to us for a second time diminishes in intensity in precisely this sense: the first time only happens once. The second time is no longer a unique experience.

In reference to the word *primavera*, which in Italian means "spring," and verismo, a late nineteenth-century Italian literary movement combing through reality in search of truth, I shall call "primaverism" the tendency of the intense person who, dissatisfied with variation and progress, attaches supreme value to first experiences, and by extension to childhood, puberty, and early history. The primaverist is one who believes that nothing is more powerful than a beginning, and that everything that progresses, grows, and develops can only decrease in intensity. Pop culture's fetish for adolescence as the true seat of human emotions is a prime example of primaverism. Since the sensations of the young organism roused by the possibilities of existence are considered the most vigorous, the springtime of life receives a huge premium. This also helps explain the penchant for cultural revivals, which bank on a return to the songs and images of one's youth. The same principles holds for the primitivist tendencies in modern art, including tribal art, art brut, but also those artists who, like André Breton, toppled the idol of progress, replacing it with a "primitive vision" untainted by haggard rationalism and modern consciousness. They are distant echoes of Rousseau's conception of the alienation of natural sentiment. The libertine tradition playfully eroticized primaverism. In the epistolary novel *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the Marquise de Merteuil is delighted and amused by the original innocence of the younger Cécile de Volanges because such vernal emotions are forbidden to her, given the advancement of her mind's faculties. In Alfred de Musset's play *Lorenzaccio*, the eponymous protagonist relishes seeing "in a child of fifteen the courtesan of the future," for contained in youthful innocence is the coming corruption of sensibility.

It is easy to see how this ruse works: intensity remains the idea but, instead of situating it in the future as a goal, it is displaced into the past as an origin or source.

In the end, the three ruses concocted to make possible a life of constant intensity—through variation, acceleration, or by ascribing maximum intensity to a (much-lamented) first time—threaten to neutralize one another. To rely on ever more frantic variations is to give up on the continued pursuit of an idea or a feeling. To accelerate an idea or to enhance a feeling is to draw away from a first-time experience often held to be vital. To consider that nothing is able to surpass the shock felt when doing something for the first time is to disavow the possibility of a force that will be all the stronger for being the result of a combination and variation of other experiences.

It appears then that the ideal of intensity is undermined by its own contradictions and the conflicting ways of realizing it. One style of intensity seems to vitiate another. The more cunning individuals employ in defending life's intensities against the dangers of identification and neutralization, the more they surrender them to these very same dangers. Wanting to shield intensities, modern individuals expose them. Wanting to multiply intensities, they atomize them. Wanting to add one intensity to another, they end up subtracting from both. The more they enhance intensities, the more they weaken them. The more variation they introduce, the more uniformity they engender.

X

Translated from the French by Danilo Scholz.

1
This loose grouping of poets met in Paris from 1871, included Verlaine and Rimbaud, and shocked bourgeois sensibilities with their obscene literary productions.

Jackie Wang

"This Is a Story About Nerds and Cops": PredPol and Algorithmic Policing

In 2011, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and the National Institute of Justice published a paper titled "Police Science: Toward a New Paradigm," the ideas of which were developed at the Executive Session on Policing and Public Safety hosted at Harvard University. The paper calls for a "radical reformation of the role of science in policing" that prioritizes evidence-based policies and emphasizes the need for closer collaboration between universities and police departments.[1] In the opening paragraph, the authors, David Weisburd and Peter Neyroud, assert that "the advancement of science in policing is essential if police are to retain public support and legitimacy."[2] Given that critics of the police associate law enforcement with the arbitrary use of force, racial domination, and the discretionary power to make decisions about who will live and who will die, the rebranding of policing in a way that foregrounds statistical impersonality and symbolically removes the agency of individual officers is a clever way to cast police activity as neutral, unbiased, and rational. This glosses over the fact that using crime data gathered by the police to determine where officers should go simply sends police to patrol the poor neighborhoods they have historically patrolled when they were guided by their intuitions and biases.

This "new paradigm" is not merely a reworking of the models and practices used by law enforcement, but a revision of the police's public image through the deployment of science's claims to objectivity. As Zach Friend, the man behind the media strategy of the start-up company PredPol (short for "predictive policing"), noted in an interview, "it kind of sounds like fiction, but it's more like science fact."[3] By appealing to "fact" and recasting policing as a neutral science, algorithmic policing attempts to solve the police's crisis of legitimacy.

The Crisis of Uncertainty

> Whereas repression has, within cybernetic capitalism, the role of warding off events, prediction is its corollary, insofar as it aims to eliminate all uncertainty connected to all possible futures. That's the gamble of statistics technologies. Whereas the technologies of the Providential State were focused on the forecasting of risks, whether probabilized or not, the technologies of cybernetic capitalism aim to multiply the domains of responsibility/authority.
> —Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* [footnote Tiqqun, "The Cybernetic Hypothesis (*L'Hypothèse cybernétique*)," *Tiqqun 2* (2001): 21.]

Uncertainty is at once a problem of information and an existential problem that shapes how we inhabit the world. If we concede that we exist in a world that is fundamentally inscrutable for individual humans, then we

PredPol co-developer P Jeffrey Brantingham at the Unified Command Post in Los Angeles. 'This is not Minority Report,' he said. Photo: Damian Dovarganes/AP

also admit to being vulnerable to any number of risks that are outside our control. The less "in control" we feel, the more we may desire order. This desire for law and order—which is heightened when we are made aware of our corporeal vulnerability to potential threats that are unknowable to us—can be strategically manipulated by companies that use algorithmic policing practices to prevent crime and terrorism at home and abroad. Catastrophes, war, and crime epidemics may further deepen our collective desire for security.

In the age of "big data," uncertainty is presented as an information problem that can be overcome with comprehensive data collection, statistical analysis that can identify patterns and relationships, and algorithms that can determine future outcomes by analyzing past outcomes. Predictive policing promises to remove the existential terror of not knowing what is going to happen by using data to deliver accurate knowledge about where and when crime will occur. Data installs itself as a solution to the problem of uncertainty by claiming to achieve total awareness and overcome human analytical limitations. As Mark Andrejevic writes in *Infoglut*, "The promise of automated data processing is to unearth the patterns that are far too complex for any human analyst to detect and to run the simulations that generate emergent patterns that would otherwise defy our predictive power."[4]

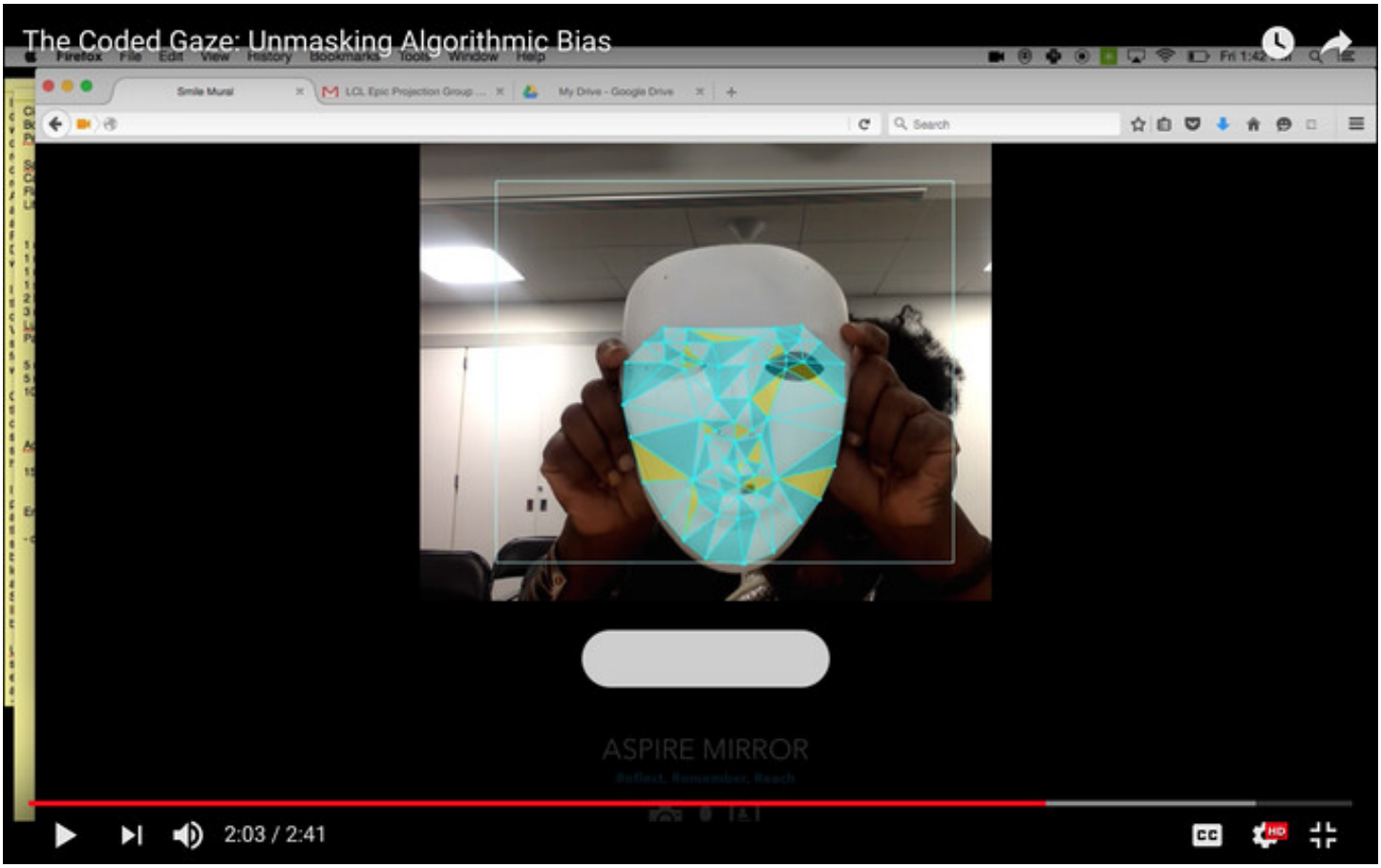
The anonymous French ultraleftist collective Tiqqun links the rise of the crisis of uncertainty to the rise of cybernetics. Tiqqun describes cybernetics—a discipline founded by Norbert Wiener and others in the 1940s—as an ideology of management, self-organization, rationalization, control, automation, and technical certitude. According to Tiqqun, this ideology took root following World War II. It seeks to resolve "the metaphysical problem of creating order out of disorder" to overcome crisis, instability, and disequilibrium, which Tiqqun asserts is an inherent by-product of capitalist growth.[5] However, the "metaphysical" problem of uncertainty that is created by crisis enables cybernetic ideology to take root. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*, Tiqqun writes, "The state of emergency, which is proper to all crises, is what allows self-regulation to be relaunched."[6] Even though, by nearly every metric, "Americans now live in one of the least violent times in the nation's history," Americans believe that crime rates are going up.[7] Empirically, there is no basis for the belief that there is an unprecedented crime boom that threatens to unravel society, but affective investments in this worldview expand the domain of surveillance and policing and authorizes what Manuel Abreu calls "algorithmic necropower."[8] The security state's calculation of risk through data-mining techniques sanctions the targeting of "threats" for death or disappearance. Though the goal of algorithmic policing is, ostensibly, to reduce crime, if there were no social threats to manage, these companies would be out of business.

Whether or not we accept Tiqqun's account of how capitalist growth generates a metaphysical crisis that enables the installation of cybernetic governance, it is

clear that PredPol appeals to our desire for certitude and knowledge about the future. UCLA anthropology professor Jeffrey Brantingham emphasizes, in his promotion of PredPol, that "humans are not nearly as random as we think."[9] Drawing on evolutionary notions of human behavior, Brantingham describes criminals as modern-day urban foragers whose desires and behavioral patterns can be predicted. By reducing human actors to their innate instincts and applying complex mathematical models to track the behavior of these urban "hunter-gathers," Brantingham's predictive policing model attempts to create "order" out of the seeming disorder of human behavior.

that are covered with red square boxes that indicate where crime is supposed to occur throughout the day. Officers are supposed to periodically patrol the boxes marked on the map in the hopes of either catching criminals or deterring potential criminals from committing crimes. The box is a kind of *temporary crime zone*: a geospatial area generated by mathematical models that are unknown to average police officers who are not privy to the algorithms, though they may have access to the data that is used to make the predictions.

What is the attitude or mentality of the officers who are patrolling one of the boxes? When they enter one of the boxes, do they expect to stumble upon a crime taking



Coder Joy Buolamwini demonstrates how a white mask is recognized by facial recognition software while her face is not.

Paranoia

But what does PredPol actually do? How does it actually work? PredPol is a software program that uses proprietary algorithms (modeled after equations used to determine earthquake aftershocks) to determine where and when crimes will occur based on data sets of past crimes. In Santa Cruz, California, one of the pilot cities to first use PredPol, the company used eleven years of local crime data to make predictions. In police departments that use PredPol, officers are given printouts of jurisdiction maps

place? How might the expectation of finding crime influence what the officers actually find? Will people who pass through these temporary crime zones while they are being patrolled by officers automatically be perceived as suspicious? Could merely passing through one of the red boxes constitute probable cause? Some of these questions have already been asked by critics of PredPol. As Nick O'Malley notes in an article on PredPol, "Civil rights groups are taking [this] concern seriously because designating an area a crime hot spot can be used as a

factor in formulating 'reasonable suspicion' for stopping a suspect."[10]

When the Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann arrived on the scene on November 22, 2014, it took him less than two seconds to fatally shoot Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old black boy who was playing with a toy gun. This raises the question—if law enforcement officers are already too trigger-happy, will the little red boxes that mark temporary crime zones reduce the reaction time of officers while they're in the designated boxes? How does labeling a space as an area where crime will occur affect how police interact with those spaces? Although PredPol conceptualizes the terrain that is being policed as a field where natural events occur, the way that data is interpreted and visualized is not a neat reflection of empirical reality; rather, data visualization actively *constructs* our reality.

Furthermore, how might civilians experience passing through one of the boxes? If I were to one day find myself in an invisible red box with an officer, I might have an extra cause for fear, or at least I would be conscious of the fact that I might be perceived as suspicious. But given that I am excluded from knowledge of where and when the red boxes will emerge, I cannot know when I might find myself in one of these temporary crime zones. Using methods that are inscrutable to citizens who do not have access to law enforcement knowledge and infrastructure, PredPol is remaking and rearranging the space through which we move. That is the nature of algorithmic policing; the phenomenological experience of policing is qualitatively different from "repressive" policing, which takes place on a terrain that is visible and uses methods that can be scrutinized and contested. Predictive policing may induce a sense of being watched at all times by an eye we cannot see. If Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century design of the "panopticon" is the architectural embodiment of Michel Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, then algorithmic policing represents the inscription of disciplinary power across the entire terrain that is being policed.

False Positives

Given the difficulty of measuring the efficacy of predictive policing methods, there is a risk of falsely associating "positive" law enforcement outcomes with the use of predictive policing software such as PredPol. The literature on PredPol is also fuzzy on the question of how to measure its success. When police officers are dispatched to the five-hundred-by-five-hundred feet square boxes marked in red on city maps, are they expected to catch criminals in the act of committing crimes, or are they supposed to deter crime with their presence? The former implies that an increase in arrests in designated areas would be a benchmark of success,

NIST computer scientist Ross Micheals demonstrates a NIST-developed system for studying the performance of facial recognition software programs.

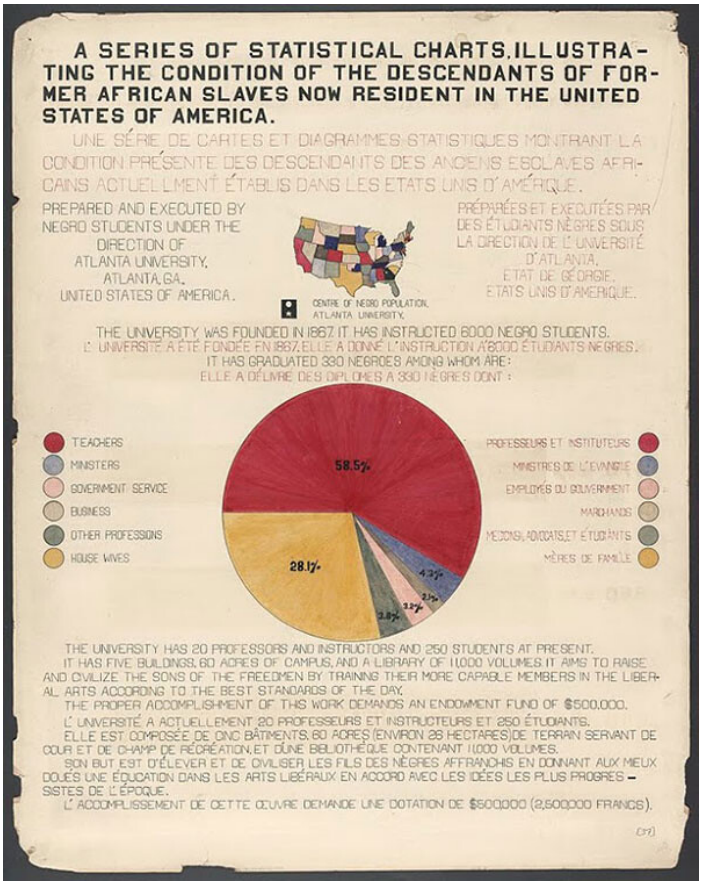
while the latter implies that a decrease in crime is proof of the software's efficacy. However, both outcomes have been used to validate the success of PredPol. A news clip from its official YouTube account narrates the story of how the Norcross Police Department (Georgia) caught two burglars in the act of breaking into a house. Similarly, an article about PredPol published on Officer.com opens with the following anecdote: "Recently a Santa Cruz, Calif. police officer noticed a suspicious subject lurking around parked cars. When the officer attempted to make contact, the subject ran. The officer gave chase; when he caught the subject he learned he was a wanted parolee. Because there was an outstanding warrant for his arrest, the subject was taken to jail."[11]

Much of the literature PredPol uses for marketing offers similarly mystical accounts of the software's clairvoyant capacity to predict crime, and these are substantiated by anecdotes about officers stumbling upon criminals in the act of committing these crimes. However, PredPol consistently claims that its efficacy can be measured by a decrease in crime. Yet across the country, crime rates have been plummeting since the mid-1990s. In some cases, the company tries to take credit for crime reduction by implying there is a causal relationship between the use of PredPol and a decrease in crime rates, sometimes without explicitly making the claim. In an article linked on PredPol's website, the author notes, "When Santa Cruz implemented the predictive policing software in 2011, the city of nearly 60,000 was on pace to hit a record number of burglaries. But by July burglaries were down 27 percent when compared with July 2010."[12] Yet crime rates fluctuate from year to year, and it is impossible to parse which factors can be credited with reducing crime. Though the article does not explicitly attribute the crime reduction to PredPol, it implicitly links the use of PredPol to the 27 percent burglary reduction by juxtaposing the two separate occurrences—the adoption of PredPol and the decrease in burglaries—so as to construct a presumed causal relation. The article goes on to use explanations

made by Zach Friend (about why and how PredPol works) to validate its efficacy. Friend is described as "a crime analyst with the Santa Cruz PD"; however, Friend actually left the Santa Cruz Police Department to become one of the main lobbyists for PredPol soon after the company was founded.

By scrutinizing the PR circuits that link researchers like UCLA's Brantingham to the police, and link Silicon Valley investors to the media, one realizes that essentially all claims about the efficacy of PredPol loop back to the company itself. Though PredPol's website advertises "scientifically proven field results," no disinterested third party has ever substantiated the company's claims. What's even more troubling is that PredPol offered 50 percent discounts on the software to police departments that agreed to participate as "showcase cities" in PredPol's pilot program. The program required collaboration with the company for three years and required police departments to provide testimonials that could be used to market the software. For instance, *SF Weekly* notes that

> the city of Alhambra, just northeast of Los Angeles, purchased PredPol's software in 2012 for $27,500. The contract between Alhambra and PredPol includes numerous obligations requiring Alhambra to carry out marketing and promotion on PredPol's behalf. Alhambra's police and public officials must "provide testimonials, as requested by PredPol," and "provide referrals and facilitate introductions to other agencies who can utilize the PredPol tool."[13]



"A Series of Statistical Charts," from W. E. B. Du Bois's The Georgia Negro: A Study (1900). Photo: Library of Congress

In "The Difference Prevention Makes: Regulating Preventive Justice," David Cole describes five major risks that come with the adoption of the "paradigm of prevention" in law enforcement. He notes that "it is not just that we cannot know the efficacy of prevention; our assessments are likely to be systematically skewed."[14] Others have raised similar concerns with PredPol. According to O'Malley, "The American Criminal Law Review has raised concerns the program could warp crime statistics, either by increasing the arrest rate in the boxes through extra policing or falsely reducing it through diffusion."[15]

The Politics of Crime Data

Crime has never been a neutral category. What counts as crime, who gets labeled criminal, and which areas are policed have historically been racialized. Brantingham, the anthropologist who helped create PredPol, noted, "The focus on time and location data—rather than the personal demographics of criminals—potentially reduces any biases officers might have with regard to suspects' race or socioeconomic status." Though it is true that PredPol is a spatialized form of predictive policing that does not target individuals or generate heat lists, spatial algorithmic policing, even when it does not use race to make predictions, can facilitate racial profiling by calculating proxies for race, such as neighborhood and location. Furthermore, predictive models are only as good as the data sets they use to make predictions, so it is important to interrogate *who* collects data and *how* it is collected. Although data has been conceptualized as neutral bits of information about our world and our behaviors, in the domain of criminal justice, it is a reflection of who has been targeted for surveillance and policing. If someone commits a crime in an area that is not heavily policed—such as on Wall Street or in the white suburbs—it will fail to generate any data. PredPol's reliance on the dirty data collected by the police may create a feedback loop that leads to the ossification of racialized police practices. Furthermore, when applied to predictive policing, the idea that "more data is better," in that it would improve accuracy and efficiency, justifies dragnet surveillance and the expansion of policing and carceral operations that generate data.

Though PredPol presents itself as race-neutral, its treatment of crime as an objective force that operates according to laws that govern natural phenomena, such as

earthquake aftershocks—and not as a socially constructed category that has meaning only in a specific social context—ignores the a priori racialization of crime, and specifically the association of crime with blackness. Historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern America* traces how "at the dawn of the twentieth century, in a rapidly industrializing, urbanizing, and demographically shifting America, blackness was refashioned through crime statistics. It became a more stabilizing racial category in opposition to whiteness through racial criminalization."[16] Muhammad describes how data was used primarily by social scientists in the North to make the conflation of blackness and criminality appear objective and empirically sound, thus justifying a number of antiblack social practices such as segregation, racial violence, and penal confinement. The consolidation of this "scientific" notion of black criminality also enabled formerly criminalized immigrant populations—such as the Polish, Irish, and Italians—to be assimilated into the category of whiteness. As black Americans were pathologized by statistical discourse, the public became increasingly sympathetic to the problems of European ethnic groups, and white ethnic participation in criminal activities was attributed to structural inequalities and poverty, as opposed to personal shortcomings or innate inferiority. According to Mohammad, the 1890 census laid much of the groundwork for this ideology. He describes how statistics about higher rates of imprisonment among black Americans, particularly in northern penitentiaries, were "analyzed and interpreted as definitive proof of blacks' true criminal nature."[17] Thus, biological and cultural racism was eventually supplanted by statistical racism.

While the methods developed by PredPol themselves are not explicitly racialized, they are implicitly racialized insofar as geography is a proxy for race. Furthermore, given that crime has historically been racialized, taking crime for granted as a neutral—or rather, *natural*—category around which to organize predictive policing practices is likely to reproduce racist patterns of policing. As PredPol relies on data about where previous crimes have occurred, and as police are more likely to police neighborhoods that are primarily populated by people of color (as well as target people of color for searches and arrests), then the data itself that PredPol relies on is systematically skewed. By presenting its methods as objective and racially neutral, PredPol veils how the data and the categories it relies on are already shaped by structural racism.

Conclusion

The story of policing in the twenty-first century cannot be reduced to the stereotypical image of bellicose, meathead officers looking for opportunities to catch bad guys and to flaunt their institutional power. As Donnie Fowler, the PredPol director of business development, was quoted saying in the *Silicon Valley Business Journal*, twenty-first-century policing could more accurately be described as "a story about nerds and cops."[18] However, more than a story of an unlikely marriage between data-crunching professors and crime-fighting officers, the story of algorithmic policing, and PredPol in particular, is also a story of intimate collaboration between domestic law enforcement, the university, Silicon Valley, and the media. It is a story of a form of techno-governance that operates at the intersection between knowledge and power. Yet the numerical and data-driven approach embodied by PredPol has been taken up in a number of domains. In both finance and policing, there has been a turn toward technical solutions to the problem of uncertainty, solutions that attempt to manage risk using complex and opaque mathematical models. Yet, although the language of risk has replaced the language of race, both algorithmic policing and risk-adjusted finance merely code racial inequality as risk. It is important that we pay attention to this paradigm shift, as once the "digital carceral infrastructure" is built up, it will be nearly impossible to undo, and the automated carceral surveillance state will spread out across the terrain, making greater and greater intrusions into our everyday lives.[19] Not only will the "smart" state have more granular knowledge of our movements and activities, but as the carceral state becomes more automated, it will increase its capacity to process ever-greater numbers of people, even when budgets remain stagnant or are cut.

Though it is necessary to acknowledge the invisible, algorithmic (or "cybernetic") underside of policing, it is important to recognize that algorithmic policing has not supplanted repressive policing, but is its corollary. "Soft control" has not replaced hard forms of control. Police have become more militarized than ever as a result of the $34 billion in federal grants that have been given to domestic police departments by the Department of Homeland Security in the wake of 9/11. While repressive policing attempts to respond to events that have already occurred, algorithmic policing attempts to maintain law and order by actively preventing crime. Yet is it possible that the latter actually creates a situation that leads to the multiplication of threats rather than the achievement of safety? As predictive policing practices are taken up by local police departments across the country, perhaps we might consider the extent to which, as Tiqqun writes, "the control society is a paranoid society."[20]

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This text is an excerpt from Carceral Capitalism *by Jackie Wang, forthcoming from Semiotext(e) in February 2018.*

Jackie Wang is a student of the dream state, black studies scholar, prison abolitionist, poet, performer, library rat, trauma monster, and PhD candidate at Harvard University. She is the author of a number of punk zines including *On Being Hard Femme*, as well as a collection of dream poems titled *Tiny Spelunker of the Oneiro-Womb* (Capricious). She tweets at @loneberrywang and blogs at loneberry.tumblr.com.

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Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.
—Nick Land

If, at its most radical, accelerationism claims, in Camatte's words, that "there can be a revolution that is not for the human" and draws the consequences of this, then one can either take the side of an inherited image of the human against the universal history of capital and dream of "leaving this world," or one can accept that "the means of production are going for a revolution on their own."
—Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian

You get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human.
—Kodwo Eshun

Aria Dean

Notes on Blaccelerationism

Let it be said that this is not a unified theory of blaccelerationism. It is not a black accelerationism—that is, a "black perspective on accelerationism"—nor is it an accelerationist theory of blackness. It is not a critique of accelerationism from the position of blackness or black studies. These are notes on blaccelerationism. This portmanteau—binding blackness and accelerationism to one another—proposes that accelerationism always already exists in the territory of blackness, whether it knows it or not—and, conversely, that blackness is always already accelerationist. It is my modest proposition that activating this blaccelerationism serves to articulate a necessary alternative to right and left accelerationism.

At large, accelerationism and black radical thought—especially as delivered in afrofuturism and afropessimism—share a number of concerns. Both are occupied with "the future" or a lack thereof, with the end of the world, with the logic and tendencies of capital, and both are locked in a struggle with humanism. However, accelerationism's articulation is rife with absences. In particular, accelerationist thinkers absent their own relationship to black radical thought, feeling their way for answers in the dark. Most crucially and consistently, the accelerationist account passes over slavery's foundational role in of capital accumulation. The only accelerationist theory and politics that can contend with right accelerationism is one grounded in an understanding that "capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent."[1]

Accelerationism is known to claim that the only way out of capitalism is through it. Capital is too quick for us. Mutating continually, it is capable of recuperating and manipulating all attempts to thwart it, restrict it, or slow it

down. As a result, the only strategy for ending global capitalism is to burrow in further, "to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies."[2]

Contemporary accelerationists trace their lineage to a loose constellation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, beginning with Marx himself. Eventually, this genealogy cleaves into right and left accelerationist camps. The right is represented by British philosopher Nick Land, formerly at the center—alongside Sadie Plant—of a cult of personality called CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) at Warwick University, and now known to a wider audience as a leading neoreactionary thinker alongside Mencius Moldbug. Land's right accelerationism advocates that capitalism be encouraged to run wild, and intensify itself toward its own destruction.[3]

Left accelerationism restages tragic Landian nihilism as a comedic urban romance with technology. In their 2013 "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that Land confuses "speed with acceleration," missing an understanding of "an acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility."[4] If technology can just be accelerated, Srnicek and Williams argue, then a postcapitalist future should be possible through the appropriation of capitalist modes and structures toward another, better end. Their book *Inventing the Future* anticipates in particular the acceleration of automation toward a post-work society and a newly transcendent post-identitarian, anti-folk-political class consciousness.

Left accelerationism is waterlogged by a duty to grapple with identity politics, labor, and practicality. Well-meaning Srnicek and Williams are consumed with searching for a subject who can contend with the immeasurably vast and powerful forces of capital. This seems to be a knee-jerk, obligatory reaction against Land's callous and aggressive inhumanism. They are troubled by the fact that Land's account of capital's acceleration is also an account of inevitable human obsolescence. What good is a revolution if we're counted among its casualties?

If Land's accelerationism proposes a schematic without a subject at its center, Srnicek and Williams's attempt to reinsert or relocate the subject sheds much of what makes them accelerationist in the first place. Their commitment to retaining a properly human—and in this case recognizably proletarian—subject at the center of their politics, instead of centering capital itself makes a vintage mistake. Rather than ask how capital secretes the idea of the human as a way of covering its tracks, they've put the mask back on the villain and crossed their fingers. Now accelerationism confronts an apparently unresolvable conceptual fissure. On the right, Nick Land continues to loom large, racing gleefully toward destruction, waving an anti-humanist flag and tweeting endlessly. The left trudges slowly behind clutching an admirable politic, but one with a tenuous relationship to accelerationism. At the bottom of this gulf lies the question of the human.

***

It is worthwhile to retrace this search for an accelerationist subject. It is difficult to do, as the chapters of this history are scattered across blogs and comment sections, some of which no longer exist. This contingent, hypertextual form is not a bug of accelerationism, but a feature. The best I can do here is map an impression of a nearly decade-old conversation, cobbled together from a mixture of block quotes, still-existing posts, and trips back in time through the Wayback Machine.[5]

In October of 2008, Alex Williams published "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound" on his blog *Splintering Bone Ashes*. Written during the peak of the financial crisis, the post finds Williams asking how the crisis might be a hidden opportunity. He writes:

> Perhaps what this crash offers however is a chink in the armour of late capital, a Badiouian event, evading the usual in-situational structural determinations … In order that the potential this event offers to be fully exploited, we need a politics capable of fully evading even the kind of generic humanism Badiou's politics (for example) proffers. For the impasse of the end of history can only be properly surmounted by a final nihilistic overcoming of humanism—in a sense even Badiou fails this test, his minimal-communist humanism not going far enough. What perhaps this might entail is a rethinking of a revolutionary position, built on the basis of a rethinking of the very notion of value itself.[6]

Drawing on Land as well as on Ray Brassier's speculative realism, Williams embraces their theories of capitalism as a machinic force with little to no concern for humanity, discussing the necessity for a new conception of capital as a "vast inhuman form." He writes, "[Capital] intersects with us, it has us as moving parts, but it ultimately is not of or for-us." It is an "alien life-form." Williams then calls for a Xenoeconomics, which would take all of this into account in formulating a totally new theory of value that "[thinks] of capitalism outside of alienation." It will be "a theory of value [that is not] predicated upon this original suffering, the voodoo process of soul-theft at the core of the alienation of labour in the commodity form."[7]

More interesting is what follows, when Williams turns directly to the question of the human as the grounds upon which this Xenoeconomics will be forged:

> As the way out of the binaries of a leftism which is

On January 14, 2017, Simon Reynolds posted this photograph on his blog, in a post titled "RIP Mark Fisher." Reynolds's caption: "Below is a photo from a party Joy and I (and Kieran) held during the summer of 2002, which was the last period we lived in England for any length of time. There's Mark, and Kodwo Eshun, and Anjalika Sagar, and Steve Goodman aka Kode 9. A clusterfuck of genius!"

> utterly and irretrievably moribund, and a neo-liberal economics which is ideologically bankrupt, we must bend both together in the face of an inhuman and indefatigable capitalism, to think how we might inculcate a new form of radically inhuman subjectivation. This entails the retrieval of the communist project for a new man, AND the liberation of the neo-liberal quest for a capitalism unbound, from both its subterranean dependence upon the state and the skeletal humanist discursive a priori which animates its ideological forms.[8]

Williams already edges up on the question that he and Srnicek would later try to answer eight years later: What kind of subject can possibly participate in the demise of this alien-machine we call capitalism? He recognizes that staid humanism won't do it, and that "the impasse of the end of history can only be properly surmounted by a final nihilistic overcoming of humanism." But the question remains for him, and for the reader: How do we get from point A to point B? And how do we do this without following Nick Land down his amphetamine-lined rabbit hole?

The next day, the late British theorist Mark Fisher published a response to Williams's "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound" on his own blog, *k-punk*. In a post titled "Nihilism without Negativity," Fisher poses what he calls "the problem of agency." It is here—in the matter of what or who can be said to be doing what or who to who or what—that Williams's nascent "leftist-spin on accelerationism" differs most glaringly from Land's neoreactive account. Fisher writes:

> Let's suppose that such a Thing could emerge from the husk of late capitalism. One major difference between SBA's accelerationism and Landianism is over the question of agency: for Landianism, Capital is the only agent of note, whereas for SBA, Capital must

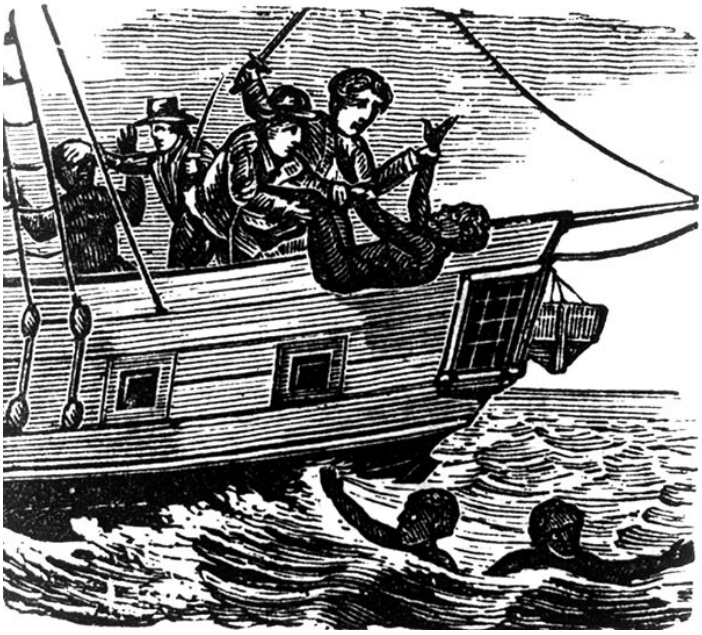
> be assisted to become something else. But what form would this assistance take? As per Tronti's question about the left after the demise of the workers' movements, what group subject could emerge which would be both willing and able to offer it? In the lack of a collective agent, wouldn't we be back to a kind of theoretical parlour game that has no consequences?[9]

Williams responds to Fisher a few days later with a long post that says less about how Williams conceives this potential agent than it does about the contours of the political hole that said agent will someday need to fill. In order to approach the question of agency, we are told, we first must approach the question of intent. Williams distinguishes two forms of accelerationism by their ends. First, there is a *weak accelerationism*, which merely argues that by "driving capitalism towards an accelerated position, the conditions for something resembling a communist revolution might be engendered."[10] Weak accelerationism chiefly seeks to invigorate an anti-ameliorative left politic. On the other hand, *strong accelerationism* maintains that acceleration doesn't just open Pandora's box, creating the conditions for revolution in a familiar form. Instead, strong accelerationism might be "the process necessary to erase the human altogether (as a form of subjectivation), to actualise something close to the dissolution of subjectivity."

So, prior to articulating what sort of "group subject," "agent," or "thing" can assist capital toward utter self-destruction, we have to answer a question for ourselves: How far are we willing to go? As a commenter on his original post pointed out when they pondered "To what end accelerationism? In order to provoke a crisis, as you say, in the system, but for what?" Williams doesn't fully answer who he aligns himself with—the strong or the weak—but it appears that he identifies with the "strong" strain, judging by his terminology's front-loaded value application, and the fact that his discussion of the inhuman continues, which a weak accelerationist position appears to reject. He leaves his readers with questions again: "How might one ground a politics which aims towards an inhuman becoming (or perhaps we ought to say de-subjectivation) … How might we be able to ground the very need for an inhumanising desubjectivation at all?"

Fisher writes back promptly, gently reiterating his concerns about jettisoning the necessarily totalizing inhumanness at the center of Land, asking, "But what would it mean to reconfigure this picture so that human agency played a role? Would this make any sense at all?"[11] Who, if anyone, is in the driver's seat? Who are the members of the "party of inhuman negativity"?

Williams was looking for two things in his original sketch of a left accelerationist position. One was a way of approaching capitalism that is rooted outside of alienation as its primary structuring relation. The other is a new inhuman subject. In fact, it is the ostensible *newness* attributed to this subject that has impeded the left accelerationist project. The model for this "radically inhuman subjectivation"—and with it a corresponding understanding of capital outside of alienation—already exists and has for some time. It is found in the black (non)subject, as it emerges in the history of capitalism that is nothing other than racial capitalism.



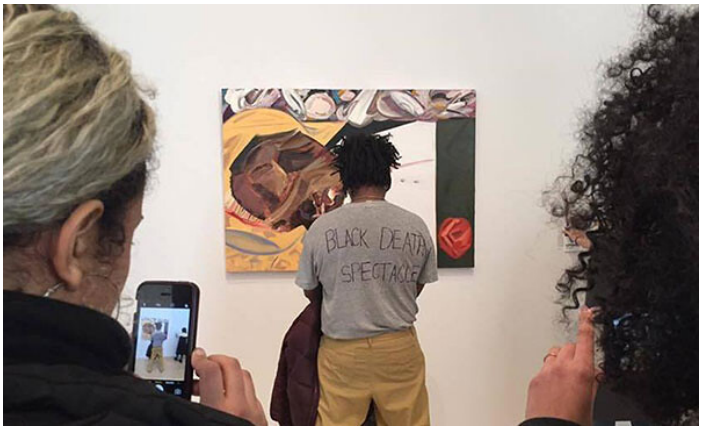
Enslaved people are depicted being thrown overboard during the Zong massacre—the mass killing of 133 African people by the crew of the British slave ship in November 1781.

Racial capitalism, a concept introduced by Cedric Robinson, names a historical-theoretical position that does not consider the development of capitalism and capital separately from questions of race. Racial capitalism instead reads Atlantic capitalism as fundamentally undergirded specifically by black slave labor. Having been—as theorist Frank Wilderson writes—"kick-started by the rape of the African continent," capital's origins are rooted in "approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching a white body with variable capital."[12] Iyko Day:

> In order to recuperate the frame of political economy, a focus on the dialectic of racial slavery and settler colonialism leads to important revisions of Karl Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. In particular, Marx designates the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations as a violent process of primitive accumulation whereby "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest

> part." For Marx, this results in the expropriation of the worker, the proletariat, who becomes the privileged subject of capitalist revolution. If we consider primitive accumulation as a persistent structure rather than event, both Afro-pessimism and settler colonial studies destabilize normative conceptions of capitalism through the conceptual displacements of the proletariat … If we extend the frame of primitive accumulation to the question of slavery, it is the dispossession of the slave's body rather than the proletarianization of labor that both precedes and exceeds the frame of settler colonial and global modernity.[13]

Racial capitalism revises the received Marxist history of capital, which "assumes a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy."[14] Any history of capital that reduces its structuring relations to exploitation, alienation, and wage labor cannot account for the position of the slave in class struggle. As elaborated by Wilderson, Spillers, Hartman, and others, racial capitalism proposes that there is an unthought position beyond the worker—that of the slave—that is crucial to the construction of civil society, and to "the drama of value," in the first place. Any analysis of capital that does not begin here makes a fatal mistake.



Parker Bright and others protest the inclusion and display of Dana Schutz's paitning Open Casket in the Whitney Biennial, 2017. The photograph was first published on Twitter on March 17 with the caption: "At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz' painting of Emmett Till: 'She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma.'—Scott Y. @hei_scott"

However quickly capital might be moving now, accelerationism is always already out of gas to the extent that it fails to recognize what started it rolling in the first place. While the American instantiation of racial capitalism has a particular intimacy with chattel slavery, the concepts this history has generated—like the concept of the human—posture as universal, and it is precisely these concepts which begin to disintegrate as they approach the black. Nevertheless, tracing the inextricable relationship between slavery and capital opens new territories for accelerationist thinking. First, beginning to think racial capitalism alongside accelerationism provides an account of capitalism and value that is "outside of alienation," as Williams calls it. Second, it insists on the non-allegorical existence of an inhuman subject: "the black."

Thinking racial capitalism provides a view of capitalism whose structuring antagonism is necessarily beyond alienation, laying the groundwork for a theory of value that performs as Williams hoped, avoiding " a [predication] upon this original suffering [of alienation], the voodoo process of soul-theft at the core of the alienation of labour in the commodity form."[15] In "Gramsci's Black Marx," Wilderson describes the exclusion of the slave from any transaction of value, having no "symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange."[16]

The importance of thinking slavery and capital together goes beyond understanding their co-implication in modernity, or their influence on how black individuals engage with capitalist structures like labor and consumer markets. Rather, slavery and capital's entanglement is also about the subjectivation of the slave, the black nonsubject that it engenders. Under racial capitalism, from the Middle Passage onward, the was-African-made-black is a miraculous paradox, human-but-not. She is an object-subject. As Ronald Judy writes:

> Niggers, by definition, are labor commodities … A nigger is both productive labor and value, a quantitative abstraction of exchange: the equivalent of three-fifths of a single unit of representational value. The value of the nigger is not in the physical body itself but in the energy, the potential force, that the body contains.[17]

What are we to make of a person who is a commodity-thing? Of subjects who are not workers whose labor is exploited and converted into capital, but who are capital themselves, bought and sold on a speculative market?[18] In the "after-life of slavery," as Christina Sharpe calls it, black people may not literally be bought and sold, but the logic of racial capitalism persists through embedded white supremacist ideologies.[19] It's Hartman-esque ready-for-the-taking, where black people still cannot lay serious claim to our selves or our own images—crystallized, for example, in this summer's prolonged scuffle over white American painter Dana Schutz's representation of the famous image of Emmett Till's mutilated body in the Whitney Biennial. As Jared Sexton reflected, "What is taken to be black is taken for

granted, openly available to all."[20] Perhaps not always immediately available as raw, manual labor, black people and blackness continue to embody a speculative and semiotic value thirsted after by a white marketplace.

Meaning what for accelerationism? Most directly, the black interrupts and prevents the establishment of a human/capital binary on which left and right might takes sides. The black is always already mutually co-constituting capital and subjecthood simultaneously. The trajectory followed by black people in the New World blurs the line set out by accelerationists between capital and its will and the human agents who are caught in its midst. This is not to say that the black subject fits neatly into the escape pod Williams set out in his blog posts. On the contrary, it is to say that to speak of transversing or travestying humanism in favor of inhuman capital without recognizing the way in which the black is nothing other than the historical inevitability of this transgression—and has been for some time—circularly reinforces the white humanism these thinkers seeks to disavow.

Kodwo Eshun once said that while listening to black American music, "you get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human."[21] He—as well as Mark Fisher—caught onto the specific resonance between black American music and accelerationism, even if primarily through the aesthetics of afrofuturism and through techno's cyborgian, postindustrial obsession. We could say that, at large, they understood that black culture in the twentieth century was drawn to the end of the world just as they and their then CCRU comrade Nick Land were.

More recently, theorists interested in accelerationism have begun to sniff out these connections. McKenzie Wark circles the question most closely, working through Eshun's writing on black music in America and the UK as exemplary of a "Black Accelerationist" position—notably distinct from afrofuturism.[22] For Wark, black accelerationism aims to recast the racist conclusions drawn over the arc of history about the inhumanity of the black-as-other as something positive to be harnessed. In his thinking, black accelerationism seems to be primarily an act of reclamation.

Blaccelerationism alternatively posits that there is no need for reclamation. A specific tradition of black radical thought has long claimed the inhumanity—or we could say anti-humanism—of blackness as a fundamental and decisive feature, and philosophically part of blackness' gift to the world.[23] Blaccelerationism also draws little distinction between a black acceleration and an afrofuturism. Instead it sees them as siblings and coconspirators. Masterworks of black art and culture that have been labeled examples of afrofuturism often participate equally in a blacceleration toward the end of the world. To give just one example: Busta Rhymes's suite of apocalyptic albums (*The Coming, When Disaster*

E.L.E. (Extinction Level Event): The Final World Front (1998) was the third studio album released by American rapper Busta Rhymes.

Strikes, E.L.E (Extinction Level Event): The Final World Front, and *Anarchy)* are often called afrofuturist for their exploration of a near-future techno-apocalypse and their warped, cyborgian accompanying visuals. However, by putting the black man at the center of the apocalypse—as both the agent of the world's demise and its inheritor—these works resonate more specifically with the child of these strange bedfellows, black radical thought and accelerationism, that I call blaccelerationism.

Accelerationist debates have left a number of questions unanswered, and some think they are better left alone. Read against the tradition of black radical thought, however, the clarity of the symptoms plaguing accelerationist thinking makes diagnosis irresistible. As a result, blaccelerationism neither "take[s] the side of an inherited image of the human against the universal history of capital and dream of 'leaving this world,'" nor does it "accept that 'the means of production are going for a revolution of their own.'" Rather, it takes a long view of history wherein these positions merge in the form of the living capital, speculative value, and accumulated time stored in the bodies of black already-inhuman (non)subjects. If Camatte claims that "there can be a revolution that is not for the human"—a statement that has been retroactively claimed by accelerationists—then this revolution is for the black.

X

Thank you to manuel arturo abreu of Home School in Portland and Reed College for inviting me to present an earlier version of this text as a lecture by the same name. Thank you also to Hamishi Farah for jointly coining—however much in jest—"blaccelerationism," and for always coming to the DM with an open mind. Lastly, thank you to Machine Project for hosting "Busta Rhymes at the End of the World."

Aria Dean (b. 1993) is an artist, writer, and curator based in Los Angeles. She is Assistant Curator of Net Art and Digital Culture at Rhizome. Her writing has been featured in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The New Inquiry*, *Real Life*, *Topical Cream Magazine*, *Mousse Magazine*, *CURA Magazine*, and *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*. She has exhibited at American Medium (NYC), Arcadia Missa (London), Chateau Shatto (LA), The Sunroom (Richmond, VA), and Boatos Fine Art (São Paulo), among other venues. Dean has spoken at the New Museum, UCLA, Reed College, Oberlin College, The New School, and Machine Project (Los Angeles). She also codirects Los Angeles project space As It Stands.

1
Frank Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003), 229.

2
Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian , "Introduction," # *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomics , 2014), 4.

3
In Land's own words: "There is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification. The auto-destruction of capitalism is what capitalism is. 'Creative destruction' is the whole of it, beside only its retardations, partial compensations, or inhibitions. Capital revolutionizes itself more thoroughly than any extrinsic 'revolution' possibly could. If subsequent history has not vindicated this point beyond all question, it has at least simulated such a vindication, to a maddening degree." Nick Land, "Psycho Politics," *Jacobite*, August 11, 2017 https://jacobitemag.com/2017/08/11/psycho-politics/ .

4
Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics ," *Critical Legal Thinking* , May 14, 2013 http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/ .

5
I have archived a portion of these blog entries and sites on Rhizome's Webrecorder tool. They can be viewed at https://webrecorder.io/ariadean/blaccelerationism .

6
Alex Williams, "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound," *Splintering Bone Ashes* , October 19, 2008 https://web.archive.org/web/20100805021724/http:/splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2008/10/xenoeconomics-and-capital-unbound.html .

7
Ibid.

8
Ibid.

9
Mark Fisher, "Nihilism without negativity," *k-punk*, October 20, 2008 http://e-flux.com/journal.

10
Alex Williams, "Post-Land: the paradoxes of a speculative realist politics," October 26, 2008, *Splintering Bone Ashes* http://web.archive.org/web/20100805024039/http:/splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2008/10/post-land-paradoxes-of-speculative.html .

11
Mark Fisher, "Spectres of Accelerationism," *k-punk*, October 28, 2008 http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/010782.html .

12
Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 229.

13
Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 114.

14
Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 225.

15
Williams, "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound"

16
Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 231.

17
Ronald Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994).

18
Ian Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) delves into this historical relationship between slavery and late-capitalist speculation, arguing that the form of value that characterizes our time was workshopped through the Atlantic slave trade. We are "flesh as value."[footnote David Marriott, "On Decadence: Bling Bling," *e-flux journal* 79 (February 2017) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94430/on-decadence-bling-bling/ .

19
Sharpe introduces this phrase in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) .

20
Jared Sexton, "The Rage: Some Closing Comments on 'Open Casket,'" *Contemptorary* http://contemptorary.org/the-rage-sexton/ .

21
Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 192–93.

22
McKenzie Wark, "Black Accelerationism," *Public Seminar*, January 27, 2017 http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/01/black-accelerationism/ .

23
Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter theorizes this throughout her work, arguing that the category of human is a narrative constructed by European men for European men. Wynter develops a theory of "counterhumanism" in the face of this.

Antonio Negri

The Common Before Power: An Example

I would like here, reflecting on the Russian Revolution, to develop three approaches within that glorious, complex, and tragic mix of revolutionary subjectivity and production of institutions that took place in the "short century."[1] In the first approach, I will consider how we should interpret Lenin's proposal for dealing with that problem (what can we call it?) of the connection between subversive politics, an economy in need of modernization, and a state in need of destruction that characterized his work. I'll start from a hypothesis, which may seem bizarre: I'd like to test it. The hypothesis is that in the short century, action from below was dominant in comparison to action from above (in my example, the action of the soviets, first against the czarist autocracy, then against the Nazis, and lastly against the dictatorship of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU]). This bottom-up action was not, of course, always active, but it was essential at crucial moments in Soviet history. *My opinion is that the October Revolution was repeated at least three times during the short century.* The first time, evidently, it destroyed the czarist state and put an end to the imperialist war: this development, followed through Lenin's actions, will make up the first approach. The second approach will consider the "Great Patriotic War," that is, the repetition of a revolutionary process in the struggle against the Nazi-fascist invasion: the victory was not of Stalinism, but of the resurrected soviets. In the third approach, I will ask whether we shouldn't explain the disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics again with the hypothesis of the protagonism, tacit yet extremely powerful, of a revolution from below—in a civil war without even one victim and which put an end to the disastrous bureaucratic dictatorship of the CPSU.

I would like, therefore, to discuss three of Lenin's slogans. The first is: "all power to the soviets." This slogan was proclaimed in April 1917, the moment when the revolution had to choose between a path already drawn by Lenin—that is, the organized vanguard seizing power—and the path drawn by the uprising and organization of the masses into councils/soviets.

The second slogan is from 1919: "socialism = soviet + electricity." This slogan was pronounced at the moment when the soviets had already seized power and it became necessary to define the model of production and the ways of life that the proletariat wanted to construct under socialism.

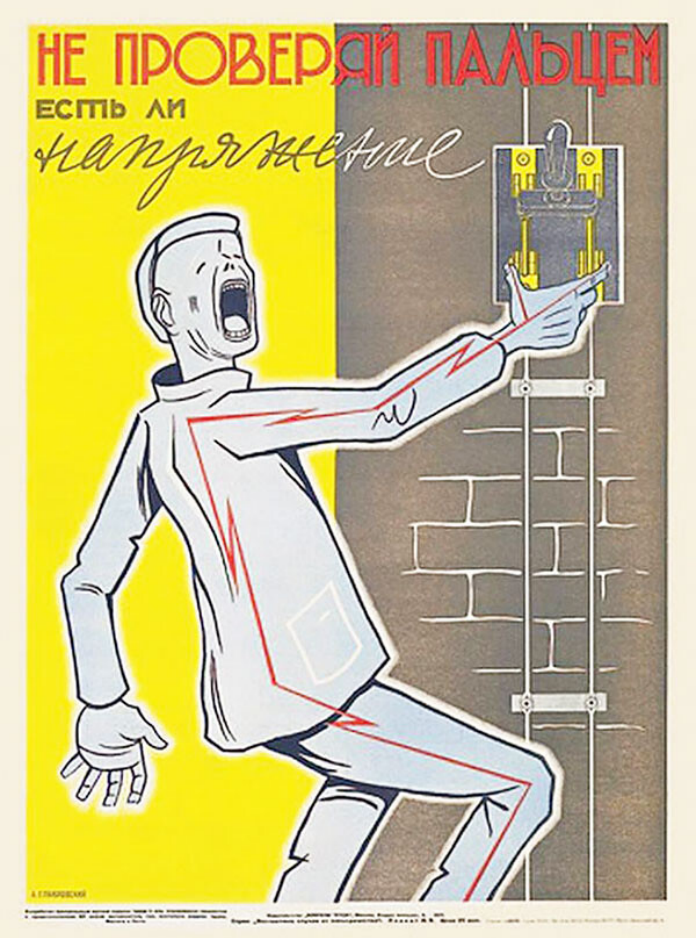
The third slogan is from early 1917, when Lenin, unable to leave Switzerland because of the imperialist war, began working on *State and Revolution* (he finished the book in August/September 1917) and proposed a communist program for the dissolution of the state. The slogan is: "the withering away of the state."

Let's examine the first slogan: "all power to the soviets." This is an absolutely clear strategic directive setting out the plan for leading the revolution and constructing socialism through the assumption of power by mass

View of the "Internationale Presse-Ausstellung" (International Press Exhibition) designed by El Lissitzky, 1928, Cologne.

bodies, that is, the soviets. "The imperialist war," said Lenin, "was bound, with objective inevitability, to turn into a civil war between the hostile classes." The soviet is the spontaneous product of this situation, "the embryo of a workers' government, the representative of the interests of the entire mass of the poor section of the population, i.e., of nine-tenths of the population, which is striving for peace, bread and freedom." This instruction is, therefore, clear. However, we older people of the twentieth century have too often understood it as if it were an example of "revolutionary opportunism," or perhaps an expression of the concept of "insurrection as art," but in any event, as a brilliant decision, sudden and magnificent, which reversed the path Lenin had prescribed for the party. In fact, with this slogan, in April 1917, Lenin (theorist of the vanguard as the direction of mass movements and a party built on the industrial model of the modern factory) radically modified the political line of the party, delegitimizing "from a distance" (he was still outside of Russia) the Moscow-based leadership that was against constituent power being transferred to the soviets. A brilliant contradiction, it was said, a Machiavellian act to virtuously convert the political project: we have heard this numerous times from those who later showed themselves to be the short century's destroyers of the working-class left. Well, this interpretation of the slogan is incorrect. The political line dictated by Lenin can in fact be summarized by the following formula: strategy to the class movement; tactics, and only tactics, to the institution, or rather, to the party, to representation and the vanguard. The independence of the proletariat constitutes strategic hegemony, where insurrectional power and the revolutionary project are formed. This is the reality on which the vanguard must focus its attention if it wants to establish a tactical proposal. The radical transformation of revolutionary tactics, dictated by Lenin beginning in April 1917, is not, therefore, some artist's gesture, but the political recognition of hegemonic maturity, of the strategic capacity of the proletarian masses (the peasants, workers, and soldiers organized into soviets) to seize power.

The Leninist gesture represents knowledge of a proletarian power that has come to recognize itself as a strategic project. The party, the vanguard, and its tactical expertise must submit themselves to that mass strength, adopt its strategy faithfully, and execute it coherently. Organizing the soviets in the revolution means giving organization to the constituent power that they express, that is, continuity of action, a capacity to produce institutions, a hegemonic project in the construction of



A Soviet work safety poster alerts workers to the dangers of electricity.

socialism. From "body of insurrection" to "body of insurrection and power of the proletariat": this transformation of the function of the soviets derives, therefore, from the real, material development of revolutionary objectives.

Let's examine the second slogan: "socialism = soviet + electricity." Here too the traditional interpretation is misleading. It insists that the soviets and their productive efforts must be subordinate and conducive to the urgent needs of socialist accumulation. This is true only in part. That is, it is true in the context of the immensity of the tasks undertaken by the revolution in just one country, characterized by semi-feudal economic and social systems, an industrial structure entirely inadequate for any modernization program, and already under concentric attack from counterrevolutionary forces. This was the context in which the project to establish socialism had to operate. But the slogan "soviet + electricity" does not mean only the need to increase the fixed, energy-related component of the organic composition of capital as a necessary foundation for any industrial expansion: Lenin's slogan cannot be reduced to this imperative. Rather, it reveals a fundamental Marxist theme: a social revolution cannot succeed without the support of an adequate material foundation. Consequently, any political proposal that seeks to undermine the capitalist system, its political structure, and the existing way of life, without presenting a plan for the adequate transformation of the mode of production, is falsely revolutionary. What is revolutionary, however, is the direct connection of soviets (and that is, the political organization of the proletariat) with electricity (that is, an adequate form of the mode of production). An adequate form being a necessary condition of the mode of production.

And, if we remove this proposal from contingency and consider it more generally (as Lenin wanted): to work towards the revolution, to "complete the revolution," means bringing to completion the relationship between what the working class consists of, that is, its technical composition, and the political forms in which that composition organizes itself. Or rather, crossing the established "social formation" of the proletariat and its technical abilities, ways of life, and desire for bread, peace, and liberty (this is the meaning of "technical composition" of the proletariat) in light of the class struggle and the transformation of the mode of production, in the context of the dualism of power, that is, of the soviets' counterpower (this is the meaning of the "political composition" of the proletariat). Socialism and communism are ways of life established around modes of production. In Lenin's view, this link lies within the construction of socialism. Thus "soviet + electricity" does not mean merely putting the soviets in charge of the technological structure (in this case, the structure tied to the industrial phase configured on the use of electricity) established by capital for its productive organization. In fact, every productive structure implies a social structure and vice versa. Therefore, according to Lenin, assembling soviets and (electrical) industrial machinery means manipulating the technical structure of production: there is no industrial production that is equally suited to capitalism and socialism, there is no neutral use of machinery. To affirm itself, socialism must erode the capitalist industrial structure, and thereby start to determine the transformation of the proletariat's way of life by modifying its use of machinery. It is within the capital ratio—that is, the relationship between fixed capital and variable capital, between the technical structures of production and the proletarian workforce—that Lenin's slogan introduces, in the same way as Marx, the revolutionary tactic of social transformation. Here the soviet is a structure of collective entrepreneurship, a figure of common enterprise.

This brings us to the third slogan: "the withering away of the state." The hegemonic strategy of the soviet that seizes political power and establishes new modes of production, new forms of using machines (both those that produce goods and those that produce subjectivization), is in fact the strategy that lays the ground for the abolition of the state, that is, the move from socialism to communism. When Lenin wrote his communist theory of the extinction of the state, taking inspiration from the apologetical

description that Marx gave of the experience of the Communards in 1871, he was unable to dispel the utopian character that it still contained. Moreover, the Leninist description of the Communard experience, like the Marxist one that preceded it, was overwhelming in its criticism of the Communards' errors. For this reason, Lenin proceeds beyond that utopia. In *State and Revolution*, his capacity to direct (while the seizure of power is underway) goes beyond the old canonical instructions. The radical nature of revolution on the social terrain—the abolition of private property, the principle of planning, and the proposal for new forms of life in freedom—are the dynamic elements around which, first, the deterioration, and then the extinction, of the capitalist state must be organized. Having been envisaged as a theoretical task, with the revolution the project finds not only confirmation, but a practical terrain for realizing that task. In fact, the project summarized the affirmation that the strategy of liberation belonged to the working class and that productive invention was the key, but also, above all, that the task of abolishing the state presupposed an enormous development in the consciousness and bodies of the workers. It constituted a majority enterprise and established itself through the irreducible growth in the proletariat's strength. Let's be clear: this was how Lenin gathered the will of the Russian proletariat into this enormous effort, which over twenty years transformed the poetic "cavalry unit" of Budyonny's Red Cossacks into the armored divisions that liberated Europe from Nazi-fascism. And this victory, for my generation, represented a good start in the practice of emancipation. It was Lenin who, with the idea of the destruction of the state, spread those slogans of equality and fraternity that for a century disrupted the global political order "of the Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, of the French Radicals and German police spies." By directing the desire for emancipation against the state as the machine that transforms social exploitation into public and private law to control life and establish class domination, Lenin left us with the problem of constructing a common enterprise that can give workers command over production and the power to exercise it, to construct liberty for all. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin writes, "So long as the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state."

And, again, the strength of the program invests and transforms workers' needs, reshaping their consciousness and their bodies into a project:

> The economic basis for the complete withering away of the state is such a high state of development of communism at which the antithesis between mental and physical labor disappears, at which there consequently disappears one of the principal sources of modern social inequality—a source, moreover, which cannot on any account be removed immediately by the mere conversion of the means of production into public property, by the mere expropriation of the capitalists.

Lenin continues:

> This expropriation will make it possible for the productive forces to develop to a tremendous extent. And when we see how incredibly capitalism is already retarding this development, when we see how much progress could be achieved on the basis of the level of technique already attained, we are entitled to say with the fullest confidence that the expropriation of the capitalists will inevitably result in an enormous development of the productive forces of human society. But how rapidly this development will proceed, how soon it will reach the point of breaking away from the division of labor, of doing away with the antithesis between mental and physical labor, of transforming labor into "life's prime want"—we do not and cannot know.

The first basic condition for the extinction of the state is, therefore, the elimination of the distinction between physical labor and intellectual labor. The second condition is the massive development of the productive forces. The third material condition, included within both the first affirmation and the second, is the anticipation of a qualitative change in the implicit development of the transformation of productive forces, and that is, a change in the consciousness and bodies of the workers. In Lenin's view, it is only on this basis that the problem of the withering away of the state can become a realizable project.

Here too we must break away from the falsity that Leninism is the exaltation of the state over social development and for organizing the distribution of wealth. Lenin's position is one of counterpower, of the capacity to build the order of life from below, with strength and intelligence joined together as one. This is the perspective that the proletarian subversion of the state has always proposed, from Machiavelli to Spinoza to Marx.

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We have seen the development of the revolution around the formidable expression of the soviets' counterpower. I will not linger on what we know happened after the revolution, during the time of the capitalist encirclement of the USSR and the tragic end of power in the furious effort to consolidate—on the inside with uninterrupted modernization campaigns, and with the angst of having to defend itself on the outside. I won't spend time recalling the details of the Third International and the tragedy

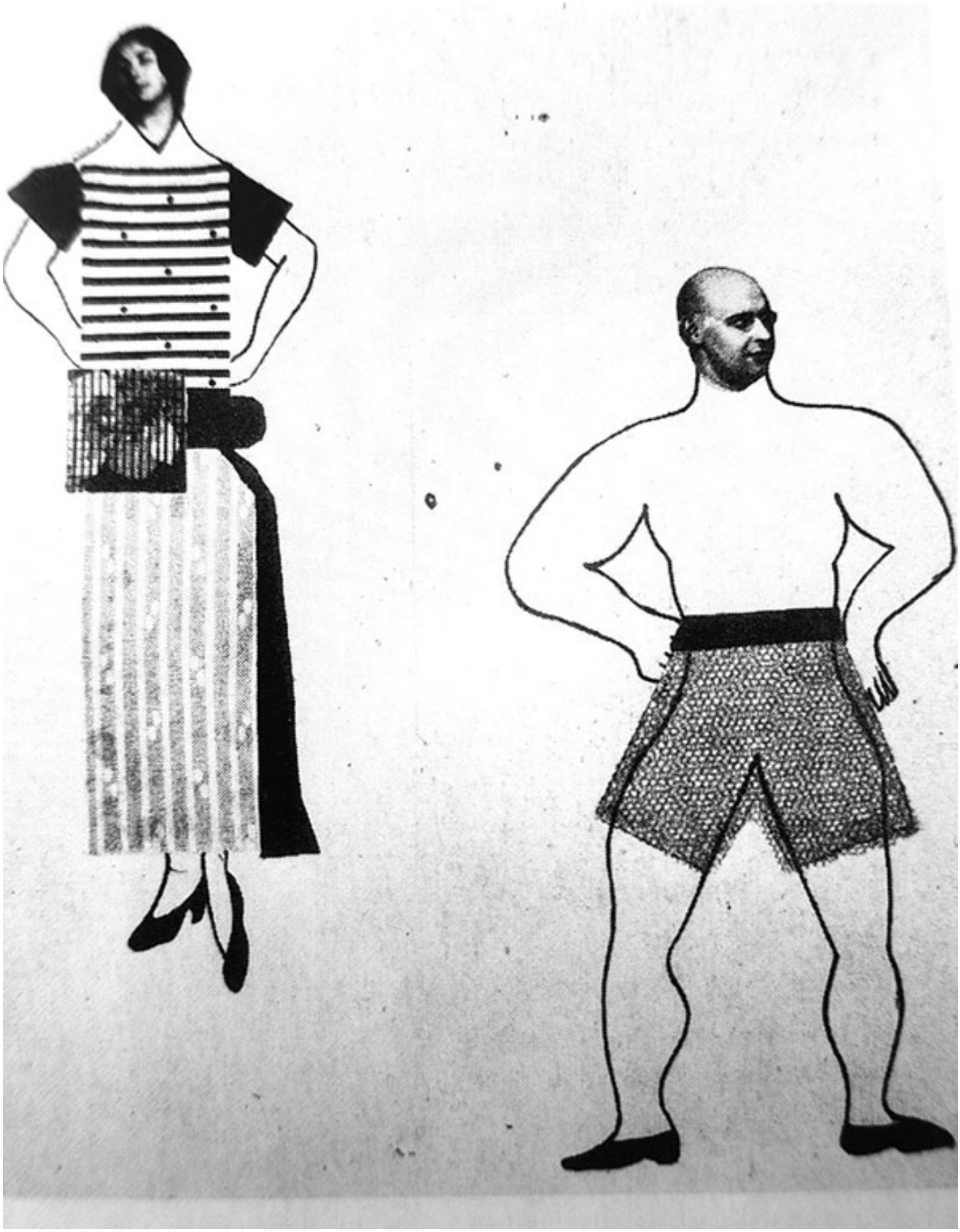
suffered within the conflict between the need to defend the "State of soviets" and the revolutionary urgencies of the working class in individual countries. The 1930s represent the most difficult moment (what am I saying!)—the most ferocious years of this whole affair. Instead, as promised, I will now discuss the second point: the victorious war of the soviets against Nazi-fascism in Europe. We know how the USSR operated, in the late 1930s, to delay involvement in the war; how it was unprepared (occupied as it was with internal modernization) to sustain an attack from an ultra-powerful military force such as the German army. It is here, nonetheless, that we find the "surprise" of those who, in the capitalist camp, had thought that the enormous difficulties of constructing socialism in just one country, and (we can add) the "betrayed revolution," had destroyed the legacy, the ontology of the October Revolution. The resistance of Leningrad and then that of Stalingrad revealed, instead, that the revolution of the soviets had not been a transient, aleatory, precarious episode, but that it had shifted the order of the factors in the definition of power. It was the actions and the strength expressed from below, by the citizens of Leningrad and Stalingrad, that formed the real resistance and once again showed that power comes from the bottom, in the same way as victory. Furthermore, it showed again that the revolution of the soviets had not been local but global. It was repeated in the resistance because it had invested the will and the hopes of the Russian proletariat (with a strong and lasting global reaction) and thus, in the long term, that experience could not have been cancelled. *There was*, and the resistance of Leningrad and Stalingrad represented its irreversibility; there was something more important than that enormous and pitiless reactionary command machine that the fascist attack represented—there was the reality of another machine, the "soviet + electricity" machine described by Lenin and made precisely by the Soviet *working masses*. As we know, starting from the battle of Stalingrad, the Soviet armed forces opened up a path that brought them directly to Berlin.

What was behind that astonishing advance? There was the power of the workers and the proletariat that was expressing itself from below. It had to be something greater than the fascist hate against the revolution, that hate organized into a formidable industrial structure and the ferocious dictatorship of fascism at the center of Europe, which took action against those who denied the existence of God and expropriated capital. It is here that we fully understand the historic effort made by the Russian people, by the working-class vanguards engaged in production and then in the war (thirty thousand Soviets were massacred in that conflict). Here we understand how deep the socialist modernization program was and how powerful it made the USSR in the war. We often talk about the effects of the great popular and national campaign that contributed to the Soviet resistance and its subsequent victory: and it's true. But all this would have been impossible without the organizational structures produced by the planning and, above all, the heroic and tireless participation of "living labor" in building Soviet power.

Allow me to share a personal memory and thought: I was ten years old in 1943–44, when the fate of the war was reversed by the defeat of the Nazis at Stalingrad and everything that followed. I lived in fascist Italy and the sensation that, still thinking about it today, I felt at that moment—it was that a world had ended, the fascist world, the Western world that I lived in: the Stalingrad victory cancelled the untruths that were told about the USSR. I remember those untruths told under the fascist regime—and under democracy they were only repeated. And, against that class strength that had won in Russia and now spread through Europe, a holy bastion was raised against the Soviets, expecting that property and family were the indestructible foundations of any order, that freedom should take precedence over equality, because only individualism allowed economic initiative and the attainment of happiness, and that solidarity and equality were merely an illusion. Well, even back then I understood that the Soviet victory against Nazi-fascism originated instead from the strength of the organized proletariat, from a counterpower that was still active, often directed against the same Soviet state structures that were already dictatorial, against the insufficient means and organizational instruments that this provided to the anti-fascist resistance, against the purging that had frequently affected the best sections of industry and the army—through and against those inadequacies, but in defense of the working-class power seized during the revolution.

A couple years ago, I happened to read the memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, who was responsible for the Stalingrad victory and who raised the red flag on the Reichstag. He had been a worker, then a soldier in the Russian civil war, then a mounted soldier in Budyonny's cavalry, and then he engineered the transformation of the cavalry into an armored division. His story showed me how the revolution succeeded in really giving the workers the chance to produce electricity and power, which, in this case, meant armored divisions and an unequalled military might. I will be asked: What do the soviets have to do with the armored divisions? Bourgeois historiography continues to ask itself this question and is unable to provide an answer. Zhukov explains it: the soviets have as much to do with the armored divisions as they have to do with the barefoot battalions of Mao Zedong or the *bigarré* armaments of every revolutionary band of proletarians. It was the insurrection of the soviets that was repeated during the great anti-fascist war. *It is the common that always comes before power* and that was demonstrated there as a decisive element.

Let us now consider our third point, concerning the collapse of the Soviet system. My theory is this: the "proletarian entrepreneurship" that Lenin had initiated



Caricatures of Alexander Rodchenko and Liubov Popova, c. 1924.

during the revolution and that the Nazi-fascist and reactionary attack had reactivated and armed in defense of socialism during the war did not cease, but took action against the structure that the Soviet system had assumed. From the time of the revolution and up to the Patriotic War, the Soviet Union had developed a form of socialist modernization whose structure was essentially disciplinarian, tied to the mass production of commodities and the reproduction of an equally massified proletariat. At the same time, the Soviet system was creating its mass intellect, that is, an educated population, often highly qualified and consequently an increasingly intellectualized (and therefore cooperative, communicative, and affective) composition of the workforce. It was the same process that the change in the mode of production, from industrial to postindustrial, was establishing in the West. But in the Soviet Union, the intensity of this transformation was accentuated by the needs and demands of a proletariat that had won the war and that, in the Soviet system, had the possibility of exercising (even in the worst periods of the Stalinist dictatorship) a latent but continuous counterpower. Why, then, did the Soviet system start to collapse? I repeat: my theory, which I share with many scholars of the Soviet system, is that it started to crumble, and finally collapsed, because of its structural incapacity to overcome the model of disciplinarian governance, both in productive units (Taylorist and Fordist), and in the forms of socialist political command, which modernized the system on the inside, while they acted in an imperialist manner on the outside. This lack of flexibility in adapting the instruments of command and the productive apparatus to the change in the workforce exacerbated the difficulties of the transformation. The severe bureaucratization of the state, inherited from a long period of intense modernization, forced Soviet power into an unsustainable position, primarily when it involved responding to the needs and desires expressed by the new workers' subjectivities. What we must understand is that, in the Soviet Union, the challenge of postmodernity had not been initiated by enemies, but by the Russian workforce, characterized by a new intellectual and communicative composition. Do you remember when Lenin spoke about the "economic basis of the withering away of the state" and he saw it in the "disappearance of the contrast between intellectual and physical labor" and the overcoming of the regulatory division of labor, caused by the extraordinary increase in labor productivity under socialism? This was the prospect that "living labor," in the new Soviet reality, perceived as achievable. But, because of the illiberal structures that characterized it, the regime was absolutely unable to respond adequately to the demands of the new subjectivities. In a context dominated by space warfare, an escalation of the nuclear threat, and space exploration, the Soviet Union could have continued to compete with its adversaries in terms of technology and military power, but the system could not withstand the competition from the subjectivities. My theory, therefore, is that after the dramatic end of Stalinism and the aborted innovations of Khrushchev, the Brezhnev regime completely froze the productivity of a living labor that had reached a significant level of maturity and that was asking for social and political recognition, especially after having sustained an immense mobilization for the war and for industrial productivity. The resistance to the bureaucratic dictatorship thus made the Soviet Union fall into crisis. The "refusal of work" by the Soviet proletariat was the same method that the proletariat of the capitalist countries had adopted to guide the governments towards a state of crisis and thus force them to accept reforms. This is the crucial point: the new productive reality, the new living multitude of the intellectual workforce, faced with the looming crisis, was again locked away by Soviet leaders in the disciplinary cages of a war economy and closed off by the structures of labor ideology. Soviet bureaucracy was not able to organize the infrastructure necessary for the postmodern mobilization of the new workforce. It was horrified, terrified by the collapse of the disciplinarian regime and this block led to, first, the Brezhnevian hibernation, and then the catastrophe. The fact is that productivity is no longer possible, in the postmodern world, without giving freedom to intelligence and the immateriality of production.

Why, therefore, was the end of the Soviet Union not marked by a civil war? In line with what I have said thus far, we can conclude that the end of the USSR was caused outside the state machine (which during the crisis showed itself to be a parasitic excrescence). It was caused from inside the productive multitude (with the affirmation, through refusal, of freedom and the power of living labor). There was no civil war because the capitalist bureaucracy that exercised its power within socialism could not survive the exercise of the counterpower, even though negative, of living labor. *The soviet was an irreducible counterpower* that was still active.

Thus, for the third time, the Russian proletariat, and those hidden soviets that formed its character, reacted to oppression.

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Translated from the Italian by Arianna Bove.

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An earlier version of this text was given as a talk at the "Penser l'émancipation" conference at the University of Paris VIII in September 2017, and subsequently published in http://revueperiode.net/les-mots-dordre-de-lenine/ (in French) and http://www.euronomade.info/?p=9675 (in Italian). That version was also translated into English by Patrick King and published in *Viewpoint*.

Kuba Szreder

Productive Withdrawals: Art Strikes, Art Worlds, and Art as a Practice of Freedom

A wave of art strikes, boycotts, and occupations has engulfed global artistic circulation. These protests have directly or indirectly targeted artistic infrastructures like museums, biennials, and art fairs. Organizing an art strike, partaking in a boycott, or occupying art infrastructure are best understood as acts of productive withdrawal. These instances of social and political creativity reinvigorate ways of practicing and thinking about art by revamping existing infrastructures and giving shape to new institutional assemblages. These new assemblages sustain art as a practice of freedom.[1]

Productive withdrawals are messy affairs. Actions called "art strikes" frequently resemble protests or pickets and do not necessarily involve any direct refusal of labor by the artists involved, a traditional precondition for calling something a "strike." The Polish Day Without Art, organized by a group of art-activists in 2012,[2] identified itself as an art strike, though technically it was more like a lockout. A few dozen art institutions across Poland closed their doors for a day in solidarity with artists protesting against appalling working conditions. A press conference was held at Zachęta, a key art institution based in Warsaw, but otherwise the day was fairly unassuming, even though it had many repercussions.[3] One was the emergence of a union of art workers, which later initiated a new cycle of struggles by organizing around the slogan "We, precariat."[4] These tactical shifts between occupation, protest, and strike repeat across a spectrum of other strikes, boycotts, and occupations. J20, an art strike that took place in the US on January 20, 2017 to protest the inauguration of President Donald Trump, also involved a closure of institutions, a media campaign, protests, and direct actions, forming a hybrid protest situation that could hardly be categorized as a withdrawal of labor, narrowly understood. Instead, it had more in common with the occupations of 2011.

Art boycotts, such as the 2014 boycotts of Manifesta in St. Petersburg, the São Paulo Biennial, and the Biennale of Sydney, also depart from what is traditionally understood by the term "boycott." Instead of being organized by groups of art consumers, they are typically organized by art producers, who refuse to take part in the event being boycotted. Despite being identified as boycotts, they more closely resemble traditional strikes, due to the central role played by the refusal of production. All the aforementioned 2014 boycotts targeted art infrastructures, which were denounced by the protesting producers as complicit in the unacceptable political or corporate agendas of their sponsors.[5]

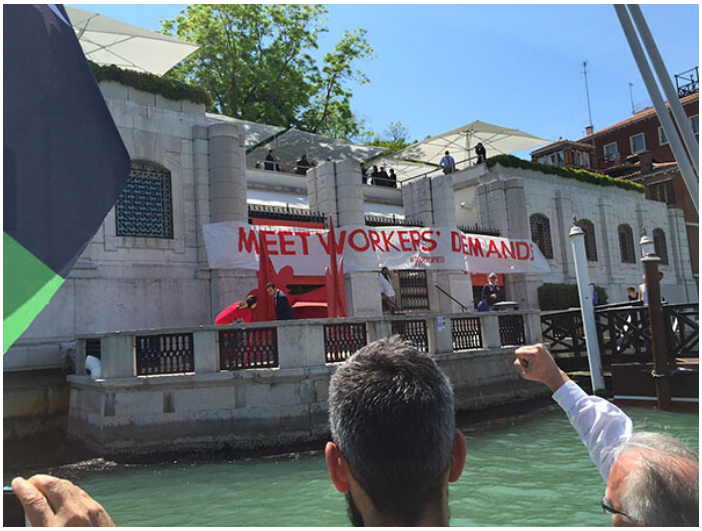
Unlike art strikes and art boycotts, art occupations do not radically depart from the received understanding of occupation actions.[6] Occupying existing art spaces or creating new spaces in association with occupations testifies to the possibility of better institutions, even as it loudly proclaims that the current infrastructure is hopelessly insufficient, compromised, or simply in ruins. When artists occupied the not-for-profit Artists Space in

A series of actions took place at Isola Art Centre after it was evicted from its premises in a former industrial building in Milan. Courtesy of Isola Art Center.

2011,[7] the premises of the Berlin Biennale (2011),[8] the Guggenheim Museum during the opening of the Venice Biennale (2015), the Teatro Valle in Rome (2011), S.a.L.E. Docks in Venice (2007), and the Embros Theater in Athens (2011), they were drawing attention to the gap between artists organizing public protests and artists organizing where they work or will work. When activists occupied Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013, it led to a curatorial implosion at the Istanbul Biennial. Institutional experimentation emerged later, as noted by Vasif Kortun, a director of SALT Istanbul:

> I consider myself a good institutional person. I know how institutions work and can push them into the next century, probably, but what really woke me up was the intelligence of the outside and the intelligence at Gezi—left to their own devices they were re-making the world. In light of these developments, our role as producers had to be completely rethought. SALT opened in 2011 and I was hoping that by 2016 or 2017 we would be in a position where we could find new effective tools to transform the institution into a commons: a new kind of commons that would take on the running of the institution in a different way.[9]

If art strikes aren't exactly strikes, and art boycotts aren't exactly boycotts, but art occupations are definitely occupations, what connects them? All are examples of what I call "productive withdrawals," and this notion is what links them on a theoretical level. Productive withdrawal is a way of practicing and instituting the commons and is often organized by people who identify as art workers. In boycotts, this identification is frequently left implicit, while in art strikes it is frequently explicit.[10] According to Julia Bryan-Wilson, "art worker" is both a theoretical concept and a political identification; it critically riffs on the division of labor embedded in classical bourgeoisie societies, which imagined artists as free spirits rather than working individuals (for good reasons, one might say, but that is a different story).[11] The concept of art worker emphasizes a dialectical relationship between artists and art institutions, in which artists are embedded while contesting their current shape,



Occupation of the Guggenheim Museum's premises during the opening of the Biennale by GULF Labor Artist Coallition. Photo: Gulf Labor

The Polish Day Without Art (2012), an art strike.

comparable to how "regular" workers are engaged in constant resistance against the institutions of the Fordist factory and the assembly line, reformatting them in a political process. Striking art workers refuse the personalized trajectories offered by the structures criticized. They target contested aspects of their industry that cannot be resolved by individual advancement, but only by collective struggle. Détourning Foucault, when art workers strike, they definitely do not want to be "governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them."[12]

Agents of artistic circulation mistake the decision to withdraw one's labor or participation for idle disengagement. The illusion of political agency granted by global artistic circulation underpins this ideology. In contrast to these false accusations, striking art workers engage in artistic self-organization, the highest form of social creativity, which produces new social assemblages that sustain artistic creativity beyond its ossified forms. When strikes, boycotts, and occupations reclaim or reshape artistic infrastructures, institutions of the commons emerge and provide ground for art as a practice of freedom. Far from destroying circulation, the refusal of art workers in moments of productive withdrawal might even accelerate social flows, while emancipating them, allowing for their redirection under better terms. Without moments of collective refusal, there would be nothing to circulate under the name of art but luxurious objects, markers of oligarchic distinction emptied of sense and any value other than exchange value.

The Agents of Circulation

The decision to boycott a large event or occupy artistic infrastructures seems futile, unproductive, and silly to many of the artists or curators who have struggled so hard to gain access to the events and institutions contested. The ideological foundations of global artistic circulation are sustained by charms of networked life, driven by promises of individual freedom and circulated agency. From this vantage point, an international art event represents the peak of productivity and an opportunity not to be missed. For people who continuously circulate, circulation is an end in itself. They are not wrong insofar as international artistic circulation secures global visibility, resources, and audiences, and provides access to powers otherwise unattainable by individuals.

Viewed from the center of circulation, art strikes and boycotts can be seen as mere disengagement. Joanna Warsza, reflecting upon her personal experiences as a curator of public programs at Manifesta in St. Petersburg in 2013, which was boycotted by many in relation to the war in Ukraine, argues that everyone is faced with a dilemma between "engagement and disengagement." Her own decision to stay inside contested structures is presented as a form of "engagement," while people who decided to boycott Manifesta, like the Russian collective Chto Delat?, were presented as disengaging from this responsibility. Warsza's position is symptomatic insofar as striking (art) workers are reiteratively presented as idle, lazy, or—in this instance—disengaged. Such "idling" art workers are contrasted with those sectors of the artistic workforce who "engage", in the most progressive scenario by attempting to revamp institutional routines from the "inside". The problem is that such transformations are prompted by collective pressure rather than good intentions or curatorial concepts, easily nullified by the very mechanisms contested.

Partaking in artistic circulation offers a semblance of agency and encourages a political illusion. One can do projects, create a stir, make things happen. However, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello stress, the world constituted by networks and flows "can win over forces hostile to capitalism by proposing a grammar that transcends it." In this "connexionist" world, "anything can attain the status of a project, including ventures hostile to capitalism," creating a situation in which "capitalism and anti-capitalist critique alike are masked."[13] A biennial can offer a platform for uttering critical slogans, precisely because the organizational grammar of global circulation neutralizes their meaning. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, one can say that these organizational apparatuses can be fed anything, because it is the circulation that matters and not the contents that are circulated.[14] The critical tendency of functionaries who work within these apparatuses is a mark of their baroque elitism, not their political activity. Sociologist Pascal Gielen criticizes "catalogue activists," curators whose politically correct views do not suffice, despite all their good intentions, to recompose the apparatuses at play.[15] One needs another, transversal means of doing this, like joining striking multitudes, which collectively amplify political messages, validating claims for criticality and recomposing the basic tenets of global artistic circulation.[16]

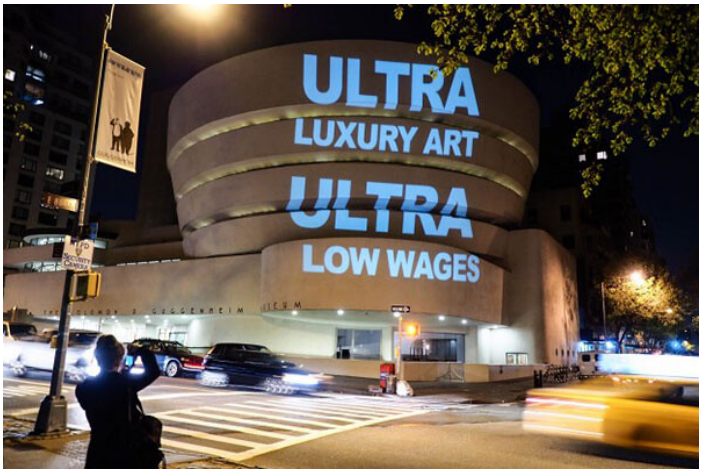
Artistic circulation turns people who circulate into structural opportunists. Italian post-Marxist philosopher Paulo Virno writes, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*:

> The roots of opportunism lie in an outside-of-the-workplace socialization marked by unexpected turns, perceptible shocks, permanent innovation, chronic instability. Opportunists are those who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another.[17]

Virno insists that such opportunism should not be morally condemned, but rather understood in materialist terms, as a dialectic relationship between a networked (art) worker and the means of production. Confronting a flow of interchangeable opportunities is both an alienated mode of transforming reality, an apparatus of exploitation, and a way of surviving. Securing access to opportunities does not differ so much from the situation of an industrial worker, who secures his survival by selling his/her labor. But in the context of artistic circulation this exploitation does not need to be mediated by contractual employment; in fact, it rarely is. Instead, artistic circulation is sustained by throngs of networkers feverishly competing for opportunities, who agree to circulate at any cost. One Polish artist, responding to a survey by the Free/Slow University of Warsaw, a research cluster specializing in the political economy of artistic labor, said: "Artists circulate in order to stay in circulation."[18] Such opportunism results from cynicism, individualism unrestrained by any normative systems, and fear for one's own survival.

Recognizing atomization, opportunism, cynicism, and fear should not encourage us to underestimate the collective agency of art workers, the vast majority of whom will never become well-networked, global art celebrities. For the masses of art workers, safe and sufficient work will remain just a dream, or rather a pre-failed ambition, the function of which is to justify present precarity. For Gregory Sholette, this "dark matter" of global art circulation will never get connected enough to enjoy life in the limelight.[19] Instead, they will merely circle around it like moths around a flame. In this "bare art world," peddling aspiration is business as usual, a good selling point for art degrees, which secures a steady supply of surplus art workers, whose social energy maintains the very economy that exploits them.[20]

And yet, this reserve army from time to time goes on strike, boycotts, and occupies, unmaking the fixations of their own desires. The aspirational machines stutter, and it becomes clear that circulating for circulation's sake is not a particularly sustainable mode of living. Actually, it is rather unpleasantly precarious to make one (unpaid/underpaid) project after another (unpaid/underpaid) project in order to make yet another (unpaid/underpaid) project, just to keep making (unpaid/underpaid) projects—without time to rest, think, create, do anything sensible, or even ask what the sense of it all is. When the promises fail to pan out, people might either drop out or go on strike—withdraw as individuals, with a sense of failure, or withdraw collectively, with a bang.



A Gulf Labor action projects slogans onto the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Industrious Withdrawals

Art strikes should be seen not as disengagements but as eruptions of social energy. "Productive withdrawal" names precisely this double movement, and it will be familiar to anyone who has ever organized a strike, an occupation, or a boycott.[21] Every organizer knows that such actions are not idle affairs. They are deeply engaging. When activists from G.U.L.F. (Global Ultra Luxury Faction) temporarily occupied the Guggenheim in New York to protest against the appalling labor conditions of workers constructing the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the museum responded by closing the premises to visitors and emptying the exhibition halls, while the activists engaged in fervent discussions and ad-hoc assemblies. When Chto Delat? decided to boycott Manifesta in St. Petersburg, they organized parallel political and educational events, published statements, and engaged in conversations. During the Day Without Art, Polish art workers not only convinced sympathetic institutions to close their doors to protest against artistic precarity, but also published newspapers, distributed flyers, and organized a professional media campaign, prompting a vigorous discussion that has reverberated since.

In light of such practices, it is clear that deviations from institutional routines should not be mistaken for a lack of productivity. The emptied space means time freed. And time freed is quickly filled with activity of a different sort: political actions, discussions, and media campaigns that aim to ensure that business as usual will not continue. Furthermore, art strikes, boycotts, occupations, and protests are moments of collective creativity, influencing the ways in which art is practiced, produced, and theorized. If artistic circulation is in itself an interruption of the steady flow of time that is characteristic of the Fordist assembly line, striking art workers interrupt the interruption with festivals of orgiastic, self-directed creativity. The interruption of the interruption creates conditions for an industrious filling of interrupted time. This industriousness harks back to the genealogical core of the word " *industria*," understood as an inventive reappropriation of time, a molding of the excesses of collective energy to shape new social universes.[22] Yates McKee discusses how the term "art strike" signifies both withdrawing and striking against the current art system, liberating artistic creativity from institutionally induced alienation. He discusses parallel processes of negation and affirmation, unmaking and reinvention:

> this renaissance [of occupations] involves the unmaking of art as it exists within the discourses, economies, and institutions of the contemporary art system—including its progressive sectors nominally concerned with public participation and civic dialogue. At the same time, it involves the reinvention of art as direct action, collective affect, and political subjectivization embedded in radical movements working to reconstruct the commons in the face of both localized injustices and systemic crises that characterize the contemporary capitalist order.[23]

Social energy is released in the process of unmaking old social patterns, such as market-dominated forms of global artistic circulation. These patterns are reinvented and molded into new forms, such as international networks of art-activists assembled around ecological movements or ephemeral alliances of art workers.

Productive withdrawals realign institutional and personalized trajectories alike. In 2011, during Occupy in New York, a studio artist could decide to bring their work to an ongoing occupation, organize assemblies, discuss issues of art and labor, or start new inquiries into artists' debt. Artists made use of artistic and organizational competences alike. When a similar path is taken by others, a new social assemblage emerges; it is at first ephemeral, but if it is compelling and persistent enough, it becomes a new center of social gravity, twisting social trajectories and forging new patterns of social flows. Art systems are unmade and reinvented together with their inherent aesthetical concepts, modes of justification, and institutional infrastructures.

The performance Non è mica la luna (2012), by Macao Milan, during the occupation of Torre Galfa, a skyscraper in Milan.

Instituting Exodus

Art strikes, boycotts, and occupations are examples of what Virno theorizes as exodus.[24] In contrast to idle escapism, exodus is a productive act of contestation that unmakes structural ossifications in order to emancipate social energy. Exodus is an expression of constituent power, a form of collective potency fundamental for establishing new institutional forms.[25] New institutions of the commons emerge beyond the tired opposition of the public sphere and the private sphere (a division based on

the bourgeoisie concept of individual ownership). As a form of exodus, productive withdrawal aims to build such new common institutions. In the context of rising fascism, reinstituting the commons constitutes an institutional bulwark against micro-fascism and articulates new left politics.[26]

The concept of productive withdrawal intervenes directly in debates about artistic self-organization. Discussing constituent power, the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP) has proposed the term "institutions of exodus," underlining the radical productivity that emerges along lines of flights transversal to corrupted institutional territories. Universidad Nomada in Spain has talked about "monster institutions"—hybrid formations that are a cross between an institution and a movement.[27] Gregory Sholette points to a plethora of mock institutions that are native to artistic dark matter—research institutes, informal universities, collectives of urban gardeners, tribes of survivalists, temporary service points—each of which tends to operate in an institutional landscape ravaged by hostile forces of late capitalism, filling the vacuum left after crises of public institutions, and which "superimpose two different states of being in the world—one deeply suspicious of institutional authority … and therefore informally organized, and one mimicking … the actual function of institutions."[28]

The Free/Slow University of Warsaw proposed the term "patainstitutionalism," a neologism patterned after pataphysics,[29] the fictional discipline outlined in the nineteenth century by French proto-surrealist writer Alfred Jarry. According to Jarry, pataphysics is a way of thinking and acting motivated by the belief that "the virtual or imaginary nature of things as glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real." It is much the same with patainstitutionalism, whose organizational potential is a product of the imagination. A similar concept was coined by Goldex Poldex, an anarcho-artistic cooperative functioning since the late 2000s in Kraków and Warsaw, who have talked about a mode of instituting called "Sector Pi," which would exist in a transversal relation to policed conventions of the bourgeoisie public sphere. Using the irrational immeasurability of pi, whose digits stretch out infinitely (3.14159265358979…), to signify a surplus sociality has allowed Sector Pi to distinguish itself from the so-called Third Sector composed of nongovernmental organizations, which, according to Janek Sowa, a social theoretician and member of Goldex Poldex, are frequently subdued by market logic or governmental agendas.[30]

The recent wave of art strikes, occupations, and boycotts shifts the focus away from a singular institution to the larger landscape of their interlocking configuration. There is always more than one patainstitution, and monster institutions come in swarms, networks, assemblies. That's what makes them monstrous. During strikes, boycotts, and occupations, artistic dark matter glows. Its molecular motion accelerates until the moment of fusion, when a creative surplus ruptures art circulation, and an immeasurable element of social energy is released that begins the work of constituting new institutional configurations and revamping existing institutions in the spirit of the commons. If one were to trace back far enough the history of progressive public institutions, associations, and institutes, one would eventually locate their origins in a similar set of events. Social movements, striking collectives, and political groupings are always the catalyst behind the progressive revamping of institutions, spurring the birth of new formats. It is not the charity of the upper classes but rather sustained pressure from below that democratized universities, museums, and hospitals.

In the context of the art world, exodus represents less an escape from institutionality than suspension of its politically compromised forms: a performative attempt at rehearsing the constitution of new institutional frameworks, alternative to the ones linking corporate museums, large artistic events, and international art fairs. Such emergent assemblages might include both informal collectives and public institutions, who transform themselves in a process of transversal exchange and friction, creating new ways of practicing, thinking about, and sustaining art. An alliance of collectives, NGOs, progressive institutions, media outlets, and channels of formal and informal communication created the conditions of possibility for Occupy Wall Street in New York, and these networks reflected the ripples left after Occupy was done. Movements like Occupy have their well-documented legacies, institutional structures, value systems, and aesthetic conventions, which are transversal to the dominant order—neither totally external (unwaveringly oppositional) nor subsumed (pathetically peripheral). Collectives and institutions like Not an Alternative, 16 Beaver, and Creative Time are not located totally outside the art system—however defined—but nor are they subsumed by an inherently corrupted mainstream. When analyzing such situations, one has to maneuver between a Scylla of totalized critique and a Charybdis of a romanticized vision of an institutional outside, a pristine territory of unspoiled righteousness and human spontaneity. Strikes, occupations, and boycotts are organized from inside contested territory, frequently making use of resources, institutions, and agents specific to it, slightly yet significantly transforming the orderings of these assemblages.

The Polish Day Without Art would not have happened if organizers were unsuccessful in their attempts to harness the support of both rank-and-file of art workers and more celebrated artists and public institutions. The significant recomposition of the local art scene that followed in the wake of the art strike would not have been possible without this engagement. Politicized art workers reinvigorated institutional infrastructures, sustaining politicized modes of practicing art and thinking about art,

such as art-workers trade unions and other art-activist groups.[31] Since the art strike, they have partaken in many political actions, making use of their artistic competences beyond the narrow confines of the gallery-exhibition nexus. It was a significant outcome, especially if one compares it to the means involved, as the strike was organized on a shoestring, the only investment being the energy and enthusiasm of the organizers.

In any case, forging such new assemblages is a messy affair, as it is not an easy task to rupture existing connections and sustain new ones. Art workers are ravaged by the forces of capitalism, which make their lives harder, resources scarce, and time precarious. The elites of the art sector are able to maintain their domination precisely because they ride on the same global flows of speculative capital that threaten the existence of everybody else. After movements subside, occupations dissipate, and boycotts runs their course, there is a tendency to return to business as usual. But from time to time the new social habitats prove quite resilient, surviving beyond the dispersal of the occupying multitudes. Strikes, boycotts, occupations can be quite potent in reverse engineering connections, even the ones constitutive of the dominant system, weakening or even unpicking the internal ties between their core elements.

"The standing man": Erdem Gündüz on Taksim Square in Istanbul during occupations of 2013.

The Pataphysical Cosmology of the Art World: From Productive Withdrawals to Art-Sustaining Environments

This social recomposition sustains art in multiple different shapes and tastes, operating according to varied economic principles—market logic being just one system among many—and aesthetic idioms. Art thus produced rarely resembles what is called and peddled as art in the blue-chip gallery nexus. Since it does not need to be an authored object of aesthetical contemplation, such art actually might be put to collective use. Steven Wright describes this process as one that creates "art-sustaining environments."[32] For a radical pragmatist, these social worlds are cooperative networks that link together art-related people, enabling them to get their art done.[33]

Some of these art-sustaining environments are small, others large, some ephemeral, others stable, some informal, others quite institutionalized, some operating on a local scale, others spanning the globe. Some of them emerge as a result of long, evolutionary processes, and dissolve as silently as they were born, without making too much fuss. Others resurface under a protest banner, during an art strike, occupation, or boycott. In this sense, Occupy Wall Street was an art-sustaining environment, a transversal recomposition of existing art systems, a new artistic habitat, sustaining collective ways of practicing and thinking about art that ventured beyond the market-gallery vortex.

To sketch a cartography of cooperative networks currently emerging worldwide, the Philadelphia-based collective Basecamp created an atlas of *Plausible Art Worlds*, a collection depicting a plethora of art collectives shifting the rules of art from below.[34] Together with Sebastian Cichocki, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, I contributed to this pataphysical cosmology through a curatorial research project and an exhibition entitled "Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times" (2016), which examined the organizational ecologies of over a hundred practices from all over the world, locating them firmly in their respective institutional habitats.[35] The research concluded by confirming a thesis outlined above: artistic dark matter is indeed getting brighter, as new forms of artistic practice are sustained by new social formations and actually existing artistic habitats.

Precisely due to the existence of alternative support structures, the decision of Chto Delat? to boycott Manifesta was not a mere withdrawal, but an eruption of social creativity. As Dmitry Vilensky, a member of the group, stated:

> We made our work *as local artists* who have the resources to continue and make a public program completely outside of the Manifesta framework. We realized a mobile platform for communication between Russian and Ukrainian artists, and it was our priority. We did a big-scale performance with our school in public space, without any authorization, and all this stuff was quite visible.[36]

It is important to underline that Chto Delat? is explicitly against boycotts, as they are committed to liberating the means of production for the sake of art workers and their radical politics. Neither can they be dismissed as marginal

outsiders. They are well-reputed internationally, and connected to various global networks (art-activist movements, academic networks, biennial circulation). Their decision to boycott was informed by the statements of Kasper König, chief curator of Manifesta, after he expressed his admiration for artistic autonomy and a reluctance to sustain a more politicized platform—a statement that was especially striking in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its war in Ukraine. Chto Delat? quite sensibly took the situation for what it actually was, and deemed the links between Manifesta, the Russian government, and global art circulation too firmly knotted to engage with in the terms dictated by the event itself. But they did not withdraw idly. Instead, they organized alternative programs and events for both local and international audiences. They were able to do this precisely because their access was not dependent on Manifesta; they had their own distributed means of gathering resources, mobilizing fellow art workers, and broadcasting their message in a way that would not distort its meaning beyond recognition.

"The Polish Day Without Art, organized by a group of art-activists in 2012, identified itself as an art strike, though technically it was more like a lockout." Courtesy of Citizens Forum for Contemporary Art.

Striking Art as a Practice of Freedom

An emphasis on sustainable social forms does not preempt the question of art and aesthetics—on the contrary. As members of the radical New York–based collective MTL suggest, artistic practices are connected to materialist perspective on daily reproduction—people "strike art as a training in the practice of freedom."[37] The art strike unmakes the art system in order to liberate art from institutional ossification. The art of the strike recalls the words of Antonio Negri in *Art and Multitude*, his collection of letters:

> To conclude, let us return to the "republican" definition of the beautiful, which I oppose to its "angelic" definition. By republican I mean the tradition which sees the collective as the basis of the free production of being. And by "the beautiful" I understand an *excedence*, an innovation. A freedom which is liberated, a liberty which is ever-increasingly free, ever-increasingly potent. Whereas the angel is the symbol of a deficit, of a relationship which will never be resolved. An unexpected illustration of the confusion of being, which is opposed to the construction of being and to its collective clarification. What a bad taste the angel has in his mouth. What impotence he expresses. At bottom, the angel remains the demonstration of a power which is disillusioned and malign.[38]

Currently, this angelic being of art, with its pretense to autonomy, circulates restlessly, chasing interchangeable opportunities, losing even its capacity to think beauty. It runs in circles, chasing its own angelic tail. The dominant market-biennial nexus—based on the financial subsumption of aura and an accelerated peddling of content—erases the artistic qualities of the idioms thus circulated. As Neil Cummings has put it, markets mark the things that circulate through them.[39] The forms of stabilizing values inherent to the market-biennial nexus depend on the circulation of emptied commodities (the faster they move, more valuable they become).

Strikes, boycotts, and occupations identify these self-referential operations for what they are: empty usurpations. When art-sustaining environments emerge, dark matter gets brighter, and new institutions of the commons sustain not only artistic practices, but also artistic values. They form what John Roberts calls the "secondary economy" of art—an institutional habitat where art regains its function as a collective practice of freedom and exercises its powers of negation, infinite ideation, and existential playfulness.[40] Hito Steyerl, looking for a refuge from endless circulation and subsumption, envisions such an economy as an alternative system of artistic currency—a current of social and artistic energies redirected from propelling exploitative circulation and towards the welfare of art workers and their cooperative networks and gift economies.[41]

Art workers working on boycotts, strikes, and occupations, are actually able to make more interesting, conceptually charged, and imaginative art—qualities that are erased in the circulatory pace of the blue-chip gallery vortex. This statement only *seems* grandiose. It is an article of faith shared by art theory and avant-garde practice that artistic qualities are stupefied by the institutional systems tasked with their sustenance. In this context, one usually refers to Marcel Duchamp and his ironic forms of dematerialization, to the self-destructive art of Gustav Metzger, or to the

artistic laziness of Mladen Stilinović. However, productive withdrawal as discussed here should not be mistaken for an individualized artistic gesture (as conceptually enticing as this would be); rather, they should be associated with Walter Benjamin's notions of repurposing the apparatuses of cultural production. In this sense, productive withdrawal is more aligned with figures like Gustave Courbet, Bertolt Brecht, the Russian constructivists, and the Situationist International, which all refused to sustain art systems, revamping them in the process. In fact, art regains its capacity for republican potency and creative excess only in the context of what Benjamin described, following Brecht, as "functional transformation" (*Umfunktionierung*), i.e., the liberation of the forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia, who instead of simply "transmitting the apparatus of production, change it to the maximum extent possible in the direction of socialism."[42]

In 1972, Jerzy Ludwiński, a Polish theoretician of conceptual art and herald of a postartistic age, described the process of the dissolution of art into general social praxis: "Perhaps, even today, we do not deal with art. We might have overlooked the moment when it transformed itself into something else, something which we cannot yet name. It is certain, however, that what we deal with offers greater possibilities."[43]

It is interesting that this idea of art venturing beyond its current systemic ossifications—an idea similarly expressed by many of Ludwiński's contemporaries, like Lucy Lippard, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, and Rasheed Araeen, just to name a few—is so often associated with productive withdrawals. As the strikes, boycotts, and occupations described above demonstrate, restoring art's capacity to be a practice of freedom keeps art workers too busy to be bothered with the trappings of artistic circulation.

X

1
I would like to thank Gregory Sholette for close-reading and commenting on previous versions of this text, which helped to improve it tremendously.

2
The art strike was organized by the Citizens' Forum for Contemporary Art and was coordinated by artist Katarzyna Górna and the art critic Karol Sienkiewicz.

3
A detailed account of the Polish Day Without Art can be found in Joanna Figiel, "On the Citizen Forum for Contemporary Arts," *ArtLeaks Gazette* , September 2014, 27–32 https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/joanna_figiel_artleaks_gazette_2.pdf .

4
The "We, precariat" struggle was initiated by a media campaign and a demonstration coordinated by the Art Workers Committee of the Independent Union Workers' Initiative in Poland, the Citizens' Forum for Contemporary Art, and the online magazine *Political Critique* .

5
An account of major art boycotts, including time lines and source documents, can be found in the excellent reader *I Can't Work Like This: A Reader on Recent Boycotts and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), edited by Joanna Warsza and the participants in the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts.

6
Some of these struggles are transversal to the field of art, engulfing entire cities or societies, including artists, many of whom are the first and most active among occupiers, to the extent that Martha Rosler has written of an "artistic mode of revolution" that is inherent to occupations and that contrasts with the artistic mode of gentrification. See her "The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation," in *Joy Forever: The Political Economy of Social Creativity* , eds. Michal Kozlowski et al. (London: MayFly Books; Warsaw: Bęc Zmiana, 2014), 177–99. The repercussions of occupations for art scenes have been tremendous, as exemplified by Yates McKee's discussion of Occupy and the New York art scene in his book *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016).

7
The action at Artists Space was initiated by Georgia Sagri.

8
The controversies surrounding this staged occupation were recounted in Sebastian Loewe, "When Protest Becomes Art: The Contradictory Transformations of the Occupy Movement at Documenta 13 and Berlin Biennale 7," *Field* 1 (Spring 2015): 185–203 http://field-journal.com/issue-1/loewe . A polemical reply by Noah Fisher to this article from was published in the subsequent issue of *Field*; see N. Fischer, "Agency in a Zoo: The Occupy Movement's Strategic Expansion to Art Institutions," *Field* 2 (Winter 2015): 15–40 http://field-journal.com/issue-2/fischer .

9
Vasif Kortun, "IN TURKISH THE WORD 'PUBLIC' DOESN'T EXIST: Vasif Kortun in Conversation with the Editors," in *I Can't Work like This,* 138.

10
A genealogy of art workers' protest is featured in Corina Apostol, "Art Workers Between Precarity and Resistance: A Genealogy," *ArtLeaks Gazette*, August 2015, 7–21 https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/corina_apostol_artleaks_gazette_3.pdf .

11
Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Art versus Work," in *Art Work: A National Conversation About Art, Labor, and Economics* , ed. Temporary Services (Chicago: Temporary Services, 2010), 4–5.

12
Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997), 28.

13
Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 111.

14
As Benjamin suggested in his seminal essay "The Author as Producer," *New Left Review*, August 1970 http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=135 .

15
Pascal Gielen, "Curating with Love, or a Plea for Inflexibility," *Manifesta Journal* 10 (2010): 14–26.

16
A similar notion—that institutions are able to revamp themselves only as a result of political pressure from outside—was discussed recently by Jesús Carrillio in his account of institutional experiments in Spain; see J. Carrillo, "Conspiratorial Institutions? Museums and Social Transformation in the Post-Crisis Period," *Wrong Wrong Magazine*, June 26, 2017 http://wrongwrong.net/article/conspiratorial-institutions-museums-and-social-transformation-in-the-post-crisis-period .

17
Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 86.

18
Michal Kozlowski, Jan Sowa, and Kuba Szreder, *The Art Factory* (Warszawa: Bęc Zmiana, 2015).

19
Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter : Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

20
Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

21
Many prominent autonomous and Marxist thinkers—some of whom will be referenced below—have discussed the theoretical implications of the withdrawal of artistic labor. See Marina Vishmidt, "Notes on Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital," in *Joy Forever*, 47–65; John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2008); Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015); Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014); Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013); Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, Artwork, and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Ewa Majewska, "The Non-Heroic Resistance: Singing Mouse, Housewife and Artists in Revolt – Notes from the 'Former East,'" in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989* , eds. Simon Sheikh and Maria Hlavajova (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

22
This language, and the theory behind it, originated in theoretical debates spearheaded by the Vienna-based European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP), the traces of which are scattered across the pages of many of the books already mentioned, such as Gerald Raunig's *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity.*

23
McKee, *Strike Art*, 6.

24
Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* .

25
This concept also emerged among the group of thinkers assembled around EIPCP, who in this case referenced Antonio Negri's concept of constituent power, discussed at length in the reader *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* , eds. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009).

26
See Ewa Majewska and Kuba Szreder, "So Far, So Good: Contemporary Fascism, Weak Resistance, and Postartistic Practices in Today's Poland," *e-flux journal* 76 (October 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/71467/so-far-so-good-contemporary-fascism-weak-resistance-and-postartistic-practices-in-today-s-poland .

27
Universidad Nomada, "Mental Prototypes and Monster Institutions: Some Notes by Way of an Introduction," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice,* 237–47.

28
Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 13.

29
The concept of patainstitutions will be explored in the upcoming issue of the *Journal for Research Cultures* https://researchcultures.com/issues/2/ .

30
Jan Sowa, "Goldex Poldex Madafaka, or a Report from the (Besieged) Pi Sector," in *Europejskie Polityki Kulturalne 2015. Raport o Przyszłości*

Publicznego Finansowania Sztuki Współczesnej w Europie , eds. Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer (Warszawa: Bec Zmiana, 2009).

31
The Polish institutional art world changed, as major art institutions signed agreements to pay exhibition fees for artists. But this was only the most visible aspect of even more profound changes in the composition of the artistic universe. The strike prompted media discussion about conditions of artistic work and more generally about precarious labor. The Commission of Art Workers was established, and now functions within the framework of the independent trade union Workers' Initiative. From the communities politicized during the art strike, many other initiatives emerged, resulting in the participation of artists in feminist and democratic protests in 2016 and 2017, and the creation of many new art groups, such as Zubrzyce (Bison-Girls) and the Consortium for Postartistic Practice.

32
Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

33
The concept of "art worlds" in plural was introduced and developed by pragmatist sociologist Howard Becker in his treatise *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

34
Basecamp Group & Friends, *Plausible Artworlds* (Philadelphia: Lulu.com, 2013).

35
The results of this survey are collected on the web page of the project http://www.makinguse.artmuseum.pl/ .

36
Dmitry Vilensky, "Withdrawal as Institutional Critique: Chto Delat and Manifesta 10," in *I Can't Work like This.*

37
Quoted in McKee, *Strike Art*, 35.

38
Antonio Negri, *Art and Multitude* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 52.

39
Neil Cummings, "A Joy Forever," *Joy Forever* .

40
John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015).

41
Hito Steyerl, "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms," *e-flux journal* 76 (October 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69732/if-you-don-t-have-bread-eat-art-contemporary-art-and-derivative-fascisms/ .

42
Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 3.

43
Jerzy Ludwiński, *Notes from the Future of Art: Selected Writings of Jerzy Ludwiński* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum; Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007), 26.

Irmgard Emmelhainz

Self-Destruction as Insurrection, or, How to Lift the Earth Above All That Has Died?

We are no longer postcolonial creatures.
—Hamid Dabashi

Soon you'll raise your world over ours,
blazing a trail from our graveyards to a satellite.
This is the Iron Age: distilled from a lump of coal,
champagne bubbling for the mighty!
There are dead and there are colonies.
There are dead and there are bulldozers.
There are dead and there are hospitals.
There are dead and there are radar screens
to observe the dead
as they die more than once in this life,
screens to observe the dead who live on after death
as well as those who die
to lift the earth above all that has died.
O white master, where are you taking my people
and yours?
—Mahmoud Darwish, "Speech of the Red Indian,"
trans. Sargon Boulos

L'umanità si sta suicidando.
Se vogliamo sopravvivere dobbiamo guardare le cose con realismo: la razza bianca reagisce al declino scatenando la guerra civile globale.
Lo schiavismo domina il mondo.
La civiltà moderna finisce nel sangue e nella merda.
Allontaniamoci dall'edificio che sta crollando.
Espelliamo da ogni luogo di vita i traditori della sinistra riformista.
Creiamo spazi di sopravvivenza autonoma.
—Franco "Bifo" Berardi

1. Apocalypse, or, the Highest Stage of Modernism

Modernism imagined itself to be beyond eschatology, those primitive bedtime stories about the end of the world, the last judgment, or some final act that would settle things as they ultimately should be. Modernism, however, in imagining that it could overcome its Abrahamic heritage, preserved it. Even as it claimed to surrender the idea of a savior, sent from heaven to redeem a fallen world, it relocated this figure again and again in this or that individual, class, or grouping—the enlightened monarch, the universal proletariat, the creative entrepreneur. The "revolutionary subject" is just another messiah born without original sin, in whose name the sinful and the fallen pursue their earthly redemption. In the absence of the savior, the image of the end of the world returns and the apocalypse reigns.

Francis Alÿs, Modern Procession, 2002. Two-channel video, 12'.

In this light, the actual legacy of modernism is not a horizon of worker-led emancipation but a biosphere on the brink of extinction, self-destructive societies, and a world in ruins. This results from colonialism—the blind spot of modernity[1]—which is not *just* a war machine designed to extract profit as quickly as possible, regardless of the consequences, but also an apparatus that employs cultural intervention and images of salvation and progress to obliterate the disruptive effects of the trauma it generates.

As the apocalypse has become central to the neoliberal imaginary, it is clear that the current relations of domination—and a corresponding redemptive horizon of emancipation—are no longer legible. What we are witnessing are intolerable forms of dependency. Instead of relationships of domination, there is systemic competition and destruction leading to self-destruction, even suicide. We are seeing the outcomes of displacement, dispossession, military and colonial occupation, the eradication of identity, and the cancellation and destruction of a world of moral belonging.

In the late 1980s, Gilles Deleuze noted that political cinema was no longer constituted on the basis of the possibility of revolution (like classical cinema), but on the intolerable. The intolerable had become *the unknown*, what the media and hegemonic narratives were obscuring. This is why in various texts Deleuze wrote, "The people are missing"—meaning that the proletariat or a unified people would no longer seek to conquer power, thus situating counter-information as a political task.[2] Along with the third-world *guerrillero*, the working class and the main protagonists of political struggle and of the militant image of the twentieth century had disappeared. As Félix Guattari put it, militantism came to be impregnated by a rancid church smell that elicited a legitimate gesture of rejection.[3] A new form of emancipation of the people of the third world had been foregrounded in the 1970s, leading to the replacement of politics by a new ethics of intervention. Third worldism or internationalism had been a universal cause giving a name to a political wrong: for the first time, the "wretched of the earth" emerged for a specifically historic period as a new figuration of "the people" in the political sense: the colonized were discursively transformed into political figures.[4] Yet, a new ethical humanism (or humanitarianism) replaced revolutionary enthusiasm and political sympathy with pity and moral indignation, transforming them into political emotions within the

discourse of emergency. This led to new figures of alterity in the 1980s and '90s: the "suffering other" who needs to be rescued and the postcolonial "subaltern" demanding restitution, presupposing that visibility within a multicultural social fabric would lead to emancipation.

In the 1990s, the panorama of resistance opposed neoliberal reforms and fought for fair trade, sustainable development, human rights, and corporate accountability; the anti-globalization movement conceived itself as a social base to criticize corporate capitalism, globalization, and the fact that multinational corporations had acquired more and more unregulated political power exercised through trade agreements and deregulated financial markets. Anticapitalist politics in this context was characterized by interdisciplinarity, the adoption of an array of countercultural positions, and provisional political associations with the goal of creating autonomous zones, albeit symbolically. Counter-informative, didactic, and symbolic interventions against capitalism in the public sphere prevailed. In parallel, minorities continued to claim visibility and accountability under the depoliticized frame of human rights, as well as demanding inclusion within globalized democracy.[5]

But once neoliberal policies of deregulation, austerity, free markets, and privatization resulted in the decline of living standards and the loss of jobs, pensions, and the safety net that the state and society used to provide, social Darwinism became the rule. One of the implications of this is that the colonial division of the first and third world as well as the global—"postcolonial"— distinction between North/South and East/West has become irrelevant, as a new arrangement of the world is now visible: modernized pockets of privilege and cultural sophistication thrive and coexist with enclaves inhabited by "redundant populations." This sector of the population has differential access—or no access at all—to education, health services, debt, and jobs, and is governed by various forms of state control that produce differential degrees of exclusion, dispossession, and coercion. These are communities whose commons and sustainable autonomous forms of life are being destroyed in the name of their well-being and development; yet, their destruction is de facto sustaining the lives of people living in modernized privileged enclaves. I am thinking of the destruction of entire communities and their lands in the state of Michoacán, Mexico since the 1960s to provide Mexico City with much-needed water. Or of shale gas extraction in Québec in order to provide gas for home use.

It is clear that under capitalist absolutism it is more profitable to destroy lives and lands, rendering sectors of the population redundant, than to incorporate them into the system as consumers or exploited workers. In this panorama, the only categories that remain are winners and losers, exploiters and exploited, included and excluded. Neoliberal common sense preaches that either you are strong and smart, or you deserve your misery.[6]

In spite of the fact that the nineteenth-century political framework had been superseded by new forms of capitalist absolutism, myths like critique (or the principle that there can be an outside that can oppose the state of things, sublating it in the interest of something better), revolution, and democracy inflamed the uprisings of the early twenty-first century (Argentina in 2000, Mexico in 2006, and between 2011 and 2012 Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, Syriza in Greece, etc.). These mobilizations fought against austerity measures and for better democracies, and demanded that states grant citizens rights. By now, however, it has become clear that struggles have lost their social base and their capacity for medium- or long-term political organizing. Moreover, the values underlying mobilization are increasingly neoliberal: they are focused on individual problems, private benefit, and consumer choices. Jodi Dean explains how the logic of neoliberalism itself has made collectivity undesirable, because in principle collectivity opposes individual responsibility and freedom, which are the main tenets of neoliberalism.[7] Mobilizations become focused on the individual, and mass demonstrations become occasions for temporary coalitions, for recognizing and comforting each other, for finding transient affinities and concerns, for sharing indignation. Mass mobilizations may open up toward political subjectivity but they are not enough to ground or sustain it.

Uprisings are about collective emotions, social disorder, acts of insurrection in which antagonism or disagreement is expressed. The state either tolerates or represses these voices. The problem is that the aspiration of politics through social mobilization has become centered around achieving democracy, denying democracy's own limits and mechanics of exclusion, and the fact that in our current historical moment it serves to validate capitalist absolutism.[8] For many thinkers, this is the reason why we live in a "post-political" era. Post-politics also implies the disavowal of the fundamental antagonism conditioning politics, as equality has come to mean inclusion, respect, and entitlement. What we see proliferate are struggles directing action at small or private battles for the defense of rights, territory, or policy proposals. "Post-politics" therefore means consensual politics, the end of ideology, the neoliberal withering away of the state (which is at the same time strengthened strategically according to the interests of global capital), and the financialization of the economy.[9] In other words, the Promethean frame of worker-led revolutionary resistance has been superseded by capitalist absolutism expressed as the imposition of neoliberal politics: centered on democracy, it cannot be uncoupled from free-market logic, which has become common sense. The unprecedented forms of state, social, and corporate violence brought about by capitalist absolutism are less tied to local than to abstract global processes, and yet resistance remains localized, isolated, ineffective. What does insurrection look like in this panorama?

Juan Manuel Sepúlveda, The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

2. Images of Insurrection are Images of Alterity

According to Serge Daney, Western universalism conceived an "abstract other."[10] In the dominant imaginary of the twentieth century, images of this abstract other materialized in the "ethnographic image," the "militant image," and the "witness image." Ethnographic images were mostly registers of non-Western peoples who were disappearing or on the brink of extinction. Infused with documentary or indexical pretention, ethnographic images are based on a divide instituted by representational technology itself. That is to say, ethnographic images are always by people with different levels of access to the means of reproduction. "Militant images" are political and meant to announce and to bring forth the revolution against colonialism and imperialism. The need for the militant image gave intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers the task of accompanying peasants, workers, colonized peoples, and oppressed minorities and individuals in revolt. Following Nicole Brenez, these images embodied critique and followed the activist model of Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925).[11] The two main debates that militant images have provoked concern their capacity to raise consciousness, to mobilize the masses toward the constitution of the people; and whether their autonomy as aesthetic creations is subsumed by their propagandistic function. The "witness image," in turn, is ethical, and came to prevail in the aftermath of the Shoah, when oral testimony, documents, and documentary images were summoned not to prove facts, but as forms of memory to sustain the ethical imperative of collective remembering. Later on, witness images acquired a documentary function, providing proof of injustices and demanding a restitution of rights. These images put on the table debates on the (im)possibility of representing trauma or catastrophe, including whether attempts to represent catastrophe end up banalizing it.

These "ethnographic," "militant," and "witness" images are linked to an ethical and politicized notion of alterity derived from Western universalism. For Daney, the image is always a slot where, paraphrasing Lacan, "there is some other" to whom we are getting close by *imaging her* by way of an interplay of presence and absence, distance and proximity, and a series of operations to render the sayable visible and vice versa.[12] We must bear in mind, though, that the image is not a given, and this is why Daney draws a distinction between "image" and what he calls the "visual" or "imagery." In contrast to the image, the visual is the optical verification of a procedure of power. It is composed of clichés and stereotypes. The visual is reality incessantly representing itself to itself. For Daney, the visual is the tautology of discourse that does not amount to an image but is simply a series of eyeless faces of the other. Taking up Daney's distinction, Jacques Rancière in "The Future of the Image" ties his notion of "image" to an aesthetic operation that produces a material presence by way of dissemblance. Following Jean-Luc Godard's famous aphorism and modernist montage credo "The image will come at the time of Resurrection," Rancière links the image to Christian theology as a promise of the spirit made flesh. To distinguish the "genuine image" from its simulacrum, moreover, Rancière separates the operations of art from the technique of reproduction. In his account, there is a taxonomy of three forms of "imageness" that borrow from each other and that come to occupy different places in the regime of the sensible. The "naked"—or documentary—image is not art because it functions as proof or witness of historical events. The "ostensive" image is sheer presence without signification, that is, the presentation of presence as art, as a form of "facingness," an address to the viewer. Finally, the "metaphorical" image is a singular rearrangement of the images circulating in the mass media that displaces and critiques these representations of imagery.[13]

My taxonomy of images of alterity from the twentieth century—ethnographic, militant, and witness—is not opposed but rather transversal to Rancière's. What I am interested in, firstly, is tracking the kinds of discourses underlying images of Western alterity in the aftermath of the postcolonial critique of the ethnographic image, the demise of the third-worldist militant image, and the exposure of the limitations of the witness image, which often serves to perpetuate the figure of the "victim." These visibilities have perhaps become the "visual" in Daney's sense. Second, I wish to consider the possibility of an image of *soulèvement*—in the sense of an image of an other that could threaten Western imperialism and capitalist absolutism, a system this is consensually driven by the desire and need for visibility, and that legitimates social Darwinism through racism and misogynist speech in the public sphere.

Is such an image possible considering the changes in political struggle brought about by what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism"? Dean has analyzed how the functioning of social media has taken over older platforms for revolution; therefore, opposition circulates in the networks of communicative capitalism such as Twitter

and Facebook. Dean observes that these mediatized forms of struggle are not defensive struggles of a middle class facing austerity measures, inflation, unemployment, indebtedness, and foreclosure; nor are they geared toward building strong forms of organization. Rather, they are aimed at gaining visibility through a different logic—by using common images, tactics, hashtags, identity politics, and iconic events.[14] The fact that these movements are focused on visibility makes their protests ambiguous, as the post-political and anti-political identities of struggles are so fluid that they can be channeled in any direction. Herein lies another reason behind the failure to construct concentrated, effective political forces with the capacity to confront and replace the capitalist mode of production.[15] Therefore, in our post-political era, as communication and speech (the grounds for political action, in Hannah Arendt's terms) have been transformed into codes, likes, shares, and retweets, the main objective of much of contemporary politicized images is to gain visibility for certain struggles and injustices. Based on the idea that images can provide a "common language," social movements have become inseparable from art and culture, and contemporary politicized aesthetic practice has become a niche or genre called "sensible politics." One of the problems that results is that people are now more interested in how social conflict and political processes are represented rather than in analyzing the underlying issues. Following Hito Steyerl, the way these issues tend to be framed is generic and tinted by ideological and commercial mandates.

Consider Shirin Neshat's twenty-two large-scale color photographs of the Egyptian revolution exhibited in a New York gallery in 2014. For Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi, these images convey a false, impossible effort to render the Levinasian face present, and in the process they embody the aggressive commodification of the Arab revolutions through "banal sympathy grounded on curatorial liberalism."[16] The images are far from the gestures of third-worldist solidarity from half-a-century ago, as for Dabashi they represent the disconnection between art, the artist, and the subject. At the same time, for Dabashi they commodify real suffering and struggle, proclaiming the Egyptian revolution as having succeeded (at a moment when its outcome was far from clear), in a world that wishes to see "stability." In general, contemporary images of uprisings tend to be either romantic—trying to transmit the euphoria of revolutions without an awareness of the human cost—or represented as horrific, senseless events, where the figure of the people erupts in visceral, zombie-like rage, as in the Hollywood film *World War Z* (2013). It is clear that in general, neoliberal images of alterity (ethnographic, militant, and witness images) perpetuate the framework of global conflict and social Darwinism. Most current politicized images function to compensate for the ravages caused by neoliberal reforms. Insofar as museums, biennials, exhibitions, and film festivals are part of the global military industrial complex, neoliberalism is evidently a *pharmakon* that offers both the poisons of destitution and destruction along with the "cures" of democracy, development, human rights, social responsibility, and support for cultural and academic production. Perhaps *visibility* has become a problem.

It is not *what we see*, but what *cannot be shown* that is obscene. And what is it that tends not to be shown in contemporary images of struggle that conform to the old categories of ethnographic, militant, and witness images? That which it is difficult for us to see: the abjection in which redundant populations live across the world, in areas disconnected from the flows of global exchange.

For Serge Daney, *true* democracy means looking into the collective mirror of images and making a distinction between what can be done, what we know we must do, and what does not come cheap.[17] And what is difficult for those in the gated enclaves of privilege to acknowledge is that for redundant populations, the kind of resistance and insurrection foregrounded by neoliberal democracy in corporatized urban public space is out of reach, a luxury. For instance, rural populations (like the Zapatistas) have traveled in *caravanas* to Mexico City in precarious conditions to voice their demands (which are rarely heard). Uprisings are premised on the failure of a preestablished set of structures to reflect or represent the popular will; but redundant populations are precisely those *excluded* from these democratic structures. At best, these populations can demand inclusion and recognition—which, again, is premised on visibility. Therefore, redundant populations resist not by rising up but by surviving, and whenever possible, by creating pockets of autonomy. What would a post-militant, postcolonial, post-ethnographic, and post-humanitarian image of redundant populations look like? What does the uprising of the "losers" of social Darwinism look like?

Clarisse Hahn, Los desnudos, 2012. 13'. Courtesy of the artist.

3. Images of Self-Destruction as Insurrection

Los desnudos (2012), a video by Clarisse Hahn, which is part of her series *Le Corps est un arme*, shows images of a protest by about four hundred members of a rural community from Veracruz, Mexico, who camped in Mexico City to demand that their stolen land be given back to them. After many years of unsuccessful struggle, they began to present their naked bodies twice a day in the streets, until their demands were partially met by the Mexican government. In her video, Hahn interviews a few of the protesters, mostly women, about what they were fighting for and about their relationship to their own bodies. What is made visible by Hahn is the precariousness of the conditions in which they survived in the streets of Mexico City. Their battle was not an uprising, but instead used bodily exposure as a defense against necrocapitalism—the creation of surplus value through the devouring of bare life. Precarious populations living in zones of sacrifice—such as Ciudad Juárez in Mexico; the tar sands of Alberta, Canada; and the Gaza Strip—are constantly exposed to destructive processes, which leads to self-destruction and the rending of the social fabric.

Otolith Group, Nervus Rerum, 2008. 32'. Courtesy of the artists.

Another such precarious population is the Mwanza people surviving on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, who are portrayed in Hubert Sauper's documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare* (2006). Sauper's post- *pornomiseria* film maps the global relationships and interests behind the misery in which native populations in Tanzania live. Using Darwin's "survival of the fittest" concept as a metaphor, Sauper draws a parallel between the Nile perch—a fish that was introduced into Lake Victoria in the 1960s, causing a major mutation in the lake's ecosystem—and the Mwanza people, who are no longer able to live off the lake with their pre-industrial fishing techniques. European transnational corporations have brought to the area industrial means of fishing, processing, packing, and exporting the fish to Europe. Colonization and modernization have impoverished the indigenous population and ravaged their land to the extent that they are no longer able to live in their native environment. Instead, they survive off the entrails of the fish thrown out by the processing facilities. Devastated by AIDS and addiction to the intoxicating fumes given off by burning the polyethylene fish containers, the community is consumed by self-destruction. The devastation is further fueled by local wars fought with weapons flown in on the same planes that export the fish. In his film, Sauper clearly illustrates how the ideology of the survival of the fittest is the common sense behind neoliberal politics and globalization: the weak can only be saved by the compassionate actions of strong individuals, who are entitled to develop the economy according to their own interests. The reality, however, is that social Darwinism is the very cause of the crumbling of our civilization.

Redundant populations live in postapocalyptic conditions that resemble the aftermath of a failed revolution. The Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum* (2008) comes to mind here. In the film, the camera travels through the Jenin refugee camp, lingering to stare at dead commodities (TVs, refrigerators, a car), graffiti, and passers-by (mostly children), conveying through its floating, unstable gaze a dreamy perspective free of any human coordinates of vision. The camera is neither on a dolly nor on a shoulder, its movement a defamiliarizing rendering of inhuman, autonomous vision. What we see is an area that was originally a transitory zone in which refugees waited to return to their place of origin, but which ultimately became their permanent home. The camera shows us the poverty in which the refugees live, the lack of infrastructure, and their disconnection from global processes. The inexorable movement of the camera through the camp also conveys a sense of entrapment, as its movement indicates that there is nowhere to go. From there, we can only contemplate the unreachable horizon of the Mediterranean Sea, seen from a nearly broken aerial tramway. In the voice-over, we hear fragments from Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* (1982) and from Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love* (1986) and *The Declared Enemy* (2004); these fragments speak of the negation of life, of the destruction of the relationship between "us" and life, of vanishing from the world. In another scene, Zacharia Zbeidi, a former resistance leader in the Second Intifada, says something to the camera (inaudible to the audience) while we see behind him a television showing images of Yasser Arafat. If the image of Yasser Arafat has survived his death, it is because it masks a reality, a silence, the absence of the image of Palestinians themselves. In *Nervus Rerum*, Palestinians appear not as presences (or absences), but as their own shadows, caught between nightmare and wakefulness, life and death.

Like the Palestinians, redundant populations all over the world seem to be living in the nightmarish aftermath of a disaster—the failure of revolutions and decolonization struggles, continuing neocolonialisms, humanitarian catastrophes. They face the impossibility and the senselessness of rising up. In 2006, in a desert area in Anapra, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, along the border with the

United States, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra had the word " *SUMISION*" (submission) excavated into the ground. Using the typeface Helvetica, the letters, which stretched fifteen meters high, were dug like graves and lined with concrete. Anapra is a shantytown in Ciudad Juárez at the crossroads between the Mexican state of Chihuahua and the US states of New Mexico and Texas. Its inhabitants work in sweatshops and other precarious industries; the area registers high levels of blood poisoning due to molten lead produced by the American Smelting and Refining company. As a result, deformities and pulmonary and related illnesses are not uncommon, and bodies of murdered women are regularly found in the area. In this context, Sierra's gesture is politically ambiguous: Does the word " *SUMISION*" refer to the submission of Anapra's inhabitants to the degrading conditions they endure? Sierra intended to fill the holes with gasoline and set them on fire, but the action was halted by the Mexican government. Does this mean that by forbidding the incineration of the word, the Mexican authorities are directly responsible for the population's submission? The ambiguity inherent to the piece indicates precisely the lack of political horizon, the impossibility of organizing politically in the form of unions, strikes, and other labor-based struggles. This is because the inhabitants of Anapra, like many other populations around the world whose ways of life have been ruined by wars, environmental catastrophe, and resource extraction, survive in a postapocalyptic situation.

Lebanese theorist and visual artist Jalal Touffic has described these situations as "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster." In his view, the long-term effects of material and social destruction remain in the depths of the body and psyche as latent traumatic effects that become codified in the genes.[18] Along similar lines, Winona LaDuke, an Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) scholar and activist, explains how her people, after having endured colonization and abject living conditions for centuries, are now subject to corrupt leadership and an ongoing epidemic of PTSD due to intergenerational, historic trauma. For LaDuke, the global dependence on fossil fuels constitutes an ongoing disaster for her people, and links all the catastrophes happening around the world. Her community, which has one of the highest suicide rates in the US, is one of many across the world living with the genetic memory of catastrophe.[19] According to Touffic, the collateral damage of the "surpassing" (or monumental) disaster implies the withdrawal of tradition. Therefore, resurrection is required. Modernism either willfully rejects tradition or is indifferent to it; only those who fully discern the withdrawal of tradition after the surpassing disaster have tried to resurrect it, since their history has been written by the victors.

Furthermore, in the case of populations living in the aftermath of a surpassing disaster, art may not show a hopeful horizon, but rather what remains. Wael Noureddine's *Ça sera beau (From Beirut With Love)* (2005) is an experimental film-essay and postcard from a city torn apart after decades of internal conflict. Shot in a fast-paced style, the camera pans seemingly randomly through different zones of Beirut, showing the physical traces of the Civil War and ongoing conflict. There are sequences of people bleeding, burning cars, distracted soldiers, a threatening helicopter. Different religious and politically driven factions convey the senselessness of the violence unfolding before our eyes, a result of the failed efforts to resurrect the tradition of revolution. The destruction outside is mirrored in the self-destruction of the filmmaker and his friends, who drink and shoot heroin in a Beirut apartment. *Ça sera beau* paints a world in which submission cannot turn into revolt, but only into self-destruction as a way of regaining agency over one's own body.

A further instance in which self-destruction becomes an act of insurrection is documented in *Prisons* (2012), another film from Clarisse Hahn's series *Le Corps est un arme*. The filmmaker interviews two young women who used their bodies as a weapon of war, taking part in a hunger strike in a Turkish prison in 2000. The strike was violently repressed by the Turkish army and both women are now living with the consequences of the hunger strike in their own bodies, which has affected their cognitive abilities.

Wael Noureddine, Ça sera beau (From Beirut with Love), 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

In these instances, people survive in situations in which not only the relationship between people and tradition has been obliterated, but also the relationship between people and the world. Populations such as these are trapped in intolerable worlds, and the intolerable is no longer serious injustice, but daily banality.[20]

The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park is a documentary film of

sorts by Mexican filmmaker Juan Manuel Sepúlveda (2015). Shot in Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver, Canada, it is the result of the filmmaker's two years of interaction with a group of First Nations people who spend most of their days in the park. Sepúlveda proposed to collaborate with them on the making of a Western film, and this is the loose narrative of the movie. The genre materializes in an array of props that the filmmaker places in the park and uses in encounters with the characters: Bear, Janet, and Harley. Cowboy hats, bows and arrows, and a burning wagon provoke the characters (who are always highly intoxicated) into rants about the theft of the land they are standing on, which used to be a First Nations burial site; about state housing and other forms of control they endure; about the lack of opportunities afforded to them; and about the epidemics of depression, suicide, and addiction destroying their community. A life-sized print of one of Edward Curtis's ethnographic photographs of Native Americans from the turn of the twentieth century appears as a specter, opening a gap between Curtis's "vanishing people" and the First Nations people of Oppenheimer Park a hundred years later, who defiantly embrace the cliché of "drunken Indians." How can they reject the conditions in which they live? How can they choose a life worth living? How can they gather strength to rise up?

Franco Berardi has written that suicide has come to be increasingly perceived as the only effective action of the oppressed, the only means to dispel anxiety, depression, and impotence. In his view, suicide—whether by France Telecom workers, Hindu farmers, First Nations peoples across North America, CFE union members, or youth everywhere—is the final self-affirmation before accepting defeat.[21] The pervasiveness of this situation recalls a recent manifesto written by young French activists: "[We are] expropriated from our own language by education, from our songs by reality-TV contests, from our flesh by mass pornography, from our city by the police, and from our friends by wage labor."[22]

Self-destruction has become a gesture of *reclamation*, as if bodies, words, homes, and communities were never owned in the first place. In this light, I wish to read Hamid Dabashi's declaration "We are no longer postcolonial creatures" as a mandate to acknowledge that the modus operandi of modernism is colonial destruction, and that a neoliberal global cartography has been established in which everybody competes against everybody for "market success." In this regard, the demise of tolerance and inclusivity, along with the rise of new identitarian essentialisms, operate as a justification for social Darwinism on a global scale. People who live in intolerable situations sustain the privileges of people living in modern, rich enclaves. By offering these redundant populations woefully inadequate tools of repair like relocation and "development," we deny that anything was ever broken in the first place and that the legacy of modernity is a permanent war against life.

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Irmgard Emmelhainz is an independent translator, writer, researcher, and lecturer based in Mexico City. Her work about film, the Palestine Question, art, cinema, culture, and neoliberalism has been translated into Chinese, German, Italian, Norwegian, French, English, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, and Serbian, and published in an array of international publications such as *e-flux journal*, *Scapegoat Journal*, *Third Text*, *October*, *Horizontal*, *Furia Umana*, *Blog de Nexos*, and *Orfeo Rosso*, amongst others. Last year she published in Spanish *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico's Neoliberal Reconversion.* Her new book in Spanish, *The Sky is Incomplete: Travel Chronicles in Palestine,* is out now.

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Karen Sherman

The Glory Hole

Body of Work

In glassblowing, you take a metal pipe about four-and-a-half feet long, stick it into a furnace of molten glass, and spool a glob of glass onto the end. The glass comes out of the furnace at two thousand degrees, a glowing, molten mass, and you must constantly rotate the pipe so it doesn't flop over and collapse onto itself. A steady spin helps to keep its center. The glass cools at a rate of fifty degrees per second, its behavior changing radically with each moment. It is never cool enough to touch with your bare hands so you shape the glass with other tools and movements. You sit at a bench and rest the glass end of the pipe on a narrow rail, which is the only thing keeping it from falling into your lap, and take what is called a rag, but which is really a thick pad of newspaper soaked in water, and you cradle the glass like it's a newborn's skull, rotating it constantly and shaping it in your hand. The hot glass on the wet paper creates a burst of steam and the glass rides the vapor as you turn it. The newspaper chars, burning slightly. You're almost touching the glass—there's less than half an inch of newspaper between your hand and it—but you're not. You can't touch it yet you feel it through its weight shifting at the end of the pipe, through the changes in density, through the lubrication of the steam.

Studies have shown that the objects we hold become neurologically incorporated into our perception of our body—especially if we use them as tools that extend our body's capacity. Monkeys who learned to use a rake to obtain objects showed activity in the areas of the brain that register touch on the hand as well as objects appearing near the hand, suggesting that the brain considered the rake to be part of the hand.[1] Other tests with human subjects showed that though a tool was perceived as part of the hand, the objects the tool touched were not. The implication was that direct contact with the skin was crucial. But this is not what I experience with glassblowing; there, my sense is that the glass is an extension of my own tissue.

As a dancemaker, it's evident to me how much glassblowing comes down to choreography and kinesthetic empathy. When you have your chunk of glass in the furnace or glory hole (more on that terminology later), there's a way you can sense—not just see, but sense—how the glass is changing and anticipate when to take it out. It's similar to the way we intuitively know how far a rubber band can stretch before it will break, how big a bubble we can blow before it pops on our face. I've been trying to find the term for having empathy with the physical properties of an inanimate material—how we experience our own body through its relationship to other things, how we exhibit a capacity for grafting with materials that we should reject.

"Somatic resonance" almost gets at it. Here, "somatic" and

Heating glass. Photo:www.wisegeek.org

"resonance" are dance terms, often associated with movement pioneers like Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the developer of Body-Mind Centering®, who says that "when we touch someone, they touch us equally."[2] The boundaries of our experienced body can change freely and extend to other people but also to objects. Or as cognitive neuroscientists Patrick Haggard and Mathew Longo write in *Scientific American*, "While we think of our body as a fixed feature of our lives, the brain displays a surprising ability to accept as part of 'me' whatever I happen to be touching and using at any given time."[3]

The brain anticipates touch as a two-way street. We sense not just what other objects feel like but also what it would feel like to be touched by them. The hand that touches also receives touch and this simultaneity is one of our very first experiences of the tactile world. Bainbridge Cohen describes the development of this faculty where perception occurs in the cellular, etheric, and immediately physical realms:

> We first experience these senses in utero. As we move in utero, our skin is stimulated by the amniotic fluid, the uterine wall and by one part of our body touching another. Thus we discover touch and movement in synchrony. Movement occurs at two levels, movement of our cells within the boundaries of the skin and movement of the body through space. Touch also occurs at two levels, cellularly and contact of our skin from the outside.[4]

Touch is entwined and flows in both directions. Thinking of touch not as an on/off switch (you're either touching something or you're not) but as an arcing energy through space that in fact encompasses that space and charges it with the anticipation of touch, makes touch a continuous, liquid action.

Rheology is the study of the deformation or flow of matter—when a substance gains viscosity or changes from a liquid to a solid. It applies to many substances, including glass, but also mud, lava, and blood. My mother is a retired medical technician. When I was trying to find a term for empathy with the cellular changes of a material, she wrote to me:

> There's a lab test called "pro time" [short for "prothrombin"], which measures the coagulability of blood. You pipette a small amount of calcium solution into a small tube of plasma, start a stop watch and tilt this liquid mixture back and forth until it becomes a clot. Normally this happens in 13 sec. When is it liquid

> and when is it a clot? After much practice, you can intuit the millisecond of change, even though you can't actually see a change, you just know it is coming. The term for this moment is “end point.”

This is a wonderfully macabre example, since it deals with the body recognizing the rheology of its own substance—blood; the body watching and intuiting a piece of itself. The body out of body.

Heather Kravas, dead, disappears, 2016. Documentation of a dance performance Photo: Tricia Keightley

Crunchy On the Outside, Rubbery On the Inside

Intimacy travels through the objects we touch, expanding the circuit of consciousness to include the conducting materials as well.

Many years ago, my former partner and I were in Hawaii, staying at a little house on the water. On our second day, we discovered a gigantic centipede in the bathroom. It was about eight inches long, and horrifically scary and disgusting and fascinating. We decided we had to kill it. We looked around for a weapon and found a broom, the kind with an angled, bristly straw head. The bristles were firm enough that they might stun or perhaps brain damage the centipede, or maybe cause it organ failure. Not necessarily dismember it, which would be messy and unpleasant. It was only in retrospect that I realized I’d contemplated any of this in those few seconds and that I’d never before considered just how an insect dies biologically after a human attacks it. I crept back into the bathroom, took up a position, and jabbed the centipede with the broom, not accurately enough to maim it but enough to make contact and instantly feel the rubbery, buoyant integrity of the centipede’s body—a steel rod wrapped in a gummy worm covered with a hard candy coating—translate all the way up the broom; through the bristles, up the wooden handle, all the way to the flesh of my right hand, gripped around the end of the broom as a final shock absorber for this horrible sensation.

I don’t know if centipedes are smart. Having attacked it and missed, I didn’t know what to expect. Plus, I was gagging from the revolting feel of its body through the broom. Which was perhaps its evolutionary strategy: to simply be disgusting. The centipede—ran? scurried?—*rematerialized* in a flash, up underneath the bathroom counter, which was open underneath to accommodate a chair. I dropped into a squat, awkwardly jabbing the broom up into the corner where the counter met the wall and where the centipede had lodged itself, flattening and creeping sideways into the crack with every hit of the broom. The broom’s long handle meant I didn’t have to get too close but it also made it hard to maneuver from a squat. Each blow had to have impact. Actual and figurative.

The first few strikes I landed again bounced back at me with that thick, sickening softness. The more I stabbed the broom, the more the centipede wiggled into the gap, and soon the only palpable message back from the end of the broom was the texture of *wall, wall, wall*. The centipede had survived but was nowhere in sight. We grabbed our guidebook (this was before smartphones) and discovered that the *Scolopendra subspinipes* is a poisonous species of centipede. Their bites have been compared to the pain of childbirth and kidney stones (if the kidney stones were also on fire). I prayed that I’d maimed maybe forty of its one hundred legs so it wouldn’t be able to crawl up into my bed while I slept but I knew from the sensations I’d gotten via the broom that I’d done nothing more than scare it. We never saw the centipede again but I’ve lived with the body-to-body intimacy of our encounter as mediated through that broom for these many years. In fact, holding a broom so that its bristles just graze the floor is enough to bring it all back. The centipede is always at the end of that tool.

The Tool That Shapes the Hand

We don’t have to have something against our skin to feel it. Feeling something feeling something is still feeling something. But sometimes an inanimate object can amplify to us the most familiar object of all—another body.

The book *Strange Piece of Paradise* is a memoir by Terri

Photo: Jessica Cressey

Jentz that recounts her nearly fifteen-year search for the unidentified man who tried to murder her. She'd been nineteen, on a cross-country bike trip with her college roommate, and only a few days into their trip, while they were camping in rural Oregon, a man drove his pickup truck up over the curb, onto the grass, and over the tent in which they lay sleeping. He backed up, got out, and started attacking them with an ax.

Jentz is tangled up in the tent and thrashing from side to side as he attacks her. Her fingers grab at what's hitting her and she feels the curve of cool metal. He stops attacking her for a moment and she opens her eyes to find him standing above her, straddling her and gripping the ax with both hands in a pose of perfect symmetry. He lowers the ax very slowly in what she later comes to understand is a measuring of the chop he is about to deliver. As she writes in the book:

> My eyes watch as [the ax] descends to a point just above my chest and pauses, I cup my hands over my heart, clasp the blade, and from somewhere in my body summon a voice. Firm, with a touch of politeness.
> "Please leave us alone," I say. "Take anything. Just leave us alone."
> He says nothing.
> I can see quite clearly, inches in front of my eyes, both hands just over my heart, folded like a prayer around the blade.
> Then gently, ever so gently, he lifts the hatchet from my grasp, steps over me, and walks away.[5]

By then, he'd already cut through the muscles in her arm, made lace of the fine skin on her scalp, slashed her fleshy palm, broken her nose, and sliced through one of the bones in her forearm. He'd also bashed a hole in her roommate's skull. He'd had plenty of tactile information sent back through the metal blade and wooden handle of the ax. Bone, flesh, muscle. But when she'd sheathed the blade with her hands, he'd stopped. This was a different kind of touch; if the ax was an extension of his hand, she'd enfolded it in her own.

Leslie Van Houten, one of the women convicted of killing on behalf of Charles Manson, described feeling a similar "exchange" with her victim, Rosemary LaBianca, at the moment of the murder. There is some dispute over whether Van Houten technically killed LaBianca (it's generally accepted that she stabbed her only after she was already dead) but in a 1987 interview, Van Houten acknowledged the enormity of the relationship she felt by "being with her, being next to her," by holding her down when she died. For Van Houten, this was a tragic supernatural connection that triggered a cascade of guilt and responsibility for what she had done. Though she was in the opposite situation than Jentz—attacking rather than being attacked—both events involved weapons that required close physical contact. A gun allows distance; an ax, a knife require touching. Holding.

This is inescapable confrontation with our shared human biology—our skeletons, organs, soft tissue, skin are mostly organized the same. We're made up of the same stuff. If I stab you, I must instantly discover what it's like to be stabbed. And vice versa. We know what we do to each other. *When we touch someone, they touch us equally.*

Mirror neurons may be at work here; the neurons that fire in my brain when I observe you doing something are the same neurons that fire when I do that very thing myself. It's as if watching you do it means I'm doing it. Studies have shown that the brain responds to images of touch in the same way it responds to touch itself; the same areas of the somatosensory cortex fire when subjects are touched on the leg as when they see images of others being touched in the same spot.[6] Those same regions of the brain are activated when you watch someone dance.[7] Mirror neurons are also thought to be responsible for how I know what you're going to do *before* you do it. They help me know from the way you stand up if you're just stretching your legs or preparing to leave the room.

But spending a few decades as a dancer helps, too.

The Out-of-Body You

There is a place in Minneapolis called Orfield Laboratories. It conducts research in acoustics, vibration,

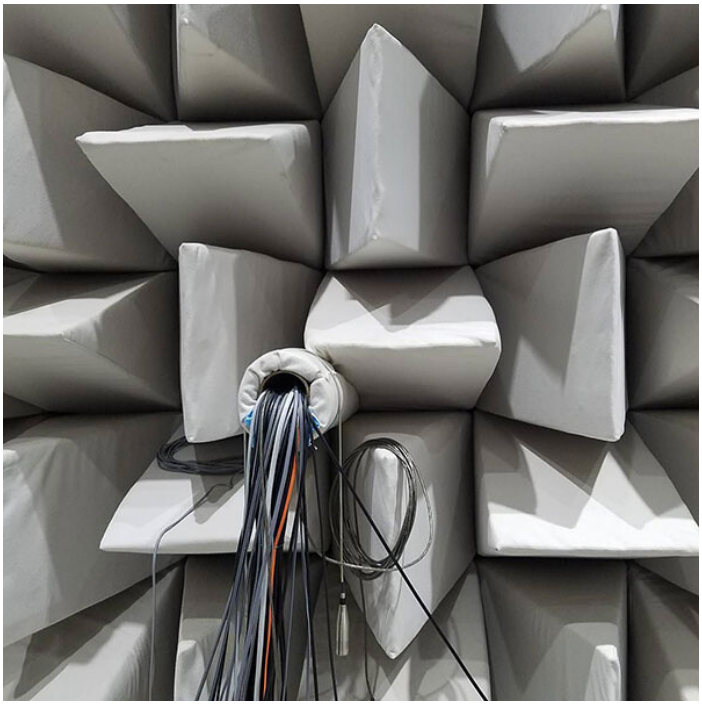

Photo:@josephichiban

and lighting. They can measure the imperceptible working tones your phone is emitting right now. Before it became Orfield Labs, the building used to be a recording studio known as Sound 80, where Bob Dylan made *Blood on the Tracks*, Prince recorded his early demos, and Lipps Inc. recorded "Funkytown." But if you've heard of Orfield Labs it's because they have an anechoic chamber that has twice been named the quietest place on earth by *The Guinness Book of World Records*. It absorbs 99.9 percent of sound. It's a room without sound, until you put something in it. A few years ago, I went on a tour of the lab led by Steve Orfield himself. He took us into the anechoic chamber, which is a small room, about ten-by-ten feet, with three-foot-thick acoustic foam wedges attached to walls made of insulated steel and a foot of concrete. The ceiling, walls, and floor, which consists of a suspended wire grid, have no direct contact with the structural walls of the building, so as to minimize vibration. Essentially, the chamber feels like a free-floating, soft-walled dungeon. The density of the air is different. You feel it in your ears when you walk in. It's like a change in air pressure, but it isn't exactly. It's more of a deadness, a thickening. There are stories that anechoic chambers will make you crazy after less than a few hours. The only sounds you can hear are those of your own body. Your heartbeat, sure, but also eventually the sound of your blood coursing through your ears, the smack of your upper eyelids against your lower. Supposedly, no one has stayed in Orfield's anechoic chamber for more than forty-five minutes.

So when Steve offered to close the door, turn out the lights, and leave us there in the sonically dead pitch dark, we said yes. There were about eight of us. We got ourselves situated on the floor and then he shut the door and cut the light. I sat cross-legged in the dark, waiting. After a bit, I realized I hadn't fully shut down my phone, which was in my back pocket, so I twisted around to my right side to turn it off and suddenly, it was as if I had been flung into darkness. Though I'd already been sitting in complete darkness for at least thirty seconds, I hadn't yet changed my physical position, which made my mind continue to perceive light where there wasn't any. I thought I could see the rest of the group, the sitting position of the person across from me, their proximity. But I couldn't actually see any of that because the lights were off. Without light and reflected sound, my brain's perception had been anchored only by my body's position, and as soon as I'd changed that, the connections between body, brain, light, and dark were ripped away. Suddenly I was reeling. My body felt spongy and disoriented. I no longer had a sense of the size of the room or where anyone was within it, I didn't know where the walls were, or the distance between my elbow and hip, my chin and the floor. I gave myself over to this dizzying absence of location. I listened for my heartbeat, terrified I would hear it—for the flow of blood in my throat, my ears, terrified I would hear it. Could I stand an hour in this room, hearing my mortality bang around in my chest? I had only gotten started on the task of taking myself apart and giving myself away when a few minutes later, Steve opened the door.

Recently, I read about an experiment that explored this type of sensation. If you hold your hand out in front of you in a darkened room and see it illuminated by a bright flash, an afterimage of your hand remains. Like a retinal burn. If you then drop your hand, the proprioceptive part of your brain feels your hand move, but the visual part of your brain still sees the afterimage and your brain can't integrate the sensations—they're in conflict with one another. So to resolve this, the brain dissolves the afterimage. You end up seeing a fading or a crumbling. It's called a ghost hand. Sometimes I think of dances as akin to this ghost hand—when you make a dance, you're making a thing that is of you, from you, but not ultimately you. It's the out-of-body you born of your body, and you make it and then it's gone but it also stays. It remains but degrades. It adheres and disappears.

Superfeelers and Blowhards

Dance requires being adaptable, watchful, and highly in-tune with others. You learn how to observe someone or something and re-embody it. Which means on some level, you understand yourself to be what you are watching. This is a dialogue based in its own runic language. Dancers have an exceptional ability to intuit, interpret, and anticipate others and to work together without needing a lot of discussion. They're good at committing to their own task while working towards the group whole, the common good. It is the deep intelligence of this intuitive,

Mervyn Peake, Glass-blowers "Gathering" from the Furnace, 1943. Watercolour on paper 50.8 x 68.5 cm. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Imperial War Museum

body-based social solidarity that makes me believe dancers should run the UN (should the UN still exist as you're reading this).

Dancers can quickly deconstruct the essence of what and who they are watching, separate out the important pieces and reactualize them. This is not imitation but embodiment, animation, (re)creation. I have a friend who can do a pitch-perfect reenactment of Charlize Theron as Aileen Wournos rollerskating in the movie *Monster*. She can do it having seen the movie only once fourteen years ago. And she can do it without needing the rollerskates. I wouldn't know how to describe "Charlize Theron as Aileen Wournos on rollerskates" but she can simply be it—and thus distill the entire emotional and visual life of the character (and the entire film) into about four seconds. A lot of dancers I know can do this. They can capture something you can't explain or didn't realize you'd observed and just show it to you. Suddenly, the person they're embodying is alive within them—they are both themselves and someone else, indistinguishable yet distinct from each other—and when they stop, that other person is gone, it crumbles. It is remarkable to witness and if you've never seen it, you need to spend more time with dancers.

Maybe dancers have more highly developed mirror neurons but I think they sense with another sense. Dancemaker Lisa Nelson codified this with her Tuning Scores, which embed "the practice of observation into the practice of action":[8]

> First, it is physical—tuning is an action. It moves my body, my senses, and my attention. It's also sensual—I can feel it happening in my body. It's relational—it's the way I connect with things. And it's compositional—it puts things in order.[9]

Studies by Karen Kohn Bradley and Dr. Jose Contreras-Vidal show that dancers store the logistics of the choreography in the cerebellum, opening up the frontal lobe for interpretation, invention, and problem-solving.[10] It's a total intelligence, and as Bonne Bainbridge Cohen says, "The mind is like the wind and the body is like the sand; if you want to know how the wind is blowing, you can look at the sand."[11]

Arts writers Andy Horwitz, Nina Horisaki-Christens, Claire Bishop, Aaron Mattocks, and others have observed that the visual art world of late is interested in performance that looks untrained, which it equates with authenticity.[12] But many in the visual art world remain ignorant of the history of dance and contemporary theater, which have both already spent generations thoroughly exploring the idea of "untrained." Dance has exhaustively excavated the pedestrian, the amateur, the raw, and the unpolished, most famously through the Judson Dance Theater's work in the early 1960s. If anything, dance is in a retrograde right now; revisiting formalism and molding it into experimental structures. Dance has already annealed the Judson and post-Judson legacy into the current moment. Dance understands that authentic experience isn't married to form. It doesn't have to look raw to be real. A lot of visual art venues don't think they're presenting "dance" and a lot of visual artists don't think they're incorporating "dance" into their work perhaps because they think dance is Martha Graham not Richard Move, still stuck in its original amber rather than reimagined by a succession of radical new nows. They often don't know what dance has already innovated in terms of human presence in the last fifty years and think anyone can incorporate a live person into their work, call it "performance," and have it be interesting. I'm not saying that dance, performance art, theater, and performance are interchangeable or all the same thing. But by not knowing how they're not the same thing, one essentially says they are.

Dance sometimes emphasizes training and technique (depending on the kind of dance we're talking about), but it's always interested in *experience*—both the verb and the noun. It doesn't matter what kind of dance you're doing or were trained in or if you were trained at all. In dance, your lifetime of experience, your hours in the studio and out, onstage and off, is considered invaluable; it's both the content and the tool of the art. Honing consciousness around it is dance's craft. Being able to feel at ease while people watch you have that consciousness is a skill that takes years to develop. This cultivated authority is what I would define as technique regardless of what the dancing or the performance looks like. Experience is both the objective and the object.

In the downtown world of yore (meaning the 1980s to the early 2000s), we used to use the words *dancer* and *choreographer* largely interchangeably. I don't know if it was because the distinctions didn't matter or that the assumption was that you did both (which is always true in dance but since performed improvisation was so prevalent in those days, you truly were doing both in the same moment). I don't recall when the distinctions started to matter so much and why. Was it because funders asked that we delineate ourselves and so we did? Or maybe hierarchy became important again as the economy improved—a choreographer is seen to hold more power than their dancers and is credited as the mind of dance, where dancers are viewed as the body of dance. Among all the familiar misogynies that privilege male choreographers over female ones, despite men being a distinct minority in the field, there is that one—the powerful choreographer is the brain, the subservient dancer is the body. Male choreographers are seen as gods, female choreographers are seen as … difficult. (This is yet one more frontier where those who identify as nonbinary do us all a great service.)

One of the psychological hazards of dance is that you are the in-person, live representation of your art; you are both the method and the very existence of it. So when people judge or critique your art, they are also judging and critiquing your very physical existence in addition to your artistic ideas. A painter doesn't have to stand next to their painting during gallery hours and absorb every comment and reaction to their work (although maybe someone has already done that piece). Performance that does occur in visual art settings is generally regarded as not happening in real-time; gallery-goers have been trained to prize the object-ness over the live-ness and this is reflected in how they navigate the room, the art, each other, and notions of "audience." At the institutional level, this has been reflected in the failure to provide workable conditions for the performers, who are more than sculptural materials and require things like bathrooms, temperature-control, breaks, a livable wage, and occasionally even physical protection.[13]

Much discourse around visual art stands at a similar remove from its maker. The visual art world's notorious, absurdist "artspeak" is composed to sound as though it's deepening specificity when it in fact diffuses it. *Narrativisation*. *Potentiality. Boundaried*. When applied to dance, it could not be less descriptive if it were trying to be (which suggests maybe it is). It's downright *depressionism*. What we call "presenters" in the dance world are called "curators" in the visual art world and when you apply that word to an art form that consists of living human beings, we are already off to a disconcerting start. Designed to assess you as someone who does or does not get art, this is language as status. It locates you in a class position. By speaking it, you elevate yourself to that world. The expression "an economy" of words takes on new meaning when the art world talks about dance.

But code switching is part of dancing—you learn how to speak other people's physical and creative language—so dancers, with their expert cerebral synchronization, can keep up with the jargon. Dance has for so long been the poor cousin that it's eager to prove its legitimacy in the moneyed art world and receive its imprimatur. Well, maybe not "eager"—the dance world has a very healthy skepticism of the visual art world at this point. But there remains allure with how museums and galleries signify status, intellectualism, and the authority of images, as well as the security associated with buying and selling, commodifying even the intangible. It's possible that the visual art world *is* better at figuring out how to market and monetize the abstract, and perhaps that's part of their interest in dance. If Performance Art was a challenge, Dance is rough trade. And the art world *does* love to be hoodwinked and humiliated, peed on and flogged. But it's a classic case of topping from the bottom; the relinquishment of power is an illusion. The visual art world hasn't surrendered its language. There is no safe word.

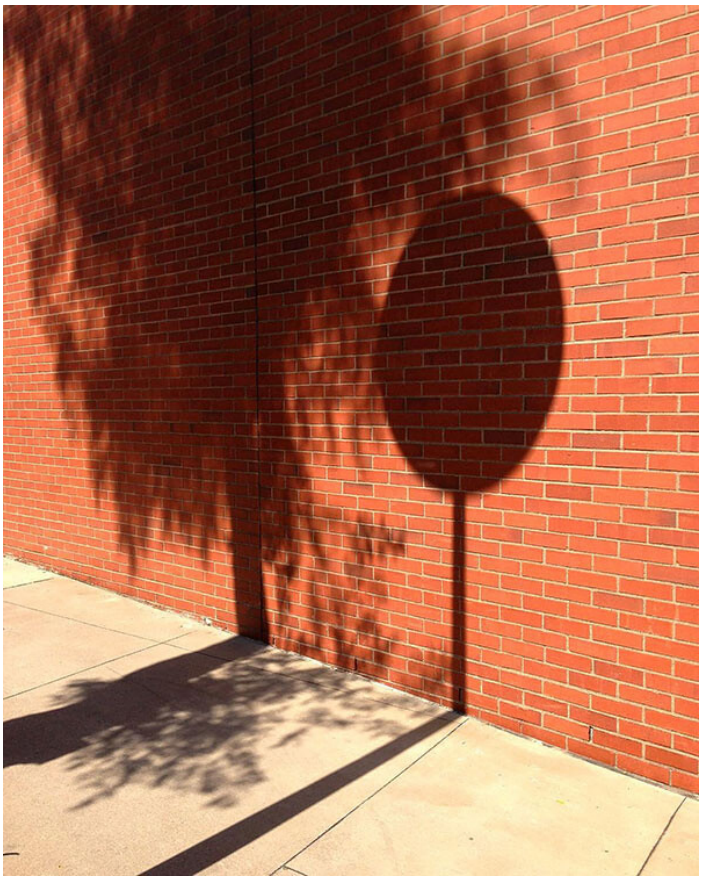

Photo: Jessica Cressey

The Happy Ending

Glassblowing, on the other hand, holds no illusion of role-playing in its language. The jargon is filthy and wonderful and wonderfully homoerotic. In addition to

putting your pipe in the glory hole, you paddle someone's bottom and you blow them after they jack. One day my instructor said, "When you come out of the glory hole you'll blow, jack, blow, jack." I expressed silent gratitude that none of my classmates were named Jack. One beginners' exercise is described to students as making caterpillars or snowmen, but glassblowing instructors across the country have told me that to each other they refer to it as making anal beads or butt plugs. Other terms include *necking*, *pegging*, *flashing*, and *wetting off*. Glassblowing is notoriously macho and sexist. There's a lot of swagger—they're playing with fire after all. The arrogance is such a point of pride that there's even a term for it: *glassholes*. As in dance, there are a lot of women in the field but the most famous and successful glass artists tend to be straight men. While glassblowing's use of the term "glory hole" predates the slang usage by over one hundred years, I wondered about all these macho dudes working with this homoerotic language for so long—if the swagger itself was overcompensation for having to ask someone to blow you while you jack after coming out of the glory hole.

It's interesting that glass, a male-dominated field, has continued to embrace its homo (i.e. emasculating, i.e., feminized) language but dance, a female-dominated form, has capitulated, molded itself to the tool through its innate skillset. Dance's recent adoption of the word "performative" is a symptom of this failure to assert its own unique language. "Performative" is actually a linguistics term referring to statements that function as transactions; the saying of the thing makes the thing happen. The most common example is when a judge says, "I hereby sentence you to twenty-five years." The uttered sentence effects the legal sentencing; it makes it so. Or when someone says, "I promise": saying "I promise" performs the act of promising. But lately when dance people say "performative," they're using it to say something is consciously acted-out or "performance-like" when they could just say what we already know it to be—a performance. The word "performative" is meant to get at something finite and consummated but dance is unspooling and unfixed. Dance is working on multiple simultaneous levels—the realized and the imagined, the conjured and the never been, the here, the not here, the recently gone. The actual hand and the ghost hand.

At first, I thought "performative" was coined by dance people in order to sound like museum people. But then I realized that the art world's misuse of this term predates the dance world's. Which made way more sense but also bummed me out even further. Why would dancemakers do this to ourselves? Why would we let museums rename what it is we already do? And why would we ourselves then use that language to describe what we have already been doing all these years?

I long to see the dance world assert its language as part of its commodity. If you want to present dance, you need to know how to talk in dance's existing language. It serves the form just fine because it is of the form. Dance doesn't want to talk about itself from the remove of class or body. Dance wants to be hot in the center of its own glory hole—though it will happily pee on the museum steps for the right price.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen writes,

> Though [in Body-Mind Centering®] we use the Western anatomical terminology and mapping, we are adding meaning to these terms through our experience. When we are talking about blood or lymph or any physical substances, we are not only talking about substances but about states of consciousness and processes inherent within them. We are relating our experiences to these maps, but the maps are not the experience.[14]

The molten glass, the metal pipe, the bristles on the broom, the coagulating blood, the perception of the hand, the body in a dark and soundless room are avenues for finding another language, from which dance, which is its own language, and its own art object, is born. Performances are living things, melting, fading, bleeding right next to you; so shouldn't the language also? Its logic is rheologic; so why shouldn't its language stay molten? What would this mean in real terms? I mean in real "terms"? I think about the "pro time" test and how the moment that matters is the one right before the blood stops moving and starts clotting. The end point. The moment when you sense that the thing is just about to change form and become static. That you see it coming and you use your words.

X

A version of this essay was first presented in lecture form as part of Half Straddle's *Here I Go, pt 2 of You,* March 2017, The Kitchen, NYC.

Karen Sherman makes dances, writes, and builds things.

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Theodor W. Adorno

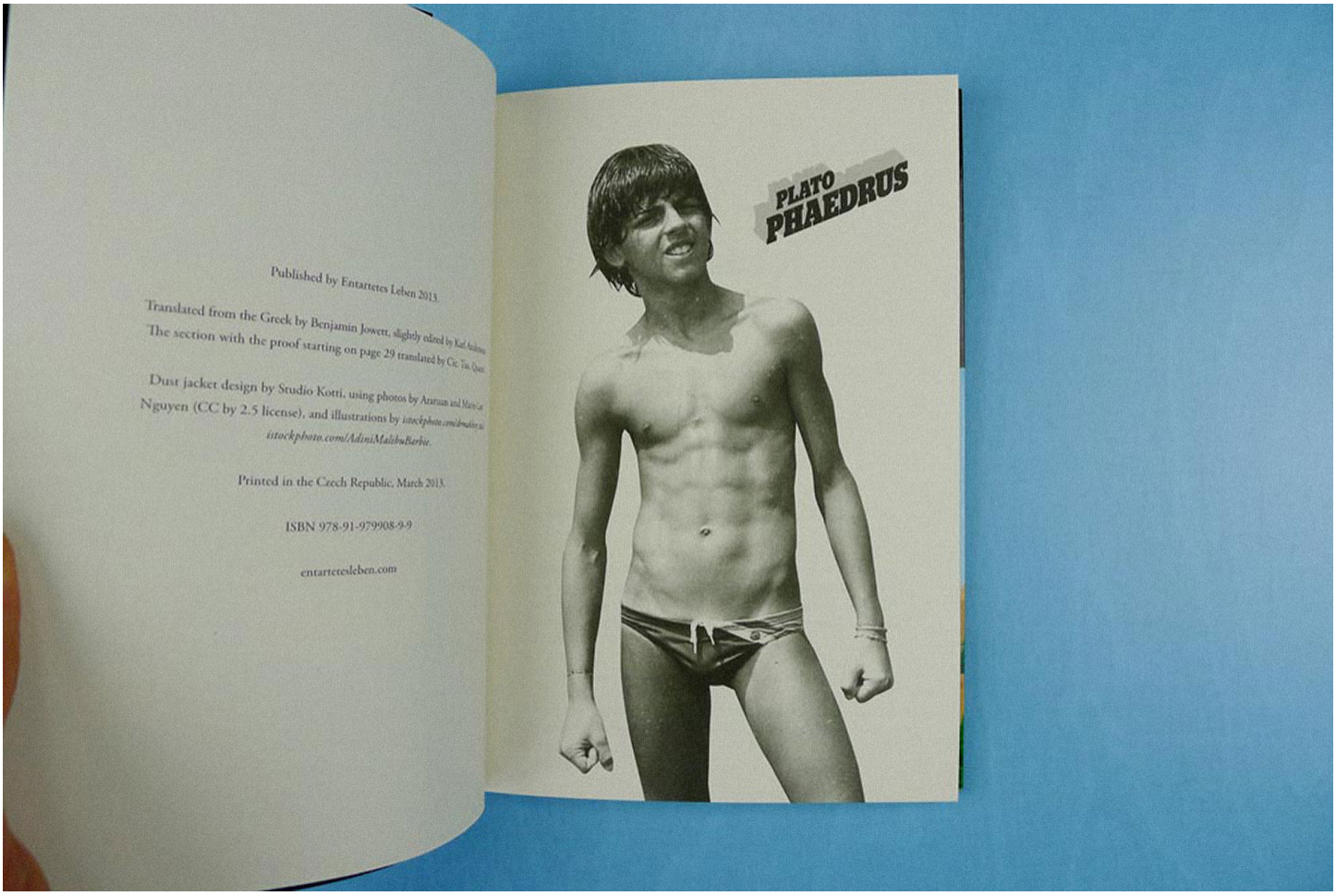
On the Concept of Beauty

December 16, 1958

It is my intention to introduce the consideration of the central aesthetic concept, namely the concept of beauty, by discussing one of the first major texts to contain something like a theory of beauty. The text in question is a section from Plato's *Phaedrus*, approximately chapters 30 to 32 according to the famous Stephanus pagination.[1]

Now, you could say first of all that it is rather strange to begin an examination of the concept of beauty by drawing on a passage of a somewhat mythological, dogmatic and certainly pre-critical character such as this one by Plato. I have chosen this passage because it demonstrates that Plato was a philosopher after all, not a mythologist; that is, all of the decisive motifs which later appear in the philosophical theory of beauty are collected in this exegesis, somewhat akin to the way that, in the introductions to certain great symphonies, the most important themes are present as if under glass and are then developed in the course of the symphony itself. So I can here present to you *in statu nascendi,* as it were in an almost prehistoric form, the motifs that dominate the discussion of the concept of beauty.

Phaedrus is one of the thinker's most complicated and enigmatic works, so complicated that it is almost impossible to point to a general theme of this dialogue. It begins as a discussion of a sophistic speech about love in which a starkly sophistic claim is made, namely that the only true lover is the one who does not love himself.[2] This thesis, which is presented to Socrates by a youth, a young student of the Sophists—Phaedrus—is then corrected by Socrates, one might say, in the sense that he immanently criticizes it and outdoes it in a speech that is both more internally rigorous and more virtuosic.[3] This, however, is suddenly followed by a magnificent rupture. The entire approach up to that point is abandoned, and we are instead offered a doctrine of love that corresponds to Socratic theory itself, and which is mostly based on the motif of re-remembering, or anamnesis.[4] And let me say it already: what the Platonic theory of beauty essentially states is that the power of beauty comes from the fact that we recognize the Form—or whatever it is—in the objects or people we have reason to call beautiful.[5] It is this splendid motif of pain and longing, which seizes people in the face of beauty, that was formulated for the first time and in the most outstanding fashion in this dialogue. This interpretation is then followed by a third part, which also has a very typical Platonic form that I would like to place in the category of return. This means that now the soul, saturated with the experiences gathered by philosophy after turning towards its highest objects, namely the Forms, returns to the earth and now brings the sublime—to use one of Kierkegaard's terms[6]—into the pedestrian.[7] This Platonic motif, incidentally, went on to play a tremendous part in German classicism too; one



Plato's Phaedrus is revamped by Entartetes Leben in a 2013 reprint.

need think only of Faust's "I weep, I am for the earth again" to understand that.[8]

I would strongly encourage all of you, if you occupy yourselves at all with aesthetics, to read the *Phaedrus* in its entirety; for one must simply recognize it as one of the greatest basic texts in the whole of Western metaphysics ... One of its central "themes" is the relationship between reason and madness[9] ... [At the turning point of the dialogue] Socrates—referring, perhaps in mild jest, to nymphs—shows himself seized by enthusiasm and leaves the rational realm.[10] There is an entirely systematic reason for this in Platonic philosophy. Platonic philosophy as a whole has a peculiar twofold character, for it is rational or, to use its own terminology, dialectical, meaning that it consists in the definition and development of concepts—both the abstraction and the classification of concepts—yet is not limited to this but rather—in order for the concept indeed to become what it really is, namely the objectively valid idea—it is joined by that very aspect of *enthousiasmos*, or divine madness, which Plato deems the element in which the highest truth discloses itself, albeit only as a sudden flash:[11] until, having experienced it, we carry out that return which is so fundamental to Platonic philosophy. And it is from this defense of madness against rationality—one could almost say: against stupidity—it is from this justification of delirium, and really an erotic delirium, that Plato's theory of beauty follows. He presents intense emotion in the face of beauty as one of those forms of madness which is wiser than the usual wisdom of reason. I had to tell you this much so that you would understand what I will now read you, and then interpret in some detail. So, we read in chapter 30:

> "Now we reach the point to which the whole discussion of the fourth kind of madness was tending. This fourth kind of madness is the kind which occurs when someone sees beauty here on earth and is reminded of true beauty. His wings begin to grow ..."

—"wings begin to grow" is a reference to the central parable that precedes this,[12] but which I shall not discuss now—

Frontispiece of Pieter Burman's Phaedrus's Fables, 1698.

"and he wants to take to the air on his new plumage, but he cannot; like a bird he looks upwards, and because he ignores what is down here, he is accused of behaving like a madman. So the point is that this turns out to be the most thoroughly good of all kinds of possession, not only for the man who is possessed, but also for anyone who is touched by it, and the word "lover" refers to a lover of beauty who has been possessed by this kind of madness. For, as I have already said, the soul of every human being is bound to have seen things as they really are, or else it would not have entered this kind of living creature. But not every soul is readily prompted by things here on earth to recall those things that are real. This is not easy for a soul which caught only a brief glimpse of things there, nor for those which after falling to earth have suffered the misfortune of being perverted and made immoral by the company they keep and have forgotten the sacred things they saw then."

That almost sounds like Hölderlin.[13]

> "When the remaining few, whose memories are good enough, see a likeness here which reminds them of things there, they are amazed and beside themselves, but they do not understand what is happening to them because of a certain unclarity in their perceptions. But although the likenesses here on earth (of things which are precious to souls, such as justice and self-control) …"

—in the catalogue of Platonic virtues, these are among the cardinal ones; *dikaiosune*, justice, is the highest virtue, and *sophrosune*, which is here termed "self-control," is really the ability to maintain a balance between the extremes of the other virtues[14]—

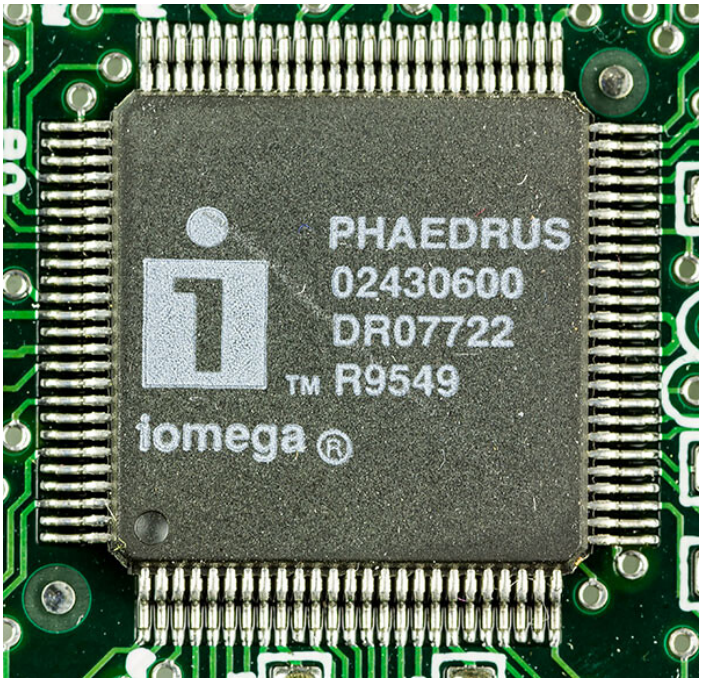
> "… lack all lustre, and only a few people come to them and barely see, through dim sense organs, what it is that any likeness is a likeness of, yet earlier it was possible for them to see beauty in all its brilliance. That was when—we as attendants of Zeus and others of one of the other gods—as part of a happy company they saw a wonderful sight and spectacle and were initiated into what we may rightly call the most wonderful of the mysteries. When we celebrated these mysteries then, we were not only perfect beings ourselves, untouched by all the troubles which awaited us later"

—that is, on earth—

> "but we also were initiated into and contemplated things shown to us that were perfect, simple, stable and blissful. We were surrounded by rays of pure light, being pure ourselves and untainted by this object we call a 'body' and which we carry around with us now, imprisoned like shellfish."[15]

The final parable, incidentally, is a kind of aesthetic variation, one could almost say, on one of the most famous passages in the *Phaedo*, to which the whole of Christian theology then referred back, namely, the doctrine of a body as a prison from which the soul must be saved, from which the soul must flee.

Beauty appears here as a form of madness. [In earlier lectures] we said that the aesthetic realm or the experience of art as such is a suspension of the so-called



Ioamega Phaedrus microchip used on mainboard of Iomega ZIP-100, parallel port printer pass-through.

reality principle; that we behave aesthetically the moment we—to put it quite bluntly—are not realistic, the moment we do not wisely consider our advantage our progress or whatever goals we may have but, rather, surrender ourselves to something that is-in-itself, or at least presents itself thus, without regard for the context of purposes. It goes without saying that this behavior, which I have characterized positively to you, always has the aspect of folly as its negative, of that which falls short of reality; and when a well-known politician, namely the interior minister of North Rhine Westphalia, recently saw fit to warn of aesthetic experiments which the majority of people consider over the top,[16] this phrase "over the top" in fact encapsulated precisely the very element which gives life to art. So as soon as what appears here as madness—that aspect of not staying on the middle path of reason—is not suspended, as soon as there is no enthusiasm that elevates itself above attachment to purposes and where people are concretist—then something like art does not actually exist. But something else is closely connected to this: the fact that this madness seizes people only because they are not themselves in control of the unconditional thing which they imagine beauty to be. In other words, then, the conditional nature of humans is the precondition for the specific experience of beauty as such. The relationship with beauty could then be understood—and we will find a very specific definition of this in Plato—as a state of tension between the conditional and the unconditional, as that emotion, that movement which seizes conditional beings in the face of the unconditional and now lifts them above the vicinity of conditionality itself, at least temporarily, for as long as they observe beauty. In all this, of course, one already finds a clear prefiguring of such motifs as Kant's "disinterested pleasure"—that is, a pleasure which is not directed at goals, at practical aspects within the context of self-preservation and control of nature but, rather, goes beyond all that.

And if I mention here the aspect of pain, which is one of the fundamental components of any experience of beauty, then the reason for this pain in the sense of Plato's theory—and this too is a very intense experience—is that, in the face of beauty, namely in the experience of the possibility of something unconditional, humans become aware of their own conditionality, their own fallibility. This pain and suffering is, in a sense, the only form in which we, as conditional creatures, can think, feel, or experience Utopia at all—for, as Plato says, we are not in control of it. If we were to see beauty in its primal image, our entire life would be suspended; we can experience it only in a state of yearning, only in the form of the rupture separating us from it, and herein already lies, beyond a substantially dynamic aspect to the experience of beauty, precisely this: that suffering, pain, and dissonance are fundamental parts of beauty, not simply accidental. You can see from this how far a classical thinker—and if the term "classical" was ever rightly applied to a philosophy, it is surely Plato's—is superior in the impulses of his thought, how far beneath him are the things one generally associates with the notion of the "classical."

I would also like to point out to you that Plato does not define beauty at this point, and I can already tell you now that the passages I will subsequently read to you and interpret further likewise contain no such definition. With a philosopher who took the art of separating, forming, and defining concepts to such a high level as Plato, this is already extremely notable, though here too I can perhaps add the general philosophical observation that, if one looks at the Platonic dialogues—including those from his earlier period—which seem to move towards definitions, one will always find that they ultimately withhold the definition and end with a *non liquet*, with an element of openness. So Plato's faith in definitions was evidently not remotely as great as the definitory method he chose would suggest. One could almost suspect that—with certain exceptions, of course, like the definition of courage as the midpoint between foolhardiness and cowardice—Plato's definitions are geared more towards thwarting the definitory procedure than affirming it. If things were indeed as I am hinting to you, then Platonic philosophy would be a dialectical philosophy in a sense that already goes considerably beyond what one usually has in mind when speaking of Platonic dialectic, by which people generally mean little more than a method for acquiring insight.

But nonetheless—and this strikes me as decisive, and of the utmost import for the theory of beauty in particular—such a concept does not remain vague in Plato's work, not indeterminate; rather, he brings together

Phaedrus as a character in Obsidian Entertainment's role-playing videogame Tyranny, released in 2016.

a wealth of aspects through whose constellation one could say beauty sustains itself. I have told you about a few of them, such as self-elevation, madness, or all these things; there is another crucial element referred to here in the text I read to you, known as being "initiated." This initiated status quite simply means that the realm of beauty is characterized by being a secularized magical realm; that is, it removes itself from the everyday context of effects into a form of taboo area and in this context of effects, it is something autonomous that one needs to have experienced, needs to have entered to see at all what is going on in a work of art. Anyone who approaches a work of art directly with the categories of everyday life, with the thoughts, feelings, and impulses one has at some moment without, I would almost say, carrying out a kind of reduction, without entering this circle and leaving their jacket outside, as is rightly expected of us in the theater, will thus deny themselves the experience of art as such from the outset.

Plato defines beauty here by its—if I should speak of definitions at all; let me correct myself: Plato seeks to determine the concept of beauty at this point by its effect, namely the effect it has on us. You could call this paradoxical—and say that Plato, in that sense, belongs to the domain of aesthetic subjectivism, the critique of which we will pursue in detail in the next sessions, because I feel that this critique is the most decisive element in a reformulation of aesthetics as such.

On the other hand, if you want to understand this theory of beauty we are dealing with here as a complexion of aspects, not as a definition of beauty—this very fact that we feel beauty only through its effect must be shown with reference to its objective nature: its character as an archetype and its special position within the realm of ideas. What I have just told you, and what initially sounds like a rather philological observation—namely that, on the one hand, Plato seeks to explain beauty only in terms of its effect, but, on the other hand, beauty is supposed to be nothing but the imitation of the idea of beauty—this seemingly merely exegetic remark on the Plato passage is, if I am not mistaken, of the most central imaginable significance for the establishment of an aesthetics. For it means that neither can we explain the idea of beauty or the idea of art as such in directly objectivist terms—that is to say, without reflection on the spirit, without reflection on humans and their attitude towards objectivity—nor, on

the other hand, is this idea of art or this idea of beauty limited to the context of effects that it imposes on us; rather, it is essentially objective and has an objective aspect. In other words: if I could already formulate here the polarity which one encounters in Plato, if one does not wish crudely to impose an inconsistent theory on him, one must say that the underlying conception of beauty itself here is a dialectical conception of beauty. This means that beauty itself, by its own nature, presents itself as mediated, inherently as something like a tension between subjective and objective aspects. And when I told you that all the motifs of aesthetics that ever unfolded in later times are already present here, as if in a kind of sacred foundational text, then this is primarily what I had in mind. For even at its highest peak, at the Hegelian peak, aesthetic speculation did not get any further than that definition of beauty which termed beauty itself—instead of calling it being in a static, object-like sense—just such a state of tension between subjective and objective aspects.

But I would at least like to say a word about the characterization of the effect of beauty which Plato provides here. For this description indeed differs fundamentally from the modern, Christianity-based description of beauty in that it does not similarly make disinterested pleasure—that is to say, the elimination of desire from the object of beauty—a self-evident precondition for the experience of beauty.[17] In this, Plato is simply closer to certain primary experiences of beauty—which withdrew ever further and, if you will, were repressed ever more in the further formation and development of art—such that he openly admits the relationship between beauty and desire of which I spoke to you at length when we discussed the relationship between nature and art. First of all, beauty for him is directly an object of desire, and only the result of a process that takes place within the concept of beauty itself, if you will, which at the very least takes place in the experience of beauty, namely that that sublimation occurs—that abstention of the experience of beauty from immediate erotic appropriation—which is already predetermined for us when we believe we are acting aesthetically. So here you gain insight into a piece of the hidden prehistory of beauty, one could say, into a process that is present in the later conceptions of aesthetics—I am thinking primarily of Kant's of course—in a congealed, an object-like form … In Plato, the theory of beauty is substantially dynamic and envisages beauty as something trembling or in internal motion. He describes the experience of beauty itself as an inalienable and constantly self-renewing process of sublimation. At the same time, you can see here whence that aspect of danger comes that plays such a large part in Plato's theory of beauty: the sublimation which characterizes the realm of beauty is a very precarious one—it never fully succeeds. That taboo domain separated off from reality which we experience as the domain of beauty is problematic, for the most profound reasons, namely due to its inner character, and that it can end again at any time. In a sense—at that moment of sublimation, in its distancing from the realm of the immediacy of purposes—the potential for collapse is inherent in the idea of beauty itself: that the aesthetic distance is not maintained, and that the aesthetic subject either falls back into the sphere of the merely existent, the sphere of self-preservation, of immediate desire, or that it indeed loses itself in that madness of which Plato very rightly says that it is an integral aspect of the experience of beauty as such.

X

This text is excerpted from Aesthetics *by Theodor W. Adorno, a collection of the author's lectures on aesthetics delivered in the winter of 1958–59. The volume is edited by Eberhard Ortland, translated by Wieland Hoban, and published this month by Polity.*

1
For this lecture, Adorno used the translation of the *Phaedrus* by Co nstantin Ritter, in *Platon*, *Sämtliche Dialoge* , ed. Otto Apelt, vol. 2: *Menon – Kratylos – Phaidon – Phaidros* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1922). His personal copy is located in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive (NB Adorno 40). Adorno further consulted the English translation by B. Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato* , vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1937); this also includes annotations to the passages from the *Phaedrus* discussed in this lecture (NB Adorno 49, pp. 250–54). The Stephanus pagination, which is normally used for Plato's works, is based on the page and section numbers from the three-volume edition by Henricus Stephanus (Paris, 1578). The chapter numbers given here by Adorno refer not to the Stephanus, however, but to the Apelt; they were presumably also adopted in the paperback edition of the Schleiermacher translation, which most of Adorno's students would probably have used. (*Platon, Sämtliche Werke* , vol. 4, ed. Walter F. Otto, Ernesto Grassi, and Gert Plamböck, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1958). The chapters in the *Phaedrus* correspond to sections 249d–252c. (In these notes, all references correspond to the edition of *Phaedrus* published by Oxford University Press in 2002 and translated by Robin Waterfield. — *Trans*.)

2
See the speech by Lysias in the *Phaedrus* (227c). In his personal copy, Adorno noted the name "Proust" next to the sentence quoted here.

3
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 15ff. (237a ff.).

4
See ibid., 25ff. (244a ff.); concerning the doctrine of anamnesis, see, especially, *Phaedrus* 250a, *Phaidon* 72e–77a, and *Menon* 80d.

5
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33 (250b).

6
See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* , trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34: "To transform the leap of life into a gait, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—that only the knight of faith can do—and that is the only miracle." Adorno quotes this Passage in *Kierkegaard* (129) and repeatedly returns to it later, for example, in *The Jargon of Authenticity* , trans. Knut Tarnowski and Fredric Will (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

7
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 35f. (252a–c).

8
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* , *Part One* (1808), trans. David Constantine (London: Penguin, 2005), 29.

9
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33 (249c–d).

10
See Plato, *Phaedrus* , 23 (241e).

11
See, in addition to the passage from the *Phaedrus*, also Plato's *Ion* 533d–e and *Timaeus* 71e–72a. See also Hermann Gundert, "Enthusiasmos und Logos bei Platon," *Lexis* 2 (1949), 25–46.

12
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28f. (246a ff.).

13
This association may refer to Hölderlin's hymn "Patmos," (1802); see Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments* , trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1998), 231–42.

14
See Eduard Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* , Part 2, Section 1, *Sokrates und die Sokratiker; Plato und die Alte Akademie* (Leipzig: Reisland, 1922), especially 882–86.

15
Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33f (249d–250c). Adorno's personal copy of the *Phaedrus* contains the note "Body as prison / Phaedo" next to the quoted passage.

16
Neither the wording nor the occasion of this statement by Josef Hermann Dufhues, a leading member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1958 to 1962, could be ascertained.

17
Concerning the "elimination of desire from the object of beauty" as a basic element of the Christian approach to beauty, see Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. Frank J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), Book 4, chapter 13ff.

Wayne Koestenbaum

Lounge Act at Thek Lounge

Transcript of a performance, given on Sunday evening, 9 p.m., November 20, 2016, during the "Avant Museology" conference at the Walker Art Center. Thek Lounge was presented by Bureau des Services sans Spécificité, Geneva, with Adam Linder, Shahryar Nashat, and Sohrab Mohebbi. Koestenbaum performed piano miniatures (Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Schumann, Fauré, Milhaud, Antheil, Poulenc, Diamond, and Persichetti), while incanting spontaneous Sprechstimme *-style soliloquies. Koestenbaum's words—improvised on the spot for the occasion—streamed in correspondence with the musical phrases in the score.*

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start shortly …

[*ambient music*]

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start shortly …

Please welcome Mr. Wayne Koestenbaum to the Thek Lounge.

We appreciate your hushed attention and look forward to serving you drinks during the intermission.

Wayne Koestenbaum: Thank you, Sohrab Mohebbi, for giving me the idea for being a lounge actor and for bringing me to Minneapolis. I owe you everything.

To strike a funereal and melancholy note: I want to dedicate this performance to the memory of David Antin, whose talk poems were the direct inspiration for my act. I can't claim to touch the hem of the great David Antin, but it's in his spirit that I wish to embark tonight.

The music that I will be playing for you tonight is entirely scripted—classical music by dead people—but the words that I speak (and somewhat sing) are improvised. Some schtick is honed at home. But most is spontaneous.

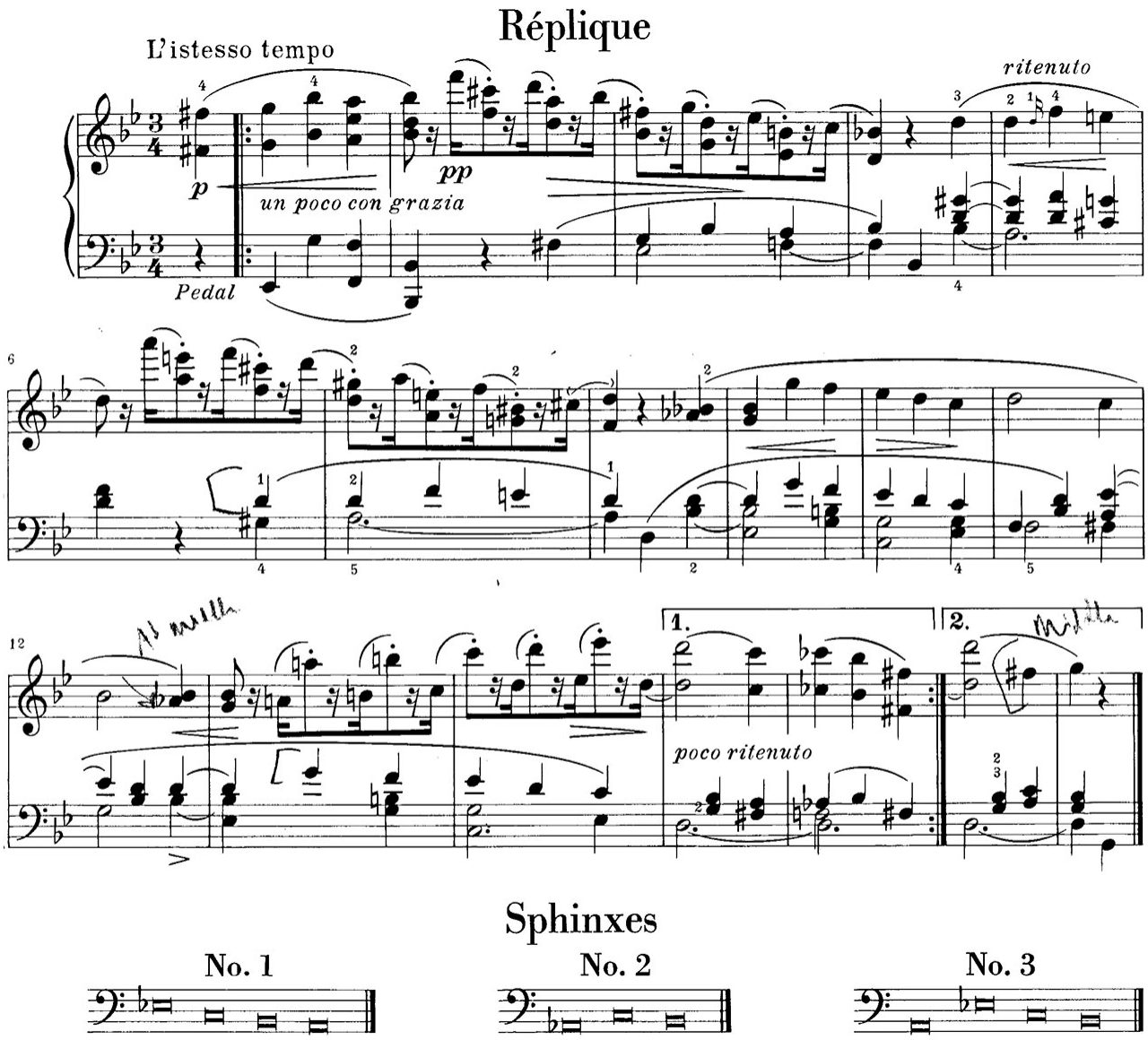
The point of this exercise, in this somewhat autumnal phase of my life, is to feel more alive. And I feel more alive if I'm improvising. So thanks for tolerating improvisation. My aim is pedagogic: in case you don't have enough improvisation in your life, let me influence you to have a little more.

O piano, my first love.

This first little piece is by Robert Schumann. My father, who was born in Berlin in 1928, would never allow us to give him gifts. The only gift he would allow us to give him was marzipan.

[*singing*]

marzipan, marzipan,



no one likes to eat marzipan

why did my father
ask us to give him marzipan?

perhaps because in Berlin
before the Nazis were fully in power
my father's grandfather had a candy factory
maybe the candy factory made marzipan

the Jews need marzipan
like a hole in their head
they need marzipan
sweet amidst sorrow

clouds of sorrow
are already arriving here

[*speaking*]

I'm in a deep state of oedipal regression, always; and so I'm thinking about 1963. The whole show is about 1932, 1963, and 2016. Here is more Schumann—

[*singing*]

when I was ten years old I fell in love with my best friend's balls
I fell in love with his testicles

and then his mother made us Swedish pancakes
she made us cube steak

I idolized cube steak because it was partitioned
I idolized cube steak because it came in bits

Melanie Klein says
the ego is in bits if you're psychotic

or if you're in the bathroom with your friend
before a course of Swedish pancakes and cube steak

my friend gave me a bottle of crème de menthe
I first tasted inebriation in the bathroom
with my best friend's balls
when his mother gave us cube steak
for the pleasure of the modernist grid

I am a sucker for the grid in any guise
I need symmetry

[*speaking*]

Why do straight men want to hang around me?

That's a topic I'm going to handle in the second part of the program. For now I'm going to stick to 1963 and more sexual adventures related to food. Schumann advised me:

[*singing*]

when I was five I played doctor with Kim
and then her mother drove us to a restaurant

somehow exhibitionism and restaurants are twinned

also fetishism and any kind of perversion you can name
they all come in a "basket of deplorables"

I stripped with my friend Kim in the bathroom
then her plain mother Joyce drove us to the smorgasbord

all you can eat
at the smorgasbord
and then you have guilt feelings
about your oppression of Kim

[*speaking*]

The temperament of this evening is influenced by German Romanticism. I swallowed German Romanticism whole, like a fish bone, and I'm trying to do the Heimlich maneuver with American 1930s "pederastic" music. This next piece is by David Diamond, from 1935. Even his obituary in the *Times* said that he was a very unpleasant man. But I imagine being at his death bed:

[*singing*]

touching a dying man's nipples
can be instructive
if the man needs an escort to go down to hell
if that man is David Diamond
who made enemies in his life in Manhattan
my goal is to touch his nipples
and bring him solace
and a day pass to hell

if you have powers in your hands to touch
any dead man's or dying man's nipples
spread your wealth, spread your spirit
through random gropes of the near dead and the living

I believe in public and inappropriate displays of affection
in the style of the Mineshaft circa 1980
when Foucault haunted those halls
and Hervé Guibert—oh Hervé
I wish I could touch your nipples
the moment before you died
as if it would do some good

[*speaking*]

Most of the aesthetic platform that I've rested upon in my life ended a week ago, unfortunately. Some of us don't need to rethink our aesthetics, but I need to rethink mine.

A week ago I would have said that I thought that separated roses on a rosebush were more beautiful than joined roses, but I'm reconsidering … [starts playing piano] Here is Darius Milhaud:

[*singing*]

does a separate rose on its bush
have aesthetic autonomy
as Adorno said it might?
ask Adorno after palpating his nipples

ask Adorno while palpating his nipples
is a separate rose as beautiful as a joined rose?
are three roses better than one?
three roses are a symbol of Lesbian Nation
oh Jill Johnston
may I be court jester for Lesbian Nation

let's bring back organizations like the Mattachine
we think we've transcended earlier
gender-revolutionary gestures

but now in a time of crisis
it's necessary to rethink the communist
communitarian impulse
and stop being a fetishist of lone things

stop the Adorno mode
stop the Adorno love of opacity
stop worshipping difficulty
join forces with others
and don't sit blindly
sick rose on your bush
a bush that has no land

you've all gotta read it
what are the origins of totalitarianism
do the origins reside in the hands of Marty
Marty Heidegger played by Ernest Borgnine

Ernst Borgnine—the German version of Marty
starring Ernst the Oscar-winner

he played a working-class lout
the Academy loves the working class
every other year
when they're not awarding a statue to aristocrats

[*speaking*]

I got lost there—I was planning to go from Lesbian Nation to Gertrude Stein and roses. Gertrude Stein seemed to stand for the solitary rose, but then she went triplicate on us with *a rose is rose is a rose*. Sameness, tautology, and repetition lead us away from the monadic state that my early love of cube steak stuck in me. One bubble per grid.

Now I'm going to speak-sing a piece. None of these pieces have words originally. These are piano miniatures: salon music for young people. Here is a piece by Vincent Persichetti. He was a rather punitive guy, I hear. He ran Juilliard for awhile—the composition department—and wrote an influential book on twentieth-century harmony, trying to justify the contortions of tonality, post-Schoenberg, but fitting them right back into the tonal system. You can hear the energy, maybe the pointless energy, of trying to fit dodecaphonic, anarchic elements into the old grid. He was a scary pedagogue, so I dedicate this song to all the scary pedagogues.

[*singing*]

if you love scary pedagogues
perhaps you're Hannah Arendt in the bower
the bower of the Hochschule
and there is Marty Heidegger with his mutton chops
beckoning you
oh he is scary but he might reveal
the secrets of being and time
and how somehow the banality of evil
will get you out of the dodecaphonic prison

what do you think about the banality of evil today
with Donald Trump around
not banal
yet sometimes I'm afraid that I'm a mere functionary
I'll stop cooperating right now
stop cooperating now
forego banality
join forces with *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
gotta read that book

[*speaking*]

Some scenes you never return from the morbid imagining of, like the love song of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, even if you know that neither the task of universal good nor the project of demolishing evil (including current evil) will be moved ahead a millimeter by morbid fantasies. I need to figure out what to do with my treasured, honed perversity and the tradition (from the Marquis de Sade through Genet, Hervé Guibert, and Foucault) that celebrates perversity and finds revolutionary seeds in it. What will you do with those seeds right now? Are they stale in the hand? Will perversity help us now? I need to return to the origins of my perversity—exhibitionism—and to think again about 1966:

[*singing*]

on our block
there was a bully named Mack
he had me strip
in the backyard
and then he promised
that he would show me the picture
of his drunk mother
when she was a psychology student at UC Berkeley
before she was a lush in butterfly glasses and a
muumuu

if I'd strip he'd show me the picture
of his mother in her glamour era before she
descended
to muumuu abjection

Mack asked, why is your penis so big?
and I said, it isn't big until
I take off my pants
then it gets big

but is size a bribe
to extort a pervert's glimpse
of that photo of his mother before she was a drunk?

and why do I want to see
a photo of an alcoholic woman
before she was a drunk

when she was studying object relations?

[*speaking*]

That piece was by George Antheil. Thank you. Two more quickies from Robert Schumann. My painting studio is right down the hall from Visual AIDS, an organization I love and support and praise. I had a funny encounter with a young man who worked there. Very sweet. He ended up going to divinity school. He said, I want to write about your book for my blog. And then he came to me afterwards and said, I'm really sorry but

[*singing*]

your book isn't AIDS-y enough for my blog

that is understandable
I know that my account
of AIDS won't be quite the account that your blog needs

and yet I remember 1983
I remember ARC and I remember GRID
I remember kiss-ins on Christopher Street
and I remember fear
I remember not getting tested

your book isn't AIDS-y enough for my blog

[*speaking*]

Back quickly, if you have the patience, to food. Schumann again:

[*singing*]

I'm thinking about my mother's tuna melt
she ate it at the counter
at Stickney's Restaurant alone

nothing more poignant than a tuna melt
I have a repetition compulsion

I loved my mother's tuna melt
and I savor its abjection

I have a death wish and a repetition compulsion
and a love of tuna melts

of the past

[*speaking*]

Tuna melts, tuna melts. Let me tell you about a dream I had. A shaman was giving a performance. He was very tall, and he was wearing just a thong. He was almost nude, and there was one thing very strange about his body, which I'll describe to you in this Chopin mazurka.

[*singing*]

that shaman had a penis coming out
of his right hip
his only penis came out of his hip
he had a super penis
but it came from the wrong place
he was like Dionysus born from the hip of Zeus

what can I do with the dream of the shaman?

can I manipulate his penis
even though it's only a dream penis?

can I transfigure myself—
can I transfigure this moment
by thinking about that third penis
like the penis in Alice Neel's painting?

you must know that painting by Alice Neel
of Joseph with three penises
Joseph has three penises
it's a symbol of social conflict
in 1930 in New York—
communism

Marxist cells on the Lower East Side
led to three penises

I dreamt about a shaman
who had a strange growth on his side
and I'll use that dream to navigate
nothingness

[*speaking*]

Try it. Does no good. That trick worked two weeks ago. Doesn't work now. The trick is to reimagine the genitals and find your way to a new world. Genitals are getting a bad name these days. Certainly the penis is. But I've always been committed to undermining the penis by complicating it. It's a dreadful sign, and it's also a symbol of the president-elect's moral decrepitude and abusive behavior. I saw a sign in New York that said, "I'm Sorry,"

and then "—Men." Men should apologize—that is the mood. But I'm also thinking about Paul Thek. He knew about Nixon; he knew about Goldwater. So this one's for Paul Thek, who communicated to me last night. Here is a Poulenc "Improvisation":

[*singing*]

Paul Thek communicated to me
he asked for a tube of Vaseline in the grave

bring me a tube
I am dead and I miss my unguents

Paul Thek
needs a tube of Vaseline

I will go down to hell with Vaseline
I'll help Paul
I'll lubricate Paul in hell
I hope he isn't busy
like Sisyphus
or all those sodomites
in that circle of hell
dedicated to a sodomitical population

Paul Thek painted the skyline—
he became a painter
after his meaty phase—
he became French
after making sculptures like that hunk of meat
you see in the back of this room

he regressed
he became a painter of landscapes
he escaped into the French image-repertoire of the liquid—
things oceanic
watery and gleaming
like Mallarmé

write yourself into a corner
write yourself into nothingness

being oceanic is nothing
and that's what Paul Thek was escaping
when he became a landscape painter again

not because he thought
painting was revolutionary

but he needed moisture in the underworld
Paul Thek needed moisture
he has dry lips
from kissing Chopin and Poulenc in hell
it's a gang bang for musical and artistic and poetic men
they find a way to penetrate each other
in the afterworld—
fun to imagine

how does bringing a tube of Vaseline
lubricate the revolution we need now?
I'll bring a tube of Vaseline
to the bonfire of America

[*speaking*]

A long time ago, before many of you were born, or when you were not yet pubescent, I made a mistake at a conference. I made the Sylvia Plath mistake: Daddy equals Führer. I don't think I truly made that mistake, but I was accused of it. I understand that kind of accusation. I indulge in a slippery, liquid mode: skidding via the signifier wherever I want, or wherever the linguistic cesspool that I am—that I embody—takes me. I trust that cesspool, and I glide on it as far as I can, in the interests of you all.

It's not my language that I'm sampling, it's yours. It's *language*. I don't own it. Back to my Germanic Prussian origins and the way I was raised: I don't know if any of you know the Wilhelm Busch book *Max and Moritz*. It's about two troublemakers. I'm going to think about Max and Moritz in these last two numbers before intermission. These pieces are by Robert Schumann, whose madness was love of the same—repetition compulsion. He was haunted, as he grew mad, by the note A—it was an auditory hallucination he could not escape. You can hear it in the pieces he wrote when he was practically a baby. They re-circle around one note, like Terry Riley's *In C*. For Schumann it was *In A,* which was being in hell.

I feel deeply, as we all do, the wound of the planet—the gash in the planet experienced last week, an ongoing gash in a ruined planet whose doom seems even more sealed. As human beings, we're all complicit with the "human turn," and so it is incumbent on me—I've learned this mostly from younger people—to think about things, plants, animals. When I was a kid,

[*singing*]

I killed my pets
I killed my pet turtle and my goldfish
I flushed them down the toilet
my father was complicit

my father pushed them
my father wanted to clean the turtle bowl
so he said let's throw them in the toilet
then we flushed it
we flushed poor turtle down the toilet

we flushed turtle

we flushed goldfish
we flushed nonhuman things down the tube

we killed my pets
I'm not celebrating their death
I can't celebrate the death of those animals
and yet I am guilty
of their extermination

[*speaking*]

Finally, another dream. I was left alone in a library—maybe the Bibliothèque Nationale—with a rabbi and a wooden nipple. Here is Schumann:

[*singing*]

I was left alone with a rabbi and a wooden nipple
the rabbi said interpret the nipple
try to knock on its wood
interpret the nipple's wood
can you interpret the nipple?
if you don't interpret, you'll be sentenced to death
death comes to those who don't interpret the wooden nipple

you must interpret the wooden nipple's
obdurate refusal to give language and milk

oh dear rabbi please forgive my interpretation
my non-interpretation of the recalcitrant nipple

what nipple?
what did the nipple mean?
can I help myself by interpreting a wooden nipple?

maybe the rabbi is Walter Benjamin
maybe the rabbi can teach me to interpret the crossroads on which we stand
and turn the crossroads into incandescence

can we turn these horrible crossroads into revolution
as Benjamin advised us
in the manuscript that was in his briefcase when he tried to cross the Pyrenees
and he said Wayne please interpret that wooden nipple
in the Bibliothèque Nationale
try to hold the manuscript for safekeeping
then you will become a posthumous star
everybody will try to learn about the revolution by perusing your case
as if your case could help
but what about that wooden nipple
what can I learn by interpreting
the nipple
the nipple can give a simulacrum
of Midrash

[*speaking*]

Take twenty—take ten—minutes to get more booze, and then there will be a shorter section, which will involve your participation.

[*intermission*]

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start shortly ...

[*ambient music*]

Recorded voice: Please welcome Mr. Wayne Koestenbaum back to the piano.

Koestenbaum, speaking: My gratitude to you for your hushed attention during the first part knows no bounds, because I had, as one would, many panicked moments in the last few weeks anticipating what this Skyline Room adventure would be like. I imagined a horde of people paying absolutely no attention, which was itself a kind of bliss. Art is nourished by nobody paying attention to it. But having the luxury of your attention was unforecasted and deeply pleasurable.

Now we're really going to regress. I'll play a slightly longer piece by Rachmaninoff, from his *Moments Musicaux*. He was always pre-October, but this piece is January, I think, in terms of inching toward the revolution. This piece is a gorgeous dirge. I've been thinking about the origins of fetishism—the usefulness of fetishism—fetishism's connection to imperialism:

[*singing*]

when I was a kid
Mr. Baer gave me his stamp collection
Mr. Baer met me at a cello concert
he had heard that I was a stamp collector
he wanted to enlarge my collection
he understood the joy of accretion
he was eighty years old
would he be a pedophile in some jurisdictions
or am I reading too much into an innocent act
of generosity?

I never thanked Mr. Baer for his stamp collection
most of the generous people in the world
aren't adequately thanked for their largesse
we take it for granted that they will look
out for our desires

I wanted to expand my collection to be alphabetized

from Abu Dhabi to Zululand
to be a stamp collector is to be a miniature imperialist
oh all the stamps were celebrating the remaining colonies

French colonies had the most beautiful stamps
Eastern Europe's stamps were drab
nothing more drab than East Germany
East German stamps typified
the demise of art under communism
or so I was taught by the *Weekly Reader* and Scholastic books

but stamp collecting
paved the way to libraries
collecting books is a form of amassing
a wall against death
and change in the troops

can you hear the troops
marching into our country?
imagine the troops marching in
and you have no
inside or outside

the martial instincts that make up Russian music
at its most romantic are part of the system you're trying to flee in pain

how can we resolve this conflict?
can we collect without appropriating
and without destroying?
is there an innocent conquest?

can you take over and introject
without violence?
can a ten-year-old's
stamp collection contain the violence of imperialism?

[*speaking*]

If you've laid most of your cards politically in the fetishism pile, where can you go with fetishism? My fetishism was a stamp collection from Abu Dhabi to Zululand. Doesn't look good. But we're going to die soon. And I'm not going to be cremated. I'm thinking now of a slightly more aesthetically revolutionary Russian, Alexander Scriabin. Here's a little prelude by Scriabin.

[*singing*]

what shoes do you want to wear in the grave?
do you want to wear Gucci?
does it matter which shoes you wear when you're exhumed?

if you were to exhume Oscar Wilde from Père Lachaise
would he be wearing shoes by Aubrey Beardsley?
or does it matter what Oscar's wearing?

Oscar worked for *Women's World*
but then he went to prison

imagine—in one year
the greatest playwright in England can be in jail

it can happen overnight
when you're wearing opera pumps

[*speaking*]

And now a slightly longer piece. I'm tapping into the French image-repertoire, where a certain harmonic liquidity, embodied in the piano by increased arpeggiation and tonal uncertainty, somehow equals *le néant*—in a sexy way: the abyss is a beckoning, entropic, narcotic invitation. Don't know if that works! I hear that many of you have sipped some libations tonight. We've all taken hits from a drug that moves through Fauré—Gabriel Fauré, the underrated. Here is his first impromptu, when he was really a babe. As I play this piece, I think of liquid, but I also think about another great dead person:

[*singing*]

Liz Taylor made many movies
she made *Boom!* and *The Sandpiper*
and *Butterfield 8*

on the mirror she wrote
I will not sell my body
though you may look at me

in *Cleopatra* she says don't look at me
and then Monty Clift had an accident
driving home drunk from Liz's house
she reached her hand into Monty's mouth

she helped him breathe though his face was ruined
Monty's face was ruined
that's how he could play Freud
Monty as Sigmund Freud
with a ruined face

how can we use Liz now
as a posthumous talisman?
what would she think now?

does no good to think of Liz's opinion
remember she was married to a creepy senator

but think about Liz at the moment of AIDS
think of Liz and Rock
Hudson and then backtrack
to James Dean and all those boys

Liz is a heroic principle of survival
she survived her tracheotomy and had a scar on her throat
in *Cleopatra* you can see the scar
on the Queen of the Nile's throat

Liz in *Cleopatra* has a gay son
who rides with her on a sphinx into Rome
and she says look at me and take strength from my cleavage

in my cleavage
lies the divide itself

and divided selves are better than one
we must, through the specular, divide our ego into parts

divide ourselves into the one who experiences analysis
and the one who performs analysis

how can you enjoy the spectacle and also analyze the spectacle
analyze the waters of forgetfulness

the waters of forgetfulness
are washing over me

I'm watching Liz
in *Boom!* when she gets an injection

she symbolizes drugs and booze
there's something heroic in the way she uses inebriants
she uses inebriants to open
her shamanic third eye

I'm now thinking about that shaman with an extra penis

like Forrest Bess
who dug a hole
behind his testicles
in search of an end

you can have your orgasm
and the world's orgasm at once

if I drive a hole through my perineum
I will bring all of us into one orgasmic moment

somehow Liz's boozing is equivalent to Forrest Bess
Bess
Liz
Bess
Bess
Liz

unforgivable but necessary
these watery connections
unjustified by anything logical
but the dialectic works in strange ways

you must use metaphor
you must crossleave with metaphor
that boat

the Bridge of Sighs is over the boat
in which Paul Thek and Liz and Forrest Bess are riding
Liz and Forrest Bess and Paul Thek are riding
under the Bridge of Sighs
in search of the nadir of the world

[*speaking*]

I didn't have the presence of mind to lead you on the trail of her scar—the tracheotomy scar and the wound, but that's part of the trail where we find Paul Thek, Forrest Bess, and Liz in that unhappy gondola. Let's call it the drunken boat.

And now the last song before the question-and-answer period: I'm going to play a Chopin mazurka.

You know I don't believe in the future. "No future," as Lee Edelman once wrote. And to avoid the future or any hope of futurity,

[*singing*]

I tied my tubes in St. Paul
before I arrived at The Walker

I tied my tubes in St. Paul
I found a rabbi
he tied my tubes

he tied my tubes and he gave me some Midrash
he said, there's no future, you should just sink

give up futurity
sink into lechery
sink into prostitution and fetishism
sink into sybaritic pleasures
forget the revolution
sink into the abyss
and retitle it *joy*

the planet is dying
a mazurka won't bring
our homeland back

and yet we sink into the absent future
I tied my tubes in honor of the dead

[*speaking*]

Okay. Four quick little numbers to end, and I would love questions—nonhostile questions. Because it's not about me, it's about the world. So if you have a comment or a question, I'll respond in a song.

Audience: What's the Midrash?

Koestenbaum: What's the Midrash that I was offered? Or what *is* Midrash?

Audience: What it *is.*

Koestenbaum: Okay. Here is a piece by Vincent Persichetti: "Dust in Sunlight, and Memory in Corners."

[*singing*]

I wasn't bar mitzvahed
so I don't know what Midrash really is
but I can tell you from Walter Benjamin
Midrash is to go into explanation
too deep for tears

to elaborate and into the labyrinth you go
you make of your confusion something decorative
and you build a fellowship of interpreters
you build a community of those who overread

you overread
you quibble about legalisms
and you say of the world
quibbling is a balance of power

you balance the power of God
you create theodicy, you justify the ways of God to men
you defend some perfect world
by interpreting

you interpret acts of evil
and your Midrash reveals God's watching
God has a plan
if you can find it

[*speaking*]

Another question?

Audience: What's up with nipples?

Koestenbaum: Mmm! Thank you. This is a Scriabin prelude.

[*singing*]

here's the story about nipples
I like to complicate the simplest anatomical facts
they are my locus

I choose an ungendered part of the body
both men and women
they and we all have a nipple unless it's removed
in a surgical procedure

so said an internist
he found a third nipple
midway on my chest

and so I'm dreaming of thirds
and thinking that the normal nipple is in twos
and what if there's a third

we must cling to the parts of the body
that are not binary
like the perineum
I would linger on the perineum
but the nipple is a nicer word

nipple is a nicer word
than perineum
but the perineum like the anus
is something that crosses the gender divide

the nipple gets a bad rap
it seems to be equated with a simplistic maternity
we need to book a room in the nipple and interpret it
to death

[*speaking*]

Another Scriabin prelude, if you ask me a question. Those were really amazing questions. Or just make a statement.

Audience: Los Angeles.

Koestenbaum: Los Angeles.

... Oh, Los Angeles!

[*singing*]

today an Uber driver
told me that he wanted to move to Los Angeles
if it's safe

he said he doesn't want to live in a place that's
dangerous
and why is LA dangerous?

I think that LA, like New York, is one of the only places
that symbolizes
the free movements of the mind

that's deplorable chauvinism but
I'm addicted to the places that I can mythologize
Gloria Swanson Sunset Boulevard
that's not the Los Angeles of skid row
I could just sing a song for skid row
but that would be obscene
obscene to sing a song for skid row
skid row doesn't need my melody

but Scriabin worked so hard on his accidentals
he thought that synesthesia
would be a metropolis
like Paris, capital of the nineteenth century
where this prelude
via its chromaticism
takes place

and Schoenberg in LA
is part of the deep dodecaphonic underpinning of this
harmonic resolution

I had my mouth washed out with soap

why am I bragging about having
a foul mouth?
foul mouth brings me into intimate touch
with the cesspool
I don't disavow the abject nature
of my language

to make a thing is to participate in shit
the cloacal is my home
I'm sewage—
sewage, baby

my thinking takes root in the nipple found in the anus
the nipple of the anus
the foul is my home
at least linguistically

I need a little bit of filth
to understand that I have a land
filth is my aesthetic homeland
no more nation-states
but for a minute give me a metaphorical homeland
called filth
where I unite with the sublime

#

Thank you.

[*speaking*]

And one more from the depth of my heart … no froth this time.

Audience: I feel like somebody missing tonight is Bruce Hainley. I wonder if there could be a way of summoning him.

Koestenbaum: That's great. Bruce Hainley's an amazing writer who long ago was a student of mine, when he was getting his PhD at Yale. He was my first graduate student. And he's endlessly inspiring to me. He lives in LA. He was going to be here tonight, and we were going to circulate cocktail napkins printed with poems from his book, *No Biggie*. I love *No Biggie*. I also love his first book of poems (this piece is by Scriabin)—

[*singing*]

Foul Mouth
I have a foul mouth
once when I was a kid

X

Wayne Koestenbaum has published eighteen books of poetry, criticism, and fiction, including *Notes on Glaze, The Pink Trance Notebooks, My 1980s & Other Essays, Hotel Theory, Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films, Andy Warhol, Humiliation, Jackie Under My Skin,* and *The Queen's Throat* (a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist). His next book of poems, *Camp Marmalade,* will be published in March 2018. He has had solo exhibitions of his paintings at White Columns (New York), 356 Mission (L.A.), and the University of Kentucky Art Museum. His first piano/vocal record, *Lounge Act,* was issued by Ugly Duckling Presse Records in 2017. He is a Distinguished Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and French at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.