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Editorial

In this issue, Alessandra Franetovich and Trevor Paglen discuss *Orbital Reflector*, Paglen's reflective sculpture launched into low-earth orbit as a satellite. Housed in a small box-like structure, the lightweight reflective material of the sculpture was meant to deploy and self-inflate like a balloon and reflect sunlight towards earth, making it visible to our eyes as a nearby artificial star. Unfortunately, at the critical moment of the sculpture's release in 2018, the US government was on shutdown, with all agencies held hostage in order to force Congress to fund Trump's gigantic border wall between the US and Mexico. There was no way to release the mirror.

Some cuts are permanent and irreparable. Then again, destiny sometimes has a naughty sense of humor, even when it comes to destinations. Maybe another satellite opened a mirror onto us just the other day, at Four Seasons Total Landscaping near Interstate 95 in Philadelphia, nestled between Fantasy Island Adult Books and the Delaware Valley Cremation Center. It's unclear what epic mix-up led Rudy Giuliani and the Trump campaign to stage a press event about alleged voter fraud there instead of the Four Seasons Hotel in Philadelphia, but we're really glad they did.

Sean Middleton, director of sales at Four Seasons Total Landscaping, was happy to get out of Bible study when he got the call to come to the shop and help prepare for Giuliani's news conference. The *Washington Post* quoted him saying: "I have no idea why [the campaign] wanted to do it here. I don't know how the government works. Maybe they saw on satellite images that we have a big back lot and proximity to [Interstate] 95?"

Sometimes, at a moment of calamitous limbo that's absurdly heavy and light all at once, it's hard to know what to say. Thankfully, there are eight pieces in this month's issue of *e-flux journal* whose authors speak with force and substance into and out of the present gap—and others.

There are writers here who hold that another (art) world is possible. Ideas in this November issue—evidenced by long-distance vision—reveal some of the many means necessary for that possibility to come to life.

Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber ask: "What would an abolitionist project directed at the art world actually look like?" In the course of examining contemporary policing, politeness, and protest—for example, why the police are so down on huge puppets—Dubrovsky and Graeber tie in the history of collectives, such as Prolekult, whose influence remains present, though under the radar of art discourse and practice today. Aaron Schuster reads Kafka's story "The Burrow" and argues that it brings the pandemic-fuelled "unbearable joy of safety"—fears of contagion, security, prepping, and privacy—into sharp focus. iLiana Fokianaki, meanwhile, investigates the range of politics around care, and asks how to bring care-full

practices from art collectives into care-less art institutions. These latter two essays are co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of "Survival Kit 11 (Being Safe Is Scary)," four special contributions to *e-flux journal* spanning the November 2020 and February 2021 issues.

Jumana Manna traces resilient practices of foraging, especially in Palestine, despite laws enforcing "natural" "preservation" in states that "forget" and police indigenous plants and human life. Hou Hanru and Ou Ning map practices and theories of contemporary agrarianism and "agritopianism," especially via the Bishan Project in Anhui Province, China, amidst a churning urbanism.

Steve Lyons and Jason Jones, writing for Not An Alternative, make a case for the broader left's language in common, with a focus on lessons in counterpower from the indigenous left. Simon Sheikh takes a hard and careful look at ghosts, zombies, the last man, and other such figures—in their histories and contemporary appearances—to ask what art might look like after the end of the world.

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Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber

Another Art World, Part 3: Policing and Symbolic Order

Continued from Part 1 and Part 2.

> The earth is a museum of humanity, traveling through the universe.
> —Nikolai Fyodorov

In the first two parts of this essay, we analyzed the contemporary art world less in terms of how it works than in terms of what it does, in what is at stake in its existence. One of the most powerful and insidious roles the art world (at least as it is currently organized) plays is in the creation and maintenance of a larger symbolic order hierarchizing what are called "the arts," creating a kind of artificial scarcity that subordinates most forms of cultural creativity. In doing so, the art world has powerful effects on many who are not even aware of its existence.

Other ways of organizing human creativity are possible. In analyzing the artificial production of scarcity, the strategic adoption of only half of the Romantic conception of creativity—or what the Romantics themselves called "genius"—we also wanted to identify exactly what made it possible for the art world to play this role, so as to imagine a different one. What if we spent half the creativity we spend on producing new works of art on reimagining the institutional structure of the art world itself? We set out to examine the matter historically, and cross-culturally, and also take inspiration from our own daydreams and nightmares, to produce a Borges-like catalogue of possible art worlds, based on different principles of value:

- What if there were an art world with the explicit aim of producing gossip?

- What if there were an art world in which art is an extremely sophisticated form of personal insult directed at those the artist hates (such as other artists)?

- What if there were an art world in which humans were not allowed to participate, but only observe the interactions of animals and machines?

- What if there were an art world in which works are meant to express feelings of shame and remorse (art as apology)?

- What if the art world were organized by the government to design previously unimaginable forms of sin, or just beautiful pornography, then sell carnal indulgences provided by the government to absolve consumers?

This was a great deal of fun, and could easily have grown to hundreds, even thousands of possible other art worlds. But after the global pandemic and the veritable mass uprisings that followed, it seemed a trifle flippant. We

Photo: Victor Bulla.

decided to reconsider our approach.

Inter anna silent Musae—the Muses all fall silent when cannons talk. But perhaps this is true of only a certain kind of muse. We came to realize that the ideas we were developing, however imaginative, were ultimately reformist. Perhaps, as Black Lives Matter has argued so cogently of the police and prison-industrial complex, the art world can't be reformed. What would it mean to take an abolitionist position?

On Monuments and the Rules of Engagement

Before the global pandemic, much of the world was already in a state of revolt. 2019 had already seen (mostly nonviolent) insurrections everywhere from Haiti to Hong Kong to Lebanon to Réunion, although these were largely isolated, with very little communication between them, or even much mutual awareness of the others' existence. In the wake of the pandemic, and the killing of George Floyd, the global uprising of spring and summer 2020 found a common inspiration in Black Lives Matter in the United States, and a common language as a generalized rebellion against the police state in many local manifestations.

By summer 2020, at least two shared themes in this global movement had emerged. The first is a process of mutual communication, starting from a shared desire to dismantle existing structures of state violence in solidarity with the population that bore the brunt of it (Romany in Serbia, migrants in Italy, for instance), but also to simultaneously begin to imagine the kind of institutions that would have to be created in their stead. The second is the destruction of monuments. There have been some incidents of looting, but significantly, they are not celebrated by protestors, and are often assumed to have been intentionally staged by police. The attacks on monuments, even if destructive, are completely unrelated to looting. Monuments, like museums—or more precisely, along with museums—are mechanisms for the production and dissemination of public meaning. It would seem that they are the machinery being at least temporarily suspended and systematically thrown into question with public gatherings in so many

towns and cities, not only in the US.

One might put it this way: those who broke out of lockdown directly into mass mobilization moved directly to take over the means of production of the symbolic order, expressed above all in the reorganization of (violent and cruel) public space through the destruction and alteration of monuments. Some people bemoan the destruction of monuments as an attack on history (though almost no one, interestingly, has seen it as an attack on art). Some distinguish between good and bad monuments. *We, , however , take the side of Nicholas Mirzoeff, who wrote a few years ago that " all monuments must fall."*

What is a monument anyway? After actions like N30 in Seattle against the WTO in 1999, the principal images that seemed to remain in public memory were: 1) anarchists dressed in black smashing Starbucks windows; and 2) colorful giant papier-mâché puppets.[1] But why, between the two, did the police seem to hate the puppets more? The police incessantly tried in subsequent actions to arrest the puppets, destroy the puppets, and organize preemptive strikes against the places where the puppets were being made. It got to the point where puppets had to be made in hiding, and the Black Bloc often had to organize its deployment largely to protect the puppets and their accompanying "carnival bloc" of musicians, clowns, belly dancers, stilt walkers, and so forth.

Why did the police object so violently to the "carnival bloc?" Part of the reason was that using art was seen as cheating. The Black Blocs were effectively combatants in a war. Mass actions involved classic military-style maneuvers aimed at ambushing, outflanking, surrounding, or breaking through the lines of adversaries. As in any war, there were limits on what weapons and tactics could be deployed, and though these limits varied from country to country, in general the police weren't allowed to use deadly force, and the other side couldn't use anything likely to cause serious physical harm. It is important to emphasize that these rules always exist—even in what seems like total war, such as the Russian front in World War II, where neither side used poison gas or tried to assassinate the other's leader.

But how are those rules negotiated? This takes place at the level of symbolic warfare, and the police, at least, feel strongly that the creation of powerful imagery to sway the public—and regulate who can use what sort of force in what circumstances—should be carried out through the media. Certainly, police representatives did this assiduously, almost invariably telling outrageous lies about "protestor violence" to justify more extreme repressive measures. From the perspective of the police, however, the Black Bloc appearing to organize a military-style confrontation, and then "defusing" or "deescalating" the situation by sending in puppets and clowns, was obviously cheating. The anarchists were demanding the right to change the rules of engagement on the field of battle. Puppets became the symbol for this demand.

But why specifically puppets? Here a further level of analysis is required. Black Bloc communiqués spoke of "breaking the spell"—we are surrounded, they said, by glittering palaces of consumerism, which seem like permanent monuments to a corrupt and fallen human nature. Yet with a simple monkey wrench, the whole facade can dissolve away into shards of glass. At the same time, giant puppets—which could represent anything from gods and dragons to caricatures of politicians and corporate bureaucrats—were simultaneously divine and ridiculous. These were objects that took days, even weeks to assemble, and were put together collectively by very large numbers of people. They were gigantic but fragile, and after a day's use, almost invariably crumbled away. In other words, they mocked the very idea of a monument. They represented the permanent power to bring the monumental into being as something very large that dominates public space, and by doing so seems to make real an abstraction. Such a constant kaleidoscope of possible monuments evoked the sacred in a form so powerful that it effectively had to be made silly. Otherwise, its power would be too terrifying.

In their self-satire, the giant puppets were also the most honest of monuments, because any monument that proclaims the eternity of what it represents—a sculpture, a mausoleum, a stolen Egyptian obelisk—is by definition a fraud. The things they represent are not really eternal. If they were, there would be no need to raise a monument. No one ever built a monument to the principle of gravity, or winter, or the sea. (Indeed, one could even argue that there is a slight danger involved in creating a monument to something like "Justice" or the nation, because by doing so one is subtly suggesting it may well *not* be eternal.)

Recent images of masked, heavily armed police surrounding the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC are not, perhaps, as ironic as they might seem. Police are, essentially, the guardians of the very principle of monumentality—the ability to turn control over violence into truth. Even the language police use to describe what they do (force, law, power) suggests that the ability to threaten others with sticks and guns, lock them in cages, or to place one's knee on their neck until they stop breathing, should be considered analogous to the principles that govern the universe.

On Politics, Policy, Politeness, and Police

During the uprisings, art institutions largely played a (sometimes surprisingly) supportive role, providing food and shelter for those fleeing or recovering from encounters with police, for example. So it might seem ungracious to take an abolitionist position in relation to the art world. We should make clear that we do not intend this

as a moral critique of individuals or individual complicity. In the same way that shifting the focus from "racism" (which can easily be turned into a moral language of endless self-examination, at the expense of action) to opposing "white supremacy" (as a set of institutional structures producing a concrete outcome that needs to be reversed, through action), we want to shift our own question "is another art world possible?" to focus on the very existence of "the art world" as an institutional power hierarchizing symbolic relations that extend far beyond its own reach. When protestors say, "The police are beyond reform; they must be defunded and dismantled," they are obviously not rejecting the idea of public safety. On the contrary, they are insisting that police institutions as they currently exist are detrimental to public safety, and for reasons running too deep for any reform to alleviate; that we have to understand what cops actually do, figure out which elements (if any) are actually desirable, and develop *other* ways, and other institutions, to do it. It's the same with the art world as an institution that restricts the distribution of sacred or symbolic meaning, the making real of abstractions **.**

But what do police actually do? In order to understand this, we need to understand the history of how police came into existence, as well as how they came to take the form—and crucially, the symbolic role—they have today. This history is not what we are taught to expect. The idea of something called "the state" only really came into currency in the seventeenth century, and modern European states were always police states in some sense, in that the creation of what were called police functions was a key part of extending sovereign authority to the entire population. But there is also a reason for "politics," "policy," and "police" (and for that matter, "politeness") all sharing the same root. Police at their inception had almost nothing to do with public safety, let alone "fighting crime" (which was still handled by constables and the local watch); police were there to enforce regulations, licensing, guaranteeing the food supply to cities to prevent riots, monitoring rootless populations, and, crucially, too, acting as spies. (Antoine de Sartine, Louis XV's chief of police, boasted that if there were three men talking on the street, one of them almost certainly worked for him.) Modern policing was born in the early nineteenth century in England, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The new, uniformed police, while now advertising themselves as crime fighters, mainly had the dual function of protecting the rich and "prevention"—which largely meant forcing able-bodied vagrants into respectable labor.

Politicians back then were often refreshingly honest about their motives. Many were quite explicit that they had no interest in eliminating poverty: Patrick Colquhoun, the first great theorist of British policing, wrote that poverty was necessary to drive people to industry, and industry was necessary to produce wealth (just not for the poor). They were concerned with that section of the poor who were *not* producing wealth, or threatening to take that wealth away, whether by pickpocketing or insurrection. In this sense, police were always political. In the US, for instance, police in the southern states were largely commissioned to enforce the segregation of former slaves, while in northern cities, one important motive for creating professional police forces was fear that the army would prove unreliable if called out against strikers during industrial disputes.

In this sense, police were, from the very beginning, concerned with social welfare, but of an intentionally limited kind. What we have come to know as the welfare state, in contrast, is quite different in its origins. It is not derived from the apparatus of state at all: from Sweden to Brazil, everything from social insurance to kindergartens to public libraries were originally the product of social movements: labor unions, neighborhood groups, bunds, political parties, and so forth. The state merely coopted them, and insisted they be run by top-down bureaucracies. For a while—mainly when capitalist states were still faced with the threat of the socialist bloc—this compromise did produce widespread prosperity. But what the state seizes the state can also lock away. As a result, since the 1970s and '80s, as revolutionary threats faded, the power of unions was broken, community groups began to be broken up, and the welfare state began to be dismantled, the police began increasingly to take over the provision of social services once again.

Just like in the 1820s, the transformation was mediated by a symbolic offensive claiming the real role of police was "fighting crime"—it's hard to remember that, prior to the 1970s, there were almost no movies, in America or perhaps anywhere in the world, where policemen were the heroes. Suddenly heroic, "maverick" cops were on screens everywhere, just as actual cops, "security professionals," surveillance systems, and the like began appearing in places where they would once have been unheard of: schools, hospitals, beaches, playgrounds. All the while, the actual function of police remained much as it had been in the 1600s: police sociologists have long noted that real cops spend perhaps 6–11 percent of their time on matters that have anything to do with "crime," much less violent crime; the overwhelming majority of their time and energy is spent enforcing the endless municipal regulations on who can drink, walk, sell, smoke, eat, drive what, where, and under what conditions. Police are still bureaucrats with weapons, bringing the possibility of violence, even death, into situations where it would never otherwise exist (for instance, the sale of unlicensed cigarettes). The main difference is that, as capitalism has financialized itself during this same period, police have added an additional administrative function: revenue collection. Many city governments are entirely dependent on money coming in from police enforcement of fines in order to balance their books and pay their creditors. Just as police in the industrial age were deployed to guarantee the continued existence of (useful) poverty, in a financial age they ensure that not just minority or marginal

populations, but increasingly, anyone who is not a creditor, is treated as a criminal.

Clearly none of this has much, if anything, to do with public safety. In fact, at this point, the yearly death rate in America from mass shootings alone is parallel to what one would expect in a country undergoing a minor civil war. As abolitionists point out, Americans would be far safer if they eliminated police entirely, returned to largely self-organized social services, stopped employing trained killers to inform them of a broken tail light, and created a completely different organization to deal with violent crime.

What Does This Have to Do with the Art World?

Our argument is that just as police ultimately operate to maintain poverty and white supremacy, what we call "the art world" ultimately exists to maintain a structure of hierarchy. What happens inside the bubble makes little difference. The issue is the existence of the bubble itself. Or to put it slightly differently, "the arts" are organized the way they are because "art" sits on top of them. A poor child growing up in a shantytown in Brazil or Pakistan has likely never heard of any of the names featured at the latest Documenta, but whatever she might dream of becoming—a rapper, a movie star, a fashion designer, a comedian (basically anything other than a tycoon, athlete, or politician)—it is already ranked on a scale in which "artist" is the pinnacle. The fact that most people have little or no idea who contemporary artists are or what they do contributes to the mystery.

This may help to explain otherwise puzzling contradictions. In trying to explain why it would be a bad thing if our troublesome human species became extinct, "art and culture" is often evoked as one of the few self-evident justifications for our existence. On the other hand, most people find artists rather useless. A recent *Sunday Times* poll challenged a thousand people to name the most essential and least essential professions. The five most important turned out to be doctor/nurses, cleaners, garbage collectors, vendors, and deliverymen. But the real headline news was that the least essential turned out to be artists (telemarketers came in second).

There's no reason to believe this reflects hostility towards artists, or a feeling that they would be better off collecting trash. Rather, it seems to reflect a feeling that "artist" isn't really a job at all. Or perhaps that it shouldn't be. It should be a reward. It's as if artists are seen as people who insist that they, and they alone, already exist under communism. Put this way, it's not unreasonable to then ask: Why should nurses and cleaners have to pay for artists? It's almost as if the contingencies of race, class, and national origin sort us all out into different historical epochs, wherein some of us toil away under capitalism, some are reduced to feudal retainers, others are even living under de facto slavery, while a chosen few are allowed to inhabit a communist future that might otherwise (perhaps) never come into being. Should we be surprised that nurses and cleaners look slightly annoyed as the artists wave from their communist starcruiser floating past?

Obviously, most artists don't see it that way. Some feel they are still blazing the trail to a utopian future in good avant-garde fashion. But by now it's just as obvious a pretext as someone telling himself his cushy job in brand management isn't really hurting anyone, since he doesn't actually do much more than spend his time updating his Facebook profile and playing computer games. Maybe this is true of his particular job, but then we also have to admit that the existence of brand management is clearly a disaster. The same goes for the art world, since to enter this communist tomorrow you need resources (and the art world's attempts to foreground more women, people of color, and so forth does little to undercut this); to be recognized as an artist, you need to support a certain structure of recognition. To take an obvious example, you need to show in museums, those temples of our civilization, where reigning symbolic codes are formed, assigned, and archived.

After all, the same is true of cops. "All cops are bastards" is a structural statement; there have always been individual cops who have been well-meaning, even idealistic (Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, spent seven years working for the LAPD). The point is that their personal character or even personal politics are mostly irrelevant; they are operating within an institutional structure that does inestimable harm, and whether any particular benevolent act does more harm by validating that structure, or good by mitigating it, is a secondary consideration.

Museums Are to the Art World as Prisons Are to the Police State

If we were to tell the history of the art world in the same way we just told the (very abbreviated) history of police, we would have to begin with the role of the museum. Of course, the French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille (a prison), but it culminated in the seizure of the Louvre Palace, which became the first national museum, effectively initiating a new secular conception of the sacred to break the remaining power of the Church.

Of course, museums do not produce art; neither do they distribute art. They sacralize it. It's important to underline the connection between property and the sacred. To sacralize is to exclude; it's to set something apart from the world, whether because it is sacred to an individual ("private property") or sacred to something more abstract ("art" "God," "humanity," "the nation"). Any revolutionary regime changes existing forms of property, and the

organization or reorganization of museums plays a crucial role in this process, since the forms of property that exist within museums represent the summit of the pyramid. They are the ultimate wealth that police protect, and that the industrious poor can only see on weekends.

Virtually all museums today operate in a way that produces and maintains hierarchy. By archiving, cataloging, and reorganizing the museum's space, they draw a line between "museum" quality and "non-museum" quality objects. But there is no ultimate contradiction between commoditized art and art considered inalienable and not to be sold, because they are simply two variations of the sacred as radical exclusion. The fact that these objects are surrounded by armed security and high-tech surveillance simply serves to underline to any visitor how much their own creative acts (songs, jokes, hobbies, diary entries, care for loved ones, and precious mementos) are of no particular significance, and therefore, that visitor will need to return to their non-museum life and continue to carry on their "non-inessential" job producing and maintaining the structure of relations that makes museums possible. Much like the cathedrals they were meant to replace, museums are there to teach one one's place.

In the same way, the art world—as the apparatus for the production of objects, performances, or ideas that might someday merit being sacralized—is based on the artificial creation of scarcity. In the way that police guarantee material poverty, the existence of the art world—in its current form—could be said to guarantee spiritual poverty. What, then, would an abolitionist project directed at the art world actually look like?

Ways Out?

The Russian parallel to the storming of the Bastille was of course the storming of the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, and the Winter Palace was itself duly converted into a national museum, the Hermitage. The Hermitage Museum survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues to this day to operate almost exactly as it had under Stalin and Brezhnev. This in itself might be worth a moment's reflection, since it suggests that property relations, and therefore conceptions of the sacred, have changed a lot less than we imagined between Soviet state capitalism, Yeltsin's wild liberalism, and the current right-wing nationalist regime. (Those running the Hermitage are, in fact, rather proud of this. They see it as proof that they represent a kind of beacon of eternity.)

There is a great deal of discussion today about the possibility of removing public monuments and relegating them to museums, but at the same time, and in a rather contradictory fashion, of turning museums themselves into places of care, love, and social transformation. There is a general sense that the art world needs to get on board with the movement against the police state, perhaps even that art could be one means of restoring the social fabric torn apart by the financialization and security culture that has spread from the United States to almost everywhere. Some seek to explore the connections between art, money, and securitization itself.

Many argue that we should stop the movement of hundreds of thousands of art tourists around the globe, stop building pointless new offices, stop hosting so many exclusive presentations and dinners that serve no purpose other than self-celebration, and imagine how art could be one of many forms of care that contributes to the reproduction of human life (education, medicine, safety, different forms of knowledge, etc.). How else could it be possible for everyone to cultivate local artistic communities as ends in themselves? These are sensible proposals, but they lack the coherence and urgency of the demands being made to defund or abolish the police. What would any of this actually mean in practice? As a thought experiment, if we were to storm the Louvre or Hermitage again, what would we do with it? Anything? It's also possible that palaces simply don't lend themselves to democratic purposes.

Perhaps there is more inspiration to be found in another revolutionary artistic institution—or, better said, revolutionary artistic infrastructure—created in Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century, which could be said to have entirely different implications than the Hermitage. Unlike Soviet museums, it only existed as a state-recognized institution for a few years, from 1917 to 1920, before being formally dismantled. Despite this, the infrastructure was so well-founded that it also, in a certain sense, survives to this day. It was the brainchild of Alexander Bogdanov, an immensely popular revolutionary who, despite being expelled from the Communist Party well before 1917, was briefly given free rein to enact his vision of art communism: Proletkult.

Proletkult aimed quite explicitly to realize Novalis's dream that everyone should be an artist. It aimed to dismantle the infrastructure for the creation of heroic, monumental figures to allow for direct, unmediated relations between producers, and to redirect social investment towards what had previously been dismissed as "amateurs," essentially reversing the values claiming that art should be anything like a job. Part of the aim, too, was to reimagine the very notions of "museum" and "archive" nonhierarchically.

There has been a kind of rediscovery of Proletkult in artistic, activist, and academic circles of late. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that what Bogdanov and his allies were trying to accomplish, on the artistic level, is remarkably similar to the attempt to create alternative institutions currently being put forward by opponents of the police state. It may be surprising that it

Photo: Victor Bulla.

took so long. After all, revolutionaries have been arguing for over a century now about the Soviet grassroots popular assemblies and the experiments in worker self-management that flourished around the same time, and their ultimate suppression by the "Soviet" regime. Proletkult was in its origin simply the cultural manifestation of the same democratic movement. It was also more massive in its scale than the organization of popular assemblies and self-managed industries, and more lasting in its effects. To give a sense of its size: in 1920, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had roughly 150,000 members. Proletkult had 400,000, and was growing when the CPSU was actually shrinking during the period of civil war. During the period of 1917 to 1920—when the movement was self-organized—artistic production concentrated above all on theater (since theater brought together visual art, design, poetry, and music—effectively all branches of art in a single collective product), and participation was so widespread that even a relatively small city might have dozens of different theatrical collectives operating at a given time. There was also, critically, an active educational component to the movement, which attempted to collapse the boundaries between academia, popular education, science, and the arts.

Long before the creation of Wikipedia, Bogdanov and his comrades also imagined and began to build a new infrastructure for the reproduction of knowledge, one that aimed to destroy the traditional hierarchies between students and teachers, and supplant them with horizontal networks in which anyone could find themselves in every role in a different situation: readers become writers, spectators become artists, producers, consumers, and so on. For Bogdanov, at least, the realization of a world where everyone could become an artist *was* communism. This destruction of hierarchies was precisely the end that the Revolution aimed to achieve.

The participatory nature of the project clashed directly with both the hierarchy of arts as it existed at the time, and the new Bolshevik project of creating an efficient police state. In fact, Lenin's reaction to Proletkult lays bare the connection between the two. In 1920, Lenin imposed state control over the project, insisting that the proletariat had a right to be "enriched" by the highest forms of what he called "classical culture"—the reimposition of the values of the Hermitage, and of museums in general, corresponded exactly to the transfer of power to the secret police (large statues of Lenin were to begin going up slightly later). Popular theater and education did continue, but under the control of Lunacharsky's Ministry of Culture it was either censored or reduced to propaganda.

Meanwhile, as avant-garde art was removed from existing museums (and many of the artists were shot), in almost every city of the Soviet Union a world heritage museum (a local version of the Hermitage) sprang up, and alongside it a museum of contemporary Soviet art and a deeply conservative educational system designed to produce a body of technically proficient cultural specialists, whether socialist-realist painters or ballerinas. One might say that the creation of bottom-up social welfare and cultural institutions, and their gradual replacement by police functions, which took almost a century to accomplish elsewhere, took place over the course of about three years in the Soviet Union.

There is still a great deal of debate over the long-term significance of Proletkult. What's really striking today is how Proletkult, despite its focus on art, offers remarkable parallels with some of the proposals for the creation of a new infrastructure to replace our current police state. Remember here that "police" originally refers to the imposition of "policy," of centralized initiatives (think of all those declarations of war—on crime, drugs, terror, and so forth). The emphasis in Proletkult was the direct inverse:

• Artistic priorities were not imposed by any "center," but responded to the specific needs of people—education, health, equality, poverty, and existing networks.

• All artistic institutions were to be local, decentralized, human-controlled, created by and existing for real people as they actually exist (not some utopian ideal of how they should exist) in a specific neighborhood of the city, or even a specific street, and capable of being changed by them.

• Localism was combined with internationalism through immediate horizontal networks of artistic solidarity around the world. There was no talk of creating a national culture, but rather, an art of the oppressed, or a proletarian culture.

Remarkably, much of this is still in place in Russia. While Proletkult as a self-organized movement ceased to exist after Lenin had Bogdanov removed and placed the institutions under the control of the Party's Central Committee, the infrastructure itself was not disbanded. Even now, thirty years after the destruction and privatization following Perestroika in all Eastern Bloc countries in the 1990s, almost every small town in Russia and much of the former Eastern Bloc still has a so-called "House of Culture" where anyone can spend their free time on anything from Go clubs to drawing and singing lessons, from puppet theater to painting classes. The professionalization of the arts and reimposition of hierarchies simply meant that the network of Houses of Culture were reduced to "amateur" status, with participants expected to act as unpaid propagandists for the Party, creating theatrical productions celebrating increased productivity, for example.

The teachers at the Houses of Culture were paid, though not much, and their symbolic capital was minimal enough for them to attract little attention, which allowed the remains of Proletkult to become a primary enclave for Soviet dissidents, or simply those seeking alternatives to official culture. Yoga, for example, was formally forbidden in the USSR, but underground yoga teachers might work there, even if they were being paid to teach something else. A place equidistant from both fame and influence, the Houses of Culture were also about as far as one could get from police control. Meanwhile, "professional" institutions like universities, artist unions, academies, and so on became gateways to privilege, "feeding troughs" for an elite with access to exclusive hospitals and resorts. Unsurprisingly, recruitment soon came to be based less on talent, and certainly creativity, than on conformity and connections. As a result, a huge number of real Soviet intellectuals actually emerged from the remains of Proletkult, from chess players to poets to Pavel Filonov's artistic pupils to mathematicians like Grigori Perelman (originally a participant in the mathematics circle at the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers). L *ike well-written computer code or beautiful urban planning,* Proletkult *turned out to be so tightly sewn into the social body that it is almost impossible to unravel it.*

We write this at a moment when many expect governments to soon begin pouring money into the arts, perhaps as part of a Green New Deal similar to what the Roosevelt administration did as part of the original New Deal in the 1930s. This may or may not happen, but if the money is directed through the existing infrastructure of the art world, it will surely reproduce a similar professionalized elite. What if we were to redirect these funds elsewhere, along with the billion dollars the New York City Council shifted from the NYPD, and the hundreds of millions of dollars circulating in offshore and private investments and art world coffers?

What if we were to create a House of Culture in every district, every street, along with a Palace of Children, a Palace of Pensioners, a Palace of Refugees, but according the original, self-organized plan? What if we didn't judge what anyone did with the resources, and simply provided the means for anyone wishing to participate in cultural activities to sustain themselves and find others interested in the same projects—to gossip, insult each other, apologize, sell indulgences, or create a waterpark or miniature golf course out of former monuments? What if we didn't organize biennials with tiered admissions, but monthly carnivals with costumes and dances in every district and every city, as we see erupting seemingly spontaneously in any "occupation" from Zuccotti Park to Seattle, from Christiania to Rojava? Except this time, without all the cops.

These are just opening salvos. In this essay, we want to suggest that what is usually presented as a decline in social welfare spending, and consequent greater reliance on the police, is actually a clash between two entirely

different concepts of social welfare. On the one hand, there is what might be termed the police model of social welfare, which uses the threat of violence to maintain a regime of artificial scarcity, yet also carefully regulates and ameliorates its worst effects to maintain social order. At one time this threat of violence was largely organized around disciplining labor, but today it has shifted to becoming itself the principle means for the extraction of profits, which are increasingly derived from rents—capitalism sustaining itself not so much by selling us cars as distributing parking tickets and traffic tickets. But the forms of the sacred appropriate to the police order remain the same: public monuments, museums, and the art world.

On the other hand, there are the self-organized forms of social welfare that are effectively extensions of communal care, conviviality, or the expectation of help from a neighbor in an emergency. Essentially, this is the form of communism that always exists in any community worthy of the name, if only in our lack of desire to hurt each other and the fact that most pleasures aren't very pleasurable unless they're shared. This communal notion of social welfare invariably, as Kurdish activists point out, generates its own notion of security and self-defense.

The question that remains unanswered is: What precisely are the forms of the sacred appropriate to the communal notion of social welfare? We have no intention of ending with ringing declarations. Perhaps we are just offering a challenge to respond to this question. We can't help recalling that Alexander Bogdanov himself thought he had a solution. He was not only the founder of Proletkult, but of the Soviet Institute for Hemotology, which was convinced that transfusing blood within communities could extend human life indefinitely. In this was the Russian cosmist belief that what is ultimately sacred is human life itself. "The earth," according to Nikolai Fyodorov, "is a museum of humanity," with the emphasis on "humanity" more than "museum." Everyone deserves the same care and attention that we direct towards monuments and masterpieces, and should for all eternity.

X

Further Reading on Proletkult

• **Alexander Bogdanov, "Proletarian Poetry" (1923)**
• **Alexander Bogdanov, "The Workers' Artistic Inheritance" (1924)**
• **Sergei Treti'akov, "Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art (Aesthetic Consumption and Production)" (1923)**
• **Report on the First Proletkult Congress (1920)**
• **Lynn Mally, Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia (Oakland: University of California Press, 1990).**
• Natalia Murray, *Art for the Workers: Proletarian Art and Festive Decorations of Petrograd, 1917-1920* (London: Brill, 2018).
• Maria Chehonadskih, "The Comrades of the Past: The Soviet Enlightenment Between Negation and Affirmation," *Crisis and Critique* 4, no. 2 (2017), 86-105.
• Jutta Scherrer, "The Cultural Hegemony of the Proletariat: The Origins of Bogdanov's Vision of Proletarian Culture," *Studies in History* 5, no. 2 (August 1989), 195–210.
• **David Walsh, lectures on Marxism, Art and the Soviet Debate Over "Proletarian Culture"**

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See David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review*, no. 13 (January–February 2002): 61–73 https://newleftreview.org/issues/II13/articles/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists .

Hou Hanru and Ou Ning

Test of Our Vision: A Conversation

The Bishan Project is one of China's boldest social experiments in recent years. For six years—from 2010 to 2016—the rural reconstruction and practical utopian commune project ran its course in Bishan, a small village in the Anhui Province. The invitations the project received for exhibition and presentation abroad incited a national debate in China.

The texts collected in Ou Ning's Utopia in Practice: Bishan Project and Rural Reconstruction (2020) *describe and criticize the social problems caused by China's overzealous urbanization process. These discourses on contemporary agrarianism and agritopianism resist the doctrines of modernism and developmentalism that have dominated China for more than a century, and respond to a global desire for alternative social solutions—in theory and action—to today's environmental and political crises.*[1]

From May 25–29, Ou Ning and Hou Hanru carried out the following conversation about the book on WeChat—between Briançon, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France, and Jingzhou, Hubei Province, China.

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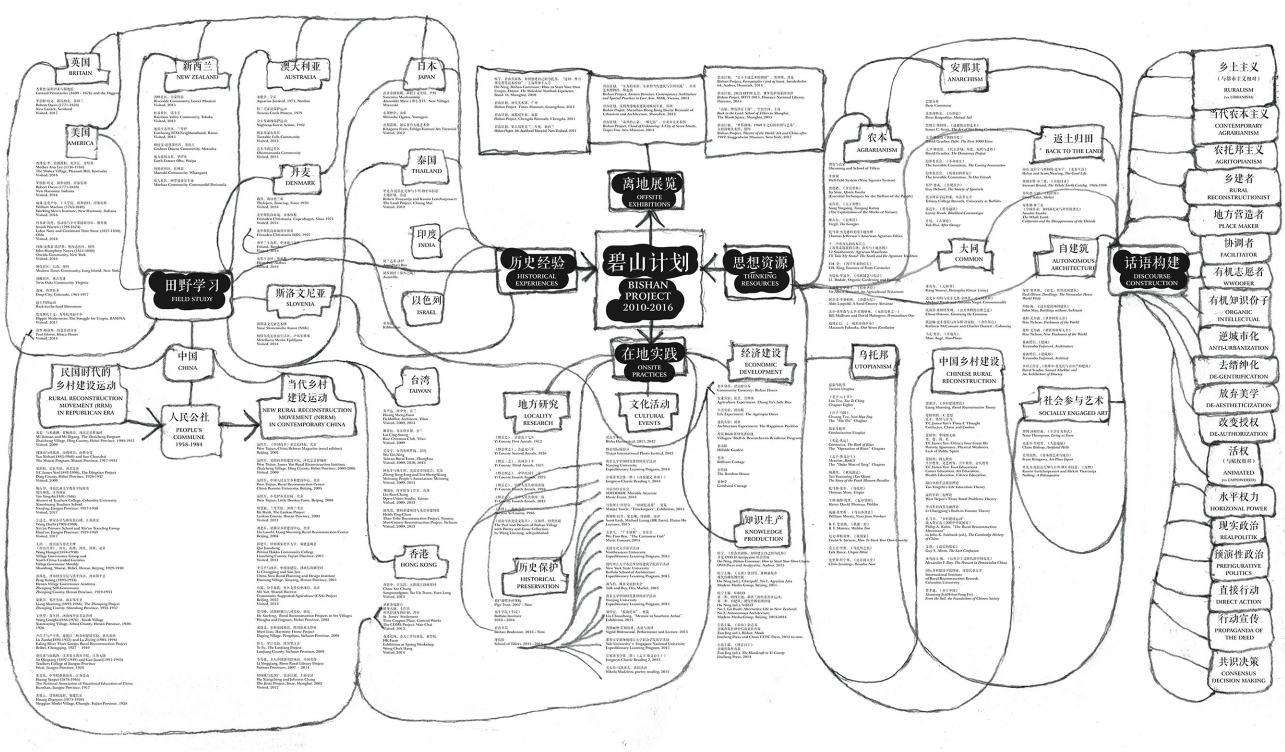
Hou Hanru: Hi, Ou Ning! In this very strange and challenging lockdown period, I had the chance to read through most of your new book. It's a very timely contribution to the current need for reflection on the difficulty of continuing to live in a world that has been so dominated and transformed by "globalization" and urbanization. There is a global tendency to "return" to nature—to the countryside—and also to the "local." (In particular, Rem Koolhaas and AMO's recent exhibition "Countryside, The Future" at the Guggenheim may trigger discussions on the topic.) At the same time, doubts and "corrections" offered to the modernization model, as well as new values brought on by the pandemic, may constitute a "timely rain." Renewed interest in the countryside might also be turned into a superficial "fashion." Your experiments in Bishan, which lasted for years, were very down-to-earth and even "prophetic." Sometimes their "persistent" idealism was radical. Their value should not be limited to fashionable discussions.

In many ways, as a matter of fact, this notion of "returning to the origin" is impossible. Not only is returning impossible, but the "origin" itself has never really existed! What has existed and continues to exist is history, with all sorts of diversities of how human beings live in the world by transforming it and inscribing the process into memory. There have always been entanglements between idealism and realism, between utopianism and "real life." With the inspiration from the legacy of anarchism, you tried to mobilize public awareness toward embracing social equality, and encouraged independent initiatives to realize their own "selves." "Returning" to the countryside here is about a kind of one-to-one dialogue to enlighten



The mind map of Bishan Project by Ou Ning for the exhibition "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World," Guggenheim Museum, 2017-2018. Designed by Xiaoma + Chengzi, 2017.

everyone's potentiality, especially for those who have been categorized as peasants and farmers, who are often stuck at the bottom of modern societal structures. If the topic of the countryside is now fashionable, and therefore, another excuse for consumption, then this "return" could become a double punishment for those already living in the countryside—people who stand the risk of enduring more exploitation and ideological injustice. How do you think your book can contribute to the challenge of changing this dilemma?

Ou Ning: Hi, Hanru! Thank you for taking the time to read my manuscript and for starting this dialogue. In fact, the countryside already became a "fashion" in the decade before the Covid-19 outbreak. This has been one reaction to the problems of over-urbanization. People regard the countryside as a destination to escape the urban problems of overcrowding, air pollution, fierce competition for job opportunities, and educational resources. Of course, there are also intellectuals who pay attention to the bankruptcy of agriculture, the depression of the rural area, the atomization of farmers, and the "upside down" urban-rural relationship. Some of these intellectuals advocate for "rural reconstruction" to carry out social reform.

At least in China, the countryside has already received and digested shifting crises passed along from the cities, for example when the two international financial crises occurred in 1997 and 2008. In other words, the countryside has long been a "landing site" for crisis transformation. This did not start with the current pandemic at all. My writings and practices may have boosted the popularity of rural issues in public discourse in recent years, especially through a large-scale debate that unfolded in China in 2014. This particular instance overflowed the circle of rural research and reconstruction, and turned it into a national "clamor." However, as the collected writings in my book show, I was alert from the beginning to the "gentrification" of the countryside— that is, how the urban middle class poured into, occupied, and consumed the countryside. This made for a "population reshuffle" rather than a solution to the depopulation problem in the countryside. I think that the recent arrivals and the indigenous villagers should live and work together to establish an intersubjectivity. However, in the debate, which was taken out of context at that time, the opposition completely ignored this idea.

While preparing for the 2009 Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture, I discussed the concept of "ruralism" with Rem Koolhaas. I invited him and Hans Ulrich Obrist to host the "Shenzhen Marathon" conversation, which also included rural issues. The "Countryside, The Future" exhibition that Koolhaas researched and prepared for years, whose opening coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic, will undoubtedly deepen people's interest in this topic worldwide. The exhibition shows the radical changes to the rural landscape in different global regions under the neoliberal economy, the potentiality of "nonurban" land

resources, and the possibilities that new biotechnology and AI technologies bring to agriculture. It also produces a strong feeling that the European architect has great ambitions and surging momentum to open up a "new world," without any sense of the crisis of agrarianism that Asian regions have long been anxious about and are struggling to maintain.

The Bishan Supply and Marketing Cooperative, 1970s. Courtesy of Cultural Center of Yi County.

The Chinese quarantined at home under the impact of the new pandemic would still be frightened by the return of problems with the "food reserve."[2] And the Showa Agricultural Panic in Japan, brought on by the Great Depression of 1929, was one of the major triggers for Japan to launch the Pacific War. Saneatsu Mushanokōji, a Japanese writer who founded *Atarashiki-mura* ("New Village," an intentional community) just after WWI, and participated in the "Agrarian Union" movement before WWII, wrote on a memorial pole in the village of Moroyama in 1953: "There is no better way to keep me alive than this, I will take this way."[3] This may explain the "persistence" of the utopianists. In order to "stay alive," we really need to be able to imagine the future.

HHR: Your interest in the countryside may have derived from your experience visiting the village of San Yuan Li, and subsequent research on the social evolution there.[4] The emergence and multiplication of urban villages in the 1990s not only produced a new urban texture and architectural typologies of the "urban-rural fringe," but also gave rise to a mixture and, simultaneously, class differentiation and conflict between immigrants (migrant workers) and aborigines (native farmers who lost their land but who, in some cases, benefitted from land sales). In this new type of social relationship, an unprecedented "autonomous region of urban-rural integration" was formed. Did this kind of research stimulate your interest in "autonomy" and "communes"? The return of migrant workers has brought these experiences back into the wider rural area anew. What inspiration has this had on the popular push for urbanization, or more accurately "townization" (*chengzhenhua*), in recent years? Does this also mean that the direction of your experiment of "activating rural life" is not a romantic "return to nature," but rather a process of self-enlightenment?

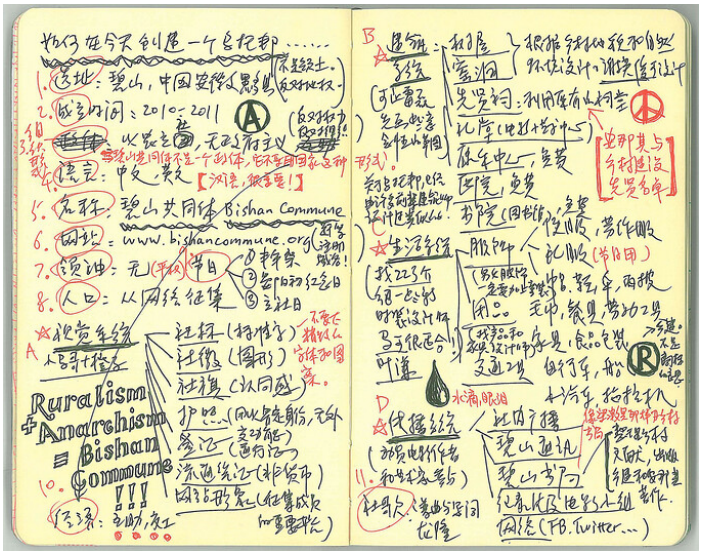
ON: Without your kind invitation to participate in the Venice Biennale in 2003, the San Yuan Li project would not have happened. I still remember that when you set up the theme "Z.O.U." (Zone of Urgency), which focused the exhibition on the radical urbanization movement in the Asia-Pacific region, I picked up the phenomenon of "urban villages" in Guangzhou to resonate with your curatorial thoughts. My interest in San Yuan Li originated from my brief visit and stay there during my college days, while Koolhaas's *Great Leap Forward*, published in 2001, opened my eyes to the "alternative modernity" in the Pearl River Delta.

Today, looking back at the indigenous villagers of San Yuan Li, I realize that the wisdom they radiated in their cramped living space is exactly what James C. Scott summed up in his peasant study as "metis," or in plain terms, "cunning."[5] The villagers followed the government-stipulated building dimensions on the ground level. But then they expanded the construction area as far as possible from the second floor onwards, thus forming a spectacle of "handshake buildings" with only "one line of sky." These buildings block out the sun, transforming the streets into dark mazes. A policeman who is not familiar with "local geography" will absolutely not be able to catch hidden criminals. They have created an inexpensive, convenient community space that's open twenty-four hours a day to new college graduates and migrant workers without temporary residence permits. It seems chaotic, but in fact it has its own hidden order. In the new era of urbanization, villagers have also corporatized the traditional village organization. Their collective assets not only make dividends every year, but also maintain large, village-run security teams. The village association and community school (*shexue*), which was used to mobilize villagers against Britain during the Opium War, evolved into a new form of autonomy.

This is the vitality of Chinese rural society, especially in Guangdong, where urbanization began at its earliest in China. This lively, teeming urban village was once diagnosed as a "cancer" in the eyes of the municipal government, but we made an experimental documentary film to demonstrate its social value. Being in San Yuan Li also inspired my further studies of rural society. I wanted to find out about its genes and different variations. Why did it decay in one place, and survive with tenacity in another? This was the starting point for my later move to the countryside. Of course, it is not for seclusion in nature, it is "self-enlightenment." Thank you for providing such an accurate statement.

The later " *chengzhenhua*" did not absorb the informal vitality of urban villages, because it is a top-down arrangement and reflected more of a state will to solve rural problems. "Townization" refers to the use of administrative means and national resources to concentrate farmers in nearby towns, providing them with orderly and standard houses that have been professionally planned, while vacated rural homesteads and cultivated land are used to develop vacation tourism and industrialized agriculture. This is a typical modernist rural reconstruction and governance scheme. It still belongs to the storyline of urbanization, reflecting the government's imagination of "modernity" in rural areas.

The cost is staggering. In the book, I quoted a report from the National Academy of Governance on the cost of urbanization. The report points out that in the eight years between 2013 and 2020, the annual additional financial cost for transforming farmers-turned-migrant-workers into registered urban residents will amount to 226.138 billion yuan. The National Bureau of Statistics shows that in 2012, the total number of farmers-turned-workers nationwide was 262.61 million, of whom 163.36 million were farmers-turned-migrant-workers. After farmers move into urban residential areas, if there is no guarantee of employment opportunities, they will even have difficulty paying their electricity bills. Therefore, some farmers moved back to the village to live their former lives. The National Academy of Governance report also predicts that if the 160 million migrant workers all become registered urban residents at one time, the minimum additional financial expenditure will reach nearly 1.8 trillion yuan.[6]



A page from Ou Ning, Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia, 2010. Moleskine sketchbook, 108 pages, 13 x 21cm, heavy acid-free paper.

HHR: As the edges of modernization, rural areas have always been the object of economic and political centers' attempts to cover, intervene into, develop, and utilize them. Between the government and NGOs, there are all kinds of elites trying to project their imaginations and schemes into this "marginal zone" in order to realize their social ideals. There are peaceful inducements and radical revolutions. Whether in peace or violence, they all take the "improvement" of rural living conditions as a premise to try to "reform" the relationship between human beings and nature. They are somewhat of the belief that "man is sure to conquer nature," and that the utopian spirit is its fundamental motive force. So how can the wishes of the "native" rural residents be represented and expressed? The starting point of your work must also be based on this contradiction. How do you face it?

ON: Rural areas cannot be ignored by any political power in any period. For the premodern, Confucian-driven empires dominated by imperial power, the countryside was the source of the *suigu* (grain tax) and guarded the lifeblood of the economy. Settled agriculture itself was the ideological basis for the successive dynasties to worship the gods of earth and grain together with their ancestries in the temples (*sheji, zongmiao*), and to use this practice as the symbol of legitimacy. Therefore, even if the countryside was "far away from the center," it would be organized by the central power to unite the people and administer the tax incomes in a unified way. When China entered the modern era, the warlords who divided power and separated the country would plunder the wealth of the countryside to support the food supply. The Communist Party's revolution could not have succeeded without the support of the countryside.

In the contemporary era, the stability of the countryside remains the singular most important political factor. In Japan, the countryside was an important source of soldiers, which of course allowed for the militarism necessary to wage war. During the Pacific War, the Japanese government kicked off the "Imperial Rural Establishment Movement" to ensure the state machine's control and monopoly over the countryside. In the United States, Roosevelt's New Deal drummed up vast public resources to support agriculture. In addition to coping with the food crisis caused by the Great Depression, another motivation behind the New Deal was related to the large agricultural population attached to the land before the rise of largescale industrialized agriculture. This population was a very important sources of Roosevelt voters. Trump's election was also inseparable from the support of the US agricultural region and the "Rust Belt." Politicians have always regarded farmers as passive electoral tools. In fact, farmers can and do also actively "create" their own agents and leaders. One can imagine that if the only farmers left in the United States were those in Koolhaas's exhibition who monitor "farming" by robots through screens at home, a large number of agricultural communities would die out and the political ecology of the US would be more easily controlled by Wall Street.

Farmers have not been totally deprived, but the decrease in population will weaken the political influence of this group.

A film screening part of "Screen Nostalgia," 2011 Bishan Harvestival. Photo: Hu Xiaogeng, 2011.

Therefore, in 2016, several writers wrote books to trace the history of the communitarian utopian movement in the US in the nineteenth century.[7] Some of these authors advocated learning from and reviving the land philosophies of early intentional communities who put down roots in rural areas of the United States, such as the Shakers. They were, of course, representative of groups who insisted on investing as much manpower as possible, using recyclable natural energy, and implementing a collective system of communal ownership of property to run agriculture and communities.

However, as you said, a "return" is impossible on many levels. But it is necessary to maintain a certain number of farmers, to maintain a rural lifestyle, and to operate agriculture in an eco-friendly way. These are necessities not only for the sake of sustaining the diversity of human life or saving an available political force, but also because modern nation-states cannot cut ties with agriculture, rural areas, and farmers.

Just imagine if China's "urbanization" turns all farmers into registered urban residents and no one cultivates the land. Wouldn't that jeopardize the supply of food and place the feeding of the entire population into the risky waters of international trade and global economic integration? Moreover, farmers are not "human waste" eliminated by the modernization process, as many people think. Their "cunning" wisdom is often unexpected. Their "brain mine" (to use James Yen's term) is rich, but ignored.[8] The problem of contemporary Chinese farmers is that they live at the bottom of an "authority-driven" society where state power permeates in a totalizing way. These farmers can neither return to the "autonomy of the landed gentry" of the era of monarchy, in which "imperial power extended down only to the county level," nor can they speak through the electoral system like American farmers. The space to realize their potential is very limited. As an outsider with neither power nor capital, all I can do in the countryside is use my own cultural resources to improve farmers and villagers' visibility in society, broaden their contact with the outside world, and build platforms within my ability to let them give full play to their intelligence. Under limited, realistic conditions, so-called "empowerment" and "moralization" are all extravagant to me, and they are also part of an elite rhetoric that I oppose. I prefer the words "mutual aid," "mutual learning," and "communal life."

HHR: In essence, you firmly believe in the classic principle of modernity that "knowledge is power," and hope to bring that through personal and "autonomous" efforts to a place where cultural independence has been lost. That way, people can rediscover and implement self-esteem and power in various ways, while using communication and sharing as the methods to seek equality within this process. As your experiment in Bishan shows, some form of autonomous community can indeed sprout. Because of this real possibility, the project also sparked a repressive response from upper-level institutions. The rejection and suppression of the diversity of personal and social life and values is the center of the problem. This is not only China's increasingly threatening trend in recent decades, but also the situation caused by the mainstream and increasingly "globalized" forces of developmentalism and capital. At the same time, the forces of reflection and resistance, especially the "organic intellectuals" and NGOs, are also constantly trying to put forward alternative opinions and solutions. The Covid-19 pandemic has sounded the alarm for everyone. It's gotten us stuck in the negative effects of the developmentalism model of modernity, and at the same time has proven the value of your efforts and those of like-minded people. The publication of your book should be a timely call to action. How can you continue your experiment in practice? Art and culture are an important part of your "experimental field." How can you cultivate some kind of "rural autonomy aesthetics"?

ON: The new Covid-19 pandemic has certainly dealt a heavy blow to the proud achievement of "globalization." It freezes the "borderless, barrier-free, and far-reaching" mobility of human beings. Not only has it deprived life and destroyed the economy, but it also urges the reorganization of the global political structure. Here are some of the things that happened: transnational capital began to flow back or transfer elsewhere; the global economic supply chain began to "unhook" voluntarily; the significance of international organizations and political alliances was put in doubt; the people who left town in haste eventually wanted to return; the voices of nationalism, localism, and protectionism previously regarded as "conservative and retrograde" had more

The villagers helped to install the "Coal and Ice" exhibition in 2012 Yixian International Photo Festival. Photo: Sun Yunfan.

supporters; and the long-marginalized "anti-globalization" movement unexpectedly gained more convincing power. Environmentalists were overjoyed that the economic shutdown and travel ban might lead to a reduction in the overall carbon footprint and a slowdown in global warming. People like me who moved to the countryside almost ten years ago were also considered to have "foresight."

In fact, I think that after the pandemic subsides, people will remain unwilling or unable to give up the convenience and prosperity of "globalization" and will gradually return to pre-pandemic inertia. However, after this unprecedented crisis, especially in the case of possible economic depression, the small, decentralized, low-cost, nature-friendly mutual aid communities that I have always been keen on may become a pragmatic choice for people. For the past two years, I have been living in Jingzhou, a small city along the Yangtze River in Hubei Province, which is only two hundred kilometers from Wuhan, the birthplace of the pandemic. Jingzhou has a rich history and natural resources to explore, and the cost of living is not high. The quality of life here is very good, but I no longer have a chance to continue communitarian experiments like in Bishan.

Bishan is a traditional agricultural settlement located in the mountain valley of southern Anhui, but in my vision, from the years when I lived there, it should be an open and international village. Today's rural areas no longer rely on "defensive houses," "fortresses towers," or "walled villages" to form a closed society to fight against banditry as they did before. They should welcome more outsiders to join as "locals." The rural society that relied on clan groups, armed self-defense, and *yicang* (communal grain storage) to cultivate together and cope with the crises of natural disasters and war is gone forever. However, during this pandemic period, many villages across China have still wanted to isolate the virus by cutting off village roads. This may be effective in the short term, but under normal conditions, villages are no longer as self-sufficient and isolated as they used to be. According to my experience in Bishan, what the villagers eat is not the rice they grow, but Northeast rice or Thai rice from the market. Therefore, when I say that the village should be built as a "place," this does not refer to traditional "localism" or "protectionism," but rather to a site-specific "community" that is open and diversified with common memory and identity at the same

time. Just as Wes Jackson, an American sustainable agriculture experimenter, said in his 1993 book *Becoming Native to This Place*, the village should welcome "homecomers" who are not necessarily native to jointly cultivate a new "nativeness."[9]

"In Bishan We Trust", the community currency Bishan Hours. Designed by Xiaoma + Chengzi. 2014.

In a similar way, I regard the agrarianism that originated from China's legendary *Shennong* era and spread to the Asian region as a cherished ideological tradition, but, at the same time, I am very wary of its evolution into nationalism. The influence of this tradition became a disaster after it was converted into nationalism by Japan before WWII, then further expanded into Pan-Asianism, and was finally absorbed into the ideological framework of the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," to become a war theory. I also understand the importance of rural ecological protection, but not in response to calls for anthropocentrism, such as "protecting the earth for future generations." Instead, I think this protection has to stem from the acceptance of land ethics and natural rights. Extreme ecologism may also turn into terrorism, while environmentalism will continue be absorbed by the updated capitalist system, because products labeled with variations on "environmental protection" can be sold at higher prices. In terms of ecological construction, the countryside is faced with the difficult problem of how to release its economic potential while protecting its ecology. For example, the historical preservation of villages cannot only rely on incorrigibly obstinate rules, but must also realistically consider the space of development.

In what you call "aesthetics," Bishan has a very broad space to develop. First of all, its eye-catching Hui-style architectural heritage can be called representative of Chinese vernacular architectural art. In the process of activating these historic buildings over the course of the project, we tried our best to keep their traditional design and appearance, but introduced various facilities that conform to modern living standards, endowed them with more functions suitable for practical use, and even adopted the minimalist interior style of the traditional Japanese house. The materials and furnishings used in the renovation process are all taken from a second-hand goods market in Yi County, so the final effect is very "local." In addition, Huizhou's rural folk craft tradition is also very rich. It has become a source of inspiration for many of the artists and designers participating in the Bishan Project. Slovenian artist Matjaž Tančič used 3D photography to take portraits of villagers in Yi County with their hall decorations, showing the relationship between the traces time has on their bodies and their spiritual space. Liu Chuanhong, a Chinese artist, made more than 140 oil paintings full of local details in a crude style similar to "peasant paintings." He divided them into different chapters according to the rural geography of southern Anhui, and set up a fictional narrative about a folk ranger traveling through the region. Graphic designers Xiaoma and Chengzi designed a set of changeable visual communication systems for the Bishan Project, all based on local folk visual materials. In addition to engaging these foreign professional artists, we published and exhibited villagers' hand-drawn Bishan landscapes and hand-made bamboo arts, arranged their Yi County Minor and Huangmei opera performances, and facilitated their interactions with the foreign artists. In a word, what we were exploring together was an aesthetic that could be called "contemporary vernacular."

Liu Chuanhong, part of Act II, Scene 11 on Yi County, 2014. 601cm x 43cm. In the Memoir in Southern Anhui, a visual narrative project including 14 sets of works that made up of 38 pieces of landscape and still life oil paintings, and a hundred freehand textual sketches including traveling diaries, military maps, attacking plans, arms diagrams, Kung Fu charts, and local social research records. These create a story about a "bandit leader" character named "Mr. Liu" who journeyed around Japanese-occupied Southern Anhui area between 1940 and 1942. The project was exhibited in the School of Tillers, 2015.

HHR: In your practice, your emphasis on the contemporary nature of "vernacular art" was the fundamental motivation to seek this "aesthetic." However, deeper changes in daily life and conditions were reflected in architectural projects. For example, the cooperation between you and the villagers resulted in a new contemporary "rural architecture." Of course, such explorations have evolved elsewhere in recent history too. Some examples are found in the work of Johan van Lengen of the Intuitive Technology and Bio-Architecture School (TIBA), who wrote the popular book *The Barefoot Architect*; Samuel Mockbee of the Rural Studio at Auburn

University; and so on. Not to mention the various practices of "green building" all over the world today. There are also a large number of architects who are skilled at turning "environmental protection" and "back-to-roots" mentalities into "politically correct" symbols and propaganda images for new capital accumulation and expansion. Nowadays, new buildings and urban planning almost inevitably have to wrap their facades in "green" so that they can be successfully promoted in politics and the market. I recently wrote a statement on the topic, titled "Green is Capital."[10] How do you face this contradiction when exploring "contemporary vernacular"?

ON: Regarding "green capital," Xi Jinping has a vivid saying: "Green mountains and clear water are mountains of gold and silver."[11] This has become the golden rule of today's "Rural Revitalization" movement in China. The natural landscape (*shanshui*) is no longer a secluded place for the ancient literati, but is now an attraction swarmed by contemporary tourists, and a grand carnival setting for holiday consumption. In order to find the next popular destination, online video channels send drones to capture the undiscovered wilderness and isolated villages, and to photograph star-architect-designed homesteads (bed & breakfasts) in the mountains. Here the eyes represented by aerial photography are the eyes of capital. The rivers and mountains hunted by drones, and edited by video-makers, are neither "nature" nor "landscape," but rather what Guy Debord called "spectacle." They are as attractive as the pinup girls in the shopping center windows. The commentary on these videos describes "spending a night in the mountains" as an emotional act of consumption, which can contribute to the local economy and engage you in voluntarily paying more for your room than you would for a five-star hotel in the city in order to fulfill your sense of moral satisfaction. Investment in B&Bs has become a craze for local governments to encourage and for consumers to pay for, while architects describe the commissioned building projects in the countryside with phrases like "rural reconstruction" and earn sufficient attention on social media. In fact, all of this is the mixed-up result of the spillover of real estate capital after it has exhausted urban land reserves, the outbreak of the middle-class "anti-urbanization" tendency, and the government's determination to solve the problem of rural depression. The countryside suddenly appeared as a "newly" found "virgin land" for capital, but its income has nothing to do with peasants. Peasants may be able to work as waiters or sell some local specialties here and there, but the bulk of the B&B economy is not for the benefit of the peasants.

This is why the countryside seems to be full of surging hot money while the peasants remain poor. Peter Kropotkin answered a similar question in *The Conquest of Bread*: Why are there still large numbers of poor people in a capitalist society with such advanced production technology and rich social wealth? Because the outcomes of workers' production are not intended for

Villagers at the School of Tillers for a film screening of artist Liu Chuanhong's work, 2015. Photo: Zhu Rui.

self-sufficiency, but for trading and making profits for capitalists.[12] If "rural architecture" is regarded as kind of production of space, its most fundamental characteristic is self-use. For thousands of years, this style of architecture has followed the life needs of villagers. Like plants growing from soil, these buildings can continuously "grow" new space when family size increases. This is a very different architecture than identical apartments in the city that are "planned" and "designed" to regulate people's lives. The original meaning of "bed & breakfast" is to share a spare room with tourists, but in China it has become part and parcel of hotel investment. Architects are invited to design B&Bs in the countryside, not for self-use by villagers, but for time-based sale to temporary visitors. So even if the buildings conform to the local style and emphasize "green" and "environmental protection," they cannot be regarded as "rural architecture"—not to mention those buildings that airdrop urban style into rural areas. Rural Studio is a commissioned architectural lab, but the users of their design projects are local residents in rural areas and there is no problem of "local user absence." The principle of "folk crafts" is the same. The handicrafts that peasants produce are all utensils and appliances that they use in their daily life. However, nowadays in China, they are collected by designers and converted into expensive luxury goods, which have become "artistic crafts" through which the middle class can demonstrate the so-called lifestyle choice of "returning to the basics."

Pig's Inn in Bishan is one of the earliest B&Bs in China. In the early 2000s, the poets Han Yu and Zheng Xiaoguang moved to the countryside and renovated old houses that had been abandoned by villagers. Because so many friends wanted to visit, they eventually had to accept payment from them. The reason I decided to move to Bishan in the first place was also related to my first experience in their houses: I fell in love with Hui-style architecture. Later, after setting up the "School of Tillers"

A hand-built bamboo tea house "Happiness Pavilion" in construction, January 20, 2016. The project was an architectural cooperative experiment by the villagers, Qian Shi'an, Cheng Guofu, Chu Chunhe, and Ou Ning. Photo: Ou Ning.

in the village (a multiuse space for contemporary agrarianists), I also used it as a platform to sign up for an account on Airbnb to collect villagers' spare housing resources. We listed these resources under the "School of Tillers Researchers in Residence" program and began to accept people from all over the world to stay, with all the income going to the villagers. These villagers didn't have to invest any money in renovating their houses. Instead, they just needed to clean up their houses, take photos directly according to their current situation, and upload them to Airbnb with our help. We indicated to the guests that there would be no services provided. When guests stayed in villagers' homes, they could eat with them and experience their most basic aspects of daily life. I regard these as real B&Bs. The guests enjoyed them, while the villagers could make income. Hui-style houses have many advantages, such as fire-proof horsehead walls, nature-friendly patios, temperature-regulating hollow brick walls, moisture-proof interlayer storage spaces, light-increasing roof windows, reasonable circulation drainage systems, etc., which are all worthwhile features for contemporary architects to learn. The local artisans who helped us renovate the old houses are very skilled, so I liked to cooperate with them on small, experimental projects, such as the thatched toilet hidden in the inner courtyard and the all-bamboo tea pavilion on the mountain. Their traditional skills are more than enough to cope with these unusual requirements.

At the beginning of the environmental movement in the 1960s, tribal dwellings, hand-made houses, and "vernacular architecture" were popular among hippie communes. Lloyd Kahn's *Shelter*, edited and published in 1973, collected a large number of such examples. It is one of my favorite books. For its part, Airbnb has brought different styles of traditional dwellings from all over the world into people's view, and has accelerated the opportunity to experience these living styles in person. At present, architects' interest in "nonurban" areas and their architectural practices in rural areas seem to be developing into a wave of "cosmopolitan vernacular." Today, the environmental movement is getting more and more deeply involved in politics. Of course, it has contributed to the growth of the Green Party as a political force from the 1970s, which continues to grow all over the world and seek political solutions to issues such as anti-capitalism and global warming. "Green" stands for nature. It was originally the pursuit of environmentalism, but its rival, capitalism, is also competing for "green." The spectrum of the world is becoming more and more complex. It is really a test of our vision.

HHR: I think this test of our vision is one of the biggest challenges we're facing today, and also for the future, because it is the starting point of self-awakening!

X

Hou Hanru is the artistic director of the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo (MAXXI) in Rome.

Ou Ning is the director of the documentaries *San Yuan Li* (2003) and *Meishi Street* (2006); chief curator of the Shenzhen & Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (2009); jury member of 8th Benesse Prize at 53rd Venice Biennale (2009); member of the Asian Art Council at the Guggenheim Museum (2011); founding chief editor of the literary journal *Chutzpah!* (2010-2014); founder of the Bishan Project (2011-2016); a visiting professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (2016-2017);

and a senior research fellow of the Center for Arts, Design, and Social Research in Boston (2019-2021).

1
Ou Ning, *Utopia in Practice: Bishan Project and Rural Reconstruction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

2
Orange Wang, "China Food Security: Country Faces 'Grain Supply Gap of 130 Million Tonnes by 2025' as Rural Workforce Dwindles," *South China Morning Post* , August 18, 2020 https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3097781/china-food-security-country-faces-grain-supply-gap-130 .

3
Saneatsu Mushanokōji founded the first *Atarashiki-mura* in Takajo, Miyazaki Prefecture, in 1918. It was flooded by the construction of a reservoir, so it was moved to Moroyama, Saitama Prefecture in 1939. The haiku poem on the memorial pole, in Japanese, isこの道より我を生かす道なしこの道を歩く. See *The Centenary of Atarashiki-mura: 1918–2018* (Saneatsu Mushanokōji Memorial Museum, 2018), 37.

4
San Yuan Li is a traditional agrarian village located within urban Guangzhou. See also *San Yuan Li* , directed by Ou Ning and Cao Fei (dGenerate Films, 2003).

5
James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

6
Du Tao and Xiao Wei, "Urbanization of Migrant Workers Takes 1.8 Billion Yuan," *The Economic Observer* , May 11, 2013 http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20130510/230115425368.shtml .

7
See Erik Reece, *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip Through America's Most Radical Idea* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (Random House, 2016); and Ellen Wayland-Smith, *Oneida: From Free Love Utopia to the Well-Set Table* (Picador, 2016).

8
See James Yen's speech at a reception for Chengdu alumni of the China Institute of Rural Reconstruction (1985), in *Complete Works of James Yen* , vol. 3, ed. Song Enrong (Tianjin Education Press, 2013), 519.

9
Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Counterpoint, 1996), 97.

10
This is the curatorial statement for a section in the coming exhibition "A Story for the Future" at the MAXXI, Rome. Not published yet.

11
Xi Jinping's slogan, in Chinese, is绿水青山就是金山银山, or alternatively两山理论 (two mountain theory). It has also been called "Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization." He first mentioned the slogan during a 2005 tour of Anji County in Zhejiang Province, while he was serving as its Party Committee Secretary. See "Green Is Gold: China's Remarkable Revival Project," United Nation Environment Programme, September 26, 2018 https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/green-gold-chinas-remarkable-revival-project .

12
Peter Kropotkin, *La Conquête du Pain* , first published in 1892. In English: *The Conquest of Bread* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 17. Available online at the Anarchist Library https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-the-conquest-of-bread#toc4 .

Trevor Paglen and Alessandra Franetovich

Impossible Objects: A Conversation

Alessandra Franetovich: I would like to start by asking you a question about first contact. You first encountered the theories of Russian cosmism while working on your project *The Last Pictures*. Your project investigates the processes, methods, and purposes that lie in the creation of images, as well as the imagery and maybe even mythology that emerged during the space race of the previous century—mainly during the Cold War period. Stretching back much further, however, the development of Russian cosmism began with philosopher Nikolai Fedorov at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, talking about cosmism today, as well as about space travel, necessitates connecting three different centuries.

The Last Pictures proposes a reflection on humankind's decades-long experience of living in the era of the "technosphere," when humans are surrounded by hundreds of satellites moving in Earth's orbit. These satellites are mainly used for communication, for mapping Earth, and for military purposes. Some of these early satellites still function today, while others are just orbital garbage that we cannot, at least for the moment, recuperate or recycle. You envisioned a hypothetical future after the extinction of humankind in which the satellites remain. In such a future, these artificial objects become ruins of modernity and monuments of a past civilization. Following from this scenario, you conceived an artwork shaped as a disk that stores a huge amount of photographs and documents, which you then placed on a satellite. This work could be interpreted as a re-reading of the Voyager Golden Records that NASA sent into space in 1977. However, you followed quite different criteria than the space agency when selecting images to be included on the disk. For this artwork, you intertwined ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Russian cosmism is absolutely based on this duality, too. How did the theories of Russian cosmism inform your thoughts?

Trevor Paglen: I had actually started two projects, *Orbital Reflector* and *The Last Pictures*, at the same time. They were two very different approaches to thinking about how to work with space. During that period I was also working with Marko Peljhan, a Slovenian artist who teaches at UC Santa Barbara in California. He had been teaching some theories from Russian cosmism in his classes. These ideas were not very familiar to Americans, but Marko is well versed in those intellectual histories, given his much stronger connection to the Eastern European and Russian histories of space. One of the big things that I was struggling with while working on *The Last Pictures* is that, at least in the American mythology, space is an extension of the frontier. So, you go into outer space, you go to the moon, you plant a flag, you do some mining on asteroids, and the idea is that it's Nevada again, or California again. I was trying to contradict that story, or that way of thinking about the cosmos. I wanted to tell a different one about space—not as a limit, and not as a horizon of possibility, so much as a limit and an encounter

Trevor Paglen, Orbital Reflector (Triangle Variation #4) Scale Model, 2020. Aluminum, mirror foil, steel wire, Kapton tape. 551 × 775 × 66 cm (216 7/8 × 305 1/8 × 26 in.) Installation view at OGR Torino Trevor Paglen: Unseen Stars. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

with the kind of something that is radically other. And that radically other thing could be space itself, or theories of infinity, and so on. When you get into things happening in solar systems and galaxies and the cosmos itself, you enter a form of time that is very alien to the ways in which we perceive and experience time as humans. So what does that encounter produce between a moment in human history and a moment in a human lifetime within the vast scales of time that characterize the universe? Marko introduced me to some of this thinking, and it made a lot of sense to me, especially because I read Fedorov in a much more allegorical way perhaps than I think he meant his work to be read. I read Fedorov by thinking about him as starting a tradition in which space flight is a series of encounters with something that is both radically other and radically one's self. On the one hand, it means going into something that's very different. On the other, that thing that is very different is also a deep reflection of something in you, or the culture that you come from, or what have you.

This was a useful way to think about a project like *The Last Pictures*, the premise of which was to put a collection of images into space, but more importantly, putting them into time—in a way that is radically different than the ways in which we normally insert images into time, or think about images in relationship to time. Questions then start to arise, like: What does an image mean, if anything? And

Trevor Paglen, SSO-A Launch, 2018. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

what does meaning mean, if anything? All these strange reflections happen when we insert something from a human timescale, and from a specific moment in human history, and a specific set of situated ways of seeing and situated knowledge, and put it into a context that is much broader and universal. And, at the same time, there's an understanding that those things don't translate, and can never translate. So, what is it exactly that you are doing, then? For me, that was the central question of *The Last Pictures*. Cosmism provided a much more helpful way to think about those kinds of questions than a kind of Western, riding off into the sunset, cowboy version of space—or even a conception of space characterized by NASA and the people who worked on the Golden Record project, which was still very much the imagination of an encounter with an alien civilization or something similar.

AF: In 2018 you launched the artwork you just mentioned, *Orbital Reflector*, in collaboration with the Nevada Museum of Art, and put it into lower orbit using a Space X satellite. The work is a nonfunctional satellite that was intended to release a giant reflective balloon in the form of a diamond. This diamond-shaped balloon was supposed to move around the Earth to reflect lights, so that it would have been visible to the naked eye. Examples abound of artworks realized in response to the imagery of the cosmos, or from the observation of planets and stars done for religious, scientific, and also artistic purposes. We can think of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of the moon, or Vladimir Tatlin's *Letatlin* (1932), which both seem to be interested in human flight. That is to say, those works follow from reflections about how to create communication with outer space—i.e., with another dimension. But what I think is particular about your work is the concept of the satellite as an art piece.[1] How did you come to conceive this experiment? And is there something specific in selecting the diamond shape?

TP: For me, a lot of different threads fed into thinking about the spacecraft itself as a kind of sculpture. On one hand there is a question which has to do with the politics of space, with looking at the history of space flight, and then asking what kinds of objects humans have put into space. Historically, those kinds of objects fall into three categories: military satellites, communication satellites, and scientific satellites. And that's it—that's all of space flight. And I would go further to say that all commercial and scientific-based flight is subsumed under military space flight. Furthermore, I would argue that there's no such thing as space flight without nuclear war. It was invented to facilitate nuclear war, not to facilitate space flight itself. When you think about that whole history, the actual practices of space flight are entirely militarized, 100 percent, through and through.

The political provocation that I was trying to ask was this: In relation to the history of space flight, can we imagine making a spacecraft whose political logic is the exact opposite of every other object that's ever been put in space? One that has no military value, no scientific value, that is somewhat radically aesthetic, but whose aesthetic creation has very different kinds of politics built into it? That's the imagination. Now, I actually don't think that's ever possible to achieve, but that is one of the animating ideas. And there are many contradictions within that, and that's fine. There are always contradictions with things in the world.

A second set of ideas informing it are, again, influenced by cosmism in a way. And when I say cosmism, I really mean Fedorov, who is the person that I have read and feel like I understand within the broader traditions of that philosophical school. Part of Fedorov's project is the imagination; in short, to imagine planetary-scale infrastructures that benefit everybody. He's proposing a kind of true internationalism with infrastructures that would be detached from the kind of territories and political logics of nation states. He's trying to imagine big cables that would encircle the world and be able to influence the weather—again, planetary-scale infrastructure ultimately designed in radically egalitarian ways. That vision of a different kind of infrastructure is another one of the inspirations that went into *Orbital Reflector*.

Related to that is a series of questions about territory, space, and public space, and how to define public art. Can we imagine other kinds of art that are public in ways that can be detached from territories, borders, nation states, and so on? These project come with high internal contradictions. And one can even say that the question is a kind of colonialist premise. I recognize that, but I'm just saying, we have to do something, we have to have different kinds of imaginings. And this was one of my attempts to imagine something else.

Third, the decision to have the object a reflector is also a very cosmist thing to do, perhaps. *The Last Pictures* was a reflector as well. They're both cosmist in the sense that you create an object that can only ever be understood through the particularities of your moment in time, and through the particularities of the weight of what you bring to it. Space is a fantastic backdrop to be able to ask those kinds of questions, because we have no idea what space is like. Space is mostly just what we imagine it is. The idea of a reflector as an allegory makes that very explicit: the thing that we see is the reflection of the thing that we want to see.

Finally, there were aesthetic as well as technical reasons for the diamond-shaped *Orbital Reflector*. The technical reasons are two-fold: on one hand, you're trying to design an object that has the maximum amount of surface area that can reflect light. The most efficient shape possible to meet those criteria is a sphere. We're actually not interested in surface area per se, but in reflective surface area, which is a different question. It turns out the most efficient shape for doing that is something much more cylindrical. For aesthetic reasons, I didn't want it to be a cylinder, but it needed to be in the ballpark of cylindrical shapes for reflective reasons. The other reason has to do with aerodynamics. When you're in a low Earth orbit or even a medium Earth orbit, a spacecraft experiences small amounts of atmospheric drag. But as you go further up into space, there isn't a specific line that separates the Earth's atmosphere from outer space—the atmosphere just gets thinner and thinner and thinner, to the point where, even hundreds of kilometers up in space, there are still particles of carbon dioxide and oxygen evaporating into space. When satellites hit those particles, it creates friction, and the satellites slow down and are eventually brought back to Earth. Satellites have to continually boost themselves into higher orbits to stay up. By creating more of a fuselage shape, you can minimize the effects of that atmospheric drag, and therefore allow your spacecraft to have a longer time in orbit. All of those things came together, so there were very serious technical restraints on the possible range of shapes that it could take. And within that possible range of shapes, I chose the diamond.

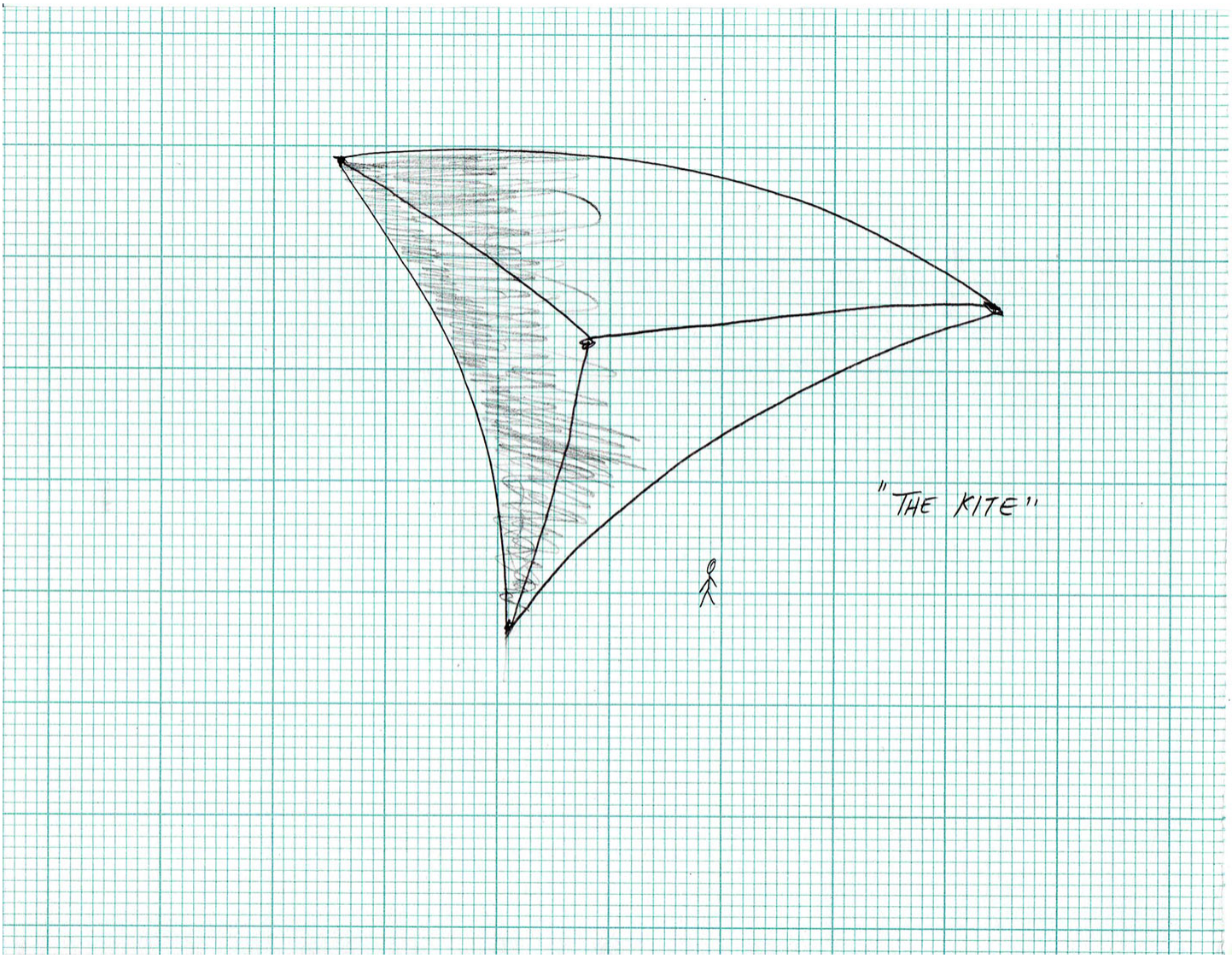
AF: I would like to further investigate your reference to public art, because this is indeed another peculiar aspect of your artistic research. Hypothetically, *The Last Pictures* could be picked up by somebody in the future and decoded, while *Orbital Reflector* is even more radically public. To me, your interest in the concept of the "public" also resonates with the idea of the "common" that was at the core of Fedorov's theoretical work, published posthumously in a volume titled "The Philosophy of the Common Task." There is an interesting relation between this and what you said concerning the politics at play in our lives. The reality of national politics did influence your work in a very real way. When the US government shut down between 2018 and 2019, this unfortunately broke the connection with the satellite used for *Orbital Reflector*. This event might be interpreted as the intrusion of fate, which is a huge topic, especially in contemporary art. Did it change your own understanding of the artworks, or the entire project at large?

TP: That's right. Despite trying to make this radically public artwork, you are still constrained by the fact that the work must be made within a nation state structure. Individual states regulate space launches, and so you can have a little bit of freedom in terms of how you pick what national system you want to be regulated by. But, regardless, you're gonna be regulated. In the US, that regulation is done by a combination of the FCC (the Federal Communications Commission), the military, and NASA. When we launched the satellite, we were in communication with it. It was a small satellite initially—about the size of a shoebox. It was launched in a collection of other satellites, but because ours was then going to blow up to be a gigantic mirror, we needed to make sure that we were not going to hit somebody else's satellite when we did that maneuver.

So we needed to track it and give it a little bit of time so that it would move out of the way of other satellites. We were tracking it and communicating with it. To make that final maneuver, we needed to get a sign off from all of those agencies. But in the meantime, the Trump administration closed down the government because they wanted Congress to fund a giant wall across the border between the US and Mexico. They basically held everybody hostage in order to get the money to build this wall. And so, the government was shut down for around six weeks. During that time, we still needed to get the permission to expand the mirror, but there was nobody to call. The people at all of the agencies we needed to speak with were furloughed. There was no official mechanism left to release the giant reflector. In a very real way, the fact is that Trump's wishes to build a wall with Mexico killed the *Orbital Reflector* project, which is obviously ironic for many reasons. In a way, it proved the point of the project, or one of the points of the project, which was to think about the relationship between the public and territories and borders. For me, it was a perfectly legitimate resolution to the project. It wasn't the one outcome I expected, nor the one that we had planned for, nor the one that we had engineered. But from a conceptual standpoint, I think it is a perfectly fine way to end the project.

AF: Do you ever consider replicating this project?

TP: For me, the project is finished. I have a backup satellite that we built. There is the material existence of the project, which has more to do with the conversations



Trevor Paglen, Orbital Reflector, 2013. Archival Materials. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

produced in the process of designing it, and in engaging with the imagination of it. This is really the point of many of these kinds of projects. And that part was very successful, in my opinion. So I'm not actually sure what additional value trying to have a second launch would bring to the table.

AF: Kazimir Malevich, a reference for your project, left behind a great deal of writing. One fragment from his writing comes to mind. In a 1919 essay reflecting on Suprematism and its philosophical system, which is based on the use of colors and shapes, he ended the text with: "the white, free depths, eternity, is before you."[2] He noted himself that the final quest for eternity was a central subject of his research. I read this as a poetic statement that can of course be connected in various pragmatic ways to his work. Are infinity and its poetic drive also a reference point for you?

TP: For me it's not these transcendental questions of infinity or form, and more about finding a way of translating those into practical questions, which are quite different things. And I'm not even sure that I'm going to be able to articulate what I mean by that. What was most influential to me was that he writes quite explicitly about wanting to build artworks that would go in orbit around the world. I think that in the introduction to his book Su *prematism: 34 drawings* publication, he proposes artistic constructions that would be put be in space and go around the world.[3] And in a way he's talking about satellites, but he was imagining that satellites would be artworks rather than military targeting machines.

Secondly, I think you can see that image in a lot of his drawings. I didn't understand that when I was younger and learning about Malevich. Sometimes I do an exercise for which I imagine there's no such thing as abstract art whatsoever, that all art is photo realistic. Then, if you look

Trevor Paglen, Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 4), 2013. Mylar, dimensions variable. Installation view at OGR Torino Trevor Paglen: Unseen Stars, 2020. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

at Malevich and say, this is photo realistic art, you start to see cosmological things going on: planetary infrastructures and planetary aesthetics. And maybe that's what I mean by translating the infinite into something that is—or what we imagine to be,—the transcendence of the infinite, and instead turn that into something like the photo-realistic infinite. What is the infinite that is not an abstract concept, but is in fact a realist concept? I guess for me that is much more obvious in a project like *The Last Pictures*, which is like entering a kind of time that is infinite for all practical purposes. But at the same time, the encounter with the infinite is made out of stuff, and was made out of images that do have very specific contexts, and come from very specific places. And so, what is it when those two things meet each other? Something that is extremely and specifically historical meeting something that is specifically ahistorical—when those contradictions come together, what does that allow us to see, if anything?

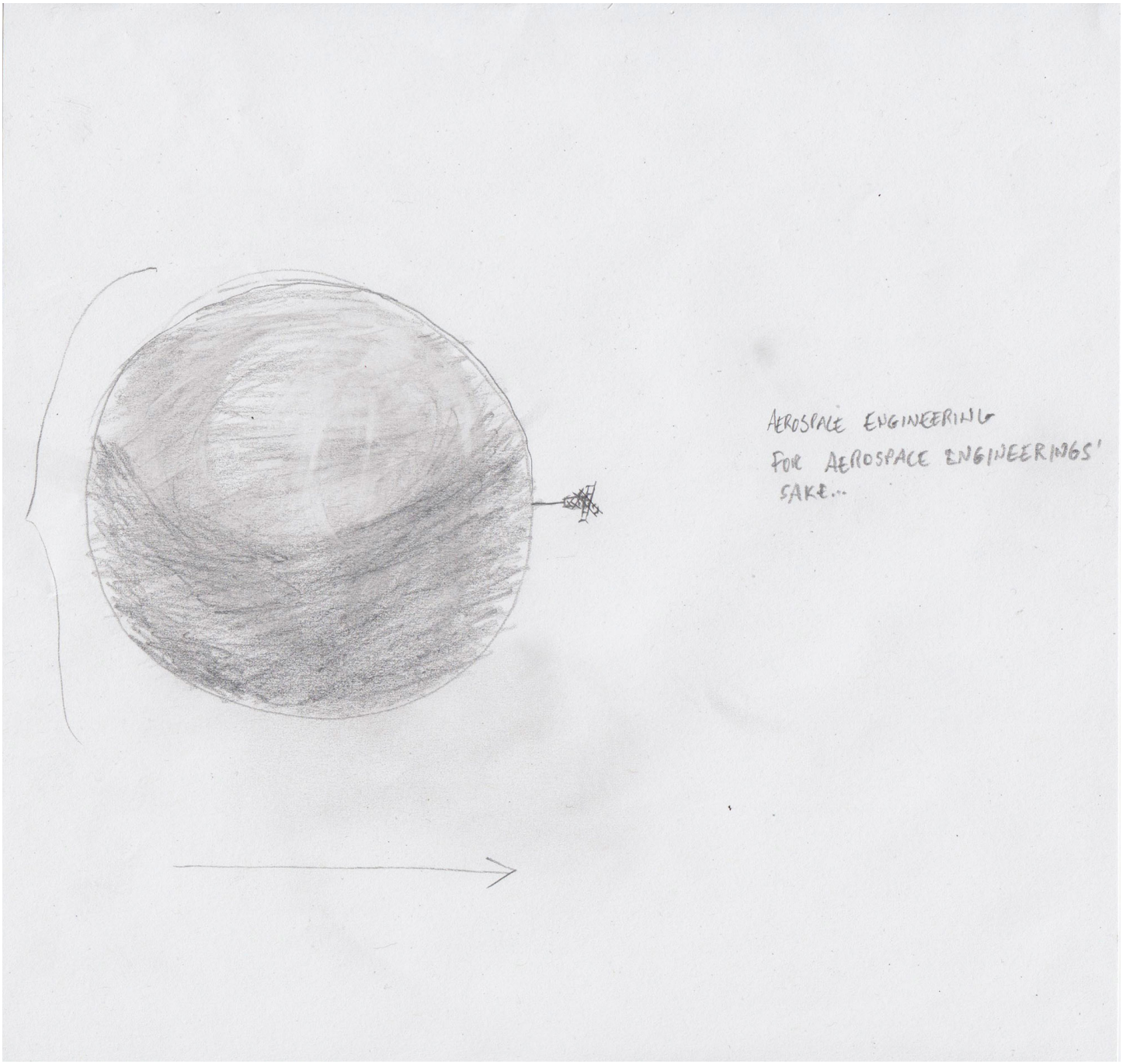
AF: Malevich wrote that text in 1920, and he named these structures, i.e. the satellites, "Sputnik." Some scholars contend that the word was a neologism he invented. Today, exactly one century later, the term has become common in global discussions again—this time, however, it has to do with the possible discovery of a vaccine for Covid-19. Some weeks ago, a vaccine named Sputnik was registered by Russia, publically revealed by Vladimir Putin. Of course, this clearly demonstrates the fact that science is an instrument governments can use for propaganda, especially during "states of emergency." Similar examples—of using the prospect of a vaccine as electoral propaganda—were obvious in the US during the presidential election, and elsewhere as well. What's striking about the Russian example is that the government is invoking the glorious event of humanity's first flight into outer space with the gravity of the current crisis. And it is also remarkable to note that such a famous name may have its origins in Malevich. It looks like art has the power to follow surreptitious means to come back into the eye of history.

This leads us to the notion of the historical convergence, or even equivalence of both art and science in constructing a vision of the surrounding world, or even for imagining provisional futures. This notion of the similarity between art and science is very present in Fedorov's writings, for example. What is your opinion about the possible relation between them? Do you see something like a harmonic relation, or maybe stronger contradictions?

TP: Today, people tend to think about science as a way of looking at things, of experimenting with materials, for trying to understand outcomes or to develop ways of seeing that allow us to interpret the world in different ways. I see lots of similarities between that and art, and historically these things have at times been indistinguishable from one another. What troubles me about the reality of art and science in the (kind of) postwar era is that science has been intimately and inseparably connected to institutions of power, whether those are corporations, militaries, or industries of science. I see and am wary of what science gets out of the collaboration between art and science. I'm not so sure what art gets out of the deal.

Having said that, both *The Last Pictures* and *Orbital Reflector* were only possible because very skilled scientists worked on them. What was fun about both of those projects is that neither should not have happened. A big part of the project, in other words, is the creation of communities of people that can put different skillsets together in order to make the impossible happen. For example, while building *The Last Pictures* I often encountered a technical or engineering problem that I had no idea how to solve, and it needed be solved in three or four days, and it was Christmas, and there was no budget. I would get on the phone and call every single person I could find in the world that could solve this problem, explain it to them, and explain the constraints. Repeatedly, I found people that were excited and offered to help.

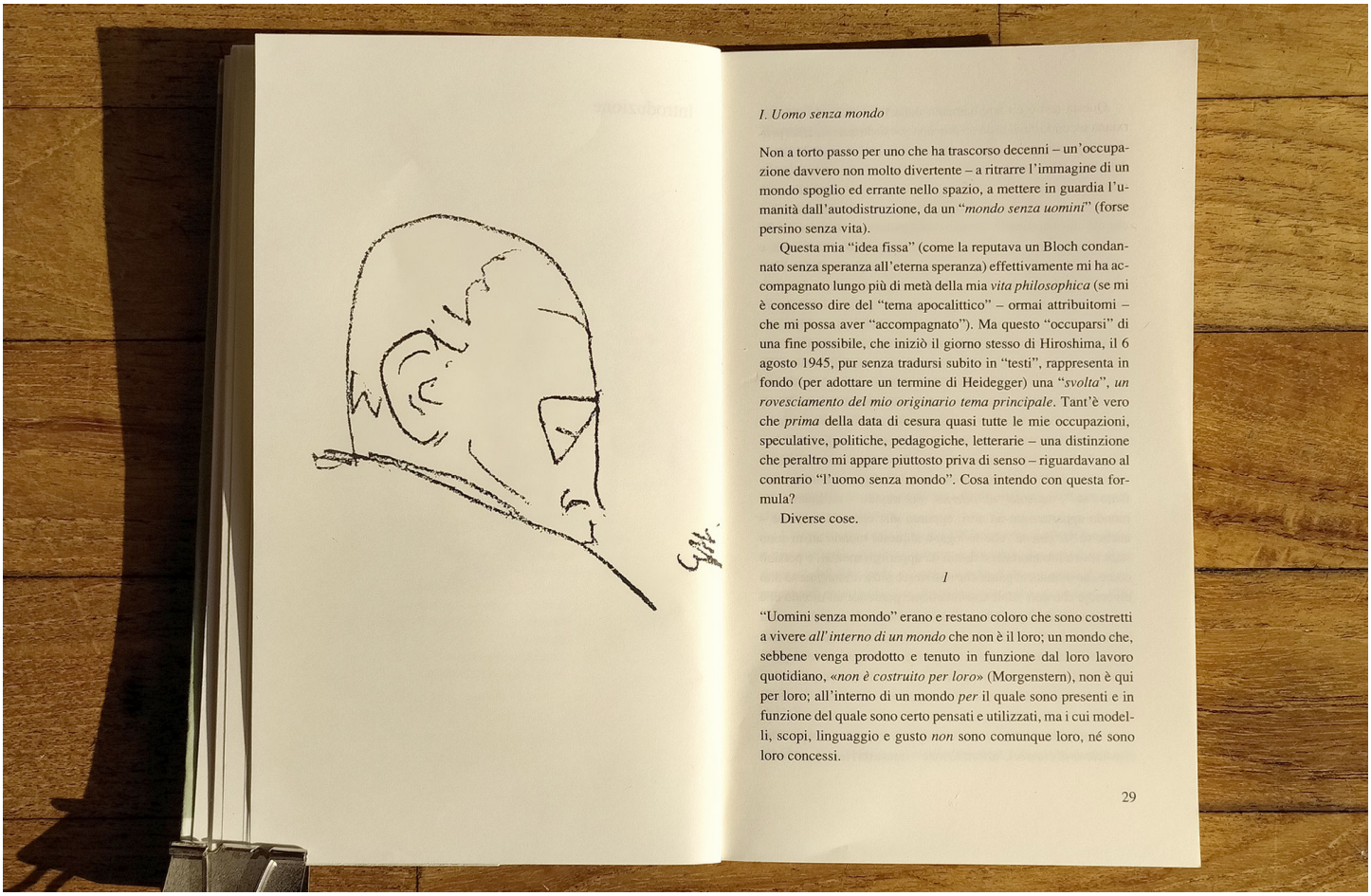
I went into engineering and science because I thought those fields were asking these kinds of big questions. But, they're not. And so, in the process of asking these more poetic or imaginative questions, I found out that a lot of people in the sciences were originally animated by very similar kinds of problems. That was true of *The Last Pictures* and *Orbital Reflector*: both projects tried to



Trevor Paglen, Orbital Reflector, 2013. Archival Materials. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

locate questions that I think many get excited about, but that are not actually addressed in the fields that could try to answer them.

AF: Let's develop your concepts of visibility and invisibility in relation to infrastructures further. Most infrastructural system are invisible to the naked eye—like the cables beneath the ocean or, again, satellites. Human society tends to hide the functional elements of our everyday technology from public view. To call this the era of the "technosphere" may seem like a contradiction, but it still allows us to speculate that humankind has leaned far into the radical distinction between "humanity" and "their own world." In the 1960s (into the 1980s), the philosopher Günther Anders theorized about the "man without world," by which he meant humans who become outdated by technology, and have therefore lost control of their relation to the environment. Our contemporary time is distinguished by hyper-specialization and the dissection of our existence and experience. Given this reality, we can



I. Uomo senza mondo

Non a torto passo per uno che ha trascorso decenni – un'occupazione davvero non molto divertente – a ritrarre l'immagine di un mondo spoglio ed errante nello spazio, a mettere in guardia l'umanità dall'autodistruzione, da un "*mondo senza uomini*" (forse persino senza vita).

Questa mia "idea fissa" (come la reputava un Bloch condannato senza speranza all'eterna speranza) effettivamente mi ha accompagnato lungo più di metà della mia *vita philosophica* (se mi è concesso dire del "tema apocalittico" – ormai attribuitomi – che mi possa aver "accompagnato"). Ma questo "occuparsi" di una fine possibile, che iniziò il giorno stesso di Hiroshima, il 6 agosto 1945, pur senza tradursi subito in "testi", rappresenta in fondo (per adottare un termine di Heidegger) una "*svolta*", *un rovesciamento del mio originario tema principale*. Tant'è vero che *prima* della data di cesura quasi tutte le mie occupazioni, speculative, politiche, pedagogiche, letterarie – una distinzione che peraltro mi appare piuttosto priva di senso – riguardavano al contrario "l'uomo senza mondo". Cosa intendo con questa formula?

Diverse cose.

1

"Uomini senza mondo" erano e restano coloro che sono costretti a vivere *all'interno di un mondo* che non è il loro; un mondo che, sebbene venga prodotto e tenuto in funzione dal loro lavoro quotidiano, «*non è costruito per loro*» (Morgenstern), non è qui per loro; all'interno di un mondo *per* il quale sono presenti e in funzione del quale sono certo pensati e utilizzati, ma i cui modelli, scopi, linguaggio e gusto *non* sono comunque loro, né sono loro concessi.

29

Sketch from Günther Anders' "Pariser Skizzen 1923-1927" included in the Italian edition seen here titled Uomo senza mondo. Scritti sull'arte e la letteratura, (Ferrara: Spazio Libri, 1991), 28-29.

see the detriments that come with harmonic or maybe even holistic connections with the environment, as well as the benefits imagined by those like the cosmists, by Fedorov, who was writing well over a century ago, and we are living in a completely different society. Where would you see yourself in this dichotomy?

TP: There are two contradictions that you're talking about in terms of relating back to Fedorov: one is the contradiction between nature and culture, for lack of a better phrase: between the humans and things that are not the humans, as well as the conceptualization of those as different things, which is certainly evident in Fedorov's work. Then the second contradiction is what we might call the alienation between people and technology. As technology's become systems that undergird a lot of political systems, cultural systems, we find ourselves enmeshed within those to the extent that we end up being influenced in ways that we don't entirely understand. Something like a YouTube algorithm would be a very simple explanation of that, in terms of propagating ideas across culture and influencing generations of people in ways they don't necessarily perceive.

One more complicated scenario to analyze would be nuclear weapons: How do infrastructures required for nuclear weapons create political institutions and create possibilities while foreclosing others? On a very broad philosophical level, my instinct would be to not worry that much, precisely because the idea that every person could understand every system that they engage with is already almost a bourgeois conception of the individual. Because no one person can ever understand everything. I think if you take a different kind of Fedorovian approach, you can say, well, are there ways in which we can collectivize knowledge which we don't have to be alienated from? That's a different system, but maybe the scale of the individual versus technology is not the most useful scope within which to think about these contradictions. Having said that, throughout Fedorov's work, as well as Marx's, there is a kind of transcendental communism. That's the way I like to read it. I actually don't think that it's necessarily meant to be there. It's way more religious and weird, which we don't talk about that much with Fedorov. Fedorov was not a great guy as far as I'm concerned. Some of the ideas are fun to play with, and some of them

Trevor Paglen, An Unseen Star (OR-1 Search in Cepheus) Delamar Dry Lake, NV, 2019. Dye sublimation print, 48 × 60 in. Copyright: Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist and Nevada Museum of Art, Reno.

are really not.

But the point is that I think one can imagine a society in which there can exist large technological infrastructures that don't have to extract value from individual humans or be turned against society. They don't have to be turned against people. Now, within a capitalist economy, they are going to inevitably work against people and workers who are sites for extracting value. But I think that in the imagination of Fedorov, or in the imagination of Marx or Lenin, you could imagine infrastructures and technological systems at large scales that are not alienating. Again, we're talking about imaginative structures, which for me is one of the fun things about the cosmos.

AF: You're trying to imagine a kind of egalitarian future society, or at least more egalitarian than today. While we wait for the realization of this fantastic and ideal society: Do you think that in order to achieve better living conditions, it would be enough to be aware of these various systems of manipulating or engineering reality—which of course can be employed for both positive and negative ends? Or, do you imagine other effective means? For me this then raises the question of how you perceive the role of art today.

TP: In a project like *Orbital Reflector*—as well *The Last Pictures* to a large extent—the strategy is to make objects that are kind of radically nonsensical. That are just really weird. Like why did you do that in order to point out the fact that we could say the same thing about infrastructures that we take for granted? And we can look at a project like *Orbital Reflector* and say, why did you do that? Well, we could ask the same question of nuclear weapons. We could ask the same thing about rockets in the first place. We could say: that was a terrible idea, why did you do that? And I'm not saying *Orbital Reflector* was a terrible idea, but the rhetorical or artistic strategy was to make objects whose logic tries to contradict the system that they emerged from. For a while, I called them impossible objects. One impossible object is a spacecraft that doesn't do anything and doesn't make money for anybody. It is just meant to be an aesthetic object, and it's created by working within the existing space industry. That is not the kind of object that would emerge organically from the existing industry. Though, "organically" is a tricky word. But, all the same, it's not something that the logic of the system would tend to produce. I also think about the works as opposite objects somewhat. In a way, *The Last Pictures* was about imagining what it would mean to try to take responsibility for the long-term footprint that humans have on the planet. How to have an ethical relationship with the deep changes to the planet for which humans are responsible? And even using a word like "ethical" doesn't really apply, because the timescales are too different. Again, there is a contradiction between the ways we can think and what we can do, which are on radically different timescales. But the point is that both projects were designed to do precisely what the industries that made them possible would not do. That's the strategy.

X

Trevor Paglen is an artist whose work spans image-making, sculpture, investigative journalism, writing, engineering, and numerous other disciplines.

Alessandra Franetovich is an art historian and independent curator who lives between Germany and Italy. She is currently a PhD candidate in Art History at University of Florence. Her dissertation research addresses the concept of the archive as a device to artistic self-institutionalisation, and investigates the role of archival practices in the construction of Russian contemporary art, through the case study of the Archive of Moscow Conceptualism owned by the artist Vadim Zakharov. She has led lectures, seminars, and conferences on her research in several European countries. As a curatorial assistant, she works with museums, art institutions, and galleries in Italy. As an independent curator, she has curated exhibitions and collaborated with art galleries, non-profit spaces, and festivals.

1
I can think of only one other historical example of this in the work of Yuri Leiderman. See my "Cosmic Thoughts: The Paradigm of Space in Moscow Conceptualism," *e-flux journal* no. 99 (April 2019) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/99/263593/cosmic-thoughts-the-paradigm-of-space-in-moscow-conceptualism/ .

2
Kazimir Malevich, "Suprematism", in *Tenth State Exhibition: Objectless Creation and Suprematism* , 1919; reprinted in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* , ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 145.

3
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* (Suprematism: 34 Drawings), (Vitebsk: UNOVIS, 1920).

Jumana Manna

Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin

Lockdown

I came back home in spring to shoot a film about foraging wild food. At its heart, it is a chase film between the Israeli Nature Patrol and elderly Palestinians who gather plants listed as protected species, particularly the wild-growing, artichoke-like tumble thistle ' *akkoub*, aka "green gold." Still in the making, this film is ultimately concerned with what is made extinct and what gets to live on; who gets to decide the fate of herb-picking cultures, and the options that remain for those who don't. Food manifests as a container for family and community histories tied to land—traditions that face suppression encoded into the legal dynamic of nature protection. The shoot has been cancelled due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and instead I find myself quarantined with my parents in Shu'fat, East Jerusalem.

Asim Abu Shakra, Cactus, 1986. Gouache on paper. 15 × 15 cm. Courtesy of Gallery One.

My daily activities are like that of a preteen or pensioner. They feature small adventures like foraging, collecting miscellaneous objects around the neighborhood, home-improvement projects, reading, drawing, watching films, and writing. Having slowly accepted the serendipitous gifts offered by the virus, I begin enjoying my exilic nostalgia, a new-old way of being present in Jerusalem after having lived abroad for over a decade. In years past, I remember lamenting not spending enough time here, popping in for a few weeks at a time to shoot and gather my cultural caché, only to exit before the

Goats and sheep in the valley. Shu'fat, East Jerusalem. Courtesy of the author.

weight of this place could get to me. Lingering fears of having become a cultural tourist in my hometown are now, thankfully, relieved.

I go walking in the neighborhood every day. I cross paths with animals, plants, and piles of scrap. I look at the neighbors looking at me, and get déjà vu of lethargic summer days, when school was out and there was time—lots of time. Helicopters watch us from above, and soundscapes from construction sites continue despite the strict curfew measures. As expected, Israel responds to the virus with a militarization of medical discourse. It fills the streets with the army, police, and border control, and it bypasses a Knesset vote and authorizes Shin Bet[1] tracking technologies to enforce social distancing. In one joint private-public effort, an Israeli tech company samples the voices of coronavirus patients, searching for clues about the illness in a person's voice and breathing patterns. A dataset of people gasping for breath.[2]

While picking wild edibles under quarantine, I've been thinking about the paradoxes inherent in the act of preservation—the politics behind the civilizational mask of a settler-colonial context. Red-listing nonhuman life to shield it from human damage on the one hand, and protecting populations from the nonhuman threat of an illness on the other, are not quite comparable activities. Yet the pandemic has highlighted varying governance structures and the intertwined politics of care all over the world. Within the immediate surroundings to which I have been confined, walking and writing have become the mediums through which to think about the militarization of biological survival, as it gets pitted against other sociopolitical rights. This text, and eventually the film, are exercises in imagining alternative, affirmative care structures that remain, within and beyond the current reality, aligned towards plant and human life alike.

A construction site in Shu'fat. Courtesy of the author.

Shu'fat

I grew up in Shu'fat, a Palestinian neighborhood located on the historic Jerusalem-Ramallah road, about three kilometers north of the Old City of Jerusalem. Throughout the Ottoman Empire, it was one of many villages in Liwa al-Quds (the district of Jerusalem) that grew to be an extension of the city from the first half of the twentieth century onwards. At the time of East Jerusalem's annexation by Israel in 1967, Shu'fat had some three thousand inhabitants. By the time my parents built a house there in the early 1990s, that number had grown to fifteen thousand. Today, Shu'fat has about thirty-five thousand residents.[3] In the 1970s and '80s, few other Arab villages and neighborhoods around Jerusalem, including Beit Hanina and Beit Safafa, still had available and affordable land. This availability and proximity weaved a new urban fabric made of growing Jerusalemite families, and early waves of Palestinian citizens of Israel arriving to the city from their villages for study and work.[4]

The heart of old Shu'fat maintains certain traditional architectural characteristics: domed roofs, thick one-to-two-story stone buildings, gardens with fruit trees, and *sanasel*— stone walls demarcating cultivated lands. These charming rural qualities did not always emerge out of the residing families' desire or choice, but rather out of a sustained strategy encoded into Israeli zoning laws. The strategy consisted in limiting the construction volume within a plot of land, in order to restrict Palestinian residents and manage the Arab "demographic time bomb." This racist phrase is often used to refer to the growing Arab population under Israeli jurisdiction, particularly in Jerusalem, where all means are deployed to maintain a Jewish majority.[5]

On the eastern side of the neighborhood is Shu'fat refugee camp, the only Palestinian camp located inside Jerusalem's municipal borders. As a teenager, I spent a few summers training in the local pool there. It was a concrete hole with water so brown that it was impossible to see further than a meter through our Swedish goggles. Today my parents buy their fruits and vegetables there. The camp is frequently referenced in the media as a pocket of lawlessness, with high rates of hard drug use and trafficking. The Israeli settlements that surround our neighbhorhood and the camp are many, and are all built on expropriated land to ensure that there is no territorial and social continuity between the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem . Instead, marginalized communities encircle the separation wall with unstable, rapidly built high-rises that house families desperately trying to hold onto their Jerusalem residence status.[6]

To the west of us is Shu'fat Ridge, a hillside that runs along the highway exiting the city. The hill used to be a planted pine forest, and up until the 1990s it was marked as a public green space to improve the air and quality of life for nearby residents. My brothers and I used to play there as kids. But as former Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek confessed after this area was "unfrozen" and earmarked for the construction of the Ramat Shlomo settlement in the early nineties, the primary purpose of defining Shu'fat Ridge as a green area was in fact to prevent Arabs from building there, until it was time to build a new Jewish neighborhood.[7]

Today all that separates Shu'fat from Ramat Shlomo is a two-lane road, beneath which our sewage flows in unison.

The Valley

I step outside my parents' house and walk westwards to the *sahel* (flat plane), through the old village, towards what remains of the olive groves that run beneath the bridges and alongside the highways exiting the city. Here, at the edges of the neighborhood, I become acquainted with a valley that kept me close to the magic of spring and allowed me to live through what I could not film. I look at the limestone rocks peppered across the hills. They are inhabited by various growths, and marked by signs of former lives. Two palm-sized depressions are carved into a bed of limestone—ancient basins to collect rainwater for animals. There are rocks that indicate cave openings. Some contain signs of an oil or wine press, while others serve as habitats for plants, snails, the pods of microorganisms, and suntanning beds for lizards. To my surprise, gazelles regularly visit this valley, leaving little excretion pellets behind on their paths. We often meet and stop to exchange looks. I move closer; they run away.

A multitude of edible plants grow in this valley, as in much of the hilly landscape of Palestine/Israel. My parents, who forage frequently, both rave and complain about how

The valley, Shu'fat, and the Ramat Shlomo settlement straight ahead. Courtesy Aline Khoury.

quickly the fridge gets filled with greens that they have to wash, chop, and cook—before even going to the market. Between the months of February and May, they collect the following plants: *khubeizeh* (mallow), *shomar* (fennel), *za'tar* (thyme), *'elt* or *hindbeh* (dandelion), *hummeid* (bitter dock), *loof* (black calla), *wara' zquqiah* or *tutu* (ivy-leaved cyclamen), *halayoon* (wild asparagus), and the much-celebrated *' akkoub* (gundelia). It is indeed possible to live off of these wild leaves and vegetables in the springtime and only go to the grocer for a bag of onions, salt, olive oil, and perhaps some grains. This novelty is particularly poignant in times like these, where supermarket racks and trollies are not only potential virus transmitters, but also a symbol of the world's agricultural and ecological imbalance.

Many of the plants that grow in the region, once known as the Fertile Crescent, are wild relatives of the cultivated legumes that are sold in supermarkets today. The seasonal foraging practices here, as elsewhere, predate the rhythms of agricultural cultivation and state-imposed commercial and sovereign interests. Collecting wild-growing food was the backbone of human survival for millennia, and continued to be a daily practice alongside agriculture for just as long. In recent years, foraging has seen a resurgence of popularity across much of the world: for some it's a leisurely weekend activity, a way of being close to nature, and for others, a means of survival—a safety net in precarious times. Inheriting knowledge about plants from my mother brought little moments of happiness, accompanied by the joy of witnessing the transformations of spring, the growths and disappearances of flowers, smells and changes in light quality from week to week. I felt so fortunate to live this magic again. Throughout the quarantine, foraging became a hybrid performance of food sovereignty as well as culinary delight; it is for me an intimate practice that strengthened my sense of belonging and connection to the landscape.

Out of this plethora of forageable food growing in Palestine/Israel, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) has listed three varieties as protected species: ‘akkoub (*Gundelia tournefortii*), za’atar (*Majorana syriaca*), and miramiyyeh (*Salvia tribola*). These are considered hard to find, as they grow in limited microclimates and are indeed often over-foraged . On my daily walks in the valley, I have made a new acquaintance, a shepherd named Abu Said. He has shared his knowledge of the area with me—a veritable embodied map of what edible food grows where. Most importantly, he’s pointed me to where ‘akkoub grows in large quantities, and so my mother and I equip ourselves with thick gloves, knives, and bags, and get ready for our excursion.

‘Akkoub tastes like a cross between asparagus and artichoke. It is a culinary obsession for many Palestinians, the utmost delicacy. For those who did not grow up eating it, however, it is simply an irrelevant thistle. Botanists have recorded the wide-ranging uses of this plant, and judging from its traces found at Neolithic sites in the region, its consumption dates back at least ten thousand years.[8] They say that ‘akkoub was mainly cooked like a vegetable, very much like we eat it today.[9] It is very rarely cultivated, and grows wildly on open limestone slopes and in reddish soil, from early February to early May, depending on elevation and rain patterns. It does not like turned-over soil, and wherever there are spills from construction sites or marks from screeching jeep tires, ‘akkoub is nowhere to be found. It is known for its wide range of health benefits: it can treat diabetes, liver diseases, chest pain, heart problems, stroke, gastric pain, diarrhea, and bronchitis. It is antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and anticarcinogenic. By the summer, the ‘akkoub dries and tumbles through the hills, spreading its seeds, and only goats are left chewing through its parched leaves.

On our ‘akkoub hunt, my mother and I clip the thistle at its base, slightly below soil level. We strip away the thorny leaves, and once we make it home, we meticulously shave off the remaining spikes before cooking. Our fingers turn black during this process of getting to the edible heart of the plant. The heart, along with the thicker stems, gets sautéed with onions and olive oil, or cooked with pieces of meat, sometimes covered with a yogurt sauce. For me, ‘akkoub foraging and peeling is a Corona activity: a prickly passing of the time.

For as long as I can remember, we would get ‘akkoub from my aunts in the Upper Galilee. They would have already generously done the hard labor of cleaning the plant of its thorns, and we would prepare it for cooking. My aunts still live within the routines and time-space of rural life, wherein picking and peeling ‘akkoub is not considered time wasted. The plant also happens to be much more plentiful in the north, in Nablus, the Galilee, and most of all in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. Only as an adult did I understand that my aunts, now in their seventies and eighties, are perpetual scofflaws. Picking ‘akkoub has been deemed illegal by the Israeli authorities since 2005, and if you ask Palestinians why that is, many would say that it is “because Arabs like it very much.”

The Law

Za’atar, the most widely used herb in any Palestinian (or Levantine) kitchen, was the first edible plant to be red-listed in Israeli law books. It was 1977 when Israel’s then minister of agriculture, Ariel Sharon, declared it a protected species, effectively placing a total ban on the tradition of collection, punishable by hefty fines and up to three years in prison. There were no official scientific studies published to legitimize the ban; rather, it was presented as a “gut” decision. Rumor has it that Sharon caught onto the symbolic value of za’atar after the 1976 siege of Tel al-Za’atar, Arabic for “thyme hill.”[10] This Palestinian refugee camp, established north of Beirut in 1948, suffered one of the worst massacres of the Lebanese Civil War in a battle fought between the armed factions of the PLO and the Christian Lebanese Militia—the very same phalangist militia with whom Sharon would form an alliance in the 1982 massacre of Sabra and Shatila. Soon after the za’atar ban, a kibbutz in the Galilee started cultivating the herb and selling it en masse back to Palestinians, as well as exporting it to Arab countries, disguised by its packaging as a Palestinian product. The initiators of this project were the former governor of agriculture in the West Bank, Ze’ev Ben Herut, and his son, Yoram Ben Herut. Through extensive time spent with Palestinians, Ze’ev was able to gather the best recipes for za’atar mixes (various quantities of thyme, sumac, sesame seeds, and salt) from his Arab friends, catering to their tastes and market demands. This early example of food appropriation, a well-publicized and widespread strategy today (humus, falafel, etc.), is one of many reminders of the occupation as an investment project, a military and technologically driven testing ground that services Israel’s multilayered economies of extraction.

Nearly three decades after the za’atar ban, miramiyyeh, a sage variety primarily used for tea, and ‘akkoub were also added to the list of protected species. This law amendment was supported by *science*, in the form of a 1995 research paper by Didi Kaplan, Israeli botanist and employee of the INPA. Kaplan and his colleagues’ research showed that over-foraging of ‘akkoub causes dwindling growth in the wild, as it has a negative effect on the flowering and rejuvenation of the plant. Kaplan, however, was against a total ban, recommending “to restrict harvesting for domestic purposes only,” and was adamant about preventing commercial exports to neighboring countries.[11] Yet, due to the difficulty of enforcement and the slippage of scientific authority into the legal-political complex, the Ministry of Environment ended up passing a total ban instead of adopting a more

A sack full of foraged ‘akkoub in the Golan Heights. This quantity can take up to two hours for one person to collect. Once the thorns are cleaned, it will make a meal for a small family. Courtesy of the author.

nuanced approach. A common argument that INPA employees voiced to me during my field research was: “How can we know whether these ten women in the valley all work for one man who goes to sell them in the market, or whether they are just picking a basket to feed their family?” Since Kaplan’s paper, there has not been a single study following up on the impacts of the protection law on the plant’s status in the wild.[12] And yet hundreds of people—exclusively Arabs—have been fined and gone to trial over the collection of ‘akkoub and za’atar.[13] These preservation laws constitute a thin ecological veil for racist legislation designed to further alienate Palestinians and Syrians in the occupied Golan Heights from their lands.[14] This is land that, in many cases, has been expropriated by the Israeli state and administered as Jewish towns, settlements, nature reserves, military training areas, and other forms of “state land.”

Preservation under Zionism

Preservation measures have always been a double-edged sword. As our quarantine experience reminds us, every act of protection is accompanied by an erasure of another kind. The key question is often not whether to safeguard, but how and at what cost. In colonial contexts in particular, preservation laws have come as top-down decisions, imposed by the colonizer, armed with a claim to scientific expertise, and restricting the “destructive tendencies” of the “ignorant natives.” This dynamic has been particularly consistent in the national Zionist project, which has worked against the potential of a reciprocal exchange with the enemy other. Zionism has developed into an apartheid apparatus, a world cut in two, where the sovereign is in antagonism and vertical superiority vis-à-vis the Palestinian Arabs. Frantz Fanon likened master-subject

relations in such colonial worlds to animal life where relations never lead to an affective community or common realm.[15] The master relegates his subjects to the category of lesser-than-human, thereby remaining forever untouched by their speech and subjecthood. In this symbolic structure, Palestinians are always on the receiving end, subjected to the law rather than subjects of its making. This sort of preservation impulse is particularly ironic in the case of the 'akkoub ban, where a plant which is essential to northern Palestinian cuisine, and unheard of by most Israelis, is protected from the threat of Palestinians. Yet again, Israeli officials have forgotten to ask us what we think.

To restore a site or an object to its assumed and ultimately imagined original state often entails a preservation effort that severs the thing from its living environment. National Zionism constitutes a restoration event, a Judeo-Christian messianic effort to selectively *return* what is believed to be the original, or "natural," state of the land to Jewish hands, excluding others', through the idealized modern configuration of being-in-common: the nation-state. In this ever-extending frontier—literally and conceptually, and along the lines of modernity at large—history-making has been a secularized version of messianic time.[16] Zionism did not stop at uncovering an archaeological site, locating the travelling sound waves of the music of the Second Temple, or speculating about the mentioning of 'akkoub and za'atar in the Old Testament. This teleological construct of a state has historically used preservation and protection measures to further legitimize its claims to the land and reinforce its self-image by all means and in all fields, not least through conceptions of "nature."

The best-known example of a nationalized landscape—a reconfigured landscape designed to mirror the state's image—is the extensive monocultural planting of pine trees funded by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). This practice grew commonplace when Palestine/Israel gradually became the homeland of Ashkenazi Jews, and Europe the object of nostalgia. "Making the desert bloom" was not a mere metaphor for the Zionist project; rather, by planting hundreds of man-made forests, Ashkenazis could imagine being back in Leipzig while living in Jerusalem.[17] The majority of afforestation projects were intended not only to make the "primitive," semi-arid hills of Palestine look more "civilized" according to European eyes, but also to erase the traces of the over four hundred Palestinian villages that were destroyed during the Nakba of 1948, after their inhabitants were forced into exile.

With the rise of environmentalism in the 1990s, the JNF realized that it was not just the Palestinians who were erased; much of the flora and fauna of these lands was decimated along with them.[18] The intrusive acidity of the pine trees prevented other vegetation from growing back, and the over-prevalence of the pines increased the frequency and force of wildfires. This echoes disasters in Australia, North and South America, Portugal, and elsewhere. In California in particular, the erasure of indigenous American traditions of managed burning has caused an overgrowth of shrubbery, which, along with the spiking rates of global warming, has resulted in chronically uncontrollable fires. Today, Native American communities have partnered with the US Forest Service to steward land for traditional values and wildfire management.[19] In a similarly revisionist vein, environmentalists realized that draining the swamplands of Hula, in Galilee, in the 1950s damaged the migration routes of millions of birds flying between Europe and Africa. So in the mid-nineties it was partially re-flooded in an effort to bring them back. The past century has seen many examples of this kind of "misjudgment" and attempted repair: from desertification in the south—the Naqab/Negev—due to the depletion of ground water resulting from the displacement of Bedouin populations, to grazing limitations that have affected Arab herders. Yet unlike other settler-colonial contexts such as the United States, Canada, or Australia, when the paradigmatic shift towards the politics of sustainability began to take root in Israel, it was not accompanied by an official apology or acknowledgement of historical crimes committed. As slim and ineffectual as these utterances have been in the West, Israel has not yet admitted that the displacement of a people went hand in hand with violence committed against the land. Instead, the new "green" measures since the nineties have been co-opted into the historical rhetoric of protection, where the binary relations of power continue to be reinforced to this day.

Despite the above-mentioned environmental "mistakes," there is some ecological basis to the fear that 'akkoub, miramiyyeh, and za'atar may be going extinct in the wild, well beyond the specifics of Israel/Palestine. Elderly people throughout the country and in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon attest that these plants are much harder to find than they used to be. This new scarcity is also felt throughout Iran's Isfahani province, where it has already become common to intentionally plant 'akkoub because the market demand is higher than what wild growth can provide.[20] Yet like most looming extinctions of biological life, the driving factors are damage to habitat, population growth, urbanization, and climate change. When it comes to plant foraging, increased demand and unsustainable overharvesting are contributing factors, but are rarely primary causes. Professor Nativ Dudai, a botanist who has researched za'atar, confirms this in an interview:

> No one talks about the fact that we, the Jewish [Israelis], destroy much more za'atar than the Arabs pick. Do you know how many great za'atar populations were uprooted by bulldozers? In Har Adar or Elyaqim interchange—locations with beautiful amounts of za'atar, and all of it is now gone. But the Arab? He picks five kilograms and gets a fine.[21]

Negotiating the politics of plant extinction with an occupier is always complicated, especially in the context of Palestine, where over the past seventy years Palestinians themselves have been treated as an invasive species in urgent need of elimination and control. The protection of one form of life—nonhuman life—has been used as an extra tool to suffocate a people who have survived attempts at cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing.

This is an ontological paradox: the same state that creates security lists, kill lists, terrorist lists, and other databases to "identify humans who risk to threaten" also establishes lists of nonhumans identified as threatened species, elevated to the political status of being in need of rescue.[22] The necropolitical state of Israel builds illusions of freedom and democracy through enmity and destruction, through a will to kill, while simultaneously adopting environmental rhetoric that claims to protect nature as virgin land, conveniently failing to recognize Palestinians' right to the land and self-determination. Instead, ancient Palestinian land practices are framed as an inherent threat to nature, and thus the right of Palestinians to access that nature is revoked. In the contested landscape of Palestine/Israel, then, the continued collection of 'akkoub and za'atar in the wild, despite and in spite of the ban, is an act of both survival and anti-colonial resistance. Foraging these plants is part of a bid to hold on to forms of memory and know-how that are fast eroding.

Court Battles

An Israeli preservation law called the "National Parks, Natural Reserves, and National and Memorial Sites Law of 1998" has been more like a pharmakon: a remedy and a poison at once. Many foragers claim that the law itself acts to propel commercial foraging. At times, in their haste and fear of being caught, foragers, especially those less familiar with the tradition, uproot the plant rather than cutting it at its base, thus depriving it of the possibility of regrowth. Others get a kick out of the illicit trade and enjoy putting up a defiant middle finger to Israel's unjust laws.

Over the past decade, Adalah, a legal center for Arab rights in Israel, has demanded the decriminalization of collecting za'atar, 'akkoub, and miramiyyeh. The attorney and scholar Rabea Eghbarieh has been at the forefront of both Arab and Hebrew media campaigns, contributing to debates and publications on the topic. In a letter he wrote to Israel's state attorney and minister of environmental protection, Eghbarieh argued that "the prohibition on gathering these herbal plants is not based on a reliable factual basis, does not serve the purpose of the law, and disproportionately harms the Arab population that has used these herbs for hundreds of years, particularly for cooking needs." Eghbarieh has often highlighted the gap in logic and rhetoric that arises during trials. The state representatives and judges perpetuate the expertise of the INPA and its scientific community, as well as the supposedly destructive tendencies of the Arabs. Meanwhile, the accused often state that they are simply out collecting food as they have done for generations. Moreover, indigenous knowledge and care around foraging practices is often dismissed: clipping the tops of za'atar and miramiyyeh stems in fact encourages fresh growth, and 'akkoub will regrow the following year and sometimes within the same season, so long as it is clipped at its base. The judicial system willfully ignores this expertise, the status of the plant as food, as well as the socioeconomic needs of those accused. Many who forage generally need to feed large families and can't always make ends meet. Instead they are met with exorbitant fines, which, if not paid, result in jail sentences.

Adalah's persistence yielded results in late February 2020, when the INPA announced that enforcement measures would be softened. For a trial period of two years, everyone is now permitted to collect up to five kilograms of 'akkoub for personal consumption. It is unclear whether the trial period is a commitment towards a lasting change of the law, or just a way to momentarily deflate what has become a topic of great sensitivity in the Arab sector inside Israel—and dodge Adalah's threat to petition the Higher Court.

Since February, nature patrollers have expressed their continued struggle to detect whether the collection is indeed only for personal consumption, or is rather for commercial sale in local markets. With a fast-growing, increasingly urbanized population, many want to eat 'akkoub but few are willing to go out and put in the hard work. In response, the prevalent model has become so-called commercial foraging, where a small group picks between thirty and a hundred kilograms a day to sell their harvest in the local market.

The real difficulty in enforcement clarifies the core of the problem: approaching conservation and preservation through criminalization, supported by a bureaucratic system of law enforcement, is a strategy bound to fail. Criminalization reinforces oppressive power relations, which, as with most societal challenges, rarely succeeds as a tool for structural and sustainable change. It is a monoculture and a mono-technology, a techno-fix—like pesticides, like antibacterial vaccines, like seeking a vaccine for Covid-19 while simultaneously leaving intact the faulty health structures, food industries, and globalized markets of the world. A new pandemic will only be a matter of time.

A Pause for Cat Orgasms

My mother and I walk eastwards this time, towards a wild hillside, hidden beneath a bridge that separates Shu'fat the neighborhood and the camp from another settlement.

My mother, Aziza, sorting her foraged goods. Courtesy of the author.

On our way, a kid asks my mother and me if we're looking for someone. I say yes, the valley. This valley, too, is full of birds, stones, plants, and bushy trees. We assume it is expropriated land, given the massive concrete bridge that runs through it. But when we look below us, traces of plowing suggest that the original landowners seasonally come back to collect what is left of their fruit trees. The hill on the Shu'fat side is full of wild edibles and other kinds of native spring plants. The hill on the settlement side, however, is bland, covered mostly by grasses, with upturned soil to create a clean and orderly slope. Needless to say, there is nothing edible here. Back on our side of the hill, behind an old dilapidated metal fence, we find so many za'atar "homes" that we can barely believe our eyes. By the look of it, no one has foraged here for years. So we do. Indulging in the process, we find another kind of thyme, one that is not illegal to pick: *za'atar al-bisas*, literally "cat za'atar" (its Latin name is *Nepeta curviflora*). This type of thyme is also known as "Syrian catnip" because of the pleasure cats get from licking it. Adorned with a substance that mimics their feline sexual pheromones, cats gets high and euphoric from za'atar al-bisas. In effect, it gives them an orgasm. The cat begins licking the plant and then leaps around in it and purrs loudly. This lasts for a few minutes before the cat loses interest, potentially to return two hours later for another go.[23]

Throughout the months of lockdown, my mother and I have returned frequently for new batches of 'akkoub and za'atar, feeling like defiant mavericks, stealing moments of pleasure as we pick the plants that we love.

Aziza smelling Syrian catnip. Courtesy of the author.

Decolonizing Extinction Listings

When studying anthropogenic extinction, climate-justice researchers essentially seek to answer two central questions: Which forms of human life are driving processes of catastrophic loss? And what are the diverse ways in which humans and nonhumans have resisted this loss? The challenge is to move away from failed policing tactics to create a life-affirming culture of preservation and sustainability. What's sorely needed is an epistemological change that decolonizes extinction and fundamentally reorients our relation towards each other and our surroundings. According to scholar Juno Salazar Parreñas, this decolonization must be "oriented towards process and experimentation and not toward foregone conclusion, except for the need to care enough about others, including and in particular, non-human others."[24]

Unfortunately, most people today—and Palestinians are no exception—do not lead a life guided by cross-species care. Palestinian society at large is now detached from its historical intimacy with the land, which only two or three generations ago was a central part of Palestinian life. A seldom-discussed transformation caused by the Nakba of 1947–49—along with the massive expropriation of land that continued well afterwards—was the process of turning peasants (that is, historically speaking, the overwhelming majority of Palestinian society) into unskilled construction workers. This intentional and systemic transformation of an entire society is manifest today. One only has drive through the West Bank to see the mutations of architecture and landscape brought about by private owners and the Palestinian Authority alike. My grandfather, who was illiterate and who himself ended up a construction worker, learned lessons the hard way and repeatedly told my father to get a good education. "They can take your land and house away from you, but knowledge is yours to keep."

The disregard for agrarian life was underway well before 1948. It began in the final decades of the dying Ottoman Empire, and it continued to spread under the British Mandate and the implantation of capitalist ideals of modern life that we have come to call "progress." This "progress" slowly transformed land from something embedded in the sociopolitical fabric of a community, into an extractable commodity. These ideals are still hard at work across an increasingly decaying planet.

Foraging, meanwhile, is an ancient method for recognizing and learning about the abundance of one's surroundings. Since 9500–8000 BC, farmers have been selecting seeds from their favorite wild plants, planting them, and repeating the process until both seeds and humans were thoroughly domesticated. Over millennia, this grooming gradually changed the genetic makeup of both partners into the tastes, shapes, and faces that are familiar to us today. The wild relatives, or "weeds," that live near fields where their cultivated descendants grow play time-travel games. Genetically speaking, these relatives are many thousands of years apart. We need to foster an imaginary that understands the depths of time embodied in these plants, an imaginary that is outside the logic of origins and the oppressive boundaries of the state. This imaginary would include a multitude of approaches to biodiversity: rewilding alongside "zoning," with the aim of educating, building agency, and encouraging responsible—and joyful—foraging.[25]

We know that abolishing the police frees up massive amounts of public funding for implementing real structural change and building community strength through education, rehabilitation, and social support. In a similar vein, reallocating funds from law-enforcement bureaucracies and military forces towards education and biodiversity can support the changes necessary to disseminate plant-related knowledge and practices. This reallocation can also contribute to cross-border conservation strategies in regions where certain species are native. After all, seeds have always defied modern ideas of order, law, and borders.

Tell el-Ful, overlooking East Jerusalem and the West Bank neighborhoods of Shu'fat, Beit Hanina, Bir Nabal, Nabi Samuil, Al-Jib, and Qalandia, and the settlements of Ramot and Giva't Ze'ev. Courtesy of the author.

This is one path towards a planetary democracy, or a democracy of the species—a possibility for freedom that breaks from slavery and colonialism in all their historical and contemporary forms. In this process, ecologies must be rebuilt and re-symbolized, so they are geared towards mutuality and affirmation, not exclusion. Only with this profound shift can preservation measures translate into a real attempt to protect life, rather than preserving the necropolitical regime already in place.

X

Jumana Manna is a visual artist working primarily with film and sculpture. Her work explores how power is articulated through relationships, often focusing on the body and on materiality in relation to narratives of nationalism and histories of place.

1
Israel's domestic intelligence agency.

2
This sentence is paraphrased from a comment Amal Issa wrote on my Facebook wall, March 25, 2020.

3
This number does not include the refugee camp, which is inhabited by at least another thirty thousand.

4
Primarily from towns and villages of the Galilee, also referred to as *a-shamaal* , or "the north."

5
After the occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem, the municipality passed a law limiting construction volume within a plot of land known as the "floor area ratio" (FAR) to merely 25 percent. By comparison, Jewish neighborhoods were built with high-rises, in order to exhaust the maximum capacity of the building area and to overlook the Arab neighborhoods. As the decades passed, the FAR increased in East Jerusalem as the Israeli state realized that Arabs had run out of land. For further reading: Eyal Weizman, "Jerusalem: Petrifying the Holy City," chap. 1 in *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso Books, 2007), 25–57.

6
At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, Israeli authorities threatened to shut the checkpoint and wall off the residents entirely, in a vague attempt to protect Jerusalemites from each other.

7
Sarah Kaminker, "For Arabs Only: Building Restrictions in East Jerusalem," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 4 (1997): 15.

8
Nicholas Hind, "Gundelia Tournefortii: Compositae," *Curtis Botanical Magazine* 30, no. 2 (July 2013): 114–38.

9
A lone German man travelling through the Levant is the first known Westerner to have illustrated and described the 'akkoub, scientifically known as *Gundelia tournefortii* . In November 1573, Leonhart Rauwolf (*lion heart, rough wolf*) left Bavaria to begin his search for herbal medicine supplies in Tripoli, modern-day Lebanon. He continued from there to the "mighty city" of Aleppo, then to Baghdad and Mosul, before ending with a trip to Jerusalem. Rauwolf, relying on a description by the ancient Greek physician Discorides, mistook the *Gundelia* for milk thistle. A forgivable mistake really, as even locals today who eat 'akkoub but aren't involved in its collection commonly confuse it with other similar-looking thistles. Prussian and other European botanists built on Rauwolf's *Aigentliche Beschribung der Reise in die Morgenländerin* (A true account of a voyage to the Levant) . They noted how in the old Baghdad markets, the mature and hardened heads were eaten like nuts, and in some parts of Turkey and Iraq were used as a source of oil and gum.

10
Rabea Eghbarieh, *Limatha Takhsha Israeel al-za'atar w'al-'akkoub?* (Why does Israel fear 'akkoub and za'atar?), *Fusha*, May 8, 2017 https://www.arab48.com/%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A9/%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%82/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1/2017/08/06/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B4%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%83%D9%88%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1 .

11
Didi Kaplan, Dror Pevzner, Moshe Galilee, and Mario Gutman, "Traditional Selective Harvesting Effects on Occurrence and Reproductive Growth of *Gundelia Tounfortii* in Israel Grasslands*," Israel Journal of Plant Sciences* , no. 43 (1995).

12
As Kaplan told me in an interview in March 2019.

13
Very few cases have been tried for the collecting of miramiyyeh, which is used mainly as an herb and not as food, and is therefore collected in lesser quantities.

14
'Akkoub is bountiful in many parts of the Golan Heights—Galileans forage most of their 'akkoub from this region.

15
Achille Mbembe, "Fanon's Pharmacy," chap. 5 in *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), esp. 153.

16
For more on the critique of techno-optimistic efforts enmeshed in Western end-time thinking, see Deborah Bird Rose, "Reflections on the Zone of the Incomplete," in *Cryopreservation*, ed. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (MIT press, 2017).

17
Paraphrased from Carol Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory in Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges and Prickly-Pear Cactus in Palestine/Israel," *Edebiyat: A Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures* 8, no. 1 (1998). Bardenstein is quoted in Irus Braverman, "Planting the Promised Landscape: Zionism, Nature, and Resistance in Israel/Palestine," *Natural Resources Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 343.

18
Natalia Gutkowski, "Governing through Timescape: Israeli Sustainable Agriculture Policy and the Palestinian-Arab Citizens," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 3 (2018).

19
Laren Sommer, "To Manage Wildfire, California Looks To What Tribes Have Known All Along," NPR, August 24, 2020 https://www.npr.org/2020/08/24/899422710/to-manage-wildfire-california-looks-to-what-tribes-have-known-all-along .

20
Habib Yazdansehnas, Ali Tavili, Hossein Arzani, and Hossein Azarnivand, "Traditional *Gundelia tournefortii* Usage and its Habitat Destruction in Tiran va Karvan District in Iran's Isfahan Province," *Science Alert*, June 15, 2016 https://scialert.net/fulltextmobile/?doi=ecologia.2016.19.25 .

21
Quoted in Rabea Eghabrieh, "The Struggle for Za'atar and 'Akkoub: Israeli Nature Protection Laws and the Criminalization of Palestinian Herb-Picking culture," Oxford Food Symposium on Food and Cookery 2020, forthcoming.

22
Irus Braverman, "The Regulatory Life of Threatened Species Lists," in *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities* , ed. I. Braverman (Routledge, 2016), 20.

23
At the end of the spring, this plant blossoms with "inverted" blue flowers. The leaves are heart-shaped and their scent is incredibly beautiful. Locally, it is traditionally used to calm nerves and as a pain relief for toothaches. It also repels cockroaches and mosquitoes.

24
Juno Salazar Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation* (Duke University Press, 2018).

25
Restricting how much of certain plants can be foraged is both difficult to monitor and arbitrary, as the number of foragers visiting particular sites varies greatly. A more effective approach might be to designate certain areas for foraging for limited periods—say, one to five years—while closing off others to allow plants to rejuvenate and multiply. This is rewilding alongside zoning.

Steve Lyons and Jason Jones for Not An Alternative

The Language in Common

The brutal police killing of George Floyd earlier this year spurred uprisings in cities across the US. These uprisings came in the form of highway blockades, port shutdowns, unsanctioned monument removals, torched cop cars, and Minneapolis's Third Police Precinct being burned to the ground. While this was happening, congressional Democrats took a knee; the street in front of the White House was renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza; letters of "solidarity" from universities, museums, major corporations, and small businesses cluttered the web. Looking back at the slowing energy around the Black Lives Matter movements during the fall, we can see a pattern that is common to so many contemporary movements: a shift from popular revolt to corporate takeover.

Corporations' and mainstream liberals' widespread use of BLM's hashtags, chants, and symbolic rituals led to a flood of media arguing that the movement's symbols had become its Achilles heel.[1] This genre of writing is a mainstay of left criticism. It tends to draw a sharp distinction between two ways of practicing politics: one that prioritizes direct material intervention as the basis for revolutionary change, and another that wagers on the political efficacy of symbols—repeatable acts, slogans, images, and other forms of action that connect the people who use them to the abstract idea of a specific movement. Critics argue that there are at least two problems with the symbolic approach to activism. First, when deployed by the left, symbols don't lead to material transformation. Performances often make those of us on the left feel like we're changing the world, but they mainly function to divert our energy from the real work of transforming the material conditions of oppression. Second, our symbols leave our movements vulnerable to infiltration and subversion by capitalists, who can easily seize and redirect them. Once the capitalists use our symbols, not only do those symbols lose their capacity to challenge power, but they no longer even belong to us.

From an anti-symbolic position, we recognize that our symbols are efficient only when used against us: as means of quelling militancy, sowing internal divisions, and producing an illusory image of "resistance" in the absence of revolutionary organization. At the same time, few have trouble seeing how the symbols of white supremacy are a key source of power for the right. Critics obsessively track the symbols, subcultures, and dog whistles of white supremacist belonging, amplifying their efficiency in the process. Beyond the Confederate flag, white nationalists have absorbed into their symbolic lexicon the green frog, the ubiquitous hipster-Nazi haircut, the Hawaiian shirt, and the "OK" hand signal. Many of us use our social media feeds to broadcast these findings, acting as though our most urgent challenge is to find the best proof that fascism has arrived. We see signs of fascism everywhere, even including where they are not. But we are often blind to the symbols, rituals, and modes of communication through which left counterpower is built.

This image of former Trump administration aide Zina Bash flashing the "OK" hand signal during Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation hearing was the subject of an online conspiracy in September 2018. Photo: C-Span.

Into this context, this text introduces a keyword, *the language in common*, which allows us to see how the left communicates the collective power it builds. The language in common is not merely the constellation of symbols, hashtags, and performative tactics mobilized in the context of social movements. It is the mode of communication of a revolutionary collective coming into being. Collective movements are not fixed entities that precede their modes of appearance. They are constituted as they are made visible and audible. The repetition of images, rituals, and signs builds and expresses collective power as it inscribes a gap through which noncapitalist modes of belonging appear. In this process, language becomes a material force as it voices an alternate imagination of the world.

[figure fullpage 113_Not_An_Alternative_1]

To be clear, this text does not advocate for the continued use of specific symbols, hashtags, and performative tactics. Nor does it take an uncritical position on their expropriation. Instead, it aims to advance a framework that refuses the either/or debate about material versus symbolic tactics by prioritizing the productive feedback loops between them. The language in common subordinates the question of political tactics to the question of political side-taking, insisting that the operative division is not between the material and the symbolic, but between us and them.

But who is "us"? Against the "we-skepticism" that has pervaded academic leftism in Europe , the UK, and North America, this text is unapologetic in its use of "we" and "us."[2] The signifier "we" constitutes a central and irreplaceable component of the left's language in common. It does not invoke a specific empirical referent (a subject that exists), but rather the imaginary subject of our politics (a subject that *insists*). To speak in the "we" is not to speak for others, but to posit a collective subject that can be struggled over. The same is true of the term "the left" as it is used in this text. There is no question that the left is internally divided. As a collectivizing term, the "left" casts a wide net over Molotov-cocktail-wielding anti-fascists and well-meaning liberals, community organizers and insurgent politicians, anarchists and communists, reformists and abolitionists. Its connotations are different depending on who is speaking and to whom. This text refers to the left in its widest sense: to delineate those who take the side of the common. The point is not to fixate on what fragments us from within, but instead to

combat left fragmentation—starting by committing to the codes that signify our collective difference. By attuning our gaze to the language in common, we expose the terrain on which our collectivity is built, sustained, and defended. This terrain is not a space of agreement or consensus. It is a gap—an open space of struggle in which to determine our collective horizon.

Building the Language in Common

Capitalism is, of course, a system of production, circulation, exploitation, and extraction. As it expands, it sets the coordinates through which we experience and engage in the world, producing a depressive realism that strangles our collective imagination. The power of capitalist realism, as Mark Fisher theorizes it, is in its capacity to convince us that capitalism has mapped the world so completely that we cannot imagine an alternative. It achieves this feat by laying claim to the symbolic systems through which we express ourselves, define our position, and establish the horizon for our politics.[3] We are trained to see land as property, monuments as testaments to the victory of the oppressor, and workplaces as monoliths synonymous with the boss. Alienated from the capitalist world, we reach for the tools of critique. We are neither the landlord, nor the oppressor, nor the boss. Our negative attachment to the system of oppression keeps us on our heels, firmly in enemy territory. We write it off, cede the ground, and are left with no affirmative place to stand.

Capitalist realism conscripts our desires to the capitalist world, but it also blinds us to the presence of actually existing alternatives to capitalism—modes of life and ways of seeing that do not fit on the capitalist map. Strands of Marxist feminism and Indigenous Marxism have worked against this tendency by insisting on the noncapitalist remainder in the capitalist world. Building on David Harvey's reading of Rosa Luxemburg, thinkers such as Sylvia Federici and Glen Sean Coulthard take specific aim at Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, which holds that the brutal transfer of noncapitalist forms into capitalist ones was a transitional phase in the development of capitalism. Coulthard argues that primitive accumulation should not be understood as a stage in the transition to capitalism, but rather an ongoing process of dispossession. This process is felt most violently by Indigenous communities who have already been dispossessed of their lands and ways of life, but who also, through their own strength and fortitude, continue to hold land as sacred and inalienable.[4] One implication of this critique is that there remain elements of noncapitalist life—unceded lands, modes of life, and ways of seeing—that remain beyond the grip of capitalism. There is a gap in the capitalist world—hard-wrangled by people who continue to refuse forced assimilation by the settler-colonial state—from which a language of difference has been and can be built.

While the left has spent the past fifty years caught in a circuit of invention and abandonment, building effective modes of communication only to disavow them at the first sign of co-optation, Indigenous Nations have struggled for their languages and cultural traditions despite targeted campaigns to erase, outlaw, or assimilate them. Through a centuries-long commitment to tradition, Indigenous Nations in so-called North America have been able to recognize their commonality, make visible their fundamental irreconcilability with the extractivist logic of capitalism, withstand state-sanctioned extermination campaigns, and mobilize their collective power to build solidarity, block pipelines, and protect water and land. These are lessons from which the non-Indigenous left must learn.

Nick Estes develops the concept of the "tradition of resistance" to theorize how, from the perspective of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate, or Great Sioux Nation, every Indigenous struggle for liberation is built upon the one that preceded it. Not only have Indigenous communities been struggling against the same system of settler-colonial dispossession for centuries. These communities also understand the ways in which the power they build in the present has been derived from the same sources for generations. The rituals, cultural practices, and political tactics devised by those who struggle over a place operate in fidelity with ancestral teachings. "By drawing upon earlier struggles and incorporating elements of them into their own experience," Estes writes in a recent book on Indigenous resistance, "each generation continues to build dynamic and vital traditions of resistance. Such collective experiences build up over time and are grounded in specific Indigenous territories and nations."[5] Rituals, symbols, and other cultural practices are not abandoned, in other words. They are reawakened, transformed, and expanded.

This attitude toward tradition is alien to much of the North American, European, and UK left. Leftist organizers, activists, and theorists hunt for the next viral hashtags, drive attention toward them, and mobilize energy around them, with the full expectation that they will only be useful in holding popular attention for a moment before fading into oblivion. Before hashtags, there were "mindbombs." In the mid-1970s, this is what Greenpeace founder Bob Hunter famously called images that could inspire collective action.[6] When approached from the perspective of media strategy, the images, rituals, and signs of counterpower have a shelf life. They are empty signifiers: equivalent, interchangeable, and competing amongst themselves within an economy of attention. When they lose their impact, they can be discarded and replaced.

If the images, rituals, and signs of collective power are not approached from the perspective of marketing and public relations, it becomes possible to understand and treat them differently—not as empty signifiers that behind-the-scenes strategists can control, but as the

byproducts of the collectives who pick them up, use them, and transform them in the process of building counterpower. When we refuse to see the images, rituals, and signs we organize around as isolated one-offs, we can begin to build continuity between our struggles. We can recognize how our symbols contribute to a language in common that sets the coordinates for how we understand and relate to the world.

The concept of the language in common names the mode of communication through which traditions produce collectives, as collectives in turn produce traditions. When new traditions are introduced and old ones are resurrected, they become part of this productive process, both expanding and sharpening the means by which collective power is asserted. Collectives become known to themselves, build counterpower, and struggle over the meaning of their language through the repetition of common forms. It is also through repetition that collectives confirm the intention of their acts, symbols, slogans, and rituals. Take highway blockades as an example. One blockade is an anomaly—its meaning is indeterminate. Ten blockades suggest the emergence of an activist tactic. Ten blockades in ten different cities suggests that the tactic is spreading. Take the movement against the Coastal Gaslink pipeline in British Columbia, led by Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs. Earlier this year, a checkpoint at Unist'ot'en Camp, established on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory in the Pacific Northwest, inspired hundreds of blockades across Canada, shutting down the country's logistical infrastructure for a month. One of the most effective blockades disrupted the rail lines between Toronto to Montreal. Situated on Tyendinaga Mohawk territory, a few hours southwest of the Mohawk Nation's landmark 1990 blockade at Kanesatake (Oka, Quebec), the rail blockade awakened the power of a longer history of anti-colonial struggle. This example represents the potential for a tactic to echo both across space and time. Across the country, blocking a highway or rail line became a gesture of solidarity, a way of showing others that their messages were heard. Blocking traffic became a ritual—a choreographed action, in short—that anyone, anywhere, could perform in order to signal their fidelity to the struggle.

When we recognize a symbol, performance, or material act as an expression of our movement, it is not usually because an individual affiliated with the movement has claimed responsibility. More often, it is because we recognize it as an iteration, elaboration, or transformation of a tradition that we believe to be ours. When we insist that the tradition is ours, we enter the struggle over its interpretation, recognizing that if we want to express our collective power, we need to tell the story from our side. From this perspective, it does not actually matter who lit fire to Minneapolis's Third Precinct during the recent George Floyd uprisings, or even whether "outside agitators" struck the match. What matters is that the action, which was undertaken by an organically composed group of people, became a catalyst that ignited the passions of millions. It stood as a symbol of revolutionary possibility—a call for collective response. Movements never start from scratch. Emerging from the material conditions of oppression and sparked by collective rage, movements build on the power that is latent in the culture, and through iterations of what came before.

One advantage of seeing movement-building from the perspective of the language in common is that it counteracts the politically halting tendency to deconstruct or dwell on left failure. Instead, it attunes our collective gaze to the traditions we are constructing, as well as to what our traditions inherit from the past. This was the lesson of Omaha elder Nathan Phillips's iconic standoff at Lincoln Memorial, following the inaugural Indigenous Peoples March in 2019 in Washington, DC. Surrounded by dozens of high school students clad in Trump swag and shouting insults, the veteran organizer held ground. Standing inches from the group of students blocking his way, he chanted an American Indian Movement anthem from the 1970s as he courageously beat his drum. As Phillips explains, "When I got here to this point and started singing … that's when the spirit took over."[7] History was awakened in the repetition of song, underscoring the power of language to anchor the individual within the collective—a collective held up by comrades past and future. When we encounter a sign as an expression of the language in common, we recognize the force of history that is behind it, as well as the emancipatory future that it makes possible—even when faced with apparently insurmountable odds. As an affirmative language of difference that is built through collective work, the language in common allows the collective to see itself as a force within the movements of history.

Negating the Negation

In the midst of the resurgent BLM uprisings, many writers on the left praised the looting, property destruction, and monument removals that spread across the US and the globe, celebrating them as revolutionary acts of rupture. But almost as soon as the state began to regain social control, many of these same writers returned to their old hobbyhorse. They decided to announce the movement's defanging at the hands of a coordinated counterinsurgency led by state and non-state actors.[8] With this trajectory in mind, we need to ask not only how our rebellions get subsumed, but also how the frameworks we use to interpret them unwittingly participate in this process of subsumption. How can we avoid amplifying our failures at the expense of what we achieve?[9]

The question is not only tactical, but also interpretive. When we evaluate our collective actions for their concrete material effects—for the damage they do at the human

scale—we are immediately confronted with our powerlessness in the face of our enemy. This enemy not only holds the monopoly on legitimate violence (and is not afraid to use it), but also knows how to weather the storm. Capitalists build pushback into their budgets. They take out insurance policies to cover broken windows, arson, and lost profits. In advance of scandal, they contract public relations firms to protect their brands. Faced with the cunning and brute power of the capitalist state, how are we to see our uprisings as anything but futile tantrums—proof of our incapacity to move from rebellion to revolutionary change? The answer is in recognizing the ways that our concrete actions in the material world contribute to the language in common, through which we build and express our difference.

Social movements are not built by consensus or organized by central committees. They emerge when groups and individuals show a commitment to a common name (BLM, Occupy, NoDAPL, Gilets Jaunes, and so on), even when they disagree about its meaning.[10] Movements are not the positive constitution of an organizational form. They name the gap through which specific events, actions, gestures, slogans, and symbols combine to give shape to an emergent collective. Whether we decide to take a knee or burn a cop car, the action we choose gives meaning to every other action. Concrete actions give meaning to symbolic actions, making them sharp and infusing them with militancy. Symbolic actions give meaning to concrete actions, connecting them to a more expansive narrative of social transformation. The language in common mediates between the material and the symbolic, holding open the gap through which we struggle to determine our collective horizon.

When approached from the perspective of the language in common, our negations are negated, and transfigured into their positive form. It becomes possible to see our actions as additive, not merely subtractive. They are our songs, our dances, our rituals, and our performances. As the forms through which we distinguish our comrades from our enemies, they awaken the shared desire for collectivity that incites us and holds us together.[11]

Consider the removal of monuments that swept through public squares over the past several months. For years, activists have called for the removal of monuments to slave traders and genocidal colonists, arguing that such commemorations are a source of ongoing violence for the descendants of slaves and colonized peoples who are forced to encounter them on a daily basis. As "spatial acts of oppression," monuments overdetermine the historical coordinates through which we encounter the world.[12] Monuments are propaganda for the ruling class. The durability of their material metonymically affirms the durability of the system of oppression that they commemorate, from which they were commissioned, and to which they owe their protection from the people who despise them. Monuments set the coordinates from which the world appears as a capitalist world.

Years of antiracist and anti-imperialist organizing to remove Confederate and imperial monuments, petitioned through open letters and public appeals to heritage officials, were largely stalled until people began taking matters into their own hands. This has been particularly evident in the wake of the George Floyd uprisings. On May 31, a monument to Confederate leader Charles Linn was toppled by BLM protesters in Birmingham, Alabama. It was followed by countless others across the US and around the world. As monuments began to fall, the tactic of monument removal and defacement became central to the language in common through which Black Lives Matter movements expressed their counterpower, and through which activists around the world identified themselves as comrades in the struggle. Every time people came together to vandalize, behead, or topple a monument to oppression, they answered a call that preceded them.When people remove monuments to white supremacy, their actions are not simply subtractive. These actions live on as image and myth, contributing to the array of gestures and symbols that build and express difference. Recall the summer of 2015, when activist Bree Newsome famously climbed the flagpole at the South Carolina state capitol to pull down the Confederate flag. The flag was raised back up within forty-five minutes, but the damage was done. Images of Newsome's action circulated widely, raising pressure on South Carolina authorities to permanently remove the flag. The point we want to emphasize is not that Newsome's action led to concrete change at the state capitol (which it did), but that the iconic image of her action became a flag for antiracism in the US, fueling many of the fires that have since been burning. Her action became generic through its media circulation, converting flagpoles around the country into active sites of struggle—places where antiracists can assemble to assert their collective power. Such tactics of resistance activate the capitalist world as a site of struggle, demonstrating how oppressive monuments can be split, seized, and reclaimed as our own.

Remapping the World

In *The Colonial Lives of Property*, Brenna Bhandar examines the imperial history of cartography. Bhandar's 2018 book reminds us that the project of mapping the capitalist world was not only one of development and modernization, but also one of erasure. The colonial concept of *terra nullius* was the ideological companion to violent dispossession, and an antecedent to capitalist realism. It enabled settler capitalists to rationalize the imposition of private property relations on Indigenous land, burying both the precolonial history of the land and the common relations that sustained it. The world in common, which was carved up and partitioned in the

making of the capitalist world, was not entirely eradicated in the violent processes of genocide, dispossession, and forced assimilation. Repressed in the capitalist map are, in Bhandar's words, "ways of relating to land that are not premised on the exploitation of its resources and the often-unbridled destruction of the environment for corporate profit."[13] The problem is not that the whole world has been subsumed by capitalism, but that we have been trained to see it from a capitalist perspective. This training has blinded us to the gap of collectivity that capitalism cannot enclose. It is not just that another world is possible. It is already here, embodied in the desires, practices, modes of belonging, ways of relating, and forms of organization that sustain collective life. To see this other world, we need a place to stand within it.

The language in common is the form through which our collective difference is asserted and organized around. When we can see our difference, we can see the capitalist world not as a totality, but as a world cut in two. Capitalists recognize the power of our language to communicate a relation to the world that is not based on extraction and profit. They interpret both our languages and our relations as a threat. Our languages of difference become expressions of counterpower when we affirm that they do, in fact, represent a threat to the capitalist world. The concept of the language in common allows us to see how social movements communicate across space and time, and how our shared images, rituals, and signs both produce and make visible our collectivity. The language in common is not, however, a substitute for political organization. Jodi Dean reminds us that it is not only a question of "constructing the political collectivity with the will and capacity to bring an egalitarian world into being," but also of establishing the infrastructures and forms of organization necessary to "hold open the space for the emergence of such a will."[14] How do we move from catching fleeting glimpses of this egalitarian world to actually instituting it at scale?

Capitalist realism has trained us to believe that there is no outside—that every site, object, and institution marks another spot on the capitalist map. This is as true of the public school system as it is of the American Museum of Natural History. Holding out hope that "revolution is in the streets," we retreat from social institutions and infrastructures, surrendering them to the capitalists who, left uncontested, use them as weapons against us. We justify this result by insisting that these institutions and infrastructures were founded to serve the ruling class; there never was an alternative. Our only option is to burn them to the ground and declare *terra nullius* for a second time.

When we define sites, objects, or institutions as inherently capitalist, we slip into the same pattern of thought that we do when we write off our traditions as soon as Nancy Pelosi performs them. We deny our collective agency and become conspiracists for the capitalist class. We affirm the power of the regime of extraction and exploitation, observe its omnipresence in our everyday lives, and declare it eternal. Our gains or advances appear as complicity and compromise. We adopt the "deflationary perspective of the depressive" that Fisher described, accepting rather than acting against the realism that capitalism sells.[15]

Instead of spending our time proving the existence of fascism or the flourishing of capitalism, we would be better off promoting conspiracies about our own power. This does not mean exaggerating how many people show up to our rallies, but it does mean training ourselves to see the signs of our collective power in every site, symbol, and institution. The language in common is not a thing. It cannot be measured or verified as real or fake, true or false. Nor is it constructed through the democratic decision-making process, where we are meant to accept the lowest common denominator, to which the least number of people disagree. Rather, the language in common nominates language as a site of struggle. We struggle for our language by believing in it, committing to it, working with it, iterating on it, and insisting on the collective power expressed in it. When we become conspiracists of our own power, we see the power of our language. We see our negations as affirmations, our acts of disobedience as obedient to another law.

Chief Rueben George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, a leader in the struggle against the Trans Mountain Pipeline, speaks of the Indigenous law that governs his community's resistance to fossil fuels and the settler-colonial state as follows: "We don't obey laws if they are unjust laws."[16] Tsleil-Waututh law comes with certain obligations. As Indigenous lawyer and Tsleil-Waututh chief Leah George-Wilson explains, "Our fight against the pipeline is based on our Aboriginal Rights and Title as supported by our Indigenous Law. It is according to our law that we protect the environment and our territory … We have the duty, the obligation to ensure the safety of the land, water, SRKW [Southern Resident killer whales], and all wildlife."[17] Tsleil-Waututh law bears no relationship to settler law. It is affirmative: it defines what is right and just. It is grounded in a non-dominating, non-exploitative relation to the land, and a commitment to steward the land for future generations. From this perspective, when the future of the land is in question, acts of resistance—from checkpoints to occupations and blockades—are actually obedient. They adhere to another law, based on a different form of justice, which subordinates profit to the future of human and nonhuman life. This other law represents the baseline for noncapitalist modes of belonging and forms of social organization. Language schools, social centers, museums, and other institutions are built in respect to this law. This concept of law asks us to move from a politics of becoming ungovernable to one of governing ourselves

For generations, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation has built Kwekwecnewtxw (or watch houses) to watch for enemies, invasions, or threats to their lands and natural resources. In 2018, community leaders built a Kwekwecnewtxw in the path of the Trans Mountain Pipeline on a day when ten thousand demonstrators marched against the project. Situated on traditional Tsleil-Waututh land, directly across the fence from Kinder Morgan, the contested Trans Mountain Pipeline's former operator, the Kwekwecnewtxw does not only watch the enemy. It also provides infrastructure for ceremony, gathering, and collective power-building for Indigenous and non-Indigenous water and land protectors. Photo: Jason Jones. Courtesy of the photographer.

differently—of relating to the world as a world in common, building language and culture around this relation, and constructing an infrastructure to support it.

As we expand our conspiratorial vision into territories governed by settler capitalist law, we see what is common within every enclosure, and we set to work at liberating it. We do not just protest pipelines. We build, protect, and expand a world in which pipelines do not belong. The Lummi Nation's Totem Pole Journey puts this world-building agenda into practice. Each year since 2013, the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation carve a totem pole, put it on a flatbed trailer, and bring it to sites of environmental struggle across the US. For the past three years, Not An Alternative has been supporting the journey. The House of Tears Carvers visit Indigenous communities that are not yet allies, as well as farmers and ranchers, scientists, and faith-based communities, engaging each group in a ceremony led by Lummi elders. Each time, participants are asked to touch the totem pole—to give it their power, and to receive its power in turn. The goal of the Totem Pole Journey is to connect communities on the frontlines of environmental struggle, and to build, through ceremony, a broad and unlikely alliance of people against pipelines—an insistent "we" that did not previously exist. Lummi councilman Freddie Lane likens the totem poles to batteries: they are charged with the energy of those who touch them, and as they travel, they give the people energy in turn.

The Totem Pole Journey offers an approach to the question of monuments from which the non-Indigenous left can learn. The Lummi Nation's totem poles are not anti-monuments, nor are they counter-monuments, which would work in equal but inverse relation to the monuments that are designed for oppression. The poles do not impose power from above, but rather concentrate collective power from those who surround them. In this way, these poles anchor comradely relations between people to a non-dominating relation with the land. Mobilizing traditional cultural objects as part of a solidarity-building infrastructure, the Lummi carvers model a transition from the language in common to an infrastructure for the common. The totem poles draw a line of division—a line in the sand against the fossil-fuel

Tribal leaders and members of the public touch a totem pole carved by Jewell James and the House of Tears Carvers during a Totem Pole Blessing Ceremony organized by the Lummi Nation in Portland, Oregon on August 24, 2016. Dedicated to the sacred obligation to draw the line against fossil fuel developments that threaten our collective future, the pole travels to sites of environmental struggle across the country to build solidarity between communities. Photo: Paul Anderson / Courtesy of the Lummi Nation.

industry, but also a line of connection between the communities they engage. As they draw this line, they become living monuments to life beyond extraction.

When we move from the language in common to the infrastructure for the common, we do not give up the symbols, rituals, and monuments to our power, nor do we give up the struggle to determine their meaning. Rather, we commit to our traditions, connect them to others, and build institutions around them. We find our coordinates and coordinate our struggles. As we aggregate our collective power against the engines of extraction and exploitation, we set the foundation from which we can remap the world as a world in common.

X

Not An Alternative (est. 2004) is a collective that works at the intersection of art, activism, and theory. The collective's latest, ongoing project is *The Natural History Museum* (2014–), a traveling museum that highlights the socio-political forces that shape nature. *The Natural History Museum* collaborates with Indigenous communities, environmental justice organizations, scientists, and museum workers to create new narratives about our shared history and future, with the goal of educating the public, influencing public opinion, and inspiring collective action.

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16
The concept of an "unjust law" invokes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (April 16, 1963), which argues that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." See https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html .

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iLiana Fokianaki

The Bureau of Care: Introductory Notes on the Care-less and Care-full

This text was co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of four special contributions to e-flux journal *—two texts published in the present November 2020 issue, and two more in the upcoming February 2021 issue. (The other November text in this series is "Enjoy Your Security: On Kafka's 'The Burrow' " by Aaron Schuster.) This collaboration aims to expand on the themes raised in the contemporary art festival Survival Kit 11. Titled "Being Safe Is Scary," after a piece by artist Banu Cennetoğlu for Documenta 14, Survival Kit 11 took place in Riga from September 4 to October 4, 2020. It was organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and curated by Katia Krupennikova.*

Exploring the mechanisms shaping the politics of safety, and taking the heavily charged title "Being Safe Is Scary," the festival aimed to establish a continuity of urgent discourse on security and political violence. At the same time, the festival sought to explore how it might be possible to transform the suppositions that undergird this discourse—reconnecting safety to practices of love, intimacy, sharing, commonality, mutual support, attention, care for each other, and care for the environment.

—Editors

In previous texts, I have described a new form of power that I named "narcissistic authoritarian statism." This power is visible globally through statesmen, national leaders, and their policies, and manifests under the guise of democracy. In a two-part essay for *e-flux journal*, I first defined narcissistic authoritarian statism (NAS) as a neoliberal power structure that merges old components of the nation-state with contemporary forms of corporate transnationalism defined by narcissism.[1] I discussed its mechanisms of slow and fast violence, normalized through policy and legislation, and examined how art institutions can be both complicit and critical. In the past year, a prominent characteristic of this type of power and its forms of violence was made brutally visible through the emergence of Covid-19, and the diminishing of care at all levels of services in many countries. To continue an analysis of NAS in light of these developments, I want to ask what this year's events mean in relation to the politics of care and their legacies, and how the art institution is implicated.

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The various forms of care provided by the welfare state model have been dismantled: health care, especially for the disenfranchised, the poor, and the unemployed; care of the mentally and physically differently abled, the elderly, and victims of domestic abuse; and on a more conceptual

level, the care provided by social justice, intersectional alliances, collective rights, and environmental justice. While depriving citizens of care, NAS nonetheless capitalizes on the individualist notion of care, widely promoted as "self-care" through an industry with billions in revenues. By "leaning-in" and taking care of oneself, contemporary subjectivities of the so-called "developed" world are tasked with the care of their overworked bodies, but are less and less interested in the well-being of bodies that are outside of the immediate realm of their family, class, workplace, city, country, and continent. They are further burdened with individual responsibility for their own care, since care has lost its character as a human right and has become a paid service.

Through a complete disregard for the politics and ethics of care, contemporary power clearly desires to banish the commons from collective consciousness. And I suspect that this desire is not only related to the classic NAS rhetoric of managing financial losses and "tidying up" one's economy. It is also a strategic and premeditated effort to quell any possibility for people to gather, discuss, organize, and effectively resist the nativist narratives, "alternative facts," and violent realities it aims to impose. I will discuss the conceptualization of care and the problems that arise from the feminization of care in contemporary society, but I will also examine the new typologies of "care" practiced by those who decide to live and organize themselves *otherwise*— and who pave the way for imagining and practicing alternative forms of collective caring.

1. Some Comments on the His-tory of Care

The word "care" derives from the Latin *cura*, which according to some linguists refers to a mythological figure known as Cura. The myth of Cura is found in the writings of first-century Roman author Gaius Julius Hyginus, who documented the oral histories of his time in his book *Fabulae* (Myths).[2]

Fabulae consists of some three hundred very short myths that might otherwise be lost to history, and is valuable for its references to authors of Greek tragedy such as Aeschylus. There are very few manuscripts of *Fabulae* left, and only parts of the original book survive, with the first translation from 1535 found in the library of a Bavarian monastery; another fragment is today in the Vatican library. The myths of the past are kept in the safes of patriarchal religiosity.

The myth of Cura tells the story of the creation of the first human. Cura, a female goddess, creates the figure of a man from clay. The god Zeus arrives on the scene and Cura asks him to give the lifeless figure a soul and a spirit, and for it to carry her name. Zeus grants her first wish, but in true patriarchal fashion insists that the new man bear his name. At this point the goddess Earth appears, also claiming that the figure should be named after her, since its body was created from her soil. The decision is left to the fourth deity that appears, Cronus, who decides that Cura will own the entity throughout its life, Zeus can have the spirit of the figure after its death, and Earth can keep its body. The name Cronus decides upon is *homo* (human), because the being was made from *humus*, soil.

This typical fable from antiquity carves out the dual character of care. Cura forms and "owns" humans but also carries their burden. In Latin, *cura* had a double meaning. On the one hand it signified worries and anxiety due to the stress of having to care for things and people and being burdened by responsibilities. On the other hand it signified what is commonly known as care today: the satisfaction of caring for others, the word having a positive connotation of devotion to caring for someone or something.

The myth of Cura, and the dual meaning of the Latin word, is revived in the writings of philosopher Martin Heidegger. In his seminal *Being and Time*, he equates Cura with his own concept of Dasein (Being-in-the-world).[3] Heidegger extracts and highlights the role of Cura as a creator, very much opposite to the dominant traditional Christian genealogies of man proposed up to that time. Thus Heidegger breaks with the accepted and normalized notion of woman as God's second creation after man, incapable of creation herself. Yet his understanding of care is limited by the singular logic of individual versus society. Heidegger's Dasein is an entity that is structurally "with" others but separated from them.[4] He seems to propose an ethics of care—that is, a cultivation of the self through the act of care—but does not understand or analyze care as a collective endeavor and way of being.

Care is the most important component of Heidegger's explanation of Being-in-the-world. But the word for "care" in German— *Sorge*—also means "worry" or "concern."On a first reading, his definition of care seems to challenge the common understanding of care, albeit from an individual perspective; care is an act by one individual upon others, and is a form of "betterment of the self" (both through the care for oneself and the care for others). But looking at Heidegger today, I cannot help but wonder whether his conception of care stops at the individual's relation with the world and others, whether he is at all interested in the potential and power of collective care. Dasein is described as the idea of "being-with-others," but Heidegger also refers to the limitations imposed by these others. It is possible that Heidegger (and other thinkers and writers after him) prepared the ground for the concept of care to be looked at solely through an analysis of the individual and his/her relationship to others rather than as a collective practice to begin with. Such academic legacies of Eurocentric thought may have laid the groundwork for the "good charitable" care of neoliberal subjectivities today.

Petra Bauer & SCOT-PEP, Workers!, 2018. Film still. Photo: Caroline Bridges.

In contrast, feminist theorists and activists have focused in recent decades on the idea of care as a collective responsibility and collective act, performed and embodied by a community. Throughout history this position has been the cornerstone of indigenous knowledges and practices. Building on these existing knowledges and practices, contemporary feminisms enact collective care. One such example is found in the collective care performed by Women on Waves, a Dutch NGO founded by Rebecca Gomberts, which provides tool kits for nonsurgical self-abortion as well as early abortion services and education to women in countries with restrictive abortion laws. With their so-called Abortion Ships, Women on Waves takes advantage of laws defining international waters and borders, to sail between countries where abortion is illegal. Another example of collective medical care is the Catalan collective GynePunk, which provides women with pap smear tests, DIY and DIT (do-it-together) tool kits, diagnostic lab tests, and techniques structured on what they term "ancestral body wisdom."[5] The latter echoes the traditions of many First Nations and indigenous peoples and the way they understand and care for their community and for nature. Māori notions such as *manaakitanga* (caring for and supporting others) and *kaitiakitanga* (caretaking for the environment and people) are always discussed as collective practices. In the words of Mexican indigenous filmmaker Jade Begay, "Now more than ever it is imperative for us to decolonize from individualism and reconnect with ways of community care."[6]

As is the case with GynePunk, collective care often derives from and is inspired by various premodern (or non-Western modern, or other-than-modern) traditions and non-patriarchal social structures, some characterized by matriarchal relations, where the sharing of care at all levels of human activity—perhaps extending also to the nonhuman realm—shapes the way people understand and exist in the world. The political subjectivity of certain indigenous groups in Guatemala, for instance, is perceived as "a collective and community one, not a liberal one in which an individual citizen exists, represented and protected by the State," in the words of theorist and activist Gladys Tzul.[7] This also translates into the way subjects understand themselves; the politics and ethics of care are less about the burden of responsibility, or the idealistic and "charitable" act of care that makes one a better person, and more about collective joy and

fulfilment. Patriarchy and NAS have tried to erase and sideline these histories as much as possible. Thus, the current structures of society, shaped by the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, the Industrial Revolution, and globalization, have caused many to understand care more as an individual responsibility than a collective joy.

Collage made by women for International Women's Day, March 8, 2017. Copyright: Melissa Center for Migrant Women, Athens.

2. Diminishing Care and its Feminization

The sidelining of the collective joy of care, and the absence of state-provided care on all fronts, has become more visible as a result of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. Given the general decline of care and the propagation of care as an individual and solitary act, care and its labor have been systematically undervalued for much longer than just this year. Patriarchal societies, especially since the seventeenth century, have made sure that all forms of labor linked with care are widely identified with women and their supposed innate desire to facilitate care for their families and communities. Despite the feminist revolution of the 1970s, this belief remains strong to this day, and is continuously revived by the descendants of Phyllis Schlafly and their contemporary Tea Parties.

In this framework, care labor has been treated as a gendered responsibility following from "natural" behavior. From the second wave of feminism to today, many feminist theorists—from Shulamith Firestone and Silvia Federici to Christine Delphy—have highlighted the link between care in the household and productivity in the marketplace, especially with initiatives like Wages for Housework. Some forty years later, and with the clarity provided by a global pandemic in turbo-capitalist times, it is even more evident that care labor, whether paid or unpaid, remains feminized. When paid, it is associated with low wages and poor working conditions.[8] As both Silvia Federici and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez have argued, the class that performs this work is the epitome of precarious, and is made up overwhelmingly of women.[9] But even when not performed exclusively by women, this work remains feminized; look, for instance, at the thousands of workers—women and otherwise—employed in new types of care labor during the pandemic, such as delivery people, funeral home assistants, morticians, garbage collectors, sex workers, educators, and nurses.

When it comes to unpaid care labor, the legacies of feminist struggles (mainly in so-called first-world economies) are evident in neoliberal state policies that recognize the monetary value of care work through benefits for nonworking parents and caretakers—although in recent decades such benefits have been reduced or completely cut. An important contribution to understanding this process is the research of scholars Sabrina Schmitt, Gerd Mutz, and Birgit Erbe, in their paper "Care Economies: Feminist Contributions and Debates in Economic Theory."[10] They examine how care is understood and provided through different manifestations of power—state, market, civil society, and household—and how these structures sustain social injustices. They focus on current feminist proposals regarding collective care and its role in shaping new forms of economy; for example, feminist theologian Ina Praetorius has proposed that the decline of the welfare state can be countered by incorporating collective care into government policy. In 2016, Praetorius participated in a three-day workshop organized by the late David Graeber and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, where she argued that care should not be talked about in terms of economic value. She called value a "nineteenth century concept of white male Europeans," which prompted an interesting debate on labor valorization within the care economy.[11]

Unpaid care labor and paid care labor, and the way they are valorized, have become even more closely connected in recent decades. As women from "first-world" economies have entered the waged workforce, their formerly unwaged labor has been passed on to predominantly migrant women from so-called "second-" and "third-world" economies, who face low pay and precarious working conditions, often living in uncertainty with zero-hour and flex-working contracts. Migration and the feminization of labor are inextricably connected. So are the burden of care labor, its low monetary value, and its close relationship to inequality. The need for a fundamental restructuring of care and care work has prompted feminists to organize in movements that call for a care *-ful* society. They critique neoliberal policies and

turbo-capitalism while promoting a feminist commons, a redistribution of power, social justice, and ecological consciousness. One exemplary group is Madrid-based Precarias a La Deriva , founded in 2002. The *derivas* were inspired by the idea of coming together to create a cartography of feminized precarious working and living conditions by sharing experiences and reflections, for common struggle and resistance.[12]

In a 2006 paper, the collective discussed what they call a "physiognomy of the crisis of care," identifying four of its characteristics:

1. "The passage from the Welfare State to ... 'risk management."

2. "The externalization of the home: many of the tasks that were previously conducted in the home now are resolved in the market."

3. "The lack of time, resources, recognition, and desire for taking charge of nonremunerated care."

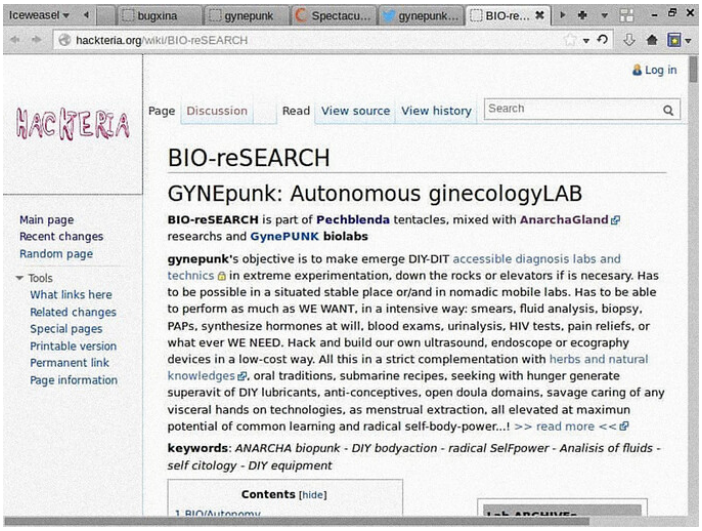
4. "The crisis (and destruction) of worker neighborhoods and their strong sense of community," and "the privatization of public spaces," which hinders the construction of "bonds ... and relationships of solidarity and care."[13]

This last element has been at the forefront of discussions of collective care in the "state of exception" of the pandemic. We can learn a lot from Precarias a La Deriva's proposal for "a care that appears here as a mode of taking charge of bodies opposed to the securitary logic, because, in place of containment, it seeks the sustainability of life and, in place of fear, it bases itself on cooperation, interdependence, the gift, and social ecology."[14]

3. Organizing around Care

What the *derivas* argued in 2006 is even more clear today: the only transformative approach to organizing around the concept of care is through a collective, feminist, intersectional perspective. What we need is a kind of *bureau of care* that care-fully considers care as a collective and structural practice not only for others but *with* others. It is thus crucial to think of organization in a dual sense: to re-organize the thinking processes and theoretical threads of the last decade, but also to organize physically so as to enact collective care.

While many theoretical threads are relevant here, of key importance is to reverse the usual neoliberal, for-profit appropriation of knowledge arising from civil society, indigenous practices, and activism, and avoid translating it into a rigid, theoretical trajectory of collective care. Rather, we must directly look to those who practice collective care today so as to contour, frame, and define their work as a

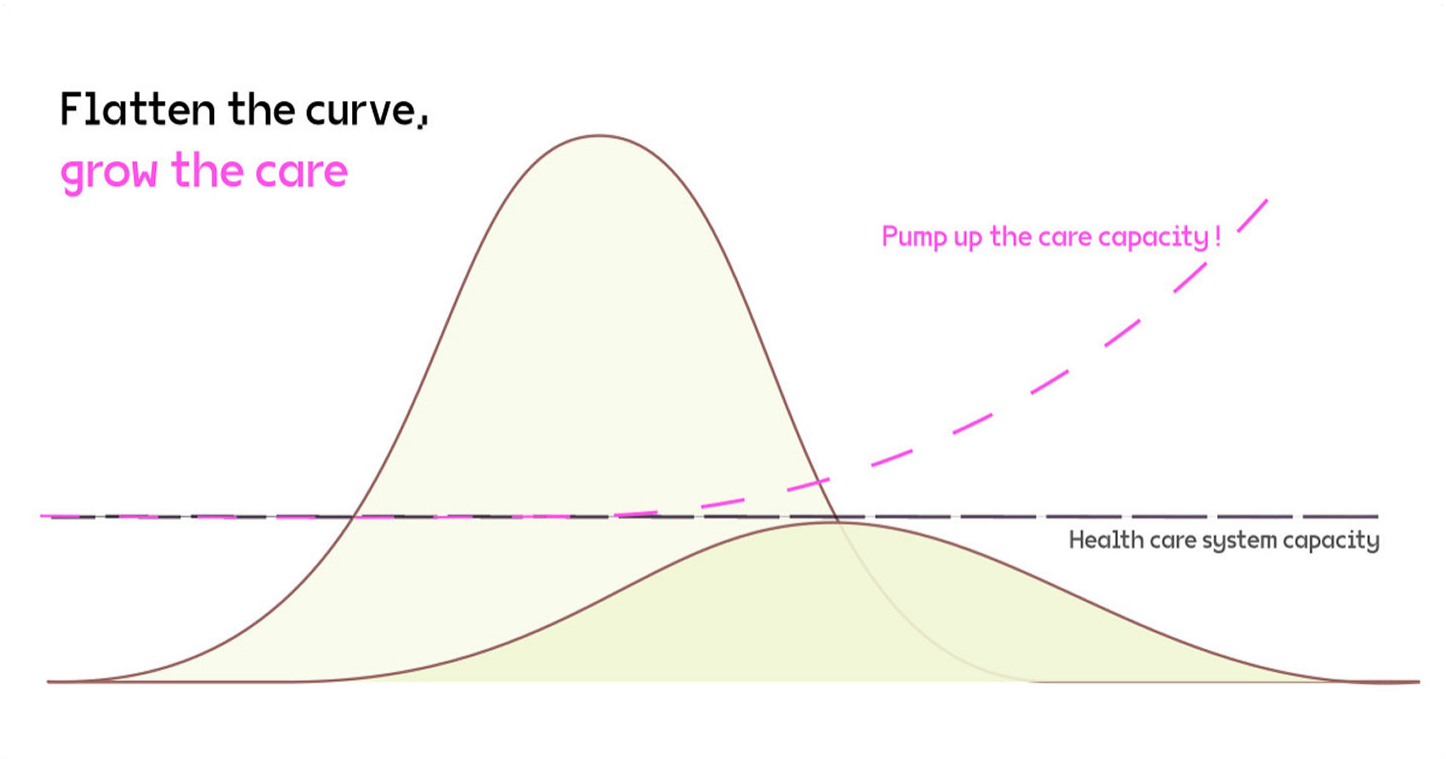


GynePunk's entry at Hackeria.org. See →.

collective care paradigm. From movements and collectives, workers' unions and activist circles, we can "take instructions" on how collective care has been enacted, even as it has been under continuous assault. In my native Greece, initiatives such as the public kitchen set up by O Allos Anthropos, and organizations like the Piraeus Open School for Migrants and Melissa, offer such knowledge.

O Allos Anthropos ("The Other Human") is an organization that refuses to be framed or validated by state or supra-state structures and their funding mechanisms. It is not an official institution and it does not accept state or EU funding; it is supported solely by individual donations and voluntary work. It was started in 2012 by a forty-year-old unemployed man who one day saw two boys fighting over food scraps in an open-air market in his central Athens neighborhood. The next day the man prepared food at his home and returned to the market to share it with others. The initiative grew exponentially; as of this writing more than two thousand volunteers have cooked, shared, and distributed upwards of five million servings of food.

The Piraeus Open School for Migrants has been active since 2005, with the aim of supporting immigrants and refugees residing in Greece through education, training, and cultural activities. It operates on principles of self-organization and communal democracy. All decisions are made by assemblies that include teachers, parents, and students, seeking to "create a broad social front to defend the character of education as a free social good that, as such, will be pluralistic."[15] Similarly, Melissa is a network for migrant and refugee women living in Greece. Founded in September 2014 with the direct involvement of migrant women leaders, it aims to create and sustain bonds among women of different backgrounds, inspired by the word *melissa*, which in Greek means "bee," emphasizing the cooperative character of beehives, and



Graph from the article "Flatten the Curve, Grow the Care" by Pirate Care, 2020.

consequently collective practices of care. Similar examples can be found all over the globe, and are a true indicator of how feminisms focus on collective care as a response to the patriarchal face of NAS.

4. The Politics of Care and the Art Institution

Care and its politics have been a subject of concern to the art world, made all the more urgent by the global pandemic. But is it a real concern that can lead to changes in the way we operate in our institutions and working relationships, or is it merely surface level? How can care, if studied care-fully , provide solutions to the various problems that art institutions and art workers face? How is it that contemporary art institutions are keen—and comfortable—to talk about care when they have been so *care-less*?

The global pandemic has brought the behavior of the care-less institution into the light. In the first months of the pandemic, the most precarious workers at major institutions like the New Museum and the Tate were fired or put on furlough, which prompted strong resistance.[16] The salary disparities between art workers and the heads of their institutions in both the US and Europe reflect the increasing class disparity of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Decisions about the distribution of emergency funds and the way labor is valorized, made by boards and managing directors, have not reflected a politics or ethics of care.[17] Furthermore, for decades institutions have often been care-less in relation to their audiences, failing in their programming to address anyone beyond the specialized and trained art audiences that belong to a certain class. Leaders of institutions have also been callously care-less in their public remarks about contemporary society and identity politics. The global Black Lives Matter movement has called attention to this in 2020, and institutions are now clamoring to prove their "wokeness," often in care-less ways—or worse, they continue to refuse responsibility for their care-lessness through gaslighting, silencing, and sabotaging staff seeking to unionize.

Since 2019 initiatives such as "A Better Guggenheim" have highlighted salary disparities and racial discrimination at major museums. This initiative was prompted by the exhibition "Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story," whose curator Chaédria LaBouvier was not fully acknowledged by the Guggenheim for her curatorial and academic input. This sparked a public debate on the ways the museum has care-lessly addressed (or completely failed to address) racial equality.[18] By investigating misconduct and giving public support to workers who are harmed, initiatives of this kind attempt to provide the collective care that the institutions so abjectly fail to provide. A Better Guggenheim's mission statement articulates "a desire to uplift those who had for so long been subdued and silenced," with the aim of "building the community we wish existed within the museum and offer a path to restorative justice for those disempowered and erased."[19] Identifying and documenting the harmful and

care-less ways these institutions operate, as well as creating a support structure for the precarious workers of institutions, is one crucial form of collective care.

Thankfully, some art institutions—mainly small- and medium-sized ones—are care-fully programming and practicing collective care. Since 2014, Casco Art Institute in the Netherlands has been developing a program of study with artist Annette Krauss, named "Site for Unlearning." It is an ongoing collaborative research project focused on the power structures of the art institution and "how rarely we question the social norms and structures that we internalize, and thereby sustain. Krauss deploys 'unlearning' as a tool to collectively reflect on our habits, so that we can adapt our ways of behaving and thinking towards a more common practice."[20] In similar vein, curator Lucy Lopez researches collective care in relation to the art institution. She cofounded the London-based space Jupiter Woods, which is based on a model of "slow production," and has initiated curatorial research projects that examine "types of exchange and economic relations that are championed and prioritised through the work of small-scale grassroots art organisations."[21]

Artist Petra Bauer has long been a firm believer in a collective approach to film production, inspired by feminist filmmakers who have highlighted the importance of making films *with* their subjects rather than about them. Bauer's film *Sisters!* (2011) was made in collaboration with the Southall Black Sisters, an advocacy service for women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who face abuse or asylum difficulties. Her film *Workers!* (2016) was also a collaborative endeavor, this time with SCOT-PEP, a sex worker–led organization in Scotland. Recently, Bauer founded a collective called the Feminist Research Group. Together with curators and theorists Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Marius Dybwad Brandrud, Binna Choi, Kirsten Lloyd, Frances Stacey, and Marina Vishmidt, the group explores collective practices of care through an intersectional feminist lens. Petrešin-Bachelez, along with fellow curator Elena Sorokina, is also forming alliances through their new Initiative for Practices and Visions of Radical Care.

Other examples abound, sketching a blueprint for future cultural practice. Forensic Architecture has made truth and truth-telling a form of collective care by exposing slow and fast violence. The Rojava Film Commune's collective task has been to spread the ecologically conscious, intersectional-feminist paradigm of the Rojava Revolution outside of Syria's geopolitical borders. The duo of Libia Castro and Olafur Olafsson has been engaged for some years in their project "In Search of Magic – Proposal for a New Constitution for the Republic of Iceland," working with many groups in Olafsson's native Iceland to enact collective care for the polis: they have recently concluded a big demonstration-performance that, together with hundreds of citizens, demanded the reconfiguration of the Icelandic constitution. Artist collective Chto Delat's many projects "based on commoning and [the] solidarity economy," such as "The School of Engaged Art" and the cultural space "Rosa's House for Culture," have the goal of "creating a community of comrades engaging into cultural activity and self-education."[22]

Possibly the most potent collective-care initiative I have encountered recently is the Pirate Care Project. Founded by Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak, Pirate Care is a transnational research network of activists, scholars, and cultural practitioners who stand against the criminalization of solidarity.[23] Since late 2019 they have been documenting numerous efforts and initiatives around the globe that aim to oppose neoliberal policies that dismantle care. They have also organized meetings and a reading group, and in 2021 will present an exhibition identifying the problematics of care as a "global crisis."[24] Their vast research is available on their website and forms an impressive library on the politics and ethics of care.

The examples discussed here show that for art workers, collective care has become an increasingly important paradigm for transforming our working and living conditions. As we take up this work, it is important that we treat activists and care workers from other professional fields as equal partners, or better yet, as *primary* guides, in our efforts to change art institutions. We must move from institutional critique to institutional transformation. For years now institutional critique has identified the problems, but true institutional change has been slow and minimal. The same problems have been popping up since the seventies: salary disparities, class and racial inequality, whiteness, heteronormativity, and so on.

NAS has brought new forms of violence into the mix, creating toxic environments that deplete care as a concept. We need to structure the institution differently, in accordance with the idea of collective care. For instance, imagine a museum where the salaries of all staff members are calculated with the same valorization method used to calculate a director's salary. How can care be enacted by all equally in the institution? Care must be enacted not just by a few people for the sake of others, but on the premise that all will benefit. This may sound romantic and utopian (I blame capitalist patriarchy for vilifying romance and utopia) but it simply requires reworking power structures and responsibilities. We can and should learn from the structures of NGOs, from refugee squats, and from care initiatives that operate outside state systems. These organizational structures are often based on the principle of collective responsibility, showing that working within a group can be more effective for all, not just those explicitly suffering.

While past institutional critique has focused on making inequalities visible, it is now time to actually change our institutions, taking inspiration from intersectional feminist, indigenous, queer, and black struggle and demanding the

redistribution of care. We have to seize the possibilities enabled by the legacies of countless forms of collective care: healers, care workers, parents, social workers, educators, and cultural workers. We must be guided by those who have successfully forged counter-power structures against efforts to quash collective care as a way of being. Taking lessons from existing collectives is necessary for the contemporary art institution to change its current shape, which is somehow still stuck in the nineties. We can start by simply reformulating the way we understand cultural practice: we should experiment with horizontal structures, the collective sharing of knowledge, the collective formulation of programming goals, a real engagement with audiences instead of tin-pot marketing solutions, a reevaluation of the compensation and value of all workers, rotating tasks and leadership roles, sourcing material and workers locally, and using less fossil fuel. And really: less paper. The blueprints were written eons ago. Our task is a matter of implementation. This is how we will dismantle and transform the institutions of old into beehives of collective care.

X

The author would like to thank theorist Hypatia Vourloumis for reminding me of the power of collective joy, the curator Julia Morandeira for introducing me to the work of GynePunk, Pirate Care for their brilliant work, and artist Jonas Staal for introducing me to Rebecca Gomperts and for sharing his current research on collectivization, which informed the ideas in this text.

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Aaron Schuster

Enjoy Your Security: On Kafka's "The Burrow"

This text was co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of four special contributions to e-flux journal *—two texts published in the present November 2020 issue, and two more in the upcoming February 2021 issue. (The other November text in this series is "The Bureau of Care: Introductory Notes on the Care-less and Care-full" by iLiana Fokianaki.) This collaboration aims to expand on the themes raised in the contemporary art festival Survival Kit 11. Titled "Being Safe Is Scary," after a piece by artist Banu Cennetoğlu for Documenta 14, Survival Kit 11 took place in Riga from September 4 to October 4, 2020. It was organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and curated by Katia Krupennikova.*

Exploring the mechanisms shaping the politics of safety, and taking the heavily charged title "Being Safe Is Scary," the festival aimed to establish a continuity of urgent discourse on security and political violence. At the same time, the festival sought to explore how it might be possible to transform the suppositions that undergird this discourse—reconnecting safety to practices of love, intimacy, sharing, commonality, mutual support, attention, care for each other, and care for the environment.

—Editors

The Unbearable Joy of Safety

One of the remarkable things about Franz Kafka's short story "The Burrow" is how much it speaks about pleasure. The words *Freude* (joy), *Lust* (pleasure), *Glück* (happiness), and *genieß en* (to enjoy) pulse through the narrative. From: the "joy in labor" procured by burrowing to the "pure joy" afforded by moments of silence and stillness; "the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness" to the "infinite pleasure" of keeping watch over the burrow's entrance; and the "happy but dangerous hours" spent glutting himself on his stores to the "furious lust" of the approaching beast, "The Burrow" can be read as a kind of treatise on enjoyment. Or to speak like Kafka's philosopher dog, an investigation into the burrow is the surest pathway to the science of enjoyment.

One of Kafka's last stories, written between 1923 and 1924, published posthumously, "The Burrow" is about an unspecified animal—let's call him a mole, for reasons I'll explain later—who digs an elaborate underground fortress to keep himself safe from predators. The burrow is his gated home, but much more than that, it's intimately bound up with the mole's being. To use Kafka's expression from another story, "Blumfeld, An Elderly Bachelor," the burrow is his "life companion." And indeed, at times they seem to form the perfect couple: "I and the burrow belong so indissolubly together"; "You belong to me, I to you, we are united; what can harm us?"[1] At one point the mole even literally embraces the burrow, hugging the outer walls of a special inner chamber, a

Wenceslaus Hollar, Dead Mole, 1646. Etching; 2 3/4 × 5 1/2 in. Photo: CC0/Wikimedia Commons

burrow-within-the-burrow that he calls the "Castle Keep." Yet this ecstatic union betrays a painful split. In fact, the burrow that is meant to keep him safe only multiplies the possible dangers. Despite his concerted efforts, the defenses can never be perfected, there is always more work to be done, new threats to be countered; the longed-for peace is perpetually postponed. What is more, mole and burrow are so closely identified that the latter becomes something like a second skin, the protective armor an extension of his own body. But, this only serves to make him newly vulnerable since "any wound to it hurts me as if I myself were hit."[2] The protection itself needs protection. Safety measures must be safeguarded. Yet even the mole's meta-defensive plans are ultimately futile, since the Enemy is already inside. Evil has penetrated the burrow, in the form of a persistent whistling sound, a slight but extremely disturbing noise that won't go away, and that drives the mole crazy with his attempts to locate its source, even causing him to tear apart his own abode. The burrow is at once himself, his closest companion, and his fiendish enemy. The burrow is unbearably the mole who digs himself deeper into it.

Reading the story today, it's hard not to think of those luxury "burrows" being built in decommissioned missile silos for the protection of the ultrarich, or other gated palaces in which elites plan to sequester themselves from coming calamities. More generally, what *The Trial* and *The Castle* are for bureaucracy and legal procedure, "The Burrow" is for security architecture and surveillance: it dramatizes the will-to-safety, and its obverse, the anxiety of precarity and risk, that so dominate modern life and politics. Kafka analyzes, with clinical precision, what might be called the neurosis of security (a Freudian will recognize here a model of obsessional neurosis), with its fear of the enemy, its insatiable need for defenses and its imperative of constant vigilance—as well as its agonizing uncertainty, its postponed grand plans, and its vacillation. If someone were to ask point-blank "What is the burrow?," I believe there are four possible responses: it's an architectural edifice, a psychic structure, a speculative system, and a social-political diagnosis—one could add others: it's also a sound laboratory, and a pleasure machine. For the mole, however, it's simply "home." Although, in what will be a series of uncanny reversals, his mania to defend the homeland dominates and destroys his very sense of home.

Like many of Kafka's stories, nothing much happens in "The Burrow"—yet a whole universe is compressed into this "nothing much." The text consists of the unrelenting monologue of the narrator-mole, whose feverish rationality and speculative drive never slacken, even when contemplating rest and silence. It's almost as if the text were trying to bury the reader under its sheer rigor. You might start to worry that this discourse will never end—why should it?—and that you'll be trapped within the labyrinthine cogitations of the mole for eternity, like the Hunter Gracchus condemned to non-death. In fact, the text does end: it suddenly breaks off, mid-sentence. The original reads: *aber alles blieb unver ä ndert, das* (no period). Usually the last floating "das" is removed, giving

the story some semblance of closure: "But all remained unchanged (period)," in the Muirs' rendition.[3] Yet it also feels uncannily appropriate that the story is simply broken off, unfinished, as if this were the only adequate non-ending to its nonstop neurotic reason. On the other hand, it is said that Kafka did write an ending for the story, a final showdown with the beast. Critics usually reject this as implausible since it is far too literal, mistaking a psychodrama for actual combat. If one wanted to think along these lines, however, there's one other possibility. No one ever suggested, to my knowledge, that the mole was surprised by the beast and killed, mid-thought.

The Impossible Gaze

"The Burrow" can be divided into two main parts, with some preliminary pages that introduce the mole and his burrowing project. In the first, the mole exits the burrow, and gazes upon his creation from the outside. The second consists in the mole's struggle with an Enemy or enemies whose presence is signaled by a troubling sound.

Let's take these up in turn. Leaving and returning to the burrow are major ordeals, which bring up all sorts of questions, doubts, reveries, and conundrums concerning the mole's relation to his beloved abode. Exiting and entering raise the thorny issue of the boundary, the border between inside and outside, which reanimates the mole's anxieties and puts under pressure his defensive system. The mole leaves only with trepidation, but once outside he finds it even more difficult to come back in; the whole drama accentuates his inner conflict or division. Of course, the mole needs to make "occasional short excursions" to review the burrow's exterior and carry out improvements, plus he can also hunt while outdoors, but these pragmatic motivations are the pretext for a more devious and perilous game.[4] The question is: Why should he ever exit the burrow? "Can there be any reasonable grounds for such a step?"[5] "You live in peace, warm, well nourished, master, sole master of all your manifold passages and rooms, and all this you are prepared—not to give up, of course—but to risk it, so to speak."[6] The mole acknowledges there is something irrational and extravagant in his behavior, which cannot be explained by practical considerations or a utilitarian calculus.

What drives the mole is the fascination of the burrow's moss-camouflaged entrance; he installs himself in a nearby vantage point and watches over it "for whole days and nights."[7] This constant surveillance, he says, "gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me" ("an unspeakable joy," *eine unsagbare Freude*, in the original).[8] Furthermore: "At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at myself sleeping, and had the joy of being in a profound slumber and simultaneously of keeping vigilant guard over myself."[9] He continues: "Sometimes I have been seized by the childish desire never to return to the burrow again, but to settle down somewhere close to the entrance, to pass my life watching the entrance, and gloat perpetually upon the reflection—and in that find my happiness—how steadfast a protection my burrow would be if I were inside it."[10] The mole enjoys in a peculiar conditional mode. From outside the burrow, he *enjoys the enjoyment* he imagines he would feel if he were safe inside the burrow. The peculiar thing is that this second-degree enjoyment is better—*unspeakably* more enjoyable—than the mere experience of enjoyment. He would rather "gloat perpetually" on his hypothetical happiness than actually be happy, even though this means exposing himself to danger. We are squarely in the realm of fantasy.

Enjoying enjoyment is better than the thing itself—why? What fantasy offers that mere life cannot is the added (or surplus) joy of *possessing* one's enjoyment. One of the essential features of enjoyment is self-loss; pleasure involves a surrender of the self, the absorption of the ego within an anonymous stream of sensations and impulses, a giving way to something that is beyond one's conscious control. To enjoy is to lose yourself in whatever it is you are enjoying. In every pleasure there is a dimension of passivity and a relinquishing of self-mastery. In fantasy, this loss is itself objectified and visualized in a mise-en-scène. What is possessed in fantasy is not only some dreamed-of enjoyment but, more profoundly, one's dispossession. The self becomes the witness to its own disappearance, it stages and controls its own loss of control, and this *impossible* gaze is what is so fascinating and enjoyable (and itself can become compulsively uncontrollable). Pleasure can only be "infinite" or "unspeakable" when it touches on the impossible. To see oneself enjoying is to capture, from the outside, what cannot be captured and what spells the disappearance of the self. Kafka's mole expresses this with great lucidity. Gazing at the entrance of the burrow, he imagines himself nice and cozy—asleep—inside it. In the mole's fantasy he is simultaneously present and absent, awake and asleep; more precisely, he is present to witness his absence. He is both the vigilant guardian, ever on the lookout for dangers, and the slumbering civilian, lost in unconsciousness and without a care in the world. Fantasy is the bridging of this split. Total surveillance and blissful disappearance are magically united; feverish activity coincides with absolute restfulness; watchful self-presence goes together with peaceful oblivion. In fantasy, you can have it all—not in the sense of having all the goods you can imagine, but of synthesizing the contradiction. And while this fantasized enjoyment is totally extravagant, it also has an *ascetic* quality. For the sake of this pleasure, the mole willingly sacrifices the comfort and safety of his burrow; he even imagines never returning to the burrow, but dreamily spending his days in a makeshift ditch beside it.

Now the mole is a bit embarrassed by all this. He admits, again quite lucidly, that his is a "childish desire," and that inevitably he's "roughly awakened" from these "childish dreams."[11] Taking his self-criticism one step further, the

mole observes that not only is there something infantile about his fantasy, but dangerously deceptive as well.

> No, I do not watch over my own sleep, as I imagined; rather it is I who sleep, while the destroyer watches.[12]

This is a haunting line, one of the most powerful in the story. Let me cite some other translations: "No, I'm not watching over my own sleep, as I thought I was; rather I'm the one who's asleep, while my destroyer awaits" (Michael Hofmann); or "No, I'm not the one, though I thought I was, who watches me sleeping; rather I am the one who sleeps while the one who wants to deprave me watches" (Stanley Corngold); or else "No, I do not watch over my sleep, as I imagined, it is me who is sleeping while the spoiler lurks with wakeful vigilance" (Peter Wortsman).[13] Who or what is this strange entity that gives the lie to the mole's *vigilant somnolence*, the "destroyer," the "depraver," the "spoiler," *der Verderber*? Kafka never uses this term again in the story, it's a *hapax legomenon* that stands out as a name (the best name?) for what will be otherwise referred to as the enemy or the beast. The mole doesn't watch himself (sleeping), but is watched by something else, and the presence of this other gaze "spoils" his enjoyment. Safety turns to vulnerability, pleasure to anxiety. There is a sense of corruption, ruination, spoliation; something's rotten in the state of the burrow. But this does not so much spell the end of fantasy—the mole's supposed awakening—as the continuation of fantasy in another form. What starts as the mole's impossible gaze morphs into the evil eye of the Other; the mole now envisions himself asleep while being spied on by the Spoiler. These two fantasies are intertwined. Underlying the imagined scene of self-surveillance is the mortal threat, the danger against which all the burrow's defenses are deployed. No enjoyment of security without a threat. Who or what is the Spoiler? It could be any of the creatures traipsing by, oblivious to the burrow's disguised entrance, or maybe just feigning obliviousness, waiting for the right moment to strike. The Spoiler can't be pinned down to a particular figure. The gaze of the enemy also has a fantasmatic quality: it is a floating gaze, both everywhere and nowhere.

System and Subject

It's almost painfully comical: the mole leaves his elaborate and carefully constructed fortress only to install himself in an "experimental burrow" next door, which is nothing more than a hole barely big enough for him to squeeze into.[14] The whole episode reads like an illustration of Kierkegaard's great line about the futility of philosophical systems (where he refers, of course, to Hegel): "In relation to their systems most systematisers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by; they do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings."[15] Interestingly enough, Kafka's biographer Reiner Stach hit on the same idea in his description of the scene: "There is a touch of insanity here. It is like constructing a magnificent mansion, then camping next to it."[16]

Kafka's burrow is a "burrow of thought," a speculative system. The mole is like the Hegelian philosopher who constructs an all-encompassing system but lives outside it; there's no place for him in the absolute. That is the fatal flaw in the grand design. The system can comprehend everything, except for the singular subjectivity who builds it. It's a Kierkegaardian either/or: one must choose, either system or subject, either system or life, either system or humanity—or, in other words, either Hegel or Kierkegaard. "In the confessional a Hegelian can with all due solemnity say: I do not know whether I am a human being—but I have understood the system. For my part, I would rather say: I know that I am a human being and I know that I have not understood the system."[17] (This opens up a third possibility, which is perhaps more conducive to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*: I haven't understood the system, and I don't know whether I'm a human being; indeed, maybe I'm a mole). Now, this is rhetorically effective but it's not Kierkegaard at his most philosophically sophisticated. Kafka was a great admirer of Kierkegaard, and it might be tempting to see the story as a demonstration of the folly of system-building, which it surely is. (One wonders if Kafka knew this passage from Kierkegaard's journals). But I would argue that Kafka goes a step further than Kierkegaard, outlining a more complex and nuanced—one could say, dialectical—relationship between system and subject. Ironically, it's precisely where system and life radically diverge—at the point of their impossible intersection—that enjoyment insinuates itself, gets its grip on the subject—without this underlying impossibility, enjoyment would lose its delectable sting, its electric charge. It's where life doesn't fit into the system that it becomes most attached to the system.

This is spelled out more clearly in a later scene. The logic of the episode outdoors is repeated after the mole has descended back into the burrow. The division between inside and outside is now transposed *inside* the burrow itself, through its splitting into an inner sanctum—the Castle Keep—and the outer labyrinth. Between these two there is a little "free space," *ein Hohlraum*, a hollow or cavity, and it's this *gap* that is the mole's most cherished abode. "I had always pictured this free space, and not without reason, as the loveliest imaginable haunt."[18] This space between-two-walls, *l' entre-deux-murs*, to echo Lacan's *l' entre-deux-morts*, is key to the burrow's topology. The mole situates himself neither inside nor outside but in a null zone, the wiggle room of the limit. And like the famous play-within-a-play, it's in the mole's relation to the burrow-within-the-burrow that his true relation to the burrow is revealed.

> What a joy to lie pressed against the rounded outer wall, pull oneself up, let oneself slide down again, miss one's footing and find oneself on firm earth, and play all those games literally upon the Castle Keep and not inside it; to avoid the Castle Keep, to rest one's eyes from it whenever one wanted, to postpone the joy of seeing it until later and yet not have to do without it, but literally hold it safe between one's claws, a thing that is impossible if you have only an ordinary open entrance to it; but above all to be able to stand guard over it, and in that way to be so completely compensated for renouncing the actual sight of it that, *if one had to choose between staying all one's life in the Castle Keep or in the free space outside it, one would choose the latter*, content to wander up and down there all one's days and keep guard over the Castle Keep.[19]

This is the secret of the drive for security: its goal is not the calm and peacefulness granted by a sense of safety, but the surplus enjoyment generated by the security apparatus itself. To gaze upon it, to contemplate it, to hold it in your paws, to play little seductive games with it, to slide one's body against it. Kafka's mole quite literally makes love to a wall. On a political level, it's hard to imagine a sharper parody of contemporary wall-building enthusiasts than this little scene of architectural fornication.

Freud famously described the drive as a force that is initially bound up with an instinctual need but spins off from it and becomes independent. In the example of the baby feeding at the breast, the satisfaction of hunger gives rise, as a kind of by-product, to a pleasure localized in the lips and tongue, what Freud calls "sensual sucking." The oral drive then breaks free from its initial context and searches for sucking pleasure irrespective of any vital exigency. The mole's burrowing pleasure is the security equivalent of sensual sucking—Kafka gives us a portrait of "sensual security," as it were. The security drive breaks away from its putative purpose—namely, providing safety—to become an autonomous end in-itself and a self-reflexive pursuit. Hence the mole's funny obsession with guarding that which is meant to guard him. Protected and protector trade places. He is the one to safekeep the Castle Keep. And the mole is even willing to expose himself to danger to defend his defenses. He expresses this in the form of a hypothetical choice (which, again, repeats his "childish" outdoors fantasy, though without the embarrassment): would it be better to stay forever within the safety of the Castle Keep, or to be forever banished from it and keep vigil on its border? The mole chooses exile. This has a certain theological resonance: the lesson is that it's better to be the gatekeeper of paradise than one of its inhabitants—for keeping watch over paradise already *is* paradise. The Kafkian universe is typically identified with the image of the man whose access to the Law, the Castle, or the Sovereign is blocked by a guardian or gatekeeper, but here we get the guardian's perspective. Paradise is the name for an (inaccessible) emptiness whose Idea we enjoy by protecting it against the (imagined) Spoiler. We cannot enjoy paradise directly; *renunciation* is the pathway to enjoyment.

This brings us back to the question of the relationship between system and subject. The subject creates an elaborate and all-encompassing system, but its place inside it is a non-place, an internal cavity or space "between the walls." It's only from this gap that the subject can fantasize about the loveliness of the absolute. This is the duplicitous structure of fantasy, which is both the crack and the concealer, the hole and the whole. (And indeed, the status of this gap is purely virtual, it does not actually exist; the margin of "free space" between the burrow and the Castle Keep is a dream, it's how the mole pictures his homiest "home"). What cannot be contained by the system is the enjoyment that is secreted by it. Not because this enjoyment is too dynamic, too vibrant, or too vital to be captured within its confines—the *becoming* of life versus the *being* of the system—but because enjoyment is rooted in the system's null-point, its void. Kafka's metaphysical principle: no system without a gap, no castle without a shack. System and subject are not so much counterposed as they are paradoxically entangled. The enjoyment of the Absolute-System, which is *possible* only from the *impossible* (de-absolutizing) point within it, is precisely what binds system and subject together. Instead of either/or, we have *both* Hegel *and* Kierkegaard—if read through Kafka.

Barely Audible, or From Gaze to Voice

But the danger is still out there. Back in the burrow, after taking a long nap, the mole's peace is soon disturbed by a peculiar sound, "an almost inaudible whistling noise."[20] It is "a faint whistling, audible only at long intervals, a mere nothing."[21] But this mere nothing won't go away, and its very faintness makes it all the more present and disturbing. Indeed, the way it comes to completely dominate the mole's existence, turning his carefully constructed world inside out, it's as if the sound were deafening in its near-inaudibility. This is the mole's new obsession, studying the noise, dissecting its nuances, speculating about its meaning, and trying to pin down its source. "The Burrow" traces a shift from the visual to the sonic register. If the earlier part of the story turned around the impossible gaze, the mole's fantasy of watching himself sleeping, the subsequent and most extended part concerns the mole's fantasy of the Other, insofar as this Other is manifested by a minimal sound, an almost imperceptible voice, that cuts through the burrow's defenses in a single stroke. From gaze to voice: this is the structuring principle of the story, its conceptual arc. The Spoiler now takes the form of an uncanny acoustic phenomenon that destroys the mole's tranquility and

reveals the vanity of the burrow and its protective architecture. Before its fading tone "the great burrow stands defenseless."[22] This also confirms a key element of Lacan's dialectic of desire, namely that the voice is the partial object (*object a*) closest to the unconscious.

"I start on my investigations."[23] How does the burrower proceed? Interestingly enough, much of his investigatory work is done in the conditional mode—he thinks a tremendous amount about what he *could do* and what the likely results of these various strategies *would be*. The mole's investigations (like the bulk of his life) are a massive thought experiment, a "burrow of thought." His thinking about the noise can be summarized in six logical steps. First, he posits that the sound is produced by the "small fry," annoying little creatures that scurry about in the burrow, and which make up part of his diet. But he quickly dismisses this possibility, since the small fry have always been around, and the noise is something new. Second, he decides the sound must be coming from "some animal unknown to me," and not a single animal but a "whole swarm."[24] He imagines that these animals are a bit bigger than the small fry; yet if that's the case, it's strange that he's never encountered them. This leads to the third hypothesis: the invading animals must be much smaller than the small fry, and it's their tininess that makes them so hard to detect. Here the mole does act, he starts defacing his home, digging up the rooms and passageways and sifting through the clump of dirt, looking for evidence of these almost imperceptible invaders. But the search for the "very tiny fry" proves fruitless, and so he envisions a new tack. Fourth, he will dig a single trench, leading in a beeline outward from the Castle Keep, not stopping till he hits the noise's source. This could be called the Cartesian option: like the philosopher's advice that when lost in the forest, the best method is to choose one direction to walk in and stick to it unwaveringly, so the mole will hunt down the sound along a single decisive path. However, this rationalist solution gets postponed and he's diverted by another idea. Fifth, the mole declares a wildly ambitious project: he will redesign the entire defensive architecture of the burrow, for only such a total renovation could hope to counter the security breach. Of course it's "too late" for this—it's always been too late.[25] The time is never right for the masterpiece, everything conspires against its possibility, it persists precisely as a missed chance. One is left with provisional projects, flawed attempts, minor experiments: life takes place in a gaping "meanwhile," in the interim time of the regrettably unachieved masterpiece. This is the neurotic fantasy of perfection, the dream of "a completely perfect burrow."[26] Finally, sixth, the mole comes to a definitive conclusion about the sound's origin. It is emanating not from a swarm of animals, but from "a single big one."[27] This unknown beast is "dangerous beyond all one's powers of conception"—instead of a multiplicity, he is the sum of all fears.[28] This fiendish animal is like a massive boring machine, furiously tunneling through the earth, and it's his gulps of air that produce the indelible whistling sound.

With "The Burrow," Kafka—an enormously talented and prolific complainer—composed one of the greatest noise complaints in the history of literature. Even as he loathes it, the mole is the aficionado of this noise, which, as he says, "is always a matter of the subtlest shades."[29] He is yearning for stillness and silence, yet captivated by a "mere nothing" (which, at the same time, is everything) posed at the very limit between sound and silence, flickering at the edge, one could say, between being and non-being. This could be a fruitful starting point for reflecting on the nature of noise, sound, music, and voice—Mladen Dolar has magisterially developed this line, proposing a new ontology of the border or the edge based on Kafka's "burrow of sound."[30] The whistling sound also connects "The Burrow" with other stories, notably "Investigations of a Dog," with its concert of the dogs and its science of music, and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk"—the mole also characterizes the whistling sound as a "piping" (*Pfeifen*), exactly the same word used to describe Josephine's peculiar singing. These three stories, from Kafka's final period, form a sort of unmusical-musical trio. But the mole is neither an artist, like Josephine, nor a theorist, like the dog. He's an *architect*, that is, a system builder. And the "old architect" is faced with both his deep attachment to and the endemic failure of his system—or better, his attachment to its failure.[31]

Let us come back to the question of the mole's enjoyment, the way *he loves his security as himself*. Who is the mole's life companion? Clearly, it's the burrow, but the mole's relationship to the burrow is complicated, and involves a number of other (hypothetical or fantasmatic) figures. For example: during his escapade outdoors, he imagines having someone whom he could trust to keep watch over the entrance. On second thought, however, this hypothetical helper creates more problems than he solves. Would the mole have to perform a counter-service for him? Or, invite him as a guest into the burrow (horrible prospect)? And wouldn't he need supervision? "It is comparatively easy to trust anyone if you are supervising him or at least can supervise him; perhaps it is possible even to trust someone at a distance; but completely to trust someone outside the burrow when you are inside the burrow, that is, in a different world, that, it seems to me, is impossible."[32] (The problem of the supervisor and the office assistant, treated in "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor" returns here). Later there's another phantom companion: at one glorious point, the mole thinks that the whistling has stopped, and, overjoyed, he runs into the Castle Keep as if to tell someone the good news. "I want first to find someone to whom in all good faith I can confide it."[33] Joy needs a confidant: this is itself an interesting proposition, another mystery for the science of enjoyment. Why do we need to tell our happiness to one another? Is there something about intense joy that requires a witness to verify its veracity, to confirm that it really happened? Or is this confiding of joy even more enjoyable than joy itself? There's one more instance of a neighbor: when reflecting

on the nature of the intrusive sound, the mole recalls a precedent for it in the past. Early on, at the beginning of his construction work, he also encountered a strange whistling noise, which he attributed at the time to "some kind of burrowing similar to my own."[34] A remarkable thought occurred to him: "Perhaps I am in somebody else's burrow."[35] Suddenly there appears a topological reversal, a displacement of inside and outside; his burrow could be enveloped by another's. Is the Other outside him, or is he inside the Other? The subject and the Other are entangled in a dizzying Escher-like loop.[36]

The assistant, the confidant, the other burrower—these are the virtual characters that populate the mole's solitude. But they are also rejected by him, in the name of a self-satisfied self-sufficiency. He is a lonely bachelor-mole who admits that "I have no right to complain that I am alone and have nobody that I can trust."[37] "I can only trust myself and my burrow."[38] But can he even trust the burrow? No: the beast, or the noise of the beast, is already inside, his most "trustworthy" of defenses has betrayed him. His self-sufficiency is a fake. Ironically, it's in the solitude of the burrow that the mole encounters the ultimate Other, his most fiendish enemy and his most intimate companion. What is the mole's relation to the beast? The crux of the problem is summed up in the line: "The decisive factor will be whether the beast knows about me, and if so what it knows."[39] Knowledge is key. Is the beast oblivious to the mole? Indifferent? Hostile? Does it know of the existence of the burrow? Its layout? What does it want? Or does it want nothing? Is it playing with the mole? Planning an attack? Will it just pass by? Would it be possible to come to an understanding with the beast? To make a treaty with it? Although "The Burrow" would seem to evoke a paranoid world of suspicion and conspiracy, the mole's uncertainty and indecisiveness place him in the universe of neurosis.[40] If certainty is the hallmark of madness, uncertainty, hesitation, and doubt are the (dubious) privilege of the neurotic. Kafka identifies knowledge—the knowledge of the Other—to be the battlefield of neurosis; this problem of knowledge will be treated in a more theoretical manner by the philosopher dog. But Kafka's mole is not too neurotic. There is even a moment when he experiences a kind of reconciliation: "I have reached the stage where I no longer wish to have certainty."[41] He doesn't know the Other's intentions or desire, but he can also live with this not-knowing and not be completely overwhelmed or paralyzed by it.

What, then, is the mole's blind spot? To put it simply, his own complicity or investment in the forces he is struggling against. Is this not the secret behind the weird noise: the insistent whistling sound is the echo of the mole's own uncanny animation, that is, his enjoyment? (Critics like to point out the autobiographical reference to Kafka's tubercular wheezing; he named his cough "the beast"). That is why I proposed calling the narrator of "The Burrow" a mole: the story has the shape of a spy hunt, where the infiltrating "mole" turns out to be the agent investigating him. The mole is the beast, and the beast is the mole (or the mole is the beast's "mole"). Security is the invader it fights against. This uncanny identity is hinted at early on in the story, when the mole prowls around the entrance "as if Iwere the enemy spying out a suitable opportunity for successfully breaking in."[42] This doesn't necessarily mean that the beast is not real—there may very well be a predator out there. But the beast's existence or non-existence would not change the fact that the beastly Other is a structural component of the mole's security-complex. The burrow is not merely a reactive phenomenon but a self-organizing reality (i.e. a drive). In the end, subjectivity is the danger "beyond all one's powers of conception." The subject is the Spoiler. There is no "completely perfect burrow," the burrow can never be whole and unspoiled. But, and this is the crucial point, the burrow is not looking for the perfection it purportedly seeks; it thrives on its crises, its failures, its gaps. (Perhaps this is also the secret behind Kafka's "Great Wall of China," with its seemingly senseless and self-defeating gaps). The mole is a kind of victim, but not in the way he imagines. It's as if he were the prey and the burrow were the predator. Like Kafka writes in one of the stunning turnabouts that characterizes his style: "A cage went in search of bird."[43] Or in this case, a burrow went in search of a mole. An uncanny reversal takes place at the heart of enjoyment: it's the burrow that uses the mole for *its* enjoyment. The system enjoys in and through the subject.

While many, indeed most, of Kafka's texts are unfinished, "The Burrow" is a curious exception. It supposedly was finished, but the last pages have been lost. Let's speculate a bit: how could the story have ended? On the one hand, and as much as this sounds like pure Kafka-fandom, it's hard to shake the impression that it's perfect as it is; i.e., as imperfect. "The Burrow" could only be interrupted, broken off; unfinishedness is the burrow's very condition. The abrupt stop might then be viewed as a *Sopranos*-like ending, a sudden cut to black—maybe the answer is that the mole was blindsided by the beast (we'll never know). Another possibility is indicated in the scene where the mole, searching for the swarm of tiny animals supposedly behind the noise, starts digging up and destroying the burrow. Peter Szendy pointed out the link between this scene and the melancholy ending of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), where the sound surveillance expert Harry Caul tears apart his own apartment in a failed bid to uncover a hidden "bug."[44] Isn't Coppola's solution the right one? We could imagine a final passage where the mole calmly surveys the ruins of his self-destructed home, with only the whistling to keep him company. According to the "official" version, reported by Max Brod, as told to him by Dora Diamant, the story ends in a bloody combat with the beast, and the mole's death.[45] Critics generally disregard this ending, as it wreaks of an un-Kafkian realism plus "the death of the narrating consciousness is a narrative impossibility in a first-person story, and Kafka was generally aware of the limitations of the forms in which he wrote."[46] What if, however, this

impossibility were the whole point? In the final battle, the mole would be in the position of *narrating his own death*, that is, he would become the impossible voice of his own demise, just like the fantasized gaze by which he impossibly watches himself sleeping. Instead of a turn to vulgar realism, the end would fully transpose us into fantasy. And isn't the fantasy of living one's death the ultimate fantasy, the fantasy-of-the-end-to-end-all-fantasies? But in order to pull this off, the narrator would no longer have to speak (neurotically) *about* his fantasy, but (psychotically) *from* it: he would have to become the partial object, the unspeakable voice itself would speak. This would approach the style of Beckett.

Building on these ideas, there's still one more possibility. It is suggested by another text, the conclusion of Clarice Lispector's very Kafkian novel *The Passion According to G.H.* What if the mole were to do what Lispector's narrator does and take the "inverse path" through his life-construction? He too could then say "I head toward the destruction of what I built, I head for depersonalization."[47]

The Passion According to G.H. is usually seen as being in dialogue with "The Metamorphosis," as the two are connected by the figure of the cockroach, but its philosophical-poetic reflections on the system, as well as the voice, place it in the orbit of "The Burrow." This would be a "happy ending," not in the sense that mole is finally safe and secure, but that he finds a way out of his deadlock, the security impasse. "My destiny is to search and my destiny is to return empty-handed. But—I return with the unsayable. The unsayable can only be given to me through the failure of my language. Only when the construction fails, can I obtain what it could not achieve."[48] Lispector, like Beckett, inherits the theme of failure from Kafka, but one further twist would need to be added to this. Something must break not only the endless perfecting of the burrow, but the enjoyment of its systemic failure. It's the whole destructing-construction of the burrow that needs to be destroyed. *The failure itself must fail*. If "failing better" means anything, this is it.

X

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1
Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," *Complete Stories* , trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Schocken, 1971), 340, 342. Unless otherwise noted all quotes from the story come from this edition.

2
Kafka, "The Burrow," 355.

3
Stanley Corngold's translation is more accurate: "but everything remained unchanged, the * * *. (Here the story breaks off.)" Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Kafka's Selected Stories* , trans. Stanley Corngold (W.W. Norton, 2007), 189.

4
Kafka, "The Burrow," 331.

5
Kafka, "The Burrow," 333.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 333.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.

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Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.

12
Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.

13
Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Investigations of a Dog and other creatures* , trans. Michael Hoffman (New Directions, 2017), 212; "The Burrow," in *Kafka's Selected Stories* , trans. Stanley Corngold, 171; "The Burrow," in *Konundrum: Selected Prose of Franz Kafka* , trans. Peter Wortsman (Archipelago Books, 2016), 346–347.

14
Kafka, "The Burrow," 336. He sums up his life in the neighboring hole: "I creep into my hole, close it after me, wait patiently, keep vigil for long or short spells, and at various hours of the day, then fling off the moss, issue from my hole, and summarize my observations."

15
Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard* , ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (Harper and Brothers, 1959), 98.

16
Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight* , trans. Shelley Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2014), 22.

17
Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* , ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 260.

18
Kafka, "Burrow," 346.

19
Kafka, "Burrow," 346. Emphasis added.

20
Kafka, "The Burrow," 343.

21
Kafka, "The Burrow," 348–349.

22
Kafka, "The Burrow," 357.

23
Kafka, "The Burrow," 343.

24
Kafka, "The Burrow," 347.

25
Kafka, "The Burrow," 352.

26
Kafka, "The Burrow," 339.

27
Kafka, "The Burrow," 353.

28
Kafka, "The Burrow," 353.

29
Kafka, "The Burrow," 351. A study of Kafka's noise complaints, on par with, if not exceeding Proust's, would be a worthwhile endeavor in its own right. To give a characteristic sample: "How I longed for silence yesterday—complete, impenetrable silence! Do you think I shall ever achieve it as long as I have ears to hear with and a head producing within itself a profusion of the inevitable clamor of life? Silence, I believe, avoids me, as water on the beach avoids stranded fish." Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice* , ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (Schocken, 1973), 496; postcard dated September 8, 1916.

30
See Mladen Dolar, "The Burrow of Sound," *differences* 22, no. 2–3 (2011).

31
Kafka, "The Burrow," 357.

32
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.

33
Kafka, "The Burrow," 350–351.

34
Kafka, "The Burrow," 356.

35
Kafka, "The Burrow," 356.

36
This topological reversal is what interested Jacques Lacan in "The Burrow"; in his words, "man is a burrow animal." See Lacan, *Seminar IX L'identification* (unpublished), session from March 21, 1962. Mladen Dolar comments on this in *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 166–167.

37
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.

38
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.

39
Kafka, "The Burrow," 359.

40
Lorenzo Chiesa made this point in his "The Trojan Castle: Lacan and Kafka on Knowledge, Enjoyment, and the Big Other," *Crisis and Critique* 6, no. 1 (April 2019), 34–35.

41
Kafka, "The Burrow," 358.

42
Kafka, "The Burrow," 337.

43
Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* , ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (Exact Change, 1991), 22.

44
See Peter Szendy, *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage* , trans. Roland Végső (Fordham University Press, 2017), 55.

45
See Max Brod, "Nachtworte des Herausgebers," in Franz Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes: Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlass* (S. Fischer Verlag, 1980), 259.

46
Richard T. Gray, Ruth V. Gross, Rolf J. Goebel, and Clayton Koelb, *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press, 2005), 27.

47
Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* , trans. Idra Novey (Penguin, 2012), 183.

48
Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* , 186.

Simon Sheikh

It's After the End of the World: A Zombie Heaven?

This essay borrows its title from a 1973 Sun Ra live album (*It's After the End of the World*, recorded in Germany in 1970). The phrase is employed here as a short riposte to an opening question or prompt that speculates on the possibility of art after the end of the world. Sun Ra's work, mainly records and concerts developing and defining the genre of free jazz, but which also encompasses poetry, graphics, science fiction, philosophy, and film, is nowadays viewed as constitutive of afrofuturism, imagining a speculative future for Africa beyond and without colonial intervention and violence—that is, the future that never came to be. As such, it is a way of imagining *another* world, and in the case of Sun Ra, an alternative to this world in outer space, on planets like Jupiter and Saturn, places and journeys constantly celebrated in his music. *It's After the End of World* is thus, at first glance, an anomaly in Sun Ra's catalogue in the sense that it is dystopian rather than utopian, indicating that the world has already ended. But, it does posit an *after* the end, meaning not just the end itself, or the end as final and complete, but perhaps as a beginning of something new: an afterlife or a new world, even.

It is in these ways that I will try and discuss the notion of the end, or ends, as they relate to art, theory, and cultural production, and as a way of engaging with the intriguing, if puzzling, quandary of art after the end of the world. This question was posed to me, other writers and artists, and to the public by Eketarina Degot as the discussion platform of the 1st Kyiv Biennial in 2012. The question was contextualized in relation to the global financial crisis from a few years earlier, and the politics of austerity that it brought with it, as well as the apparent lack of alternatives to these measures, resulting, in part, from the fall of real existing communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were the endings of concrete lived experiences and specific life worlds, as we shall see. Degot posed a seemingly simple question, albeit rooted in a specific historical and indeed *art* historical time, which, in turn, added several complications: "Art is quite comfortable with the idea of the end of art. But how can art deal with the end of the world?"[1] In this question, there is both a presumption and a prediction at play. First of all, it assumes that through the course of modernity—with artistic avant-garde movements based in negation and deconstruction—art as we knew it has ended, and indeed contemporary art had become a sort of postmodern endgame celebrating and mourning this end of art. However, this thinking and making with the end, and with endless endings, could also potentially allow for art to consider a larger issue: not just the end of art, but the end of the world in which art could allow itself to end. The end of such a world could allow art to empty itself of preceding historical meanings, and this endgaming could contribute to a speculative postapocalyptic thinking beyond the confines and histories of the art world. Art, instead, could concern itself with the world, as it is now, potentially ending. This proposition hinges on two main: a) the popular motive of apocalypse has not just religious but

Daniel Kaluuya falls into the "sunken place" in the 2017 movie Get Out.

also political significance, in the sense of growing discontent, anxiety, and even unrest—the end of the current status quo is both dreaded and demanded; b) there is a desire to not just wait for this to unfold, but rather to begin now *, before* the ending of the world, to imagine and construct the world to follow the demise of the current hegemony. In short, could the end of the world be viewed in utopian as well as dystopian ways?

After the End and The Last Man

We shall return to how and whether contemporary art truly is comfortable with discussing and theorizing its own demise. First let us investigate the notion of art after the end of the world, and the two figures this proposition conjures up: the figure of the *post-*, something after the event; and the figure of the main event itself, the end of the world, or if you will, *the apocalypse*. If there is to be something like art after the apocalypse, this would mean that something is still present, in whatever form, or that something is still being presented and produced, and possibly made public, whether as a form of signification or de-signification. That something (i.e., art) has a meaning or being after the end of the world, whether symbolically or in actuality. Let us first investigate the latter: that the world has in fact ended, but there is still art, still cultural production. By whom is it produced if the world has ended? What could it possibly mean, moreover, to produce art and culture *after* the end of the world, and thus, presumably, *after* the end of both the natural and the cultural world, of both *bios* and *zoë*, as it were? Would there still be life, or even afterlife, at all? What would it mean to be alive after the end, either as survival or beyond death? Would such a subject still be human, or perhaps rather inhuman or even post-human? In any case, the suggestion of an art after the end of the world implies that there is *someone* around after the end, whether as producer or receiver: that there is transmission of some sort or another, intentional or unintentional.

In the popular imagination of the apocalypse of the twentieth century—from the end(s) after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the fear of nuclear annihilation that followed during the Cold War, to present anxieties over global pandemics and the slow violence of climate change—disaster movies are an often precise symptom of their time and current imagination of the end. However, they are also accurate synthesizers of what the popular imagination speculates will come after, i.e. the day *after* tomorrow. From twentieth-century popular imagination and culture, we know of different figures for such an (after)life. One well-known figure from

Will Smith in the 2007 movie I Am Legend.

Hollywood cinema is the lone survivor, as seen in the 2007 blockbuster *I Am Legend*, the third film adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel of the same name (the previous versions were *The Last Man on Earth* [1964] and *The Omega Man* [1971]). In his incisive comparative analysis of the three films, Slavoj Zižek describe the story line as "yet another fantasy of witnessing one's own absence."[2] The plots of the three movies are fairly simple, albeit with different and complex endings, not just in terms of the interpretations they lend themselves to, and indeed their moralizing function, but also because each points to a different way forward after the end of the world.

In terms of what the three plots share, we begin by following this last person on earth—the last man standing, as it is indeed a *male* protagonist—as he wanders the ruins of our defunct civilization, living out his end days as the last Man. Apparently a virus, to which this man is immune, has wiped out the rest of humanity. In a sense, this is not so much the end of the world, as in the end of the planet, but rather the end of mankind—that is, the end of *our* world, and thus, our worldview. This was meant as a horror story, evidenced by the slogan of the 1964 poster: "Do you dare imagine what it would be like to be the last man on Earth ... or the last woman?" As it turns out, of course, this last man standing is never really alone, but haunted by past and present presences, first in the form of vampiric, zombie-like ghouls (the infected), and later on in the form of a mysterious woman appearing, who may or may not be human, who may or may not be trusted, and, post-Edenic as this setting is, may or may not be desired. And thus, the slogan on the 1971 movie poster, repeated in the 2007 marketing campaign: "The last man alive ... is not alone!" The hero's tasks become evident: fight off the ghouls and save the woman, and by extension mankind. But to do so means sacrificing himself. And so, the moral dilemma of this deeply Christian story and the different endings of the three films attests to what Zižek aptly calls a "gradual ideological regression."[3] Crucially, in all three films, the man is a scientist, but also a warrior, who can provide a possible cure for the virus as well as almost single handedly eradicate the ghouls. In the end, he is always individual, a heroic singular figure towering above all the others, and indeed *the other* as such.

However, as Zižek also points out, the endings of the films carry drastically different messages. In the first film, *The Last Man on Earth*, the roles end up reversed, as it is actually the ghouls that are human, and the last man—portrayed by Vincent Price, who mostly played villains-—that is inhuman. In the second adaption, *The Omega Man*—in my view the most interesting of the three—the last man turns out to not be the end of humanity, but rather the end of the *white* man as

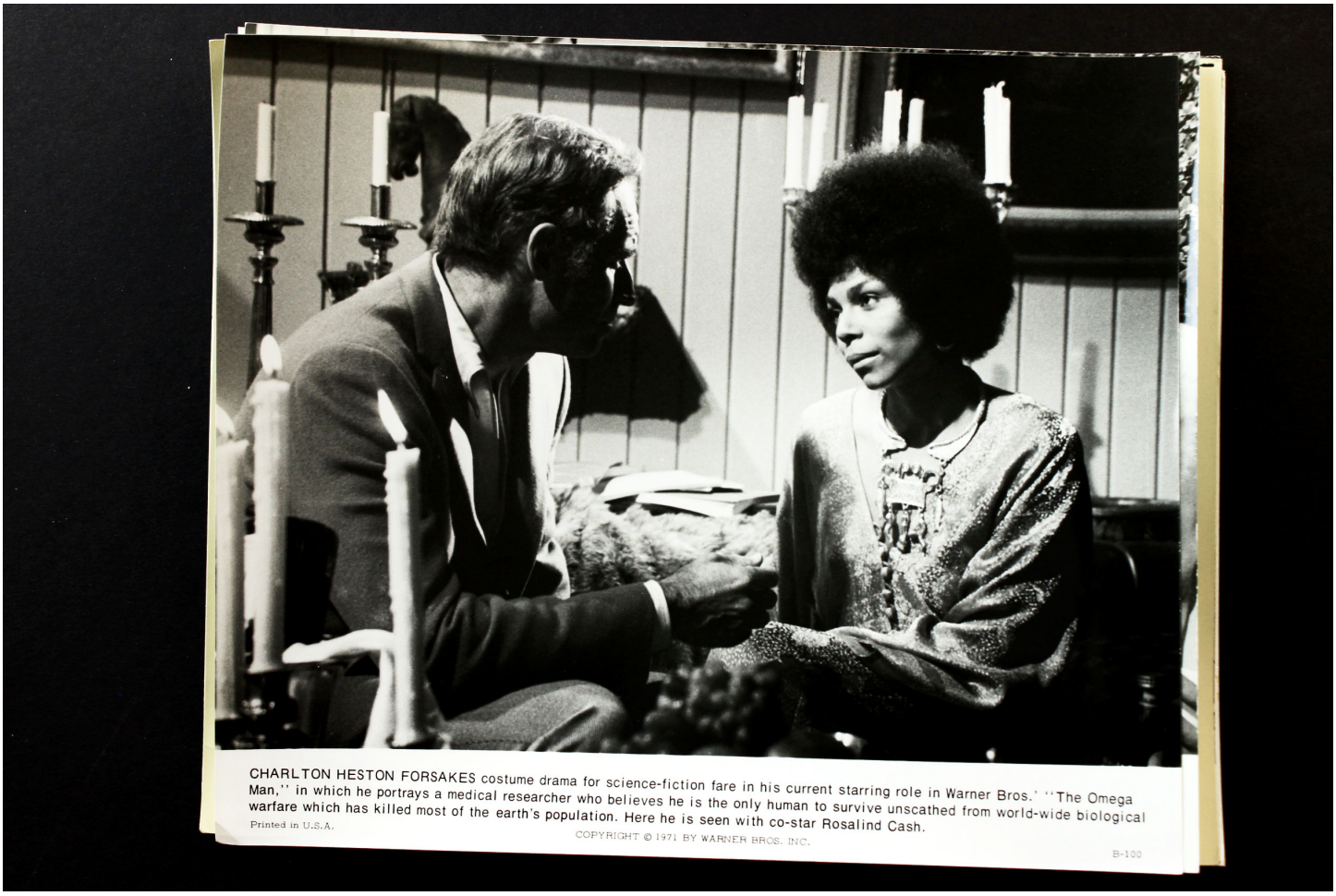
synonymous with humanity. In a crucial and inspired example of casting, the protagonist is portrayed by an actor who was whiteness personified: Charlton Heston. Instead, the woman, whom he at first refuses to acknowledge as a fellow, is African American, played by Rosalind Cash (who spent most her career in television rather than film). In the film, Heston's character boasts of his superiority—"100 percent proof Anglo-Saxon, baby!" as he happily exclaims—and his romantic involvement with the woman (the film includes a historic interracial kiss) seems to be explicable due to the fact that they are the last man and woman alive. It can be surmised, then, that his sacrifice for the future of mankind is two-fold: giving up his own life to save the woman, and giving up his racial purity for the sake of reproduction. His sacrifice is, in opposition to the other two films, not voluntary, but rather enforced by the inhuman ghouls—eerily called The Family, echoing the contemporaneous Manson Family and their attempt to start a race war in America—who have rejected the modern science of the Omega man. As infuriating as this all was, the casting of Will Smith in the leading role of *I Am Legend* at least promised some kind of compensation, but as Zižek's analysis makes clear, the last film is the most fundamentalist and Christian, with the woman telling the protagonist—the scientist—that she is sent from God, and that he can be saved by following her to a safe haven, or more likely, a Christian sect in idyllic Vermont. In the end he is forced to sacrifice himself, Christ-like, to become the "legend" of the title, in order to pass on the cure for the virus to the woman, who will take it to Vermont so that the community there can survive and thrive while acting like missionaries to ostensibly save the rest of the infected world.

Zižek is justified in his harsh criticism of this version. But this being contemporary Hollywood, the film doesn't have just one ending, but rather, like a computer game, more possible endings. The film now circulates with two different endings. In the alternative ending, the protagonist does not actually have to sacrifice himself, but instead acknowledges the humanity, or remnants of humanity, in the ghouls after realizing that two of them are a heterosexual couple in love. With this realization comes identification and pity. In this version, the protagonist's soul is saved not through self-sacrifice, but through showing mercy, and not blowing himself up with the barbarians (the inhuman ghouls) to save the Christians (the humans in the imagined community of Vermont). It is noticeable, though, that this alternative ending offers not only a heteronormative understanding of what it means to be human, but also an individualized rather than collective identification. The protagonist spares the ghouls only after recognizing the human-like love relation between them, rather than after any recognition of their collective agency. The lone survivor, the last man standing, remains in stark contrast and opposition to any such agency.

Afterlives: Zombies and Ghosts

Are there also figures of collective, or even communal, survival after life? Figures of humanity in the end times who are not the last Man, masculine and individual, like the hero of an Ayn Rand novel, defined *against* the collective, the mass, or the multitude? In fact there are two well-known phantasmagoric figures of collective afterlife, although both are somewhat sinister and uncanny, perhaps as a negative metaphor for collectivity itself, like the ghouls in the above-mentioned movies. I am thinking of zombies and ghosts. Like the ghouls, zombies and ghosts are formerly human—folkloristically post-human rather than techno-scientifically post-human. They are figures that succeed the human form and life span, if not the human world, which they seem to co-inhabit with us, partially and temporally, even if they are a direct threat to it. In different ways, their being—their post-humanity—is dependent on humans, as an *outcome* of our lives and after lives. But their cohabitation and codependency with humanity is a conflictual one, leading inevitably to our demise, with the zombie literally feeding off the living, and the ghost trying to scare you to death. Their relation to us is always one of destruction and dread, but their agency and their aims are different, as is the state that they are in as post-human: ghosts are in pain, and looking to avenge this pain, whereas zombies, half-disintegrated as they appear, do not seem to be in pain, but rather in ecstasy, in some sort feeding frenzy that drives them forever forward.

There are also significant differences in how these figures hunt and haunt us. Whereas the ghost comes to us in both the singular and the multiple form, the zombie is pure collective consciousness: they always travel in packs. While the cultural origins of the zombie are complex, let us begin by considering them simply as a form of post-human afterlife, as they are in most pop culture depictions. As such, it is questionable whether zombies have any consciousness, since a zombie-like state of being is usually one that indicates no brain activity (although they do feed on the brains of the living, presumably). Indeed, being in a zombie-like state usually implies a dumbing down of the human intellect, sedated by junk food and trash television, no longer capable of any significant brain activity apart from reaching for the remote control or opening the fridge. Although this everyday use of the term speaks volumes about the class connotations, disgust, and struggle involved in the metaphor of the zombie, it is also grossly misleading in its indication of inaction. Zombies are anything but couch potatoes. They may not be conscious, but they are hyperactive and invasive, and if they cannot think for themselves, they are nonetheless the expression of a very single-minded collective will to destroy the living and turn everyone into zombies. So perhaps the fear of zombies is actually the fear of a collective consciousness and the general intellect. Perhaps this fear expresses a liberal fantasy—or more accurately nightmare—of the masses rising up, of a communalist revolution, but also a communist way of life,



Production still distributed by Warner Bros for the movie Omega Man, with Charlton Heston and Rosalind Cash.

or being, which is ironically the very opposite of the metaphor of a modern consumerist zombie, even if projected onto the very same social class. This is certainly how the zombie has been employed in contemporary art, with works such as Robert Longo's monstrous and kitschy sculpture *All You Zombies: Truth Before God* (1986), and the group Bank's infamous *Zombie Golf* exhibition from a decade later. Both these works set the zombie in opposition to the idealized bourgeoisie culture of their time. Longo's work followed his "Men in the Cities" series of cavorting male bodies in business suits, usually seen as a critique of the period's Wall Street yuppies, and thus, as a premonition perhaps—one type of American psycho supplanting another, at the height of the Reaganomic reconstruction of society, not least its economic base. Similarly, Bank's 1995 installation and exhibition *Zombie Golf*, which was realized in the middle of the cool Britannica frenzy of the YBA movement, and in the transition to New Labour cementing neoliberalism as the only possible version of a UK society (or the lack thereof, as it were ...), used kitsch, pop, and violence as their particular brand of art class politics, and posited the zombie as a revolutionary subject. In this narrative and carnivalesque exhibition, viewers were presented with the scene of a golf course, where the bourgeoisie playing on it were suddenly attacked and devoured by zombies, as a metaphor for working class revolt. The vulgarity of the zombie figure from pop culture also contaminated the pristine space of the white cube gallery. Bank wanted to bring class war to the YBA party (which was, after all, a group of artists that prided itself on its working-class roots and culture of aspiration and achievement, eerily heralding the coming of New Labour), but not only: they also wanted to spoil the party, just like zombies at a golf course.

Zombies are the monsters of mass society, at once animalistic and cannibalistic, and more body than mind. In this way, the zombie represents a kind of bodily survival or afterlife of the human form and life-form, which is no *real* survival since the brain has been eaten, and with it the soul and personality of that body, that former person. No wonder, then, that the zombie has so often been the metaphor for the abject body, especially in Hollywood cinema, in terms of disease and sexuality, but also for a collective, even communist social body that, as opposed to the liberal individual subject, has no will of its own, no private thoughts and aspirations, but only the beastly roar of the maddening crowd and mob rule. Zombies are

unclean and unruly, like the working classes, and cannot be reasoned with, but only annihilated (it's them or us). It is this inherent violence that gives the figure of the zombie its symbolic power, but in a twofold sense: the rampant violence the zombie performs, but also the license to kill that this violence gives to humans (whose own violence is presented as self-defense of course). Indeed, zombie movies revel in the pleasure of performing death, of the spectacle of massacre. It should thus come as no surprise that the proliferation of the zombie has happened through popular culture rather than contemporary art (even though it has made its appearances, or cameos, here too), particularly through George A. Romero's zombie films and their many subsequent and contemporary spin-offs. Indeed, Romero's second, and breakthrough, zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead*, famously takes place within a shopping mall, thus directly connecting the carnage with consumption. Perhaps fittingly then, the zombie as a metaphor for modern culture and consumer society has by now become a global franchise. That said, it has a special place in the aesthetic and political imagination of the United States, as Mike Mariani summed up in a 2015 article:

> For a brief period, the living dead served as a handy Rorschach test for America's social ills. At various times, they represented capitalism, the Vietnam War, nuclear fear, even the tension surrounding the civil-rights movement. Today zombies are almost always linked with the end of the world via the "zombie apocalypse," a global pandemic that turns most of the human population into beasts ravenous for the flesh of their own kind. But there's no longer any clear metaphor.[4]

Mariani goes on to bemoan how the figure of the zombie has been emptied of meaning, not just in the sense that it no longer vectors current social issues and problems, but also in terms of how its Americanization (one hesitates to say zombie-fication) has all but erased its original historical meaning. This meaning emerged in the context of the slave trade and the independence struggle in Haiti, where the figure of the zombie first appeared as dead slaves not being able to leave their bodies and return to their ancestral homeland, instead doomed to wander the plantations of Hispaniola for eternity. In this origin myth of the zombie, the "brains-eating fiend was a slave not to the flesh of others but to his own," which is altogether more brutal.[5] Mariani is correct in categorizing the proliferation of zombies in mass entertainment as nothing more than whitewashing. However, it's crucial to not that his essay was written in 2015. Since then, Black Lives Matter movements have gained further traction as an undeniable political force, and we are now literally living through the kind of global pandemic fantasized in so many horror and disaster movies. This gives the figure of the zombie, zombie culture, and indeed zombie politics a renewed resonance. Romero's very first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead* (now a cult classic), doesn't just end with the defeat of the zombies, but also with the police shooting an innocent African American man, the otherwise lone survivor of the zombie onslaught. This ending is more shocking than the many graphic deaths caused by the zombies, but also horrifyingly realist, then as now, giving the film a political and contemporary reverberation. Indeed, one of the most significant recent blockbuster films about race relations in the United States, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), not only employs the horror genre, but also plays with zombie metaphors, in the film's overtaking of bodies and the hollowing out of souls. Elderly, dead, and dying white upper-class New Englanders overtake younger able black bodies, suppressing their souls to a Sunken Place, conscious, but powerless, clearly returning to the original notion of the zombie and its relation to slavery. *Get Out* also knowingly refers to, but crucially *reverses*, the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*, as the protagonist, a young black man, is here *not* shot by law enforcement at the end, but rather saved by a TSA officer, offering an intertextual and intergenerational reparation to its viewers. It also brings a reversal of a second kind: whereas *Night of the Living Dead* concluded with a sobering dose of social realism, *Get Out*, phantasmagoric as it is genre wise, ends on hopeful note, maybe, but possibly also with the most unrealistic scenario in the whole film.

To consider the reactivation of the zombie as a figure of political force, positively as well as negatively, we should also look at its multiple roots and indeed routes, as these are pertinent in the present moment of revolt and retraction—that is, public protest on the one hand, and anxiety and isolation on the other (a.k.a., social distancing). The word "zombie" was introduced into the English language in the early nineteenth century by the historian Robert Southey, who imported it from Latin American culture, but not from Haitian voodoo. He took it from Afro-Brazilian history and its fugitive communities.[6] Zumbi dos Palmares was born in a community of escaped slaves (a *quilombo*) in Palmares, but was captured by the Portuguese as a child. As a teenager Zumbi escaped and returned to the *quilombo* in Palmares, where he later became king and strongly opposed the Portuguese rulers of Brazil. The zombie is here a figure that haunts the white settler colonialists, and can provide us with a link to what Fred Moten has described as "the fugitive movement," as constitutive of the concept of blackness as an always already "stolen life." For Moten, fugitivity is "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed."[7] In this sense, a community of zombies is not about relentless attack, excessive consumption and destruction, or a total lack of agency and consciousness. Rather, it is a community that exists outside of the normative and the established (colonial) rule of law, but without complete liberation from this law. In the eyes of the colonizer, the former slave, as a fugitive, is a form of

Betty Gabriel in the 2017 movie Get Out.

the living dead, in the sense of being a lost commodity. From the point of view of the fugitive, this former life as enslaved was indeed a stolen life. The fugitive now lives outside colonial rule and its laws, but is always at risk of being subjected to it again and again, and thus becoming a living dead soul once more.

As Mariani pointed out, it is thus remarkable how the zombie has become increasingly white in popular culture, as the abject bodies of white-trash hoodlums overtaking civil(ized) society, or as working-class communist revolt. The imaginary hordes of living dead terrorizing the land of the rich and the free --stems from the plague years in medieval Europe, where the infected bodies looked as if they were possibly rotting before dying, or simply living on after death. But my purpose here is not to recount the history of how a pandemic-devastated Europe reinvented itself through settler colonialism and the systematized slave trade. Rather, I wish to point out how the present pandemic has reversed the role of the zombie. It is remarkable how the aesthetics of Robert Longo's grotesque *All You Zombies: Truth Before God*, a bronze statue of a heavily armed man carrying the American flag and an electric guitar, have, subconsciously perhaps, influenced the attire and appearance of contemporary American anti-lockdown protesters as they attack government buildings and occupy public spaces, usually without masks, faces full of hatred, like Longo's lone warrior, ragged but right (in more senses than one)—refusing to become sick, denying that they too can carry the virus, and refusing the scientific understanding of the severity of the virus, as postmodern pandemic refuseniks, calling all zombies before the eyes of almighty God. But this is as ambiguous as the statue itself: Who are the zombies—the sculpted figure, or its opponents? And which truth is being posited in front of whose God? It is perhaps these white men who are now the zombies. Certainly the rights of freedom they claim and proclaim do not extend to protests against police authority—one instance of state control they seemingly do not oppose—but seem mostly limited to the right to go to the mall, to shop, to enjoy the zombie culture of consumption. Indeed, as Angela Mitropoulos has pointed out, the fear of contagious diseases and the rites of excessive consumption are bound up in a perverse social contract, now given another spin in an alt-right direction.[8]

Conclusion: Is There A Zombie Heaven?

In discussing the monstrosities of the contemporary American political and cultural landscape, Henry A. Giroux has named our current epoch "casino capitalism," producing a zombie culture *and* politics:

> Not only do zombies portend a new aesthetic in which hyper-violence is embodied in the form of a carnival of snarling creatures engorging elements of human

A Sketchfab scan of Robert Longo's All You Zombies: Truth Before God (1986/2012) by user Phil. See →.

> anatomy, but they also portend the arrival of a revolting politics that has a ravenous appetite for spreading destruction and promoting human suffering and hardship. This is a politics in which cadres of the unthinking and living dead promote civic catastrophes and harbour apocalyptic visions, focusing more on death than life. Death-dealing zombie politicians and their acolytes support modes of corporate and militarized governance through which entire populations now become either redundant, disposable, or criminalized.[9]

In his damning critique of the contemporary situation, Giroux uses zombification in both a cultural and a political sense. These senses are interconnected: gory television shows and movies literally employ the zombie figure, while casino capitalism follows a zombie logic— senseless and ruthless, but nonetheless highly organized. Moreover, zombie culture and politics both activate and pacify the masses, in a specific sense: activating the masses towards a common destructive goal, and pacifying any other agency, along with any critical and reflective faculties. While zombie culture today is far from the poetic and prophetic invocation of the zombie in early Brazilian and Haitian postcoloniality, it is nonetheless about enslavement—to commodities, entertainment, corporations, and demagogues, in what may indeed be the end times in the sense of what is, arguably, the terminal phase of global capitalism. It is thus not so much a form of post-human afterlife or survival, but rather a politics of death, and an endgame for society *as social*.

While zombies, then, are *post-* human, as in no longer human, they are perhaps not a form of (human) afterlife after the end, after the apocalypse itself. Rather, maybe they are figures *leading* to the demise of humanity itself—morbid symptoms appearing as the old order is dying and a new one is not yet born. This would differentiate them from other post-humans, such as ghosts, but also from avatars and cyborgs, whose relationship to humans remains alluringly ambiguous. Indeed, zombies are wholly dependent on the living, since they can only grow by overtaking the living, feeding on live brains, as it were. The zombie a form of afterlife that is conditioned on there still being life. After all, what will the zombies feed on once there are no longer any live humans left to tear into? They can only survive as long as they kill, and when everyone has succumbed, they will, presumably, no longer be able to survive either. If there is such a thing as a zombie heaven, this is no heaven at all, but rather a living hell: our current malaise.

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1
See https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34520/art-after-the-end-of-the-world/ .

2
Slavoj Zižek, *Living in the End Times* (Verso, 2011), 61.

3
Zižek, *Living in the End Times*, 61.

4
Mike Mariani, "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies," *The Atlantic* , October 28, 2015 https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/ .

5
Mariani, "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies."

6
Robert Southey, *History of Brazil* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810).

7
Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 111.

8
Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Minor Compositions, 2012).

9
Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2014).