

A photograph of an open metal can, likely a food can, lying on its side. The can is filled with dark, moist soil and several large, pinkish-brown earthworms. The can's lid is partially open, showing the interior. The can is placed on a light-colored fabric with a delicate floral pattern. Scattered around the base of the can are small clumps of soil and a few small, dark, round objects, possibly seeds or small stones. The background is a soft, warm-toned fabric with a subtle floral design.

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Soon

A strange adaptation of an old joke starts like this: a group of feminists walks into a glass ceiling, and a can of worms pours out ...

So what happens if the glass ceiling breaks? Who picks up the pieces; who do the pieces fall on? Why haven't we been setting our sights above it this whole time?

Previously in *e-flux journal*, we asked:

In ten seconds, how many synonyms can you think of for the word "power"? And then, just when you thought that you finally got the hang of how the power structures around you function, they seem to be coming undone ...

What is feminism, precisely? What are feminisms today?¹

Julieta Aranda and Kaye
Cain-Nielsen
Editorial

To examine these questions and myriad others, the previous and present issues of *e-flux journal* have been dedicated to feminism(s). It has been a particular pleasure to embark on an exploration and an unfolding of the many complex realities and iterations that feminisms can accommodate. Not one feminism, but many.

This season, feminisms continues. In this issue, nine authors locate various theories, practices, principles, limits, lineages, and outgrowths of feminisms, in geographies as immediate as the human lap—a space explored in this issue by Filipa Ramos—and as distant as the diplomatically double penetrated *Soyuz-Apollo* docking system in outer space, whose trajectory Natalya Serkova writes here. Histories of feminist movements are traced back—for example, to the Marxist feminist Alexandra Kollontai, whose work Maria Lind navigates—and projected forward, as in the enclosed science fiction story by Nisi Shawl, which depicts an alternate timeline in which members of a revolutionary social movement motivated by feminist principles send encoded messages to one another by drone. Via Denise Ferreira da Silva, a black feminist poethics takes shape. Marwa Arsanios relays ecofeminist practices taught in refugee camps, passed down from one generation to the next. McKenzie Wark speaks around and through the many, and many-gendered, voices of Kathy Acker. Doreen Mende tracks the archival metabolism of the undutiful daughter. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez proposes intersectional antidotes to art institutions drenched in shades of white.

Before we delve deeper into the social structures that perpetuate gender inequalities, it is worth taking a step back to think about how gender parameters have been established: Who gets to define what womanhood is? Who gets to write the script of how gender should be

performed and to delimit the borders between one gender and another? And more importantly, who gets to blur said borders, and point out how leaky and gray-zoned these concepts tend to be, regardless of any insistence to the contrary? How can we make sure that the tasks of describing, living, and representing gender subjectivities are evenly distributed?

When the distribution of gender subjectivities is not even, we quickly run into problems. Those who manage to excel against the odds become exceptional. Being exceptional sounds much better than it actually is. When you are an exception, nothing that you do has any bearing on the rest of the group that you belong to—because you are in a league of your own, right? Tempting as it may be to be singled out for one's accomplishments, the price one pays for it is high. If you are an exception, then you are not the norm. You are abnormal. And being denied normalcy is actually a rather uncomfortable way to navigate life, when one actually wants to do normal things, in addition to having a successful career. Thinking about how the label of exceptionalism is applied also makes one think that defining someone's path as an exception is a quick and easy way to make sure their accomplishments are not easily replicable, and that they don't get absorbed into the culture.

Now, let's go back to the question of power, and let's explore the possibility of defining power by its absence/negation. Withholding your power (such as it is) as a woman could prove to be a valuable exercise in accessing the power structures around you—be it as a clinical exercise in understanding how you connect to them and how they affect or intoxicate you; or to show others what happens in your absence, to make visible your invisibility as a connective tissue of sorts, to demonstrate your value by its absence; or to teach yourself how you too feed the current power structures.

Last year women went on strike in around thirty countries. Some of the guidelines for participation were loose, signaling that this was not your conventional workers' strike. On Womensmarch.com, instructions were as follows:

- 1) Women take the day off, from paid and unpaid labor
- 2) Avoid shopping for one day (with exceptions for small, women-, and minority-owned businesses)
- 3) Wear RED in solidarity with A Day Without a Woman

In this continuing post-Fordist moment, where is all our paid and unpaid labor located: at work, at home, or everywhere? On the pervasiveness of affective labor, Silvia Federici warns: "The generalization of affective labor, i.e., its dispersal over every form of work, takes us back to a pre-feminist situation, where not only the specificity but

the very existence of women's reproductive work and the struggle women are making on this terrain become invisible again."²

How to strike as feminists? Do you sabotage your commute, refuse to feed your child, boycott the family vacation with the kids? Do you write a considerate out-of-office reply and attach a friendly GIF? Do you perform an exorcism, found a coven? Where do I go to work at being a woman and where do I exit the factory, the Lumière Brothers-style outpour at the end of the day? Kathi Weeks asks, "How might feminism contest the marginalization and underestimation of unwaged forms of reproductive labor, without trading on the work ethic's mythologies of work?"³

Should resistance be armed or should it be peaceful? Imagine waking up tomorrow and all the guns in the US are in the hands of women. How would that day end? How many women would be killed at the hands of other women?

Barring this extreme, does striking as a woman entail refusing to smile, or to provide sex or acts of caretaking, maternal or otherwise? Is it a disruption to the pulse of emotional labor, as many second-wave feminists argued? Or, in the complete opposite direction, does striking as a woman involve the embrace, against the grain, of a smirk, a jab, a scream, a frown, an act of radical self-care, of sex, of surrogacy? Does striking consist precisely in caring for others? Perhaps resistance is to be found in the act of making kin where there is none to be found; in embracing excess, and refusing to let others police just how much is too much; in refusing to naturalize both nature and nurture, and deciding to fuck them up, ecosexual-style. While you're at it, can you kindly let us know where you fall on the spectrum between florasexual and faunasexual?

As you're probably aware, this was not the first women's strike. In Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, Athenian women withhold sex from their husbands to protest against the Peloponnesian War that men are waging. In 1895, Susan B. Anthony said, "The women of Kansas should sit by and fold their hands. If they would stop their helping the men for six months, we would have equal suffrage granted us." In 1970 there was a women's strike in the US called "Women's Strike for Equality." In 1975 there was also a women's strike in Iceland, but they decided to refer to it as "Women's Day Off" rather than a "strike." The wisdom of this decision is attested to by the fact that 90 percent of Icelandic women stopped performing their usual labor for the day. Icelandic men are known to have nicknamed it "The Long Friday."

Many other forms of refusal have been practiced by women in history everywhere. Consider, for example, the Igbo practice of "sitting on"—gathering to publicly shame, through singing and dance, a man who has committed an injustice but who enjoys impunity under the rule of written

law. In the early 1900s, women in British Nigeria also used this practice to protest against figureheads of colonial rule. It is significant that feminists started identifying reproductive labor as such—as *labor*—around the same time that deindustrialization, off-shoring, and pink-collaring were changing labor conditions. Perhaps the decision in Iceland to refer to the women's strike by the more appeasing label "Women's Day Off," like last year's "A Day Without a Woman," speaks to the changing nature of work itself. In Iceland: a gendered version of not-working, of a holiday, because leisure—not nonwork—is the opposite of work. Last year: an apocalyptic extraction, so that a world without women renders itself visible. So you see, many of us, and others before us, bargained decades ago for a party, and all we got was ladies night. Free love! But it got watered down to free beer and a ton of unstructured family ties. Turns out you are relieved from the baby in your lap, only to have a laptop sit there instead. You took the pill but almost overdosed on estrogen in a medical trial led by men.

When the labor of womanhood is under permanent discussion, where exactly does your labor stop? Because it just so happens that, as a feminist, you also have the task of understanding how power functions around you. Possible answers might read like a *Cosmopolitan* quiz:

YOU SEE POWER AS:

- a) A one-way vector
- b) A two-way vector
- c) A contaminated site that slowly burns through your skin
- d) An intoxication that turns you genderless as soon as you reach the pinnacle of your profession and obtain the power associated with it
- e) A strange force that coerces, but from which you can also steal, in order to perform it
- f) None of the above
- g) All of the above

And here are a series of questions to help you understand what *type* of power you are:

Do you take your power to a BDSM party?
Do you imagine yourself as being inside a complex *Game of Thrones* plot, in which your secret weapon is called Stockholm Syndrome?
Do you burn bras, or demand that bras be better designed?
Do you take down femininity, or do you play with lipstick?

There is also the open question of what constitutes "feminine" or "female" power. What might a matriarchy look like? One fleshed-out history comes from the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko:

In the old days, strong, sturdy women were most admired. One of my most vivid preschool memories is of the crew of Laguna women, in their forties and fifties, who came to cover our house with adobe plaster. They handled the ladders with great ease, and while two women ground the adobe mud on stones and added straw, another woman loaded the hod with mud and passed it up to the two women on ladders, who were smoothing the plaster on the wall with their hands. Since women owned the houses, they did the plastering. At Laguna, men did the basket making and the weaving of fine textiles; men helped a great deal with the child care too. Because the Creator is female, there is no stigma on being female; gender is not used to control behavior. No job was a man's job or a woman's job; the most able person did the work ...

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, a man could dress as a woman and work with the women and even marry a man without any fanfare. Likewise, a woman was free to dress like a man, to hunt and go to war with the men, and to marry a woman. In the old Pueblo worldview, we are all a mixture of male and female, and this sexual identity is changing constantly.⁴

There is much yet in terms of pasts and futures to discuss in our present. Two issues deep and our work here at *e-flux journal* is just getting started. Feminisms contains multitudes, and the writing of multitudes does not fit within two editions of a contemporary art journal. A large part of the editorial impulse here is to keep the momentum going. Already, several texts commissioned under this theme will appear not in these pages but rather in the pages of issues to come. We will be paying close attention to the multiple channels of feminist frequencies from here on out. Stay tuned ...

X

This editorial was cowritten with Mariana Silva. Thank you to Andreas Petrossiants, Amal Issa, and Rachel Ichniowski for their invaluable contributions. Cover photo: Rachel Ichniowski.

Julieta Aranda is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal*.

Kaye Cain-Nielsen is the editor-in-chief of *e-flux journal*.

1

Julieta Aranda and Kaye Cain-Nielsen, "Editorial," *e-flux journal* 92 (June 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/206017/editorial/>.

2

Silvia Federici, "On Affective Labour," in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut (Peter Lang, 2011).

3

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

4

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 66.

received July 19 2025:

OxfordEgret463326Ninja16072025(EggPearl) (Almond)

Loosing her hold on the knotted strands of the message, its recipient sighed and tilted back her head. Above, the cloudless heavens flickered with light: the sun's reflection off the thousand high-altitude balloons flying over her even here, at the continent's edge.

The message was trouble. A request for connection. She couldn't accept it. She couldn't turn it down, either. She couldn't afford to be known to have read or received it, so she certainly couldn't afford to keep it. But the message carriers' passage was logged on Balloonnet's individual balloons' platforms. Loss, destruction—built-in redundancy handled a certain amount of that, and she'd stayed within statistical bounds when dealing with other such requests. But too many missing drones and there'd be attention, follow-up ... She needed to try something different this time.

#

Excerpts from the Wikipedia article "The Five Petals of Thought," accessed April 5, 2028:

Nisi Shawl

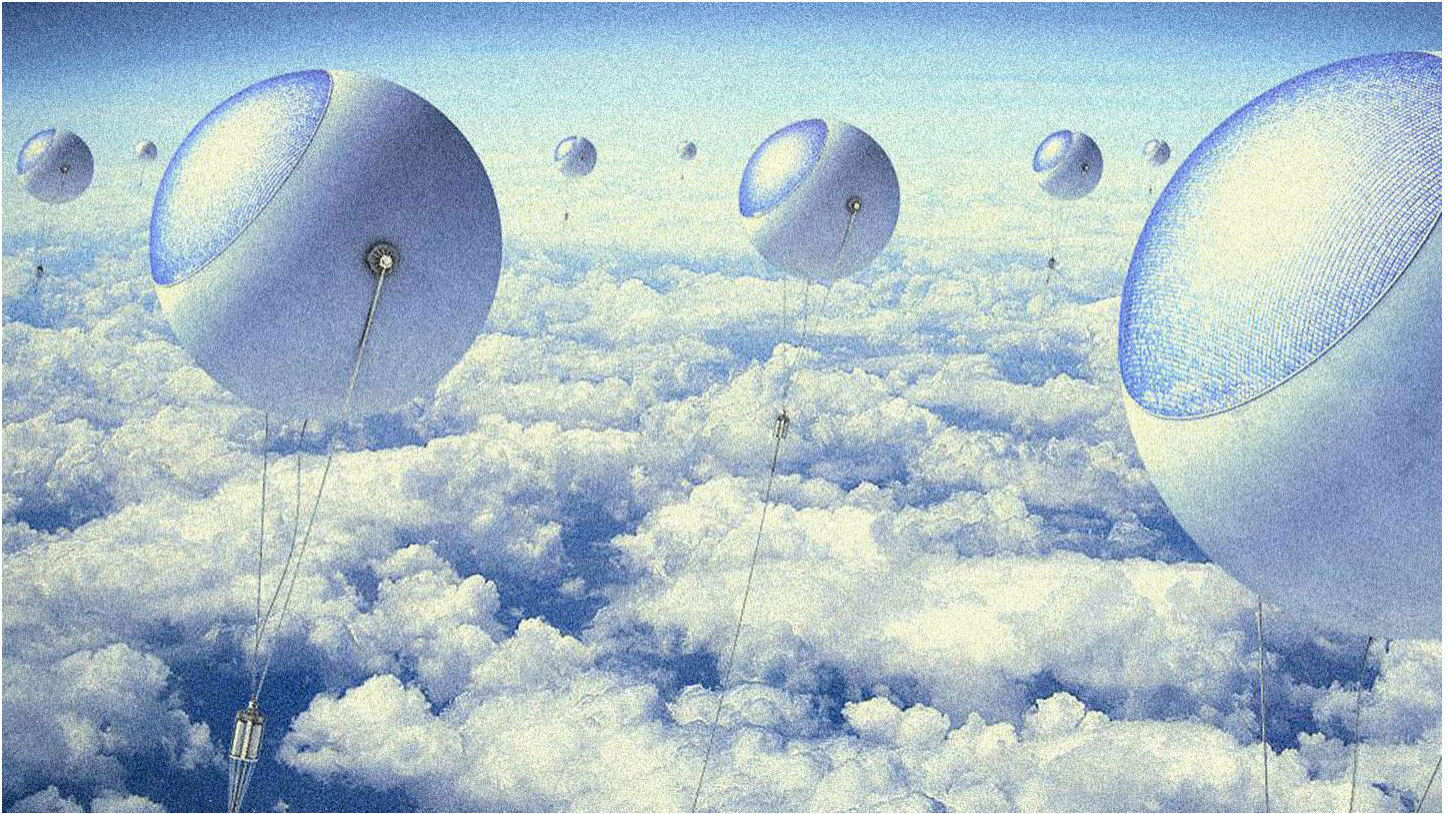
New Action

The Five Petals of Thought, aka the New Bedford Rose, refers to a philosophical system dating back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries widely adopted by activists in Anglophone countries, primarily the US and Great Britain,[1] ...

Elements and Structures: The Five Petals of the New Bedford Rose represent Thought, Action (also called "pre-action" and "pro-action"), Observation, Integration, and New Action (also called "re-action"). Thought is the first step in any course. The first petal is thus associated with visualizations, dreams, and all other methods of forming concepts. Action is next; its alternative names of pre-action and pro-action refer to the idea that any action taken will serve as a prequel or prologue to another action. Observation occurs both during and after Action, and provides material for Integration into the original concept. Integration then leads to New Action.[2]

Many followers of the New Bedford Rose stipulate its application as cyclical in nature, saying that New Action should be followed again by Observation, Integration, and further New Action[citation needed] ...

Rediscovery: The immensely successful[under review] popular psychology book *The Five Petals of Thought* by Melissa Skye is undoubtedly responsible[under review] for the resurgence of the activist philosophy for which it was named ... Translated into twenty languages and also offered in multiple audiobook formats, *The Five Petals of Thought* focuses on personal applications of the



An artist rendition of a solar farm powered by balloons floating above the stratosphere. Photo: www.pixscience.fr/EmmanuelJullien/GrégoireCirade

philosophy. A brief history section relies heavily on quotations from the works of Elvira Coker and other firsthand participants, and a short chapter speculates on the philosophy's ontological roots in the remnants of its first proponents' African belief systems.[9]

To date more than 100 million copies of *The Five Petals of Thought* have sold worldwide.[10]

#

received July 24 2025:

OxfordEgret463326Ninja16072025(EggPearl)(Almond)
(MumboSyrup)(forward)

"She found out about us somehow." Willis shook his crinkly chestnut curls back from his sweaty face. July was hot and humid, even here in the Appalachian mountain valleys, even in the shade of the old growth.

Madison nodded. "Yeah! Do I care how? Do you know who Melissa Skye even *is*?"

"She—"

"She wrote the *book!* *Five Petals of Thought*? She brought the Five Petals back—she's why we're *here!*" In her excitement Madison grabbed his arm and Willis had to pry her hand off. "That's the template we used to form

our *dopkwe*"—Madison, though white, used the Dahomean word—"for collecting these wild herbs. *Hers!*"

"All I'm sayin is, if our security's compromised—"

"*Fuck* our security! Drug it and fuck it on the permafrost!"

"You don't really mean that," Junie's voice interrupted. It held half a question. Her small, plump hands held their lunch: tubes of peanut butter and plastic tubs of sliced peaches. Willis took his share and Madison took hers.

"I guess I don't." The white girl slumped down onto her sit-upon. "Just—I'm tired of the Antitrust butting in. They don't own the balloons. They have no right to tell us how many friends to make or seize harvests when someone won't cooperate. Didn't our parents fight for us being able to organize how we wanted?" She opened her tub and set the top aside, unscrewed the tube's cap and set it on its side on the sloping plastic.

Willis reached over and caught the peanut butter cylinder before it rolled off into the dirt. "Sure they fought. Same as their parents, and their parents' parents before them." He stood the cap on its bottom and it stayed on the tub top. Then he opened his own tub and tube. "Fighting ain't winning. Antitrust took last year's sang crop cause they wanted. Cause they could. How we gonna stop it?"

Junie hunkered down beside them. She waved off Willis's offer of a peach slice. "Thanks. I ate while we walked here. So you worried about that message?"

"I am." He tucked his chin to his chest. "The message itself is innocuous enough, but if we're charged with conspiracy to network across state lines we'll need lawyers. No, not if; *when*."

Madison frowned and unhooked her water bottle from her belt. "How would they get conspiracy from an unsolicited message about a care collective in Washington supporting the Rose?" She swallowed a judicious amount of cold water. Too much would cause cramps.

Junie laughed through her nose. "They'd get it by pulling it out their asses. Same as they get everything against us."

She unfolded from her hunker, smooth and graceful as a scissor lift. "And also they'd be talkin about how Skye had got our internal address."

"That's the big problem," Willis agreed.

"So besides freakin because we don't know—"

"The simplest solution, that we gave it to her? That, Madison, is what the Antitrust Authority will assume when we file our report with them tonight. That's what they'll use to accuse us of illegal, overextended organizing. Maybe resurrect the charge of harboring 'peripatetic' travelers who keep us in touch. Maybe add it to their list of excuses for shutting down the high-altitude balloon networks."

"Some of those balloon people rich."

"Get ready to make a recommendation back at camp tonight. Last time we all get to be with each other for a while; tomorrow we fan out in small groups till next Gathering Day." Junie moved off in the direction of the rest of the *dopkwe*, leaving Willis and Madison to eat in silence.

The Five Petals of the New Bedford Rose were Thought, Action, Observation, Integration, and New Action. Meals were a good time for Thought.

Presently Madison spoke. "If Melissa Skye messaged our coordinates by chance, there won't be any record of us sending them to her."

"Notoriously difficult to prove a negative such as us *not* sending them, though. In fact, it's impossible." Willis poured water in the peach tub and swirled it around to rinse it, then drank. "Besides. Why we have to bring that up? Let's shift the focus. She only forwarded what someone else wrote, right? Maybe by mistake? Maybe she got it by mistake, too—I say we recommend returning the message to the original sender and Observe."

#

*Excerpts from the Wikipedia article "Balloonet,"
accessed April 5, 2028:*

Balloonet refers to the redundant distributed communications system developed by hobbyists and activists primarily in the Northern Hemisphere. High-altitude balloons launch and dock drones carrying occasionally subversive[citation needed] messages recorded in a modern dialect of the Incan knot-based language known as *kipu* or *quipu*. New Bedford Rose adherents teach *kipu* encoding and deciphering free of charge ... Wealthy amateurs built Balloonet by expanding on the schedules and experimental practices of pre-existing educational groups, extending balloon flights' durations with superior materials till they became indistinguishable from permanent installations.[citation needed] The first *kipu* payload was recovered on August 25, 2021 (presumably launched shortly before), but subsequently disappeared from the NOAA facility where it was stored.[citation needed]

#

*received July 28 2025:
OxfordEgret463326Ninja16072025(EggPearl)(Almond)
(MumboSyrup)(forward)(HappyDust)(forward)*

AND

*received August 4 2025:
StellarRobin880581Cat25072025(EggPearl)(Alto)*

"Glitch?"

Donna shook her head no. "The system's too redundant. And we got the pingback twice. There's another East Pomona Care Collective way over in Washington State, and they're who sent this in the first place. So—"

"But they don't have our same coordinates—or username!" Spots protested. He slammed the washer door shut and jammed in the start button.

"True!" Donna shouted above the water rushing into the industrial washing machine. "And Washington puts them just about as far away from here in Florida as they could be on the continent."

"Get up. I gotta clean the dryer's lint trap behind where you're sittin. Don't you think it's kinda coincidental they sent a message how they decided to join the Rose, and it's the very issue we've been talking about?"

"Coincidences happen. Us communications engineers know all about that."



A DIY RC FunJet ULTRA model plane launched by David Windestål was able to reach the stratosphere and capture its own weather balloon burst with a GoPro2 at an altitude of roughly 30,000 meters. The shadow of the model plane is captured in this shot. Photo: David Windestål.

"Sure." Spots balled up the maroon-and-grey lint wad he had scraped from the trap's screen. "But some people here are, I guess you could call em superstitious. That's why they scheduled a meeting for a vote on the topic this afternoon, a week ahead of time. Because we got that message last Monday. A week ahead, a week after. You goin'?"

"Of course! A 'yes' decision could put us on the wrong side of the Authority for good. Maybe force them to try to shut us down and seize the building. Which could be a heavy straw placed exactly right on the back of their camel of a regime. You're coming too, yeah?"

Spots shrugged. "I dunno."

"Why not? You use the Five Petals yourself, don't you? Scared that the monitors Antitrust is sending will see you?"

"Not really. And yeah, I use the Petals. Mostly. Look, let's say I'm like Slattery and Prine and Greta and Schrodinger and all them, and I expect the universe to conform to certain laws. I expect if I shoot this lint ball off the ceiling vent and it bounces straight in the wastebasket—" he twirled and executed the bank as he described it "—that means I'm in tune with the music of the spheres. And *that* means my support of the New Bedford Rose is good and

correct, and everything will wind up for the best."

"So?"

Spots opened the dryer door and shoveled warm clothes onto the steel-topped counter opposite. "Help me fold these, please."

"It's my break," Donna complained. But she picked up a pale pink gown and shook its static-y front and back apart.

"Thanks. So I don't think like that. Don't think we're basically one-up on the Antitrust without tryin. I use the Rose, but I don't *believe* in it. If you get the difference."

"I do. Though I'm not sure an Antitrust officer would. They tend to set it off first, figure out what they're targeting later." She smoothed the tamed gown's fabric, squared its bottom fold with its shoulders, and picked a dozen brightly colored bandanas from the work pile to do next. Simple. But in the time those pieces took her, Spots demolished most of the rest of the pile.

Then her fitbit chimed. Donna sighed. "Break's over. Incoming."

"Help me finish and I'll go up with you to collect."

One bedsheet left. They danced a minuet with it. Spots loaded their neat stacks of laundry into a basket, bra-and-panty sets on top. Scooping up the basket in his long, skinny arms, he walked it to the dumbwaiter by the steps to the ground floor and started the automatic pulleys that lifted it to the dressing room. "Now let's see what you got."

Their climb up the East Pomona Care Facility's open staircase turned into a race. Running off their nervousness. Breathless and giggling, they spilled out of the door on the roof.

The message drone waited on the far side of the drooping catchnet. Donna retrieved it and reset the notification trigger attached to the net's outermost strand. The practiced motions kept her calm. "This message's fletching's from Stellar Robin 880581 Cat's flock," Donna pronounced. "I like them. They've circumnavigated the globe sixteen times now."

"Why's that good? They learn from experience?"

"Hah. Like they're Als. No, I guess not."

She read the message. "As I thought. It's about us and the Five Petals again. But I didn't expect ..." Long seconds passed.

"Didn't expect what?" Spots peered over Donna's shoulder as if he, too, could read the coded text. Shimmering knots ran up and down its grid, their shifting shapes matching sigils Donna had memorized in her sleep. Her specialty, but Spots could have taken the course too; anyone at the care facility could have, as part of preparing to join the New Bedford Rose. Rumor was Antitrust Authority officers were regular participants.

"It's from the other East Pomona."

"In Washington?!"

"Yeah. Them. The same ones who sent that first message we got 'returned' this morning." She backed up to lean against the wall at the roof's edge. "They—here, I'll read it.

"We promise Integration after you incorporate. Help us unfurl the Petals. We will assist you, too, in any way we can. Any way you want. A program to exchange personnel? Recipes? Persecution avoidance? Look for advantages in our mirror-bias geographics."

Spots slid from where he leaned beside Donna to sit on the mat of purslane growing beneath the catchnet and out to the wall. "What's all that mean?"

Their feet bruised the purslane's fat, rosy stems and freshened the hot afternoon air with their green smell. "Pretty much what it says. We'd have to axe an existing

connection maybe, but no biggie. What's surprising is they decided they had to specifically say it, specifically to us."

"Well, if it's gonna affect our decision to join we got till the meeting at four to share it. If we rather the monitors the Authority sends don't get in on the discussion."

"Shouldn't affect anything." Donna scowled. "It's nothing new."

"Maybe they put a secret message inside?"

"Why? Reading messages is a skill taught by the Rose and nobody else."

"Taught to whoever wants to find out how. Plus if texts are cast from one flock to the next they can be intercepted."

"You're talking about what they do with radio waves?" Donna peered down at him, a peculiar but nice sensation. Usually he was looking down at her. "I suppose so. Which is why the idea of secrets is ridiculous. Messages go so many different places. Like they did on the internet before all those businesses took over, back before Neutrality ended.

"If there's anything hidden, anything to what they sent beside the words, it's in the words' context." Donna held out her hands. Spots grabbed them in his and hauled himself upright. "Let's ask some of the residents. They have the best perspective, the most experience."

"Start without me? I should unload the dumbwaiter and check to make sure the washer's gonna stay balanced through the spin cycle. We need to act normal, finish our chores in case Antitrust sends officers early, right?"

"I'll meet you on the second floor. First won't take long."

Fifteen minutes later the two slipped aside her soundproofing curtain and stepped together into Bridie Raymond's room. The resident's thin white plaits hung limply on her substantial bosom. She smiled in their direction. "Miss Donna. With the latest message? And who's that accompanying you? Mr. Spottiswoode?"

"Good guess." Spots cleared his throat. This client was partially blind, which the other staff knew made him uneasy. "I brought you a new spray-on odor remover to try. An experiment." He took the spritzer out of his apron pocket.

Her mouth twitched; smiling or frowning? Both? "Set it on my table. No, the big one by the door.

"Why are you really here?" The black eyes had turned toward Donna. "It isn't class time. Meeting's not for another hour-and-a-half, couple hours."

"We're not actually sure," said Donna. "Could be something in this message?" She read it aloud.

The old woman rearranged herself on her pillows and tilted her head reflectively. "Seems normal. Which is weird, true. Why spend any effort sendin a message when it's not sayin anything you ain't already know?"

"What I was wonderin myself. Want to hear it again?"

"No, no. Nothin wrong with my memory. You mind me touchin it?"

Donna handed over the message. Examining it visually and with her fingers, Bridie clucked her tongue. "They tell me these descended from them knotted cords the Incans carried around?"

"Incans and a bunch of people. The way these ones' figures move keep em from making sense if you haven't had the latest training. But I *have* had it, and I still don't get more outta this than I read you."

"And you think it's there. Under the surface ..." The old woman's fingers combed apart the strands' twisted ends and stopped. "What's this?" Her voice cut sharp as a box knife.

"What's what?" Spots left the wall he'd been ostentatiously lounging against.

"These spozed to come in pieces like this?" In Bridie's palm lay the straw-like segment of a hollow thread.

A moment of stunned-sounding silence. "No," said Donna. "No they're not."

They found five other easily removable segments, all on the message's address edge. East Pomona's proper coordinates marked the old openings. But the new openings were inscribed with different marks. No one who'd received any version of the New Bedford Rose's reading lessons—recent or obsolete—could decipher them. Clandestine coordinates.

None of the rest of the residents they visited saw anything wrong—practically, ethically, or even legally—with what the overt message proposed.

Antitrust sent four officers to monitor the meeting. They arrived a quarter of an hour early, lotioned up with their standard first-line protectant against the sedative gas they always carried. Oily-faced and impassive, they occupied the comfortable seats reserved for them near the common room's exhaust vent and didn't appear to notice Spots hovering by the kitchen's serving hatch. Despite performing their usual random credential checks for "peripatetics."

When they left two hours later East Pomona had officially voted to join the New Bedford Rose. When they'd been gone another two hours the meeting reconvened to consider another issue. Arguments took hardly any time. The conclusion reached had two elements: use the strange new inscriptions directing the drone instead of the original ones, and append to the drone's text lattice an affirmative response to the other East Pomona's offer.

#

Excerpt from the Wikipedia article "Antitrust Authority," accessed April 5, 2028:

History: Following the suppression of so-called "freecycle"[3] and "Buy Nothing"[4] associations as competing against them unfairly, retail arms of many for-profit corporations sought further protection from social media-advantaged peer-to-peer distribution modes. Originating as an arm of the Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Competition, establishment of the Antitrust Authority facilitated regulation of multiple kinds of "overconnectedness," ranging from commercial to cultural to aesthetic linkages.

#

sent August 4 2025: OxfordEgret463326Ninja04082025 (EggPearl)(Amber-Zoo)

"Good. Because we don't know what Antitrust will try next."

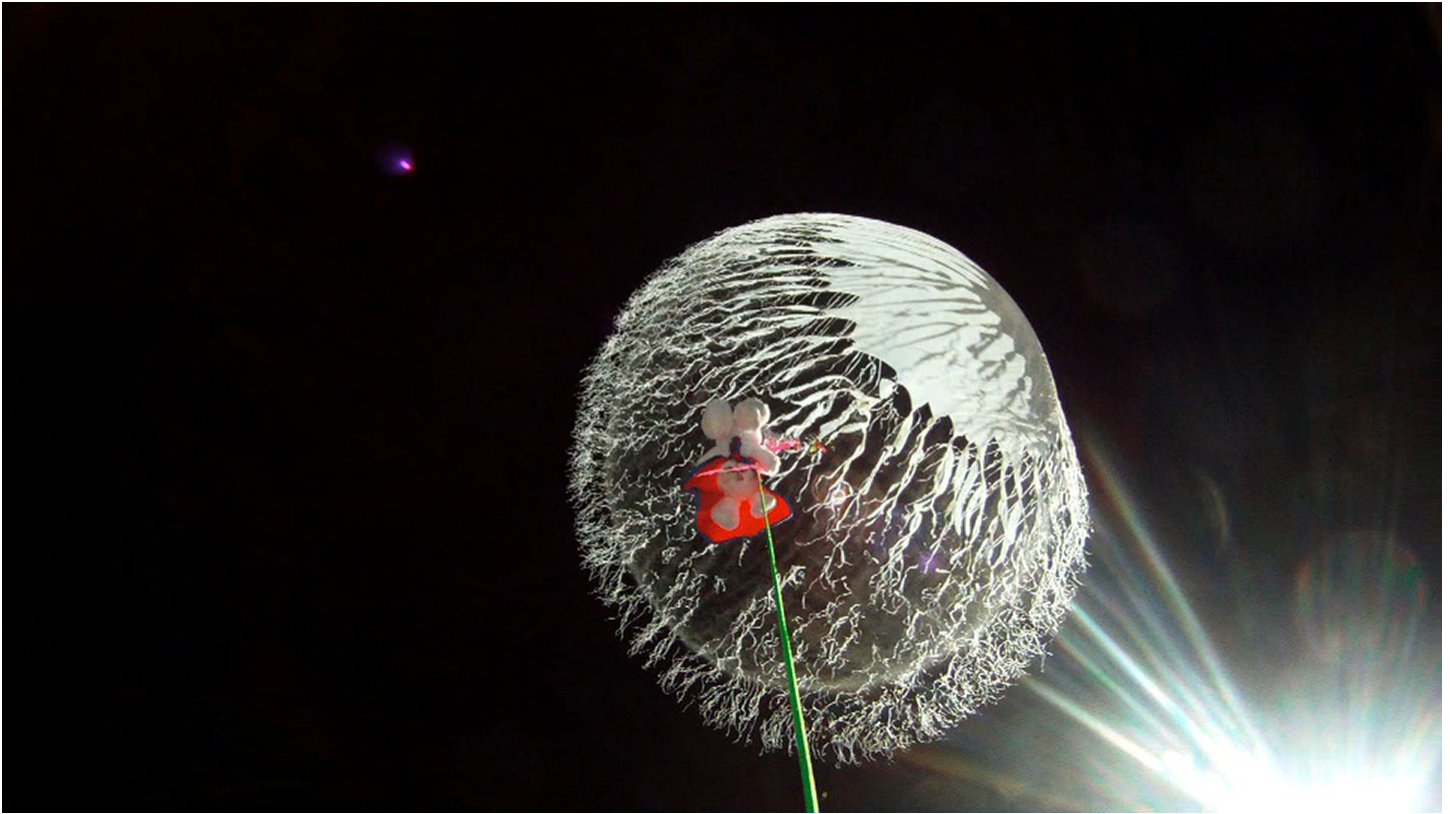
Shyreesha shook her head "No" vigorously. "We never do. This way we're prepared when they shut our other addresses down. We can use these clandestine coordinates to communicate. That way we help the rich balloon hobbyists sow confusion."

"Pre-action," Melvin Wembley agreed, standing below the scaffolding where she knelt. "Pro-action. But what about the message to Melissa Skye?"

"Went wrong, I guess." The hopvines mostly curled in tight, clockwise spirals around the poles where they were planted. Then there were these rebels. "Nothing ever came back from her." They ought to just clip them off.

"You sure?"

From kneeling on the scaffold plank with her arms stretched overhead and hips straight, Shyreesha sank back on her heels. There was no reason for her to feel insulted. She reminded herself firmly that Melvin was woke. Softly, without force or rancor, she threw the ball of twine she'd used to tie back a wayward green bine down to where he waited on the ground. "Drones fail. Hawks and



High-altitude balloon during burst, viewed from up-facing camera. See →

other predators—”

“I know, I know.” Melvin caught the twine and rewound the loose end. “Anything ready to harvest yet?”

Shyreesha picked a promisingly dry cone and opened it. Golden powder filled the pale cups of its bracteoles. “Yes. Do you have a bag?”

“In a minute.” The sound of Melvin brushing along the thickly planted row of hops receded toward the residence. Shyreesha continued to sit on her heels a moment, then began gathering ripe cones from the bines within the scaffold’s reach.

Would it work? East Pomona had created four separate identities and joined the Rose under each, serially. Enough false leads? Too many? Each identity had reached its Antitrust Authority–mandated networking limit soon after its creation. The existence of a care facility with the same name clear across the continent was fortuitous—or was it? Distraction or clue? Especially now they’d contacted it directly and issued that invitation.

Melvin returned with a brown paper grocery bag and Shyreesha put the hop cones inside. Then she climbed down and they wheeled the scaffold further out the row.

“Careful of the spuds,” Melvin warned her as she drifted

too near the neighboring potato hills.

“All right.” But Shyreesha’s attention was on the road bordering their property. A skimmer stirred dust and light gravel as it approached. It crossed the old cattle guard, turning in. Yellow grass grown up between the road’s ruts bent beneath the wind of its lift engines. It was headed for the residence. This was nap time. The kids. She dropped her hold on the scaffold’s guide bar and moved to intercept the intruder. Fast.

In front of the ranch-exterior, the building’s main elevation, the skimmer came to a stop and lowered itself gently to the ground. Crimson gull-wing doors lifted and twin-clad bureaucrats stepped out. Male-presenting. Tan complexions glowing with protective lotion. “May we speak with the person in charge?” said the one on the left.

“No.”

“No such person,” Melvin explained, breathing hard from catching up with her. “We’re a collective, consensus-ruled.”

The officers nodded. Probably they’d known all along there was no use asking. “We’re from the Antitrust Authority.” That was the one on the left again. “I’m Officer Stitt, and this is my partner, Officer Chumley.”

An awkward silence. Neither Shyreesha nor Melvin offered their names.

"Shyreesha Dinan and Melvin Wembley, yes?" No hesitation. Antitrust had easy access to population registers. "We're here to investigate a possible infraction of the citizen connection laws." A shorter silence. "May we come in?"

"No."

Melvin once more explained her answer. "Our kids are lying down right now; it's quiet time. Questioning us might disturb them." And the gas in the canisters Antitrust officers carried was worse for minors than adults.

"All right," said Chumley. "Suit yourself. We can request a warrant."

Shyreesha's smile made no effort to look sincere. "And by when you get it back and downloaded and printed you won't need it; we only have them sack out an hour. Twenty minutes left. Whynchou come sit with us by the duck pond till then?"

"I'll get us some lemonade," Melvin volunteered, heading for the front door at top speed.

Exchanging a loaded look, Stitt and Chumley followed Shyreesha around the house's far side to the fenced-in pond. Steps led up from the top of a stile to a gated balcony jutting from the roof of a low structure smelling of grain, mud, and duck shit. An awning provided shade to the balcony, and alders provided it to the water below. Plastic barrels and wooden crates topped with cushions were scattered around on the balcony's bare boards; Shyreesha gestured to the officers to have seats on them.

"So what can I tell you that you don't already know?" she asked, lowering herself to balance lightly on an empty olive barrel.

Officer Stitt tilted his head and gazed downward, body language evocative of self-deprecation. "Start with the basics, I guess. What do you call this place?"

Shyreesha stared at him warily. "We got a few names. Cause we does a few things."

"Let's cut the crap." Chumley pulled aside his tunic's top lapel and grabbed a fist of hardcopy. "We have you listed in our files three times." They'd missed an iteration. "Each listing admits to lateral connections with six suppliers, six outlets, six promotional associates, six financial affiliates, and one uncategorized organization. No replication. That's seventy-five total, making this location a real danger."

Shyreesha frowned and tucked her chin in like she was refusing a plate of spoiled food. "Danger to what?"

Stitt replied, "To the inherent hierarchy of government. You want to fight human nature."

He licked his thumbnail screen awake and read a quote from *The Five Petals of Thought*: "'Widespread lateral networks are able to prove that equality is stronger, overall, than inequality.' We're not giving you that chance."

Leaning forward, she said, "Could be just a misunderstanding. We call this here East Pomona Care Facility on most forms, but there's near as many names as we got members."

"But you're registered—"

"Hey! Anybody wanna help me?" Melvin's shouting interrupted the interrogation. "My hands are full and the gate swung shut." Shyreesha rose from her barrel, but Chumley beat her to the head of the steps. When he came back he bore a glass jar of sugar cookies lifted off the tray of mugs Melvin brought up behind him.

"Scuse me." Melvin set the tray on a crate and picked up two sweating, near-full mugs by their handles.

"Oh, no." Chumley pursed his lips and Stitt pressed his together tight. "We couldn't. Not while we're working."

"Why? It ain't alcohol." He thrust them in the officers' faces. They took them, but didn't drink.

Melvin and Shyreesha took up theirs. "Cheers." Both swallowed big gulps and let out satisfied-sounding sighs. Melvin scooted a crate closer in from the rickety-looking railing and sat.

"Human nature." Shyreesha lifted her mug again, this time taking a mere sip. "It's complicated. You got lots of components. Some of em contradictory." She broke apart a sugar cookie and pointed at the pond below with its white crescent. "Society determines which parts of your nature get the most play."

"Ummm ..." Stitt and Chumley exchanged another glance. "Right. So are you saying you deliberately subverted the law?" Stitt asked.

"You're certainly at liberty to consider me a virgin if you like; I've been corn-holed."

Again Melvin translated. "That's a line from her favorite porno. Means she doesn't care for the question's root assumptions."

"Well she's not going to care for anything else we're asking either." Chumley inhaled the sweetly acid aroma of the lemonade but still held off from tasting it. He set it down on an empty barrel top, distancing the temptation. "'Root assumptions'? Got em. We assume the law's right."

We assume we get to enforce it. We assume you owe us some answers." His voice hardened with each statement. "We assume you're going to give them to us whether you—"

"Now Herman," Stitt interrupted. "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, as my aunt always said."

"What's that supposed to—"

Loud quacks burst from the pond like farts, drowning the officer out. The ducks contended against one another for some invisible advantage. Wings beat, beaks stabbed, water spouted up and splashed back down. Then the waves and noise subsided, leaving the ducks swimming cordially together as if nothing had happened.

"Very hierarchical animals, ducks," Melvin observed. "Humans, not so much."

"You think so?" Officer Stitt set his untouched mug next to Chumley's. "Why?"

Shyreesha finished her mug and slammed it down on the balcony's floor. "Ever hear of a concept called '*mudita*'?"

"No, can't say we have."

"Google it. Sort of the opposite idea of *schadenfreude*, which you guys keep in wide circulation. It's like a particular kind of empathy—joy in another's pleasure." She grinned. "According to the copy of your interning script I read, I am going to *mudita* the hell out of what happens next."

Scooping up the mug she'd just deposited, Shyreesha leapt to her feet. She crouched, knees bent, arms wide, and sprang over the intervening space at Officer Stitt. They crashed together against the balcony's rail—which held.

"Reesha!" cried Melvin. He rose too. Tried to.

"Sit! Hands up!" Chumley ordered him. He pushed him back down to make him obey. "And you—Ms. Dinan—stop! You're under arrest!"

Shyreesha looked up from her embrace of the other officer, eyes wide and angelic. She drew back the fist with the mug in it and smashed it against Stitt's head. Got in two more blows before Chumley ripped the top off of his gas canister.

Soundlessly, stainlessly, the nitrous oxide derivative it contained expanded outward. Quick-absorbing, this sedative's contact vector. Officer Chumley barely had time to pull on his mask. Stitt's only protection was the chemical in the lotion Antitrust made them rub on their skin before field assignments. The injured officer inhaled

the gas helplessly; Chumley accepted that was probably for the best. The aerosol component worked more slowly, but its analgesic properties would combat any pain from Stitt's wounds. And there'd be no permanent harm; as the woman had alluded, part of Antitrust Authority officers' training involved exposing themselves to this stuff. NewNight, which was what its manufacturers called the gas, wore off in a couple of hours.

Not this fast, though. Not so fast Shyreesha should be sitting up clear-eyed. Not so fast that Melvin remained erect on his crate rather than sliding off half-conscious.

"You oughta had some lemonade." The impervious man pointed at the officers' abandoned mugs. "If you hadn't suspected poison you'd be full of our antidote."

Officer Chumley protested the impossibility of an effective antidote to NewNight the best he could with his mask muffling his mouth. "Here, lemme help you." The woman snatched it off and tossed it to the ducks. Chumley scrambled to the balcony's edge but it was gone, a floating smudge in the pond's shining black-and-algae-green surface, dully translucent and drifting deeper deeper deeper deeper

"You hurt?" Melvin asked Shyreesha.

"Couple splinters. I barely feel em. Messages sent?"

"I think the drones needed brushin up, raise their charges so they reach the right berths. Kids are still workin on em—they'll get em away before this wears off, though." He tapped Officer Chumley politely on one shoulder. "You want to stand up."

"Yes." NewNight made its recipients amazingly suggestible.

"You want to check how your buddy's doing." It helped if the suggestions matched the recipients' innate desires.

Chumley walked to Stitt's side and knelt. No blood. The prone officer rolled over at his colleague's prodding. His eyes stayed closed. Chumley slapped weakly at his cheeks. "I'd better bring him to a medic."

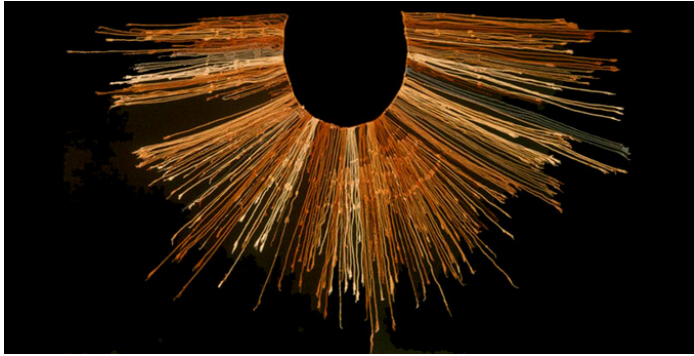
"You hit him that hard?" Melvin asked Shyreesha.

"Hell no! With *this*?" She showed him the mug she'd used. Half of it had crumbled apart. "Papier-mâché, remember? I did pound him with it, though, just like we practiced. Maybe the dose we coated it in was too high? But, you know, I'm feelin good on about the same amount."

Melvin returned his attention to the fallen officer. "You want to wake up." Stitt's eyes opened and he levered himself from the floor.

"You found what you were looking for. Now you want to leave."

#



An example of a quipu from the Inca Empire, currently in the Larco Museum Collection. Photo: Wikipedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0/Lyndsaruell

Excerpts from the Wikipedia article "Message drones," accessed April 5, 2028:

Technical developments: The ability to store kinetic power and derive it from human manipulation ("stroking" and "petting") were added almost simultaneously. Most credit these innovations to the same cohort of Five Petals followers that helped configure the original enthusiasts' haphazard high-altitude balloon flights into the current Balloonnet ... Early and middle period address protocols relied on idiosyncratic impressions on freshly exposed string-end-sockets made by hand-cast tools. These tools, created by scattered artists, never conformed to a set standard. However, their individuality helped protect information subject to unwelcome government scrutiny, particularly important during the period in which tracking programs were monitored. Along with the frequent revisions of knot codes and the institution of multiple clandestine addresses, these highly interpretable sigils helped disseminate the practical lessons of the New Bedford Rose more widely even than Skye's bestselling book.

#

*received August 1 2025:
StellarRobin880581Cat25072025(EggPearl) (Beaver)*

AND

*sent August 11 2025:
DancingPeacock907019Eel11082025(MumboSyrup)
(Antler-Zinc)*

Melissa sighed. That worrisome message from East Pomona had gone back to them by way of her attempt at giving it an imaginary address. The recipients it reached had been real. They'd forwarded it to a different East Pomona, which may have been what triggered an even more problematic message to that second East Pomona from the first one. How did she know the new message was even more problematic? Because she had a copy on her lap. They'd sent it to her complete with secret coordinate sets, and she'd read it, and kept it for the last ten days—

She sank her forehead onto her clenched fists, then knuckled her tightly closed eyes. She had *tried*. Writing *The Five Petals of Thought* was just supposed to make her rich. Yes, the New Bedford Rose was revolutionary and yes, she cared about it. Yes, in the past it had changed lives, spread around the world, probably changed the course of history: hard to imagine women's suffrage succeeding, or the Civil Rights Movement, or the defeat of Belgium's Leopold, without it. Those, though, had all been before her time.

And yes, the Rose challenged the current government's fundamental precepts. But.

But she had her place in the scheme of things. She couldn't afford to lose it. She had her wins: this school, her home, her favorite charities. Health care providers who paid attention to her complaints.

Another sigh escaped her. Here on the hillside where she always lunched and breakfasted, always examined the latest messages, Melissa's view of New Ramblin's precincts fell before her like a rumped tapestry: the red horse barn, the white goathouse, the chicken coop, dronecote, bath, woodshed, and workshops connected by flagstone paths; the pool and boathouse; the commissary. The clinic being built down near the main entrance. All those neat and oddly assorted visions: the commissary like a Black Forest cottage, dripping with faux gingerbread and windowed with sugary panes; the circular dorm with its circus-tent roofline; and all the eccentric rest. Born of Thought, Action, Observation, and Integration. Persisting via pro- or pre-action, on her part or on the part of some other member of the Rose. Now for something New. She set aside the message that had meant another round of trouble.

Would the school go on without her? Could it?

One way to find out. One deliberately provocative way. Accept an illicitly high number of connections.

Shaking her head at what she was doing, Melissa turned and lifted the top drone off the fifty-plus crated beside her. Now where ... she found and opened the pen cushion compartment of the message kit on the wooden table beside her. Running her fingers over her pen's heads she

selected the right one and thrust its point into a hollow thread's opening. Repeated the sequence for each of the other address threads. Then she stroked the wings on either side of the drone's body till she felt sure they were charged with enough kinetics to make it to the nearest balloon with a drone booster berth. And lifted it up and released it on the wind.

###

X

Nisi Shawl's stories have appeared in science fiction anthologies ranging from the groundbreaking *Dark Matter* series to *Salon's* online *Trump Project*. Ursula K. Le Guin described Shawl's 2008 Tiptree Award-winning collection *Filter House* as "superbly written." Though best known for her short fiction, Shawl also wrote the 2016 Nebula finalist novel *Everfair*, an alternate history in which the Congo overthrows Leopold II's genocidal regime. She has appeared as a lecturer at Stanford and Duke Universities, University of Hawaii Manoa, and other institutions. In 2005, Shawl co-wrote *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*, a standard text on inclusive representation. She's a founder of the Carl Brandon Society and has served on the Clarion West Writers Workshop's board of directors for nineteen years. Shawl reviews for *The Seattle Times*, *Ms. Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and contributes monthly columns to *The Seattle Review of Books* and Tor.com. She edits reviews for the feminist literary quarterly *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*. Additionally, she has edited and co-edited several anthologies, including *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany*; and *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*.

Denise Ferreira da Silva

In the Raw

What is it that a black feminist poethics makes available? What can it offer to the task of unthinking the world, of releasing it from the grips of the abstract forms of modern representation and the violent juridic and economic architectures they support? If it is a practice of imaging and thinking (with/in/for) the world, without separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, then it approaches reflection as a kind of study, or as the play of the imagination without the constraints of the understanding. And, if the task is unthinking this world with a view to its end—that is, decolonization, or the return of the total value expropriated from conquered lands and enslaved bodies—the practice would not aim at providing answers but, instead, would involve raising questions that both expose and undermine the Kantian forms of the subject, that is, the implicit and explicit positions of enunciation—in particular, the loci of decision or judgement or determination—this subject occupies.

With the following black feminist reading of Madiha Sikander's *Majmua*, I intend a theoretical proposition that focuses on its matter without endowing the *material* with the attributes associated with other causes, such as *finality* or *efficacy*. This poethical reading approaches the artwork, *Majmua*, as a composition, the components of which also include, for instance, the artist's intention, but are not determined by it. For what the reading does is to move to consider whether, and if so, how the components of the artwork, approached *in the raw*—that is, as matter contemplated both as actual and virtual—signal a path for a kind of reflection that avoids the colonial and racial presuppositions inherent to concepts and formulations presupposed in existing strategies for critical commentary on art. Let me say it in another way. Finding refusal (to signify in spacetime) in the matter of the work and not in the forms in the artist's mind, through a poethical (material and decompositional) rather than critical (formal and analytical) reading of the work, this text does no more than to experiment with an approach to artistic practice that seeks to expand its relevance beyond the bounds of criticality—as set up in the Kantian grammar, that is, the dead-ended formalism it has gifted to the critical traditions it has inspired—and considers artistic practice as a generative locus for engaging in radical reflection on modalities of racial (symbolic) and colonial (juridic) subjugation operating in full force in the global present.

I.

A black feminist poethics attends to matter in the raw, that is, as that which has been appropriated (extracted, violated) but not fully obliterated by the practices and discourses that describe what happens and what exists as determined by form (as abstraction) or law (efficacy), something akin to Hortense Spillers's flesh.¹ In the raw, The Thing, as a referent of undeterminacy ($\infty - \infty$) or materia prima, hails blackness's capacity to release the



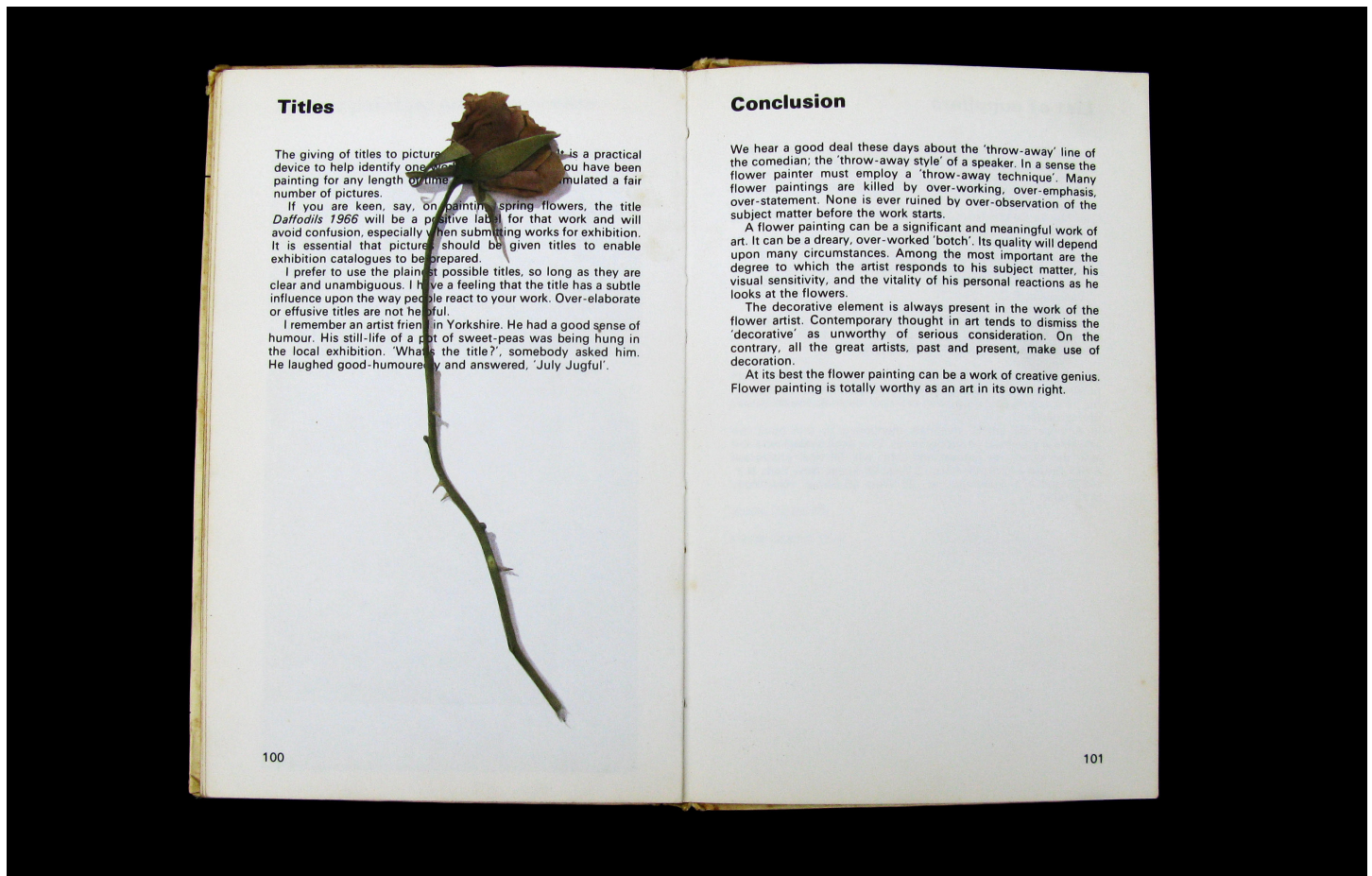
Madiha Sikander, *Majmua*, 2017-18. Clove monofilament glass and metal beads. Courtesy of the artist.

*imagination from the grips of the subject and its forms, which is but a first gesture in regard to a mode of thinking that contemplates virtuality and actuality all and at once.*²

What I do in this piece is to experiment with a black feminist poethical reading of an artwork. More precisely, I trace the steps towards a reflective practice that does not, for instance, approach a given artwork as a particular to be subsumed under a, even if subjective, (formal) principle organizing a common (universal) sense. This procedure, as I have offered before, is similar to focusing blacklight.³ Blacklight, or ultraviolet radiation, works *through* that which it makes shine: for example, it has the capacity to transform at the DNA level, that is, it reprograms the code in the living thing exposed to it, and causes mayhem in their self-reproductive capacity at the cellular level. We could think of this process as one of breaking up a modern substance, that is, of separating form (the code, the formula, the algorithm, or the principle) and matter (content, or that of which something is composed). (I use the modifier “modern” because of my interest in dissolving the abstract forms of the understanding. However, there is

nothing to prevent us from imaging blacklight breaking through any other abstract or sensible form, even, hopefully, at the atomic level. In any event.)

Once released by blacklight, the matter becomes available for something that can be termed a recoding—which in the case of cells usually means deadly ungoverned reproduction of cells—or to compositional practices that do not hold that which they combine prisoner to the form (figure or shape) with which it apprehends it, such as for instance a tarot spread. In other words, matter becomes available to poethical readings, to the kind of re/de/compositions that do not deploy the onto-epistemological pillars of modern thought, namely separability, determinacy, and sequentiality. To make it possible, at least two intentional steps must precede the reading. First, it is important to avoid presupposing the modern re-arrangement of classical causes—namely, final, formal, efficient, and material—in which the material (that out of which something is made) is but an effect of the end (final), the abstract formula (formal), or the universal law (efficient) that is transparent to none but the



Madiha Sikander, Inconvenient Truth II . Gadrung on paper.

subject. Second, while not ignoring that it belongs in this world, a reflection on the material cannot merely move to treat it as content. For even Adorno's proposition of the artwork as "sedimented" content relies on the very distinction between the empirical and the aesthetic which presumes the empirical as the site of intervention of the understanding—which refers to the position of the subject as the giver or knower of universal laws, in the register of efficacy.⁴ This is crucial because this assumption has consequences for contemporary artworks, which were not even on the radar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when, for instance, Gauguin and Picasso, borrowing the "form" of the anthropological "primitive" subject, would demarcate their "genius."

When attending to the work—the creation or the product—black feminist poethics' first step is to identify and dissolve the workings of separability in the delimitation of the position of the transparent subject. This decompositional step consists primarily in exposing and setting aside the fashionings of the Kantian grammar. In particular, it targets the (explicit or implicit) linking of art and its particular mode of expression to an ideal of humanity. Doing so, it indicates why perspectives such as Rancière's aesthetic regime, which relies on a notion of

equality, the emergence of which he locates in the late eighteenth century along with that of Kant's ideal of humanity, offer no entry point for a reflection on artwork that is not immediately taken as an expression of it.⁵ Simultaneously, decomposition, the breaking of the code, also targets later, nineteenth-century refashionings of the Human, that is, the analytics of raciality and its tools (racial difference and cultural difference), the social-scientific reconstructions of Kant's and Hegel's programs, which have embodied and emplaced humanity. In sum, a black feminist poethical reading reflects on the artwork in relation to the arsenal of raciality at the very same time that it also considers how the artwork refuses to simply become an object of empirical anthropology.

II.

Attending to the matter of the artwork, a black feminist poethical commentary moves to release it from the realm of the subject, whose faculty of aesthetic judgement rests on a figuring of the sensible (and the conditions of affectability) mediated by the forms of transcendental reason and a view of the imagination that articulates it as always already in the service of the abstract forms of the

understanding.

In the empty gallery, *Majmua* stood as an aggregate of things *known* but unusually combined: clove and beads joined by monofilament in the form of tiny lozenges and larger rectangular stripes. None of its components afforded a *proper* position for knowing; that is, there was no common “cultural” ground for my familiarity with the form and matter of artwork. The inspiration, Madiha Sikander told me later, came from observing First Nations weavers with the late indigenous (Kwakwaka’wakw) artist Beau Dick while he was in residence at the Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory at the University of British Columbia, and from the practice of miniature painting, in which she was trained in Pakistan. Both of which account for her use of beads and cloves, respectively, but not for why I was (pleasantly) surprised to see these familiar materials in her artwork.

How to account for a feeling of pleasure mediated by the knowability of the materials? The “how” of this mediation, I hope, will become evident soon. Let me first comment on two possible ways through which *Majmua* could have appeared “unmediately” familiar (*known*) to me. Both ascribe “immediacy” (familiarity, at the level of cognition) to the subject, but toward distinct formulations of its position. On the one hand, pleasure resulting from *knowing* its components (cloves and beads as matter) would not immediately imply the Kantian aesthetic subject. For knowability in the Kantian formulation of the aesthetic register refers to the transparent I, as a formal entity, the one whose relation to the world—both sensible and intelligible—is mediated, but by forms (intuitions and categories) of the mode of cognition grounded on transcendental reason. Put differently, his account of aesthetic judgement is supported by the assumption that the forms of the object (of art or nature) are compatible (“harmonious” is the term he uses) with the conditions of the subject of determinative (sensibility in the register of the understanding) and aesthetic (sensibility in the moment of imagination) judgements, without a recourse to an empirical (scientific) or practical (moral) ground.⁶ Put differently, Kant’s feeling of the beautiful educes a position of enunciation captured by his notion of “subjective universality,” which, in the case of the aesthetic appreciation of artwork but also of nature, presupposes separability, that is, a delineation of the distinct cognitive faculties of the imagination and its intuitions and of the understanding and its concepts.⁷ Here the transparent I, when judging an artwork beautiful, presumes that it enjoys universality and necessity not because it has reference to a concept but to a feeling (of the beautiful) which is presumed (“as if it were”) universal, because it is grounded on common sense (or the assumption that every human being shares in the cognitive structures and their capacities).⁸ As such, the feeling of the beautiful is not an effect (or rather affect) of matter (of the object) on the subject but rather of its form (formal intuitions of space and time), which is always

already in the subject, since he alone is able to reflect, that is, to consider a representation without referring back to its object, but only to his cognitive faculties (imagination and understanding).

On the other hand, however, the knowability of (familiarity with) the components (cloves and beads) of the work does not escape determinacy. Because in the case of *Majmua*, while reflection remains the play of the imagination and the understanding, the latter has supremacy, for it is always already under capture as ethnographic specimen. This is an immediate consequence of its commentary on Pakistani miniature painting and Coast Salish First Nations weaving practices, which very quickly and effectively prompts the position of the subject of empirical anthropology. In this case, knowability could refer to the position of the appreciator of global contemporary art. However, while the appreciator may occupy the position of transparency, the artist (as well as the forms and the matter of the work) would occupy the position of enunciation of the subject as an affectable I, that is, the racial/global subaltern produced by the tools of raciality (racial and cultural difference). Or, put differently, the artist occupies the position of enunciation Spivak calls the “native-informant,” either in finding in the work a form (social? cultural?) that augments the knowledge of human diversity, or attributing to it the purposeless purpose of expressing other dimensions of what is unified under the idea of the human.⁹ Either way, the artwork becomes a postcolonial object which refers to an ethical relation (an immediacy figured by the presupposition of shared humanity in its diversity) that the artwork itself enables, but only because it is mediated by the tools of the understanding before which the postcolonial subject of artistic production is affectable (as an anthropological object) and the postcolonial subject of aesthetic judgement remains transparent by proxy (as the subject of anthropological knowledge).

When considered in the critical-Kantian framework, in regard to the reflective judgement of the beautiful, *Majmua* exposes something else that is also operational if it is taken as a postcolonial piece, which immediately confines it to being an object of determinative judgement. For while philosophy’s (Kant’s) New Hollander has no appreciation for the sublime (as Spivak notices¹⁰), the analytics of raciality’s Australian aboriginal—much like Kant’s “Negro”—has no appreciation of the beautiful because its “normal idea” of the human does not correspond to the “ideal of humanity” that these analytics would later find actualized exclusively by European bodily and social forms.¹¹ This is not Spivak’s “cultural difference,” which she in fact finds foreclosed in Kant’s writings on the sublime.

Recall that, for Kant, the “man in the raw”—under Spivak named, that is, the New Hollander and the man from Tierra del Fuego—provides no basis for considering the figure, Humanity, that organizes his formulation of aesthetic



judgement.¹²

It was not until the early twentieth century, after the analytics of raciality—through the notion of cultural difference—wrote the “other of Europe,” that these men in the raw could be written as variants of the Human. When they enter the aesthetic register, they do so as products of Kantian tools of the understanding, in two key moments of the analytics of raciality: 1) they are constructed as specific kinds of human beings—subjects of “primitive” or “traditional” cultures—but 2) also as affectable subjects, those whose minds have no access to Reason, which is the cognitive capacity necessary for entertaining the idea of a moral law and the attendant conception of Freedom. For the affectable subject (of cultural difference)—the racial/global subaltern—is marked precisely by its lack of the minimum requirements for the judgement of taste, which is the rational core of Kant’s “ideal of humanity.”¹³ The affectable subject is also marked by its lack of a conception of a *forma finalis*, an idea that underscores Kant’s account of taste and its attribution of a formal purposiveness to the object. The concept of a *forma finalis* is a reference to the subject’s own cognitive capacities, in particular its ability to approach the complexity of the world by reducing the purpose of the latter (which it can never know) to an order (that it alone can understand).¹⁴

Fortunately, however, precisely because of its inability to be taken as a formal-practical aesthetic object, *Majmua* exposes the limits of Kant’s formulation of affectability rooted in (as well as his arresting of the imagination by) an account of the judgement of taste that rests on the transcendental (formal) principle of finality and prefigures efficacy and necessity (that is, the basis of ordering accessible to the understanding).

III.

A black feminist poethical reading deploys blacklight to dissolve determinacy, which grounds the Kantian rendering of aesthetic judgement, shifting the focus to the elusive, the unclear, the uncertain—the scent—thereby making it possible to dislodge sequentiality and expose the deeper (virtual) correspondences comprehended (but not extinguished) by the abstract forms of modern thought.

At first sight *Majmua* appeared tall, wide, and continuous, though after a few seconds it broke horizontally into smaller brown bands, separated by green strips. A closer look found these brown bands separated by very small red strips, and an even closer look revealed the small lozenges. By then, however, something else had arrested my attention: a known, familiar scent that I could not immediately name. It took a still closer look for me to notice that the lozenges were made of clove sticks. Shapes and colors lost my interest then. Every component of the work would be familiar to most viewers, yet also not, because each component originated from a different

faraway place. Each of the components—but in particular the beads and the cloves—have been present in South Asia and South America for such a long time that no one even considers the question of where exactly they are from and how they came to be part of our environment.

Talking with Madiha Sikander about her piece and her training in miniature painting made me think about the need to recall that “form” has at least two meanings—the Aristotelian form as figure (shape or composition) and the Kantian form (as formula or principle). One important aspect of her training in miniature painting in Pakistan, said Sikander, is that students are told to practice until the skill becomes instinct. I am sure that this forgetting plays a part in *Majmua*, as the name (“assemblage”) explicitly indicates. What interests me is what happens when the artist is trained to surrender, to forget, and to yield to all that is involved in the artwork, from materials to conditions. Forgetting a skill because it has become an “instinct” obviously has several consequences for the artist and her work. In *Majmua* we see that forgetting carries a radical potential for artwork as practice, object, and commentary on the global present. What’s so compelling about forgetting, about surrendering the artist’s intentions to the needs of the work? It leads to a loosening of the composition and its materials, which invites them to signify willy-nilly. Each and every decision she has made due to familiarity (but also perhaps to efficiency, curiosity, availability, precarity, abundance, or even patriarchy) with the forms and materials used in the work loses its immediate efficacy in the assemblage. Each piece composing *Majmua*—the cloves, the beads, the monofilament—refigures how current global geopolitical and economic lines have been designed by layers of trade, vanquished imperial powers, and the juridic-economic subject they created. Each lozenge refigures how the lines of the Silk Road and the routes of the Spice Trade map the Indian subcontinent, trade routes tracing to the Neolithic and extending to Southern Europe, North and East Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. Each bead recalls the European expropriation of indigenous lands in the Americas and of human beings in the African continent—the “slave trade beads” Europeans used in their dealings with indigenous American groups. Each material component recalls errant and unbounded and deep temporality. The figural time of matter dissolves historical time’s (abstract) closures, thereby exposing the otherwise invisible and yet-so-familiar colonial links that cross oceans and continents. The matter used in *Majmua* raise questions about what happens to the artist’s intention when attending to materials that have become familiar. We forget that they are both iterations of something that has always existed through the depths of spacetime and beyond, and always already commodities, as items of trade and products of labor.

IV.

What blacklight makes available, what it offers to the task of thinking and unthinking the world, is the possibility of considering thinking in some other way: What if what matters in (the) artwork exceeds representation not because of its “why” or “when” or “where” but because of its “how” and its “what”?

By reading the artwork as composition, reflection can attend to its components as raw material. It can also uncover how the artwork’s knowability (to both the artist and appreciator) results from the way this raw material allows for the *traversing* of spacetime¹⁵—like Dana, the main character in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*—and the exposure of how the current map of globality (the ontological horizon delimited by raciality) figures all and at once merchant, industrial, and financial capital. Reading the artwork this way corrupts the fixity imposed by concepts and formulations that inform (the abstract forms of) critical commentary. Let me say it another way. By attending to *Majmua*’s cloves and slave beads, it is possible to read, through *raw material*, the colonial as a moment of the creation of capital. It shows that commodities, such as cotton in the colonial past (and copper in its global present), are not a specimen of other (alien or old) social relations or modes of production—which capital must subsume, articulate, or replace. Since the early sixteenth century, when Portuguese merchants began trading in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, commodities (slaves, cloves, cotton) extracted from various colonial sites have been transiting between Europe and its colonies due to the operation of the modern juridic devices of coloniality.

When blacklight hits the artwork, its *materia prima* (raw material) shines. As such, this method for reflection and thinking is *critical* only to the extent that it acknowledges, *and* seeks not to remain within, the bounds of the world as imaged for the subject. What happens is that attention goes to what in the artwork resists the reductive apprehensions of critical discourses—their request for a subject—and insists on signifying *in the raw*. With this I am not extending the thesis of the autonomy of art to include the matter of the artwork, but rather inviting a certain kind of reflection that unfolds outside the realm of the subject. Put differently, I attend to the artwork as a poethical piece, as a composition which is always already a recomposition and a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions. By doing so, then, I propose that the artwork does not have to come before the appreciator as an “object,” with all the presuppositions and implications this entails. For the object (of science, of discourse, or of art) is nothing more than a concoction of the onto-epistemological pillars of universal reason that support the modes of operation of the subject, in the moments of appreciation, production, and actualization. Extricated from the subject, reflection on the artwork releases the imagination from the grid of signification sustained by separability, determinacy, sequentiality—a

crucial step in the dissolution of the mode of knowing that supports state-capital, that is, that grounds an image of the world as that which needs to be conquered (occupied, dominated, seized).

X

All images courtesy of Madiha Sikander.

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1
Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

2
For an elaboration of virtuality see, for instance, Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Towards the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

3
See Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Blacklight," in *Otobong Nkanga: Luster and Lucre*, eds. Clare Molloy and Philippe Pirotte (Sternberg Press, 2017).

4
Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Continuum, 1997), 6.

5
Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Continuum, 2006), 27.

6
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Hafner Press, 1951.)

7
For a racial critique of Kant's common sense, see David Lloyd, "Race under Representation," *Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1 (1991): 62–94.

8
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 46.

9
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

10
Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 14.

11
See generally Lloyd, "Race under Representation."

12
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 71.

13
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 70.

14
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 55.

15
For a setting-up of transversality, see Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics."

Laps are uncertain places: they consist of a corporeal configuration with no bodily matter inside the space they create, only form. The lap isn't an organ, a limb, or a joint; the lap isn't even a fixed cavity like the mouth, the navel, or a nostril. In being a hollow area, laps could be compared to the axillae, but armpits are still there when a person stretches or raises their arms, while there is no specific body part that is only and always attributed to the lap: when you sit, you make a lap; when you stand up, the lap is gone.

Filipa Ramos

The Company One Keeps: Laptops, Lap Dances, Lapdogs



Gabriël Metsu, *Het zieke kind* (The Sick Child), c. 1664–66. Oil on canvas.

Laps have ambivalent meanings. As a concept, laps are where care and burden walk, or sit, hand-in-hand. Luxury and subservience coexist in the lap, where fixed lifelong roles of giving and taking are rehearsed and first enacted. A brief look at how the lap appears in a handful of English idiomatic expressions attests to this disparity. If “to drop a weight in someone’s lap” means to give a person an unforeseen responsibility, “to fall into one’s lap,” on the contrary, stands for receiving something without any effort. An individual can only hope for the positive outcome of an unpredictable fate if their situation is “in the lap of the gods”; by contrast, “to live in the lap of luxury” means to thrive in great comfort and wealth. A person sits down when they “make a lap,” but they can rightly be called “a lapdog” if they act in a subservient manner.



Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *La Gimblette*, c. 1770. Oil on canvas.

Likewise, to “take a lap,” often said in the context of sports and just as often a punitive measure, is physically undertaken by someone on the bottom of a hierarchical relation. Lapping, an activity shared by all dogs, lap- and non, has a different meaning but a common etymology: the Germanic term *læppa*, a piece of cloth folded to keep things inside it. Just like the bended tongue of an animal lapping.

The charged and, arguably, intangible space of the lap as a site can host the promise for a new condition of intimacy, one embedded in a different set of biopolitical, cultural, and gendered imaginations.

From Lapdogs to Lap Dances

Over the centuries, the lap has been a space where primates—humans and non—have gotten closer to other people and animals. Yet, starting in the last decade or so of the twentieth century, the lap became the support for another vital form: the portable personal computer, commonly known as the laptop, whose invention, subsequent commercialization, and widespread distribution opened the lap to a new set of relationships and activities. If until then the lap was mostly a holding device (a place to sit for children, other adults, and pets),

with the introduction of the laptop, the lap was turned into another support structure, its function becoming closer to a table.

But it might be worth slowing down and going back to the beginning. The lap can be made to hold and support another individual, a child, an animal, but also an adult. It is one of the primordial figures of motherhood and also of the dutifulness associated with it: the artistic canon of the *pietà* (the representation of the Virgin Mary holding the body of her dead adult son) provides a good example of how the lap stands for the dutifulness (and indeed, “*pietà*” means “dutifulness”) of motherhood during the entire life of the offspring.

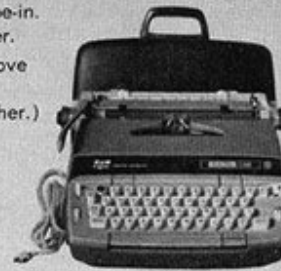
Long before the company of the laptop, another companion species had already made its way to the laps of people in all classes and genders of society: the lapdog. Lapdogs aren’t a specific breed but a generic term for a type of dog with a relatively small size and a friendly disposition. Lapdogs are tertiary-sector service workers: they are neither employed to support agrarian tasks (like herding and hunting), nor to assure the security and protection of their owners. Instead, their main function is to provide companionship. They are also a useful garment complement, providing warmth and softness, and a hygienic device, drawing parasites such as fleas and ticks away from humans. Anatomically, lapdogs show distinct

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A 1967 advertisement claims the Smith-Corona Electric Portable typewriter is "the thing with teenagers who want to swing college. Not the sit-in. Or the be-in. The type-in."



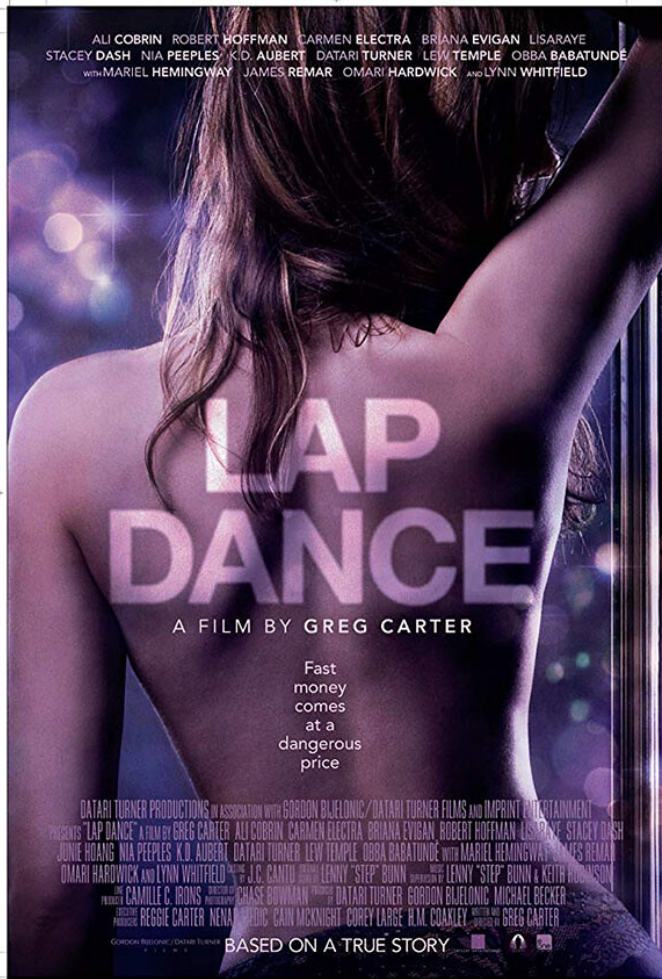
David Adolph Constant Artz, *In Slaap Gesust (Lulled to Sleep)*, 1871. Oil on canvas.

differences from their full-sized counterparts. The average skull of a lapdog is approximately the size of a table-tennis ball; lapdogs generally have a short muzzle and high forehead, as they have been bred to retain juvenile characteristics, a phenomenon known as neoteny (also characteristic of humans).¹ The potential inconvenience of this transformation could be summed up by the Latin expression *multum in parvo*, or “a lot in a little”: a great deal of dog compressed in a small creature with the propensity for a nervous, agitated, and loud character. The body proportions of such dogs have also been human-changed to retain juvenile characteristics, resulting in animals with relatively short legs and large heads. Many lapdogs have also acquired traits that resemble those of human babies, such as their overall size and weight, and their high forehead, short muzzle, and large, engaging eyes. Although selective breeding for such traits has detrimental effects on a dog’s tear ducts, dentition, and breathing, and may cause such conditions as encephalitis (a lethal inflammation of the brain and meninges), these features also increase the owners’ bonds with their animals, promoting an attitude of caring

due to the dog’s similarity to a surrogate infant—cruelty and caring being impossible to disentangle.

While it is undeniable that lapdogs helped to shape the conduct and symbolism of a leisure- and pleasure-prone bourgeoisie, and were the object of transference of public and domestic libidinal drives, they also supported fundamental gender struggles, as noted by Paul Preciado in a text featured in a footnote to Donna Haraway’s 2008 book *When Species Meet* (a text that very much deserves to be republished and further developed):

Fabricated at the end of the nineteenth-century, French bulldogs and lesbians co-evolve from being marginal monsters into becoming media creatures and bodies of pop and chic consumption. Together, they invent a way of surviving and create an aesthetics of human–animal life. Slowly moving from red-light districts to artistic boroughs all the way to television, they have ascended the species pile together. This is a history of mutual recognition, mutation, travel and queer love ... The history of the French bulldog and that of the working queer woman are tied to the transformations brought on by the industrial revolution and the emergence of modern sexualities ... Soon, the so-called French bulldog became the beloved companion of the “Belles de nuit,” being depicted by artists such as Toulouse Lautrec and Degas in Parisian brothels and cafes. [The dog’s] ugly face, according to conventional beauty standards, echoes the lesbian refusal of the heterosexual canon of female beauty; its muscular and strong body and its small size made of the *molosse* the ideal companion of the urban flâneuse, the nomad woman writer and the prostitute. [By] the end of the nineteenth century, together with the cigar, the suit or even writing [itself], the bulldog became an identity accessory, a gender and political marker and a privileged survival companion for the manly woman, the lesbian, the prostitute and the gender reveler [in] the growing European cities ... The French bulldog’s survival opportunity really began in 1880, when a group of Parisian Frenchy breeders and fans began to organize regular weekly meetings. One of the first members of the French bulldog owners club was Madame Palmyre, the proprietor of the club “La Souris” located in the lower reaches of Paris in the area of “Mont Martre” and “Moulin Rouge.” This was a gathering place for butchers, coachmen, rag traders, café owners, barrow boys, writers, painters, lesbians and hookers. Lesbian writers gathered together with bulldogs at La Souris. Toulouse Lautrec immortalized “bouboule,” Palmyre’s French bulldog, walking with hookers or eating at their tables. Representing the so-called dangerous classes, the scrunched-up faces of the bulldog, as those of the manly lesbians, were part of the modern aesthetic turn. Moreover, French writer Colette, friend of Palmyre and customer of La



According to the tagline for the 2014 film *Lap Dance* (dir. Greg Carter),
"Fast money comes at a dangerous price."

Souris, would be one of the first writers and political actors to be always portrayed with her French bulldogs. By the early 1920s, the French bulldog had become a biocultural companion of the liberated woman and writer in literature, painting, and the emerging media.²

The extension of the overlaying functions of caring and intimacy on the lap can also be observed in the public appearance of the lap dance—a type of erotic performance in which a dancer, typically a woman, establishes physical contact with a seated client (the lap dance normally involves a monetary transaction), generally for the duration of a song, and in the setting of a nightclub.

Lap dances as a form of entertainment have a relatively recent history. They started in the 1970s in New York's Melody Theater, with the introduction of what the venue described as "audience participation." Subsequently, lap



Sidonie Gabrielle Claudine Colette, better known simply as Colette, poses with her dog, Souci, c 1930s.

dances became popular in the UK between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. There is a whole history to be written on the relation between the growth of the popularity of the lap dance and the structuring of manly individualism during late capitalism.

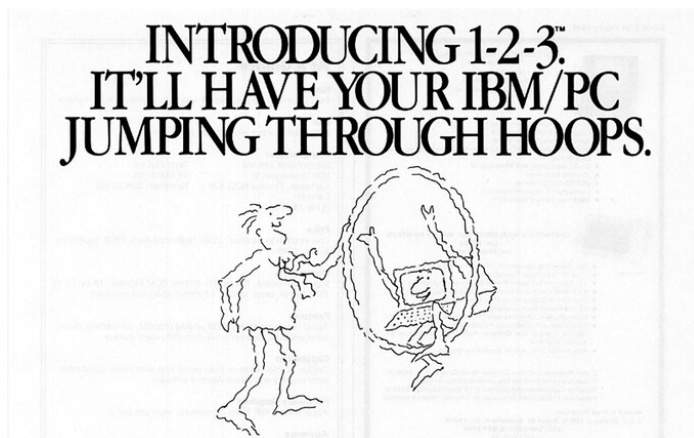
This bilateral development is not disconnected from the creation and widespread use of the chair, whose history, as highlighted by Francis McKee, "is also closely aligned to the emergence of the individual human subject in the eighteenth century." He continues:

Previously benches had been the main form of seating, emphasizing communality and shared space. The rise of the capitalist subject in Europe was marked by the creation of private space, the acknowledgement of individual ego and the expression of the unique self through consumer objects: the chair became a quiet symbol of this social transition.³

In later centuries, the lap dance appeared to provide the necessary reassurance of the status quo of the powerful individual male and his seated position, in which work, wealth, and pleasure converged.

Affects, contemplations, stimulations, and struggles happen in and through the lap, this site that accumulates

the contexts of motherhood (associated with the womb and with the bodily grammar of caring), sexual entertainment (the lap as a space where two bodies come closer through a clientele dynamic), and domesticity (the pet dog as an extension of the family sphere, a receiver of libidinal transferences, and as *sublimator* of privately occurring sexual drives). The lap constitutes a space at once para-sexualized—where the relation between the mother and the child, the caretaker and the cared for, takes place—and a space at the core of the unfolding of a relation of intimacy, as the lap opens itself to both male and female sexual organs, with potential physical consequences for its beholders.⁴ The significance and potential of this accumulation of functions in this space that is at once intimate and public opens itself, when the laptop arrives, to a new configuration.



The 1-2-3™ system by the Lotus Development Corporation boasted of combining information management, spreadsheet, and graphing functions in one software package. This advertisement for the software appeared alongside competing advertisements in a 1983 edition of InfoWorld, The Newsweekly for Microcomputer Users.

Computing Intimacy

The early 1980s saw the patenting of some of the first ever portable computers, namely the Epson HX-20, registered in July 1980 by the Japanese company Seiko and introduced in the United States in 1981; the Osborne 1, patented in 1981 by the Silicon Valley company Osborne Computer Corporation; the Tandy Model 100, registered in 1983 by the Japanese multinational Kyocera Corporation; and the Gavilan SC, created by the Gavilan Computer Corporation, also based in Silicon Valley. The Gavilan SC was the first handheld computer to be named a lap computer, or a “laptop” (a term used to establish an analogy with the desktop).

By being called a laptop, the handheld computer knows it can be taken everywhere. It can leave the office space and initiate a colonization of private and domestic



In this vintage Sharp computer ad, baby and laptop are positioned side by side.

environments, widening the ubiquitous and remote possibilities of office work. It also knows where to sit. It demands to be positioned in a space that, until its arrival, was largely dedicated to specific tasks of bodily intimacy, to domestic and/or intimate functions and transactions. This new form of contact, introduced by the computers that sit within a space of the human body traditionally associated with care, opens the path for a rethinking of the ways intimacy is conceived, thought, described, and enacted. Such a redefinition of intimacy, expressed in a verbal and nonverbal eloquence, has the potential to reshape forms of sociability and individuality across private, public, and hybrid spheres. Could the laptop support and lead its users to go beyond what Lauren Berlant defines as “the ongoing present [which] is also the zone of convergence of the economic and political activity we call ‘structural,’ by suffusing the ordinary with its normative demands for bodily and psychic organization”?⁵ Could it redefine intimacy by bypassing plain reproductions of normative attachments and encoded representations, and in doing so, contribute to surpassing the biases that still dominate the norms of intimate relations and the individual (gendered?) roles within them?



Laptop, worker, baby, and LapBaby™—together at last.

To think about the lap in the era of computational transformation means to think about intimacy (about intimacy as a memory and as a promise of a future). And to think about intimacy means to consider the institutional coding of relationships that unfold across the politicized space that bonds intimacy to public life.

This discourse considers, of course, the inception of handheld digital devices. Today the laptop is accompanied by even smaller and more portable devices—pads, phones, watches, glasses that are miniaturized computers, progressively smaller, lighter, faster, more nervous and responsive, retaining the childish features of their larger versions (entertainment options, rounded features, colorful displays, insistent notifications that demand immediate attention). It might even be that the laptop, diffused ten years after the proliferation of the lap dance, established yet another quasi-sexual relation with its users, which probably dethroned the lap dance as a source of excitement. What happens when this device literally jumps into our lap and positions itself in an area of the confluence of affective and sensual pleasure?⁶ What does it generate and how does it affect individuals? A more classical position would maintain that, by locating itself in the lap, the personal computer took over the ultimate intimate and particularly feminine site. In this reading, the agencies behind this device and its uses claim this space for themselves, rendering it yet another site of exploitation and further propagating the existence of domestic, immaterial, unpaid, invisible caring labor. Hence the laptop would contribute to further consolidating gender roles, as the lap becomes a working platform and environment: from domestic labor to participating in the system of global, corporate trade.

With the widespread adoption of the laptop, the lap is no longer just a site of intimacy for the labor of care, where

life is brought closer; it is also the place from which thoughts, ideas, affects, calculations, and all sorts of transactions are disseminated far and wide: “From my lap, with love,” could be the signature of an email sent from a laptop.



This 1982 advertisement for an early tablet says that the Epson Hand-Held-Computer HX-20 is the computer that goes along on the trip.

Conclusion

Relations and positions change; normative configurations call for reinvention; a whole new assemblage of interpersonal and transpersonal dynamics is set in motion, one in which the biology of the human body becomes but one factor in defining a species, a gender, a skin. In this new context, it is possible to learn to create different social bonds, to invent new structures other than families and hierarchies to negotiate affects, experiences, and positions. And this happens not only through a new rhetoric, but first and foremost by considering the new material conditions that reshape it. The material conditions for such reconfigurations emerge not in bodies, not in minds, not in atomized individuals who hold their

computers on their laps, but across, in between people. As Tim Ingold asks,

What if we were to think of the person ... not as a blob but as a bundle of lines, or relations, along which life is lived? What if our ecology was of lines rather than of blobs? What then can we mean by "environment"? People, after all, don't live inside their bodies, as social theorists sometimes like to claim in their clichéd appeals to the notion of embodiment. Their trails are laid out in the ground, in footprints, paths and tracks, and their breaths mingle in the air. They stay alive only as long as there is a continual interchange of materials across ever-growing and ever-shedding layers of skin.⁷

The location of the personal computer in the lap can become an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—to think about how both conventional identity politics and traditional notions of embodiment might be reformed with this pairing of the handheld computer and the lap. What I'm proposing here is that a device that combines hundreds of functions and possibilities, a device that is meant to sit on laps, has the capacity to redefine the relations to those political positions that rely on a sense of belonging and on the perception of the relevance of what happens within individual, enclosed bodies. What else is changing now that we communicate, write, read, photograph, record, calculate, predict, buy, learn, think, travel, play, love, cry, and laugh from our laps—now that our laps have become the place where such disparate elements as the cosmos and cosmetics meet?

modes also allow us to rethink, with Berlant, "intimacy in terms of what we have been and how we have lived in order to imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living."⁸ By claiming a privileged space of affective dynamics—the lap—and turning it into a stage for the redefinition of who we are and how we are, this presence has the potential to denaturalize canonical relations and conceptions, bringing us to conceive of our selves as "intricately enmeshed relations rather than the (classical one) divided into discrete and autonomous entities."⁹

X

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In this 1999 comic by Dan Piraro, lapdogs unite against their lap-rivals.

As intimacy develops new norms and new channels, novel personal, collective, political, and social configurations are emerging. New modes of attachment are being established across persons and collectivities, traversing public and intimate spaces; they are arising from this new presence in our laps, a presence that allows for the discovery of less normative, less binary selves. These

1

Neotenic features in lapdogs include soft, folded ears, short muzzles, and playful and docile traits. See for instance Stephen Jay Gould, "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse," *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 95–107.

2

Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 303–04.

3

Francis McKee, "Martino Gamper's 'Middle Chair,'" *art agenda*, July 25, 2017 <http://www.w.art-agenda.com/reviews/martino-gamper-%E2%80%99Cmiddle-chair%E2%80%9D/>.

4

See for instance the scientific paper, published by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, by Conrado Avendaño, Ariela Mata, M. S., César A. Sanchez Sarmiento, and Gustavo F. Doncel, "Use of laptop computers connected to internet through Wi-Fi decreases human sperm motility and increases sperm DNA fragmentation," *Fertility and Sterility* 1, vol. (January 2012): 39–45 [https://www.fertstert.org/article/S0015-0282\(11\)02678-1/fulltext](https://www.fertstert.org/article/S0015-0282(11)02678-1/fulltext).

5

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

6

It might also be worth noting that the German term for lap, "*Schoß*"—hence "*Schoßhund*" (lapdog) and "*Schoßkind*" (spoiled child)—can also be used to refer to the female sex organs.

7

Tim Ingold, "From science to art and back again: The pendulum of an anthropologist," *ANUAC* 1, vol. 5 (June 2016): 8.

8

Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 2, vol. 24 (Winter 1998): 286.

9

Ingold, "From science to art and back again," 8.

Natalya Serkova

World Wide Gold

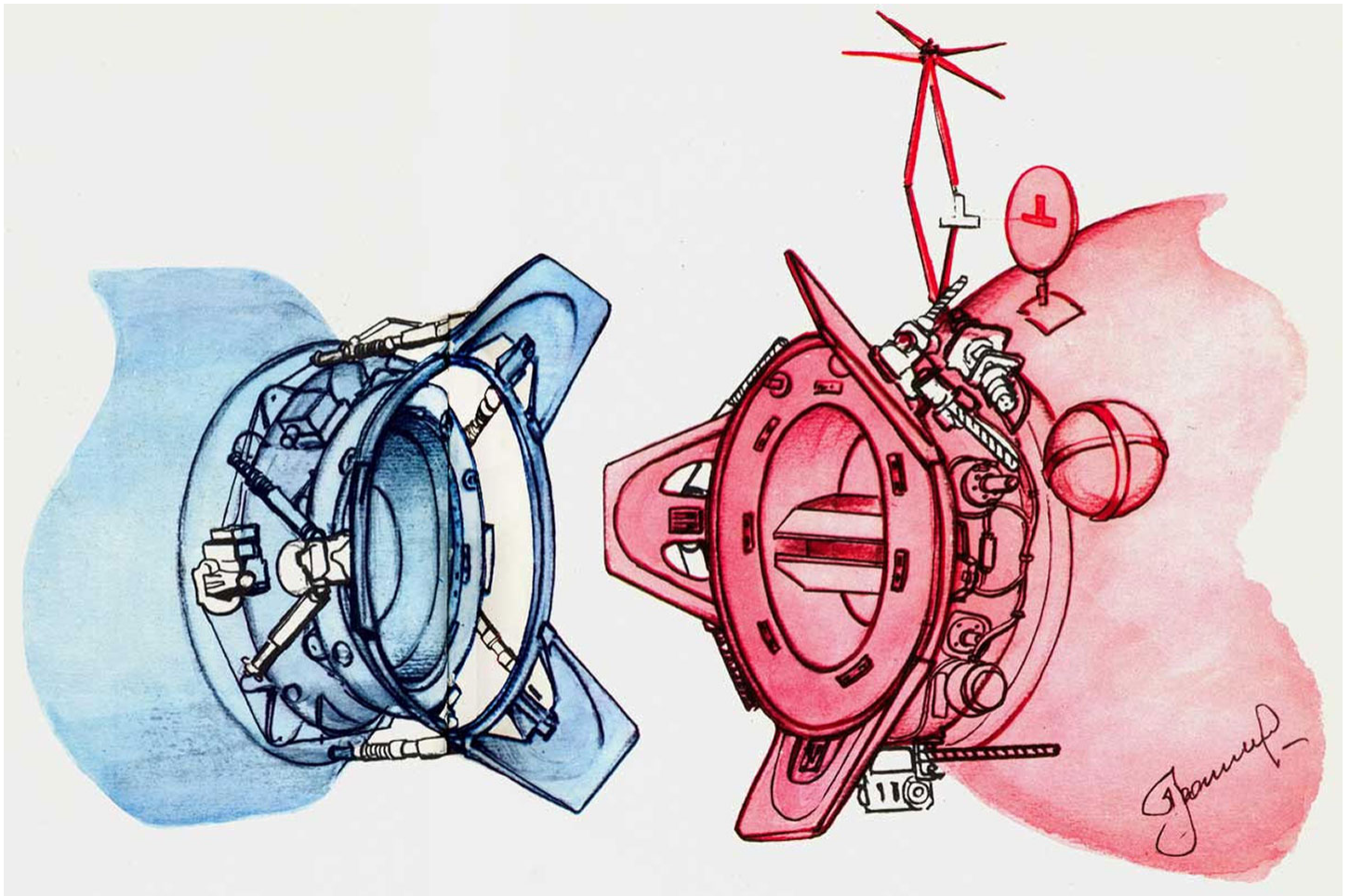
On July 15, 1975, the Soviet spaceship *Soyuz 19* and the American *Apollo* entered earth's orbit. Two days later, on July 17, they performed the first docking together of two spaceships belonging to different countries in the history of space exploration. This event had been preceded by several agreements about joint USSR-US space exploration in the interest of the advancement of science. The first such agreement was signed in 1962, and in 1970 discussion of the jointly piloted space flight of the two ships began. The docking of the American and Soviet modules and their collaborative work in space was referred to in both countries as a "handshake in space." It came to symbolize the dawn of the new era of international space collaboration "for the good of humanity and in the name of peace and progress."¹

The pathos of this scenario, one of the last large-scale projects that could be considered part of the modernist trajectory, compelled all those involved to carefully plan not only the technical but also the symbolic details of the operation. From today's vantage point, the production of the semiotic system of the *Soyuz-Apollo* project appears so well-implemented as to be unsurpassed. Elements of this semiotic system have locked into their grooves so well that the symbolism continues to work, long after the actual spaceships parted ways on July 19, 1975. The persistence of the symbolism enables us to take a closer look at the manifold patterns concealed behind the seemingly polished surface of a scientific project. Today, this expensive international experiment, meant to herald humanity's technological triumph, could be understood as one of the most spectacular occult actions of contemporary civilization.

Tragedy is reborn when science becomes painfully aware of its limitations, wrote Nietzsche. We will attempt to listen to the tragic chorus of the *Soyuz-Apollo* project. Perhaps following these voices will allow us to slightly shift the orbits on which the two ships circled forty years ago, and to send their movements along a trajectory that was not officially mapped by ground control in 1975. To do this, I would like to first step into a lab filled with the acrid smoke of material experiments in the period before the modern era and its scientific methods, studying texts written by people for whom the modern world order—the same world order that began to painfully convulse in the twentieth century—had not yet solidified.

Cosmic Androgyne

The core symbolic and scientific meaning of the *Soyuz-Apollo* project lay in the successful docking of the two ships out in earth's orbit. Two modules with very different technical characteristics were supposed to become one: to sync up their movements and the operations of their technological guts. Until then, all apparatuses used for space dockings required a system



Alexey Leonov, Androgynous Peripheral Attach System (APAS), date unknown. Illustration

with an active shaft that had to enter into the opening of its passive counterpart (or, as engineers call it in their professional argot, a “mother-father” system). For the obvious reason that neither country could be represented in a passive role, this system was unacceptable for the encounter of American and Soviet modules. In the 1960s, the Soviet academic Sergey Korolev had already formulated the technical task for future generation of spaceship designers, urging them to “create docking apparatuses which would be the same on both ships and provide astronauts with a communicating passageway tunnel.”² It was this exact construction that was realized for the first time in the *Soyuz-Apollo* project. It was called an Androgynous Peripheral Attach System—APAS for short.

Such attach systems, installed on both ships, were completely identical and each could simultaneously perform passive and active functions. Grabbing mechanisms were placed along the round circumference of the apparatus on each ship. A tunnel formed after the docking was to provide a passageway for the astronauts. It was in this tunnel that Soviet and American astronauts were supposed to have their first handshake in space.

Essentially, APAS was the protagonist of the entire enterprise (its acronym only differed by a letter from the acronym for the whole experiment: the *Apollo-Soyuz* Test Project, ASTP). It made the docking of the two ships symbolically neutral and allowed the handshake to happen. Symbolically as well as practically, this androgyne occupied a central place in the joint space apparatus, firmly holding its two parts together and permitting the new hybrid spaceship to function.

The androgyne figure is one of the key concepts in ancient esoteric teachings as well as in mystical branches of early and medieval Christianity.³ The alchemical tradition, which flourished in Christian Europe in the eighth to seventeenth centuries, derived its ideas about androgynes from Greek mythology and Gnostic texts.⁴ In alchemy, the androgyne is a result of a so-called alchemical marriage—a mixing of sulfur and mercury, the two principal alchemical elements, purified in a special way. Their combination, made in correct proportion, was believed to produce the philosopher’s stone, which could, among other things, change metal into gold. Mercury signified a feminine element, while sulfur was masculine.⁵ In general, one of the foundational principles of



The Soviet Soyuz and the American Apollo teams. From left to right: Donald Slayton, Thomas Stafford, Vance Brand (Apollo), Aleksey Leonov, Valeriy Kubasov (Soyuz), 1975.

alchemical experiments was the presence of both genders, of two complimentary elements capable of entering into contact with each other. The sacred number two is foundational for alchemical processes. Within the alchemical system, everything is paired: earth and sky, sulfur and mercury, east and west, the moon and the sun, the Christian tradition and paganism, the clear recipe and the esoteric messages. The union of irreconcilable elements, the merging of opposites, not only gives birth to the sought-after philosopher's stone, but also helps achieve universal wisdom and eternal intellectual enlightenment. In this regard, a space experiment "for the good of humanity" is not all that different from the alchemical pursuit, whose ultimate aim was for the alchemist-demiurge to achieve power over the mystery of the universe.

Alchemists shared the ancient Persian belief that a wise magician able to penetrate this mystery may be born only out of an unnatural, incestuous union. The Soviet engineers' description of the union of the two space modules—the unnatural union of two antagonistic countries—resembles a mating ritual: "During the approach, a passive ship does not remain entirely passive. Its radio station provides the active ship with all the necessary information. It automatically locates its partner and, in the process of approach, rotates its docking port towards the docking port of its partner."⁶ After two rotations around the earth side by side, the machines were to connect their docking systems, forming one white body glowing against the background of black open space.⁷

"Earth and Sky were married. A child shall be born to them. For whiteness is a sign of the sacred union of the

stable and the evanescent, of the male and female.” In this way Antoine-Joseph Pernety, a seventeenth-century French alchemist, describes a successful union of alchemical elements in his *System of Physics According to Hermetic Philosophy and Theory and Practice of the Magisterium*.⁸ A properly performed wedding ceremony opens the road to other transformations: a child-APAS, a keeper of the mystery of the sacred union, proudly lifts its male-female face and points the way toward further alchemical recipes.

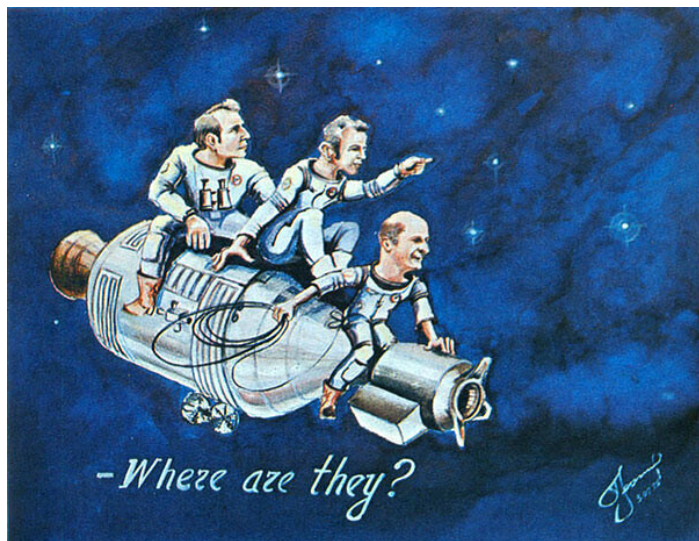


Illustration by Alexey Leonov (1975)

Sick Gold

The handshake successfully took place. After docking and shaking hands, the two Soviet cosmonauts (Aleksey Leonov and Valeriy Kubasov) and three American astronauts (Thomas Stafford, Donald Slayton, and Vance Brand) had planned to conduct a series of complex experiments while in orbit. However, first, a dinner was to take place. The menu consisted of borscht, entrecôte, juice, and black bread. Leonov, the good-natured captain of the *Soyuz*, decided to play a prank on his American colleagues; he attached Soviet vodka labels to the tubes of borscht and insisted that the American astronauts drink with their Soviet colleagues. Stafford and Slayton (Brand stayed on Apollo) were very confused and resisted for a while. But once they finally conceded, they were surprised to discover that instead of alcohol, their tubes contained innocuous soup.⁹

Every successful alchemist had to have a creative and playful approach. Alchemical recipes often took the form of riddles and always left room for improvisation. The practitioner was advised to approximate this or that ingredient, and the ingredients themselves were often described in a coded or poetic manner (heat up the green lion and evaporate the red dragon, so that the snake will

eat its tail and the black crow will cast a shadow on the glass retort, etc.). According to V. L. Rabinovich, who published the first study of alchemy in the Soviet Union in 1975, this kind of codification served to protect recipes from the uninitiated. Moreover, the success of the experiment depended on how experienced a given alchemist was in “eyeballing” his ingredients.¹⁰ Therefore, despite referring to an authoritative recipe, in order to actually obtain the philosopher’s stone and the golden essence an alchemist had to act as an artist, introducing an element of play into the technical process. Similarly, during the space flight, when each minute was strictly accounted for, the astronauts still managed to leave space for creative disorder and play.¹¹

Hardly anything in alchemical texts should be taken literally. Behind each word is a hidden symbolic meaning, and its possible interpretations are almost always contradictory. If we consider the dinner in space as another alchemical recipe, it too would point to something beyond itself. Vodka, which made its surprising appearance on the docked ship, even if only represented by stickers attached to the food tubes, takes its place among the ingredients of this cosmic alchemical experiment. In alchemy the concept of strong vodka might correspond to nitric acid—the derivation of the latter was one of the earliest alchemical experimental traditions, sanctified by the highest alchemical authorities.¹² Nitric acid was used to dissolve mercury and sulfur to purify them before any further attempts at synthesizing the philosopher’s stone could be made. The entrecôte consumed during dinner was a cut of beef from the rib area (in French, *entre-côte* means literally “between the ribs”). Here we are dealing not with the alchemical, but with the Biblical tradition, namely with the story of doubting Thomas, who poked the wound between Christ’s ribs after his resurrection. With this gesture, Thomas ascertained that Christ’s spirit had not been resurrected alone; to the surprise of all the apostles, Christ’s flesh in all its materiality had been restored to life as well. The theological question of whether or not Christ had been resurrected in the flesh was very actively debated in the early days of Christianity. While the Church would eventually officially insist on complete physical resurrection, Gnostic Christians had their doubts. In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Christ addresses his disciple with the following words: “If the flesh came into being because of spirit, it is a wonder. But if spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth has made its home in this poverty.”¹³ According to the Gnostics, Thomas was not all that interested in pushing his fingers into Christ’s wound, since the material aspects no longer played an important role for the spirit once the spirit had uncovered cosmic infinity.

Alchemy combined Gnostic and more orthodox Christian elements and developed its own understanding of materiality. On the one hand, unlike the Gnostics, with

their disdain for the physical world, alchemists strove to master materiality through experiments and learn how to directly influence material properties. In their writings they described, with considerable attention and imagination, colors and textures obtained as a result of exceedingly laborious experiments. On the other hand, unlike medieval Christians, alchemists held that, just like God, they too could completely transform the external appearance as well as inner constitution of substances and morph one body into another so completely that the old one would disappear without a trace. "Even God ... in the end may be equated with gold—as well as with any other substance. This has to do with the principal indeterminacy of matter. Such fundamental lack of organization and structure of the physical world can easily give one vertigo."¹⁴ Gold, at the apex of the alchemical hierarchy of material substances, was the only truly pure element and could penetrate all. All materials that were not gold were simply its sick iterations in need of treatment. If a cure were administered correctly, the metal would be freed from corruption, would regain its lost state of purity, and would once again become gold.¹⁵ The entrecôte eaten at the astronauts' dinner reveals a connection between these three traditions and introduces into the alchemical recipe of the mission yet another alchemical element: the knowledge of the complete mutability of material bodies.

The air that the *Soyuz* crew breathed was an oxygen-nitrogen mixture, while the astronauts on *Apollo* were inhaling pure, unmixed oxygen. After the docking and opening of the hatches, the two air compounds blended, a sort of alchemical merger of the different internal environments. After their ships were joined, the crews of *Apollo* and *Soyuz* began conducting joint experiments as part of the initiative EPAS (Experimental Project *Apollo-Soyuz*, an acronym again only one letter away from APAS, the name of the docking system).¹⁶ One of them, bearing the rather alchemical name of "the universal stove," was meant to ascertain whether it was possible to achieve a uniform character of metallic alloys and the ideal lattice structure of metals in zero-gravity conditions. The purpose of another experiment, titled "microbial exchange," was to study the composition of microorganisms living on the skin and mucous membranes of the astronauts as well as the microflora of the two ships. As with the blending of the atmospheres of the two ships after the opening of the hatches, their microbial environments ended up forming a composite.¹⁷

The quality and extent to which composite parts blend to form a homogeneous and radically new product is the mark of success for an alchemical experiment. "Just as in the result of the blending of two molecules a new element gets synthesized that has qualities not found in either of the original elements, so did the docking of *Soyuz* and *Apollo*, the two spaceships of very different 'characters,' form a new dynamic system that possessed properties absent in either of its composite parts"—according to one of the engineers from the EPAS working group.¹⁸ In this

sense, the new system was formed thanks to complete molecular mixing. Although alchemists denied the atomic structure of metals and insisted that new elements could be born through blending, in the scientific and technical history of twentieth-century space exploration, a birth could be achieved only by passing through articulate stages of microbial and molecular exchange.

Perhaps the most curious experiment took place during the first of the two (two again!) undockings of *Soyuz* and *Apollo*. In order to conduct the "artificial solar eclipse" experiment, *Apollo* was to position itself with regard to *Soyuz* in such a way as to completely block the sun from the Soviet ship. Then the *Soyuz* crew could clearly view the so-called solar crown—the upper rarefied atmospheric layers consisting of ionized hydrogenic plasma—and take a series of photographs to be further studied by scientists back on earth. Sun and moon, those alchemical parents, gold and silver, sulfur and mercury, were called to form an alloy—an androgynous child. However, as we have seen, the androgyne had already been born during the successful docking of the two spaceships, taking its symbolical place between the two gigantic cosmic retorts of *Soyuz* and *Apollo*. Therefore, the processes initiated by such a birth had already begun. These were the processes of comprehensive/universal blending, of symbolical metamorphoses, of material production, and of cosmic intellectual renewal. Within such a logic, *Apollo*, the alchemical embodiment of both gold and the sun, was made to occupy the place of the moon, and therefore, by default, the moon became the sun. This is exactly what happened during the space experiment: out of their hatches, *Soyuz's* crew could simultaneously observe two suns and two moons, since both the *Apollo*-moon and the star-sun simultaneously became each other's opposites.¹⁹ The passengers on *Soyuz* (which means "union" in Russian) witnessed and photographed this transmutation, once again emphasizing the close bonds of the lovers' union between moon and sun, sky and earth.

The Stench of Putrefaction and the Aroma of Success

And what was happening back on earth during this cosmic experiment? The day of the docking saw the release of EPAS, a perfume manufactured through joint Soviet-American efforts; the perfume bottle was American, while its contents were a French-Soviet production. Another commemorative product was the *Soyuz-Apollo* brand of cigarettes, designed by Philip Morris and produced at the Moscow "Java" factory. It is not exactly clear why, out of the entire range of possible souvenir goods, perfume and cigarettes were manufactured. The simplest explanation is that the manufacturers wished to reach male and female demographics with the two broadest possible strokes. However, viewed through our "alchemical" prism, this decision too does not appear



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Original package and bottle of EPAS perfume, 1975.

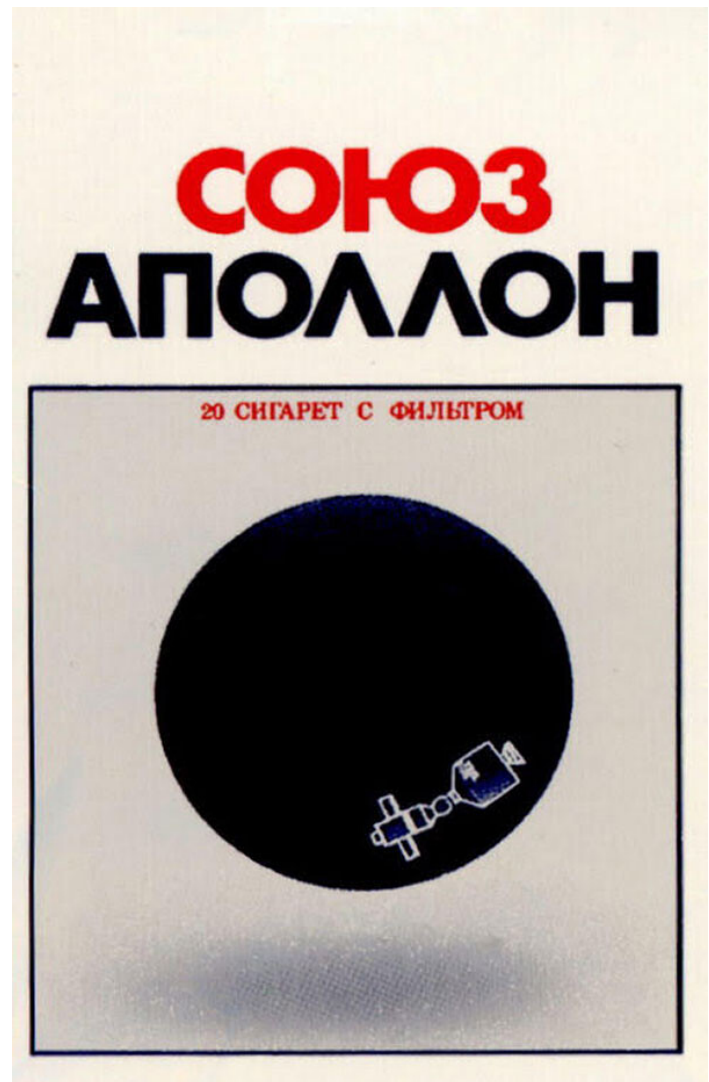
accidental.

The *Soyuz-Apollo* cigarette pack featured an image of a black circle, which could clearly refer to that solar eclipse. The contents of the pack also possess dual properties. First of all, smoking inevitably creates acrid-smelling smoke. Secondly, no matter how much the proponents of smoking would like to deny this, all cigarettes bear a strong visual association with smoker's rotting lungs that begin to darken and decay while the smoker is still alive. Darkening, decay, and decomposition of material is the first of many stages of alchemical transformation, during which original substances are destroyed to give way to further mutations. Alchemists believed that at this stage, a practitioner killed a substance and then manipulated the dead material, which was no longer resistant. In the end, after passing through all the stages of transformation, it was hoped that the material would become alive again, this time in the form of gold. The demiurge alchemist, ruling over life and death, would produce an alchemical miracle and renewed light would shine through the decomposed matter.²⁰ The black rot of decay is just a starting point for the ambitious and creative alchemical enterprise of transforming the world.

For its part, the EPAS perfume is easily recognizable as the golden essence. Its golden lid and the golden (not black, as on the cigarette pack) circle on its label signified the shining success of the experiment that was being conducted in space. The philosopher's stone, the alchemical ur-matter, has been found at last. The name of the perfume—the abbreviated name of the entire project—is a homonym of the English "e-pass" and the French "e-passe." The essence contained in this bottle signifies a passage—but a passage to where? Into what dimension is this space experiment directed? What door is supposed to open as a result of the triggered alchemical transformations?

The *Soyuz-Apollo* cigarettes and the *EPAS* perfume framed the initial and the end stages of an experiment that had been taking place in the sky. *Soyuz* and *Apollo* had been sent out into dark, empty space to couple. But why did the experiment have to take place in space in the first place? Why did both nations have to conduct the entire series of necessary transmutations off the planet? Let's try to understand why it was necessary to produce a celestial and not a terrestrial androgyne. On the one hand, the hermetically sealed spaceship forced its crew to strictly abide by the prescribed plan. This made it easier to ensure that all stages of the alchemical recipe were followed through in their proper order: dozens ground-control operators closely watched over the proceedings on the ship. But as we've already seen, even despite such a high level of control, the astronaut-alchemists managed to pull off one or two creative tricks.

More to the point, in space, no accident or foreign chemical admixture could interfere with the purity of the



Package of "Soyuz-Apollon" cigarettes, 1975.

experiments conducted there. Any mistake would have proven fatal. Out in space everything runs according to the "all or nothing" principle. For this reason, Peter Sloterdijk compares spaceships to islands and considers them as miniature models of the world. "If islands are the models of the world," writes Sloterdijk, "that is because they are sufficiently removed from the context of the world for an experiment of restoring totality in a limited form to take place."²¹ Following Sloterdijk's thought, this project, conducted by only two of earth's countries, becomes an expressive symbol of a global pursuit.

Finally, it is the very immensity of the distance between the top (the *Soyuz* and *Apollo* ships, floating in their celestial union in earth's orbit) and the bottom (of the cigarettes and perfume used on earth and framing the entire experiment) that reunites them. For an alchemist, the top and the bottom are not opposites; the alchemist's world is simultaneously manifold and horizontal, and the top and the bottom are constantly switching places. What



Illustration by Alexey Leonov (1975)

is sacred and divine is profaned until it dissolves in a glass retort, while the metals extracted from the bowels of the earth gain divine properties. The legendary Hermes Trismegistus, the first alchemist and a great sage, provided the foundations of this worldview. In his *Emerald Tablet* he writes: "What is above is like what is below, and what is below is like that which is above. To make the miracle of the one thing."²² Cosmic skies descend upon earth, while the weight of the earth moves upward. An androgynous ship, two mutating deities, rotting metals, a black sun, aromatic cigarette smoke, and golden essences all dance around in orbit. Eventually, under their own weight, they begin to deviate from the orbit and start moving in a new direction, the passage into which has just been opened.

Shifted Orbits

Where does the new passageway opened as a result of the successful *Apollo-Soyuz* flight really lead? The Gnostic Gospels, which inspired alchemists over many centuries, provide a clue. For the longest time, Christianity has denounced these texts as heretical because their authors and followers refused to comply with the Church orthodoxy. If one were to describe the Gnostic doctrine in the most concise form, one would call it a system with a radically open architecture. The process of acquiring knowledge, for Gnostics, was always more important than any ossified canon. How can one penetrate a divine mystery if one cannot approach existing texts as an artist, adding something new to them with each encounter? Any person can solve cosmic riddles, provided they approach them creatively enough. That's why Gnosticism has always been an elite, esoteric teaching that nevertheless holds a door open for newcomers.²³

Gnosticism insists on complete equality between men and women. In the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, we read that Jesus loved and was closer to Mary Magdalene than to any of his male disciples. And the Gospel of Mary Magdalene says that it was she who inspired the otherwise despondent followers of Christ to go and spread his teachings after his execution.²⁴ Female Gnostics in the first centuries of Christianity were so emancipated that their conduct earned a harsh rebuke from the early Christian writer Tertullian: "These heretical women—how impudent they are! They are immodest, they are daring enough to argue, to teach, to cast spells, to heal, and maybe even to baptize."²⁵ Moreover, the Gnostic God describes itself in the following way: "For I am the first and the last. / I am the honored one and the scorned one. / I am the whore and the holy one. / I am the wife and the virgin. / I am <the mother> and the daughter. / I am the members of my mother. / I am the barren one and many are her sons."²⁶ As you can see from this passage, Gnostic teaching shares with alchemy the principle of the unity of opposites.

Such is alchemy's attitude toward its own symbolic system. The alchemical sign is always polysemantic. The meanings that it contains are frequently contradictory. It is always open to new interpretations. In a way, it requires them. At the same time, alchemy's faithfulness to its symbolic system was one of the reasons why alchemists risked being burned alive by the Christian Church. A symbol is always prepared to point in the direction of a truth that is temporarily captured in it. This is why symbolic thinking is always iconoclastic.²⁷ It rejects the transcendental inaccessibility and solidity of divine truths, because a symbol is always ready to reveal those truths before our eyes. The alchemist is always an iconoclast, a medieval Christian terrorist, trying to implode from inside the rigid logic of religious dogma.

The *Soyuz-Apollo* project was the culmination of the symbolical game of late modernism. The reason its symbols were presented in such a crude and direct manner is that it was already too late for any transcendental truths. Having demolished medieval metaphysics, modern humanity had entered an airless space, within which medieval symbols began to form a new and thoroughly secular system. This system was no longer built around a single god—he had been replaced by a multiplicity of dark, smoke-filled laboratories where transformations for a new alchemical recipe were and still are taking place today.

The force of pathos behind the *Apollo* and *Soyuz* flight was apparently strong enough to overwhelm the strictly scientific and rational premises of this project. It is as if the project prophesized today's chaotic commingling of ingredients outside of any plan or recipe, a time that hadn't yet arrived in 1975. We, as people who live in this new time, can observe all around us the unfolding of open structures worldwide. The internet and networked technologies make room for brand-new communication,

social connection, and eventually ontological shift. Within a network, one can simultaneously encounter strict mathematical calculation and the abstraction of a mystical tractatus, iconoclastic pathos and jokes about the emergence of a new religion that lays its claims with the seriousness of revelation. Everything can transform into everything else; unequal can become equal. Yet the logic of these new compounds remains concealed from us by the smoke of an alchemical experiment. Circumferences that conjoin opposite poles have been drawn apart, yet the many-faced space androgyne continues its flight. It carries within itself all combinations—combinations that can only be imagined. The flight of imagination happens at just such moments in history, when the simplest-seeming logic becomes clouded with the smoke of lit cigarettes.

X

Translated from the Russian by Anastasiya Ospiova.

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- 1
"Soyuz" i "Apollon": *Rasskazyvaiut sovetskie uchenye, inzhenery i kosmonavty—uchastniki sovremennykh rabot s amerikanskimi spetsialistami*, ed. K. D. Bushuev (Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1976), 8.
- 2
"Soyuz" i "Apollon," 123.
- 3
Soviet engineers made several curious remarks on the subject. "By the way, we've borrowed the term 'androgynous' from mythology: androgynes were hermaphroditic creatures," confessed V. S. Syromiatnikov, the leader of the third ASTP work group. "Soyuz" i "Apollon," 121.
- 4
The following passage is from the Gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia*: "I am androgynous. I am Mother (and) I am Father, since I copulate with myself. I copulated with myself and with those who love me, and it is through me alone that the All stands firm. I am the Womb that gives shape to the All by giving birth to the Light that shines in splendor. I am the Aeon to come. I am the fulfillment of the All, that is, Meirothea, the glory of the Mother. I cast voiced Speech into the ears of those who know me." See <http://gnosis.org/naghammm/trimorph.html>.
- 5
See the first study of alchemy published in the Soviet Union: V. L. Rabinovich, *Alhimiia kak fenomen srednevekovoi kul'tury* (Nauka, 1979).
- 6
"Soyuz" i "Apollon," 102.
- 7
One of the most difficult issues that American and Soviet engineers had to face was coordinating flight trajectories of the two ships to ensure their successful docking. Since space exploration programs in the Soviet Union and the US had been developing independently of each other, each country had a different model for calculating ballistics. The task of reconciling these models was extremely difficult. Later, engineer O. G. Sytin would write: "We managed to achieve practical compatibility of our ballistic calculations for a real flight. When everything was over, we would joke and say that we made everything possible and even made use of the 'k-ballistics.'" "Soyuz" i "Apollon," 96. It is hard to imagine anything more different than precise twentieth-century cosmic science and esoteric teachings. At the same time, these systems are polar opposites to such an extent that at some points they begin to collapse into each other.
- 8
Quoted in Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 98.
- 9
"I brought several vodka labels from earth—Stolichnaya and Osobaya—and attached them to the food tubes. Once we were all seated around the table I handed everyone their tube. 'Come on, guys,' I said. 'We can't.' 'It's a Russian tradition. Before we eat, we must drink Russian vodka. It's very good for your stomach.' They stopped protesting. We opened the tubes and cheered. We have photos of Deke Slayton looking bewildered, having just discovered that it was borscht and not vodka after all. That was a simple human joke." See http://www.tvc.ru/channel/brand/id/20/s how/news/news_id/923.
- 10
Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, especially the chapter "Alhimicheskii retsept: deistvie i sviashennodeistvie."
- 11
In another interview, Leonov spoke of an instance of improvisation during the flight: "During one of the discussions of the *Apollo-Soyuz* flight, there was an argument about what minimal distance should be maintained between the two ships, before the mutual maneuvers could begin. Until the very last moment, NASA bureaucrats kept on insisting that the distance between our ships could not be less than 150 meters. However, Tom Stafford, *Apollo*'s captain, disagreed and insisted that forty-five meters would suffice. At that moment, I pulled Stafford out of the room and told him: 'They won't be there to control us once we are out in space. Let's just act as we see fit and not tell them about it.'" See <https://inosmi.ru/world/20110507/169140284.html>.
- 12
Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 59.
- 13
See <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html>.
- 14
Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 79.
- 15
Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 79.
- 16
For more on the experiments conducted during the *Soyuz-Apollo* flight, see NASA's *Apollo-Soyuz Mission* documentary film (1975) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHWkeQxKclc>.
- 17
Engineer V. A. Ol'shevskii noted that "most of the microbes (they) found were on the surface of the docking tunnel and in the parts of the ship closest to the docking apparatus." "Soyuz" i "Apollon," 191.
- 18
"Soyuz" i "Apollon," 112.
- 19
Besides, "alchemical gold and silver form a pair, yet they are hardly opposites. They represent the gradations of perfection." Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 108. Gold and silver, sun and moon can trade places as easily as any of the components of the alchemical pairs.
- 20
"Matter, once it is animated by fire, begins to darken. Black contains white, yellow, and red colors. White for alchemists did not signify higher purity—it was simply one color among many. Black, on the other hand, was believed to be as a source of all other colors." Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 93.
- 21
Peter Sloterdijk. *Foams: Spheres, Volume III* (Nauka, 2010), 313.
- 22
See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.htm>.
- 23
Elaine Pagels writes: "Valentinus and his followers ... argued that only one's own experience offers the ultimate criterion of truth, taking precedence over all secondhand testimony and all tradition—even gnostic tradition! They celebrated every form of creative invention as evidence that a person has become spiritually alive. On this theory, the structure of authority can never be fixed into an institutional framework: it must remain spontaneous, charismatic, and open." Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books, 1989), 25.
- 24
For instance, consider the following lines from the Gnostic Gospel of Philip: "And the companion of ... Mary Magdalene ... loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples ... said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Savior answered and said to them, 'Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.'" See <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>.
- 25
Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, ca. 190–220AD.
- 26
See <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/thunder.html>.
- 27
Rabinovich, *Alhimiia*, 85.

The Commons Meets NGOs

In a cooperative in Hermel, east of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, on the border with Syria, Khadija is running a workshop teaching Syrian women living in neighboring refugee camps how to preserve seasonal vegetables for the winter. She is cooking green fava beans on one side of the oven and tomato paste on the other. While explaining every step in the cooking process and the benefits of each vegetable, its type, origin, and local source, she pours the beans and the paste in a jar, closes it, and turns it upside down on the table. "That's how you keep the pressure in and avoid any air leaks." Every jar will serve as a meal for the family, with a portion of rice on the side. It's spring and the contents of these jars will be eaten next fall or winter. Buying fava in March is very cheap, since it's in season. "We are learning how to eat cheap and healthy," she says while stirring the tomato paste, which has been cooking on a low fire for the past thirty minutes. "Always buy seasonal vegetables and conserve them for the coming season. Each season has its vegetables and each vegetable has its preservation process."

I met Khadija in her cooperative, which consists of a three-room workshop and a big kitchen. It is surrounded by a plot of land that she inherited from her mother and turned into a food production cooperative, where she grows most of the crops and where women can gather, share knowledge, and learn from each other about food preservation, crop cultivation, seed preservation, and different ways of treating the soil. She has been running this cooperative for seven years, despite the local politics and the tensions with Hezbollah (the dominant party in the area), which often tries to make it difficult for her to continue with the cooperative. Meanwhile, she has continued to pursue her activities, producing seasonal jams and other food provisions that she sells to sustain the cooperative. Regarding the political tensions, she says to me: "Hezbollah could benefit from the fact that I am creating a micro-economy and transmit forgotten knowledge, but instead all they think about is how to have sole hegemonic power. They don't want any growth that is outside of their control." In fact, small independent organizations and cooperatives supported by international funders are usually left to do their work, unless it is believed that they oppose the dominant political power; the latter situation leads to clashes, tensions, and difficulties, such as indirectly pressuring the farmers to slow down their work or to stop it completely.

This cooperative is funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and has collaborated with different groups since 2013, especially humanitarian refugee organizations. When Khadija was approached by USAID (as part of their program to fight hunger), she was already known for her skills and knowledge regarding the edible and medicinal wild plants she gathers. It is an old practice that many women carry

Marwa Arsanios

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on. Usually it is transmitted to them by their mothers or another elderly woman in the family.

Khadija opens a folder where she has gathered an extensive archive of dried wild edible weeds. She has a precise knowledge of the use and medical benefits of each plant. "This is precious knowledge from my mother. She was also a farmer and owned this piece of land that I inherited from her." After each workshop on cheap, healthy food and edible wild plants, the products are equally divided between the women to feed their families.

Since 2012, the flow of refugees from Syria has led about fifty international NGOs to set up camp in the Bekaa region. As the immediate crisis-solving apparatus, they settled in the area with the highest density of refugees. The few food cooperatives and NGOs run by women in the region became spaces where the transmission of knowledge happens. A few have begun to be used as support spaces for refugee women, in collaboration with humanitarian NGOs.

Before 2011 and the eruption of the Syrian revolution, these kind of initiatives (mostly funded by USAID and the EU) had found their place on the map of Lebanon's eco-conscious urban middle class. In urban areas they could sell produce to restaurants and directly to customers at farmer's markets. After 2011, many employed low-wage Syrian women, turning the cooperatives into fully-fledged businesses or transforming themselves into useful spaces for women from the

camp—sometimes both.

The cooperative Khadija runs seems to want to reinforce the politics of the commons through the transmission of a knowledge that is embedded in a very specific geography and seasonal landscape. This knowledge of wild plants, often considered "bad herbs" in modern agricultural practice, is at the core of this cooperative.

What makes this construction of the commons possible in this case is in fact the global aid economy (USAID funding). The cooperative cannot fully sustain itself yet, since the food and herbs it produces doesn't bring in enough money.

Many nongovernmental women's organizations have emerged in the Arab world in the past twenty years, and even more since 2011 to deal with the refugees crisis, a lack of nutritional resources, domestic violence, and women's health issues. Though some do not present themselves as explicitly feminist, many deal with women's issues or create spaces that specifically support women. Others more directly present themselves as feminist through research, discourse, and knowledge production. Often compensating for a lack of state structures, NGO structures work within the global economy and produce discourses that travel within and are shaped by this global economy. While many of these small initiatives adopt a language of "empowerment," "development," "economic independence," and "women's entrepreneurship," they also function within a very small locality, and their political



struggle often becomes isolated in local politics. Gender essentialism—"women's empowerment"—overtakes any class or race discourses, which are at the core of internationalist feminist politics. "Global womanhood" becomes a category or a class in itself. Hunger is separated from class and from the failure of states to provide and distribute wealth equally. The main political aim becomes fighting hunger, without any reflection on what has caused this hunger—for example, the failure to subsidize farmers' material needs; the historical mismanagement of water distribution, which has led to drought in many areas; the overexploitation of underground water (like in the Bekaa valley); the distribution or subsidization of fertilizers for farmers, which over many years has damaged the soil; toxic waste polluting the water; and more generally the laws around property or land ownership, which favor the few at the expense of the many. NGOs do not address this mismanagement at the state level; instead, they try to compensate for it.

"Entrepreneurship" and "independence" become the ultimate goals of women's emancipation, privileging narratives of individual achievement (as in the case of Khadija's co-op); rather than demanding redress from the state for its failure, individuals are expected to bear the responsibility building structures to make up for where the state has failed. Terms like "empowerment" are used to describe these projects, which really only emphasize "powerlessness" and corner women into a narrative of victimhood. The mission of NGOs is then to intervene in order to empower the victim and "save her," without taking into consideration the existing and historical collective support networks among women—especially among women farmers; this ill-considered intervention often risks breaking up these networks in order to single out individuals and support them. These nongovernmental structures, functioning within the global capitalist economy, produce an apolitical managerial discourse that risks erasing the existing struggles of feminists.

Food and the 2011 Uprisings

In 2008, as the price of cereals doubled across the world leading to hunger riots in Egypt (April 2008), Syria's policy of food self-sufficiency pursued since the Ba'athist revolution of 1963 appeared vindicated. Syria had the most thriving agriculture of the Middle East. It was highly subsidized and accounted for up to one third of the Gross Domestic Product and employing up to a third of the working population. It enabled almost half of the nation's inhabitants to stay in the countryside, especially in the North East of the country, the Jazira, which is the source of two thirds of cereal and cotton production, partly thanks to irrigated zones developed as part of the State Euphrates Project. However, this achievement was in question after three consecutive dry years (2008–2010), in which Syria had to receive international food aid for nearly one million persons, its emergency cereals reserves were exhausted and tens of thousands of peasants fled to main city suburbs in search of informal work. Its agricultural work force may have dropped from 1.4 million to 800,000 workers in this period. Some believe this is also linked to the dismantlement of Syria's socialist agriculture.

—Myriam Ababsa, "Agrarian Counter-Reform in Syria (2000–2010)"¹

One immediate trigger of the 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world was the increase in the price of bread and other nutritional basics due to the failure of self-sufficient agricultural production. Movements, whether grassroots or opposition parties (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), were met with repressive state violence, and in the case of Syria this has led to the ongoing war, the displacement of about six million people, the killing of half a million, thousands of rapes and abuses against women, disappearances, torture and unaccounted deaths in the regime's prisons, the use of chemical weapons by the regime—all this without having a clear account of the consequences of this violence in the domestic sphere, and

without having a clear account of the damage and violence inflicted upon animals, trees, plants, water, and the land. The demands of the uprisings, from very basic food and economic needs to human rights, have been met with brutal crackdowns. States reacted to their own collapse with violent repression. (The one exception might be Tunisia, where certain laws that used to enshrine gender inequality have been abolished.)

The lack of capacity to produce cereal and to meet the demand for bread was one of the factors that finally cracked the repressive regimes' system of control. In the case of Syria, this lack was partly due to the slow dismantling of socialist agriculture and to the ensuing liberalization process, most apparent after the reforms of the 2000s. Could we talk about a failure of the agrarian revolution's ideal of self-sufficiency? We can certainly talk about a failure of the whole ideological apparatus that brought about the agrarian revolution, with its industrialized monoculture. Perhaps we can talk about the failure of the myth that monoculture will resolve the problem of hunger. Within the ecology of uprisings, the question of agriculture and the dismantling of the socialist agrarian revolution was at the core of the ideological failures of the repressive regimes. The anti-hunger program that Khadija's cooperative is part of comes in the wake of this slow dismantling of the self-sufficiency ideal.

On the one hand there is a broad network of women's NGOs spread across the region, which are dealing with the immediate consequences of the refugee crisis. On the other hand we have witnessed the emergence, in the Kurdish area of northern Syria, of a feminist and ecological agenda that is nonetheless in a precarious situation, since it depends on an alliance with Washington, which allied with the Kurdish forces in order to fight ISIS. Though we should not necessarily compare the Kurdish struggle to the rest of the Arab uprisings—since the Kurdish autonomous women's movement has been organizing for forty years—new potential was given to this movement by the Syrian regime's loss of full control and by the 2011 revolts. The Kurdish experiment in autonomous governance (a bottom-up democratic confederalism) might have to shift from its current form, as the Syrian regime is unlikely to accept a regional fully autonomous government. But what is certain is that it has already established and institutionalized a feminist and ecological popular movement.

Perhaps the already established agricultural cooperatives and ecofeminist projects will be able to tackle the failures of the agrarian revolution, poised as they are to renew the ideal of self-sufficiency.



Marwa Arsanios, *Who is Afraid of Ideology 1*, 2017. Film still

No-State Solution, Autonomy, and NGOs

Pelshin is a guerilla fighter. We set up a meeting with her in one of the women's houses in Sulaymanyah, Iraqi Kurdistan. She happened to be in the city because she was undergoing a foot operation. She was walking with crutches but remained surprisingly nimble, moving alongside me at a normal pace and climbing stairs without help. We sat with her for about five hours, first discussing a text she wrote about ecology during wartime, and then conversing freely for the rest of the time. I was trying to understand how the ecological paradigm is practiced in the communal life of the guerillas, how it is inseparable from the feminist paradigm and the gender struggle, how all these paradigms were made possible structurally through different organizations and committees, through the production and transmission of knowledge, and through the relation between this knowledge and praxis.

Pelshin:

There is a contradiction between ecology and war. When I joined the guerrillas twenty-four years ago, I entered a war atmosphere. The conditions were such that you sometimes needed to cut parts of trees, to have something to lie down on or to protect yourself from animals.

The understanding of ecology in the women's movement was strongly influenced by these kind of experiences and contradictions. Our ecological consciousness within the movement evolved within our communal life in these conditions of war.

There's always a strong parallel between the massacre of nature and that of women. We, the women's movement, had to protect our existence.

I was in the mountains of Dersim for three years, where there are a lot of mountain goats. We were hungry many times during those three years, but only once did we kill goats for food. That is a rule of the guerilla.

I want to point out something about my personal experience. I remember my childhood. My first ecological teacher was my mother. She taught me that we as humans have a place in nature, like trees and birds. I have the right to exist, like all other species in the same place. You shouldn't hurt the earth, you should protect it. Don't kill trees, don't kill animals. But we are the children of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so it took a long time for this philosophy to reach us. But these things transmitted by my mother are the signs of this old philosophy.

Pelshin is one of the ideologues of the women's movement. She serves on multiple committees; one of them is the *jineology* committee (Kurdish for "the study of women"), which is a project to rewrite the history of science from the perspective of women. The committee also publishes a quarterly journal, *Jineology*. Thinking of different paradigms of the communal life within the party and the relationship between knowledge, ideas, and practice, Pelshin presents us with so many contradictory ideas and situations from guerilla life. How to inhabit these contradictions? In the case of the autonomous women's movement, the conditions of existence are in complete contradiction with the ecological paradigm, due to the war situation. But the ecological paradigm itself and the way it is practiced were born from the guerillas' communal situation and their life in the mountains.



The gender struggle within the Kurdish guerilla movement began forty years ago. Since then the women's units have built a solid autonomous structure on an ecofeminist and socialist foundations, following the "cutoff theory," which calls for the establishment of all-female units separate from male units, in order to build an independent female structure and leadership. The Kurdish movement has been influenced by Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology, which proposes that the world's ecological problems stem from social problems, which themselves arise from structures and relationships of domination and hierarchy. At the core of this internationalist movement is the concept of self-defense (with an ecological bent).

On the subject of self-defense—the core concept of the women's movement—I interviewed Dilar Dirik over Skype. Dilar is a member of the Kurdish women's movement. She spoke to me from her apartment in Cambridge, where she is now finishing up her doctoral thesis on the movement.

Dilar:

Self-defense actually comes from nature itself. It is something that is very organic. Every existence, whether human or not, relies on a means of protecting itself. In the human context it cannot just be in the sense of the army or states or police and so on. Rather, we must think of collective ways of protecting ourselves, because in a world in which indigenous cultures are being eradicated, in which women are being subjected to modern-day sex slavery, rape culture, domestic violence, and so on, it is simply not an option to not think about how we can defend ourselves. In liberalism, in liberal thought and philosophy in general, the expectation is that people should surrender the means of protection to the state. The state should have a monopoly on the use of force. The assumption is that you as an individual member of society should not have the agency to act because the state should decide on your behalf what is dangerous to your existence.

Look at the universe itself, how ecologies work, how environments work, how beings and existences interact with each other. They do not necessarily do so according to the social Darwinist concept of competition and survival of the fittest. Ecology is always based on interaction, on mutualism—on cooperation, if we want to use human terms. We need to understand ourselves as part of nature, but with the acknowledgment of course that the capitalist system has made us alienated from nature. In the case of the Kurds, for example, the mountains have historically always been a very strong protector of people who have been persecuted. In 2014, when ISIS attacked the Yazidis, the first thing that they did was to flee to the mountains. Landscapes, natural geographies, and water have always been sites of protection for people. This is not because nature is there to serve humans, but rather because humans are part of nature. Until the creation of states, big cities, and especially capitalism and industrialism, people understood how to live together with nature. I know this from my own grandparents' village. They have a very different relationship to the animals they raise. They sing songs to the mountains, not about the mountains. I think many different cultures, especially indigenous people, have this kind of relationship with nature, which is very much a comradeship. For the Kurds and other groups who have always understood themselves in relation to a specific geography, who have never been part of a dominant state, and who have in many ways very local ways of organizing their lives, relying on geography to survive, the relationship to nature is like a friendship rather than an alliance.

Destroying nature is part of a policy of assimilation on the

part of the dominant nation-states. The less people are aware of their link with nature, the more likely they are to become liberal individuals, with loyalty only to the state. So the more we are connected to nature through geography, the more likely we are to be conscious of ourselves, be conscious of our place in the universe, our place in ecology in general. The state is actively trying to destroy that because the state is very well aware of the connection between humans and nature. The state knows that in order for it to be legitimized and justified, it needs to break this link between humans and nature.

It is important here to think about the ways in which nongovernmental organizations can learn from the autonomous women's movement, whose politics go far beyond liberal pacifist feminism. As Dilar states in her article "Feminist Pacifism or Passiv-ism?": "Liberal feminists' blanket rejection of women's violence, no matter the objective, fails to qualitatively distinguish between statist, colonialist, imperialist, interventionist militarism and necessary, legitimate self-defense."² Could nongovernmental organizations, which often emphasize individualistic achievement, learn from the collectivist principles of the autonomous women's movement and resituate the struggle in a collective and historical context? Instead of talking about "independence" as a goal, could we think about "interdependence"? Within a neoliberal global economy, discourses on "empowerment" replace discourses on "emancipation." Rights are emphasized over demands. Self-defense becomes a legal issue that is handed over to the state.

The agricultural cooperatives that are being implemented by the autonomous women's movement specifically in Northern Syria also come as a response to years of state agricultural policies that tried to break the ties between farmers and the land through strict agricultural and land laws. The purpose of the cooperatives is now to repair this damage through the collective work that a cooperative demands.



Land, Communes, Cooperatives, and Self-Sufficiency

In between wheat fields a small village is being built up. The houses are made of mud in the traditional and most sustainable way, just as they have been built here in the region for thousands of years. The newly planted garden makes a change in the landscape; little fruit trees, olive trees, tomato plants, cucumber, watermelon, paprika, aubergine and a lot of wildly growing portulac all around, needing just a little water and earth to grow. The village is called Jinwar, and it is a women's village.

With the planting of the communal garden the women are aiming to create a base of self-sufficiency for the village, but also to maintain the connection to the earth and food. In an area of quasi-desert and wheat mono-culture, being the result of the Syrian regime's policy to industrialize agriculture since the 1970s. It will change the territory, revive the ground and create an example of how a commune can live and work with the land in a sustainable way.³

This is how a women's commune that is being built in the north of Syria describes itself. It is one of the ecofeminist projects of the autonomous women's movement, striving to create self-sufficient agricultural production for the village but also trying to repair the land after a history of industrialized wheat monoculture and drought. At the same time, the members of the commune are repairing themselves, their relationship to the earth, creating an intimacy with the land. This intimacy encompasses different dynamics and affective relations between humans, nonhumans, and matter.

The commune is built on state-owned land that was taken over by the autonomous government after the Syrian regime's forces were pushed out of the north. Eventually, thirty houses will be built on the land, inhabited mostly by widowed women with their children, and other women who want to live away from traditional domestic life. Most of the state-owned land was turned into agricultural cooperatives, some of which are women-only. The cooperatives are run by the farmers themselves, with technical supervision from the autonomous government's agricultural department. In this area of the country—the Jazira region—the Ba'athist regime had established state farms and cooperatives in the late 1960s. They were run by representatives who strongly supported the regime, and the cooperatives functioned as a control mechanism for propagating Ba'athist ideology. In addition, the Ba'athist regime paid the farmers a paltry monthly salary for their labor, and this intentional impoverishment was a way for the regime to maintain control over the different ethnic groups living in the area. Today, almost all of the territory formerly occupied by these state-owned farms has been taken over by the autonomous Kurdish

government. There are now about fifty-eight cooperatives spread all over the region, which have helped make the region agriculturally self-sustaining for the past seven years.

It remains to be seen how many of the ecofeminist projects spearheaded by the Kurdish women's movement will survive this tumultuous period, as the autonomous region begins to negotiate with the Syrian regime over territory and resources (oil), and as reconstruction deals are made in the wake of major fighting. For all the power and success of these projects, a crucial question must be asked: Are we falling back into a gendered division of labor, where women are placed in the role of caretakers?

At a conference on "decolonial practices" held at the Akademie der Kunst in Berlin this summer, Françoise Vergès said:

Women are often put in the position of cleaning and caring for what is broken. There are fifty-three million domestic workers in the world who are cleaning the city for the white middle class ... We must think about waste and the production of waste as a capitalist mode of production. Women are now expected to clean and care for what has been broken in the earth, for the damage that has been done to the earth, to the land. But before rushing and doing the naturalized work of "repair" and care, let's take a moment to think about how it was broken, why it was broken, and by whom.⁴

All the projects I have discussed—from the NGOs working within the constraints of the international aid economy to the ecofeminist projects of the autonomous women's movement—are necessary alternatives. But they can only exist in a more sustainable manner if the question of responsibility is articulated: Who has inflicted the damage?

The Syrian regime has pointed to drought and climate change, rather than their own crimes and corruption, as reasons for the uprisings that began in 2011. In this way, the regime has used ecological concerns to cover up its own repressive violence and intentional mismanagement of resources. In an interview with a Russian TV channel in 2016, Asma al-Assad talked about the 2008–11 drought as one of the worst in the history of the modern Syrian state and as the main reason for what she called the "crisis."

The response to this should not be to dismiss climate change and drought as factors in the uprisings, but rather to insist that the regime should bear the responsibility for the drought—another one of its many crimes. Only then can the ecofeminist work of repair and growth begin to bear fruit.

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Unless otherwise noted, stills are from Marwa Arsanio's video *Who is Afraid of Ideology 2* (2018). All images courtesy of the author.

Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher who reconsiders the politics of the mid-twentieth century from a contemporary perspective, with a particular focus on gender relations, urbanism, and industrialization. She approaches research collaboratively and seeks to work across disciplines. She is cofounder of 98weeks Research Project, and is currently a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Kunst in Vienna.

1
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2
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3
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4
Françoise Vergès, comments
made during panel discussion at
"Colonial Repercussions"
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Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez

Transforming Whiteness in Art Institutions

What are we supposed to prioritize as the most important struggle right now? Struggles are taking place on multiple levels. We should be able to engage with them on concrete levels and in the places in our proximity.

—Nacira Guénif-Souilamas¹

On veut des complices, pas des alliés. [We want accomplices, not allies.] Now you know how to use your privileges.

—Filmmaker and activist Amandine Gay²

In a recent lecture at the Kaaitheater in Brussels, decolonial feminist Gloria Wekker analyzed what she calls the phenomenon of “white innocence” in contemporary Dutch culture and the importance of accountability in response.³ In Wekker’s conception, white innocence refers to the denial of colonialism, where the presupposed ignorance of the country’s colonial past ensures white Dutch speakers a place where they cannot be held accountable. And yet, as Wekker asked in her talk, how could one seriously believe that centuries-long imperialism would not leave its traces in the institutions, languages, and ways in which those in the Global North look at one another?

“If you want to decolonize knowledge,” said Wekker in a recent interview, “how are you going to do that with the current workforce who do not even have the vocabulary to talk about it?” She goes on: “The thing that makes it so difficult, with respect to academics, to people in media—who regard themselves as very progressive, ‘We are non-racist by definition’—is that it is harder to hold them accountable for racist behaviour if it is all over the place.”⁴

Alongside political and social institutions, the institutions and professionals of contemporary art across Europe have been coming under increasing pressure to hold themselves accountable when confronted with structural racism, the continuing coloniality of power, growing social and environmental inequalities, right-wing populism, and sexism.⁵ Accountability can be enabled by conscious and reflexive work, which art institutions should be doing (and some are doing) more infrastructurally. In addition to programming, accountability should have a prominent place on the level of teamwork as well as in situations of exchange and mediation with the publics. During previous decades in the social sciences, especially in anthropology and feminist studies, the reflexive turn toward accountability has led researchers to the systematic and rigorous disclosure of their methodologies and their own subjective and situated views. Employing and learning with this method, institutions can enable accountability,



Saddie Choua, *Am I the Only One Who Is Like Me?*, 2017. Installation view at *Show Me Your Archive* and *I Will Tell You Who is in Power*, KIOSK, Ghent.
Photo: Tom Callemin.

which is a powerful weapon against co-option in the fields of social and environmental justice especially. It can also be a tool for institutional reorganization. Specifically, in the field of contemporary art, it can be a tool for reforming institutional ethics, teamwork methods, and internal diversity policies, and for repeatedly redefining who the institution intends to address.⁶

In an earlier text on the notion of “slow institutions,” I offered some proposals for how institutions of contemporary art can counter the imperatives of late-capitalist and neoliberal progress-driven modes of living and thinking.⁷ I discussed the non-innocence of the white cube paradigm, suggesting that all art institutions in the Global North are a result of a process of the coloniality of power and racial capitalism, which, as we well know, has accumulated wealth through the mechanisms of racialization and dispossession resulting from the centuries-long slave trade and, above all, through the “bellies of African women.”⁸ In this essay, however, I would like to explore if and how the co-option of feminisms can be countered in art through incorporating intersectionality as a way of living and looking at the world.

Late-capitalist societies of the Global North have co-opted the struggle for the liberation of all women embodied by the legacies of European and North American second-wave feminism. Establishing a legal basis for women’s right to abortion, equal economic status, and equal participation in the political sphere are a few of the battles that have been appropriated by corporate feminism.

The type of corporate and state feminism present in many organizations, companies, and throughout society aims to assure equality without forcing any real structural change. This is only one example of the depoliticization of feminist legacies. “Femonationalism” is a term that Sara R. Farris proposes to describe the political exploitation of feminist themes by both ultra-right-wing politicians and neoliberals.⁹ Conservatives take up these issues by elevating traditional values, such as supporting a work-family balance, as a new ideal for women, while neglecting the issues that have historically preoccupied feminists, such as equality, liberation, and social justice. Considering that the unacknowledged domestic and care workers who enable professional women to strive towards

"balance" in their lives are less privileged and are often women of color, this omission is not surprising. And neoliberals increasingly generalize, stigmatize, and criminalize Muslim populations—women and men alike—under the banner of gender equality.

Further recent co-options have occurred in the context of the #MeToo movement, which has been concerned with sexual harassment and violence against women, especially in the various spheres of popular culture and the arts.¹⁰ As outrage spread widely following the public disgrace of the film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, the movement took over the #MeToo name that had been introduced in 2007 by Tarana Burke, an African-American survivor of sexual assault and an activist who created a nonprofit organization to help victims of sexual harassment and assault.¹¹ Burke's activism can be understood in the context of the legacy of black women who helped fuel anti-rape activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as scholar Crystal Feimster has recently argued.¹² Feimster shows how, in the days after slavery ended in the American South, black women were particularly important in the rise of the nonviolent movement against sexual violence. Following the belated recognition of Burke's pioneering care work, Feimster encourages current #MeToo activists to recognize their allyship with the historic struggle of black women against issues of rape and racism.

The term "intersectionality" was famously coined in 1989 by the law professor and theoretician Kimberlé Crenshaw. She defined it as the "view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity."¹³ As Crenshaw sees it today, "intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects."¹⁴

An intersectional worldview was already present in various art disciplines prior to Crenshaw's coining of the term. For example, the groundbreaking collection of essays, poems, and artworks *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published in 1981. This testimony to feminist women of color that was coedited by poet and activist Cherrie Moraga and poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. In the preface to the fourth edition, published in 2015, Moraga precisely defines the importance of the book: it shows the "living experience of what academics now refer to as 'intersectionality,' where multiple identities converge at the crossroads of a woman of colour life. The woman of colour life *is* the crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape."¹⁵ Alongside poems, letters, testimonies, and manifestos by women of color from all over the world—among them the foundational intersectional manifesto of the Combahee River Collective from 1977¹⁶—are reproductions of

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COORDINATION

DES

FEMMES NOIRES

JUILLET 1978



Pamphlet published by the group Coordination des Femmes Noires (1978).

artworks by Ana Mendieta, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Celia Herrera Rodríguez, and Betye Saar.¹⁷

Another prehistory of the term can be found in a 1978 manifesto-pamphlet by a group of feminist activists who had recently immigrated to France from West Africa and the Antilles. The group, which organized in Paris under the name Coordination des Femmes Noires, wrote: "Where we are colonized or put in ghettos, we, black women, declare that we struggle against all forms of racism, against structural segregations that guarantee murder, against imperialism, patriarchal power, and all practices of torture inflicted on our bodies and our thoughts."¹⁸ The membership of Coordination des Femmes Noires included several writers and playwrights, such as Awa Thiam, the Senegalese author of the seminal *La Parole aux Nègrèsses* (1978); and Gerty Dambury, a poet, dramaturge, and theater director from Guadeloupe. The group was active until 1982, organizing demonstrations and writing pamphlets on anti-imperialism, class struggle, and the lack of rights afforded to immigrant women in France. The members also denounced the

instrumentalization and repression of women under dictatorial regimes in Africa.



Françoise Dasques, *Conférence des Femmes—Nairobi*, 1985. Film stills. 1'05", sound, color. This work documents a parallel ten-day meeting to the official UN Governments Conference attended by 14 000 women. See →.

The film *La Conférence des femmes—Nairobi* (1985) by Françoise Dasques also exemplifies intersectionality in the arts before Crenshaw's theorization. This exceptional one-hour documentary, commissioned by the feminist video documentation and archiving institution Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris, depicts the proceedings of Nairobi's seminal 1985 NGO Forum of women's groups from all over the world.¹⁹ The intense polemical speeches at the event address topics such as the Palestinian struggle, female genital mutilation, transnational alliances of LGBTQI communities, and the various significations of veiling women's bodies in postrevolutionary Iran. These topics are all debated exclusively by women—across races, classes, and sexual orientations. In one scene activist, writer, and educator Angela Davis speaks about the need for feminists to join hands across races and classes while nonetheless acknowledging the specificity of each person's oppression.²⁰ In other moments, we see discussions with the decolonial feminist scholar Paola Bacchetta and the transnational feminist Nawal El Saadawi. Renowned ecofeminist writer and activist Vandana Shiva appears in another accompanying video by Françoise Dasques about Nairobi.

It has recently become clear that some women in the cultural sphere today think very differently about feminism than Angela Davis and the other revolutionary women depicted in *La Conférence des femmes—Nairobi*. In France earlier this year, in reaction to the #MeToo movement, around one hundred women from the fields of film, contemporary art, and literature (including, most notably, Catherine Millet and Catherine Deneuve) published an open letter in the French newspaper *Le Monde* expressing concern over the alleged puritanism of the movement and its "witch hunt" against men. The letter infamously stated that "men should be free to hit on women." In a response to this letter entitled "Can Feminists Speak?" seven intellectuals criticized its

manipulation of the notion of liberty and its unacceptable universalization; rather than acknowledging that certain groups are racialized and subjected to unequal treatment on a daily basis, the letter places the blame on those who are suffering.²¹ Art critics Elisabeth Lebovici and Giovanna Zapperi published another response to the letter, drawing attention to the danger of conflating human rights, artistic freedom, and personal freedom as understood by the (French white) women who wrote the letter.²²

In response to these debates, many progressive institutions of contemporary art in both the northern and southern hemisphere are struggling to operate structurally against racism, sexism, and homo- and transphobia, not only on the level of programming but also on the level of transforming the administration and the hierarchies among employees. Several exhibitions, and increasingly also biennials, proclaiming intersectional methods have been organized in recent years. Examples include an exhibition simply entitled "Intersectionality" at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami in 2016, and the 2018 Berlin Biennale, entitled "We Don't Need Another Hero." There are also groundbreaking examples of whole institutions from the Global North attempting to reorganize.

One is Centro Cultural Montehermoso Kulturunea in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, which was run by Xabier Arakistain between 2008 and 2011. In 2005, Arakistain published "Manifiesto Arco 2005," demanding that administrators at publically funded art institutions adopt practical measures to implement equality between the sexes in the art field. Then, as head of Centro Cultural Montehermoso, Arakistain not only turned the center into a notable institution for contemporary art and culture; he also restructured Montehermoso along feminist lines, turning it into a pioneering institution for gender-equal employment policies.²³ Gender quotas were instituted for every activity and program, ensuring that half of the participants were women. Salaries and public budgets were apportioned on the basis of gender, which Basque law requires but which is rarely implemented. Furthermore, the artistic program of the institution actively promoted contemporary feminist thought in art and theory.²⁴

Arakistain, along with Ewa Majewska, Giovanna Zapperi, and Luba Kobová, recently contributed to a remarkable charter, "Code of Practice," which was put together after a 2017 seminar in Prague hosted by tranzit, a network of autonomous art initiatives. The seminar was about what feminist art institutions could be. The charter reflects on power, work, human relationships, quotas, and forms of oppression.²⁵ It states, for example, that "a feminist art institution is receptive to those of its workers who have responsibilities as carers. It makes every attempt to create a working environment that includes space for care activities." It continues:



Saddie Choua, *I'm sorry I can't offer you tea, my hands are a little tight* (2014) and *Am I the Only One Who Is Like Me* (2017). Installation view at Show Me Your Archive and I Will Tell You Who is in Power, KIOSK, Ghent. Photo: Tom Callemin.

A feminist art institution refuses to abide by the unwritten criteria of the culture industry as we know it today. The art world is based on a system of competition, in which only those who demonstrate the requisite endurance, ambition, strength, assertiveness succeed. A feminist art institution advocates other values and virtues. It takes into account human weakness, frailty, and fatigue, and prioritises human relationships over “performance.” It sets itself different rules within the framework of its possibilities.

In a similar vein, Lina Džuverović and Irene Revell of the London-based feminist and grassroots curatorial collective Electra published an essay assessing the more than decade-long existence of the organization. They highlighted Electra’s anti-patriarchal model of resisting dominant structures: “Notions of care, long-term commitment, attention to detail, and slow, well-developed outputs all stem from the socially undervalued realm of unpaid, traditionally female labour (the domestic) in which well-being emerges from process, not grand gestures and bombastic events.”²⁶

In her essay “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” art historian and curator Helen Molesworth proposes a new model of museum display. She argues for a feminist method of exhibition that “allows us to think about lines of influence and conditions of production that are organized horizontally, by necessarily competing ideas of identification, attachment, sameness, and difference, as opposed to our all too familiar (vertical) narratives of exclusion, rejection, and triumph.”²⁷ As an alternative to chronological installation and thematic exhibition methods, Molesworth proposes a generational model based on the idea that women artists form intergenerational alliances. She makes the case for what she calls her exhibition “fantasy room,” with works by Joan Snyder, Cindy Sherman, Amy Sillman, Wangechi Mutu, and Dana Schutz. By establishing a mother-daughter relationship between these artistic legacies, she points to the creation of intergenerational feminist genealogies between artists. She calls this exhibition mode “horizontal display,” based attachments and alliances, as opposed to a vertical model of history characterized by narratives of exclusion, rejection, and colonization of the other.

Molesworth, along with several other female curators and museum directors such as Laura Raicovich and María Inés Rodríguez, have resigned or been fired from their institutions in recent months—is anyone surprised? In an inspiring conversation published in *ARTnews*, Laura Raicovich and the writer Aruna D’Souza explore the notion of “infrastructural critique,” a phrase coined by D’Souza and Paul Chan. Raicovich and D’Souza discuss how to decolonize museums so that they operate in accordance with a value system that challenges the biases inherent in their structure. They note that museums are

happy to invest temporarily in artists of color, but when it comes to funding real resources that provide long-term support for such artists (i.e., space in the permanent collection, long-term installations, diversity within museum teams), the money can’t seem to be found.²⁸

Art critic Genevieve Flavelle has written about another inspiring feminist institution, the Toronto-based Feminist Art Gallery (FAG).²⁹ In collaboration with Toronto’s queer and feminist art communities, artists Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue founded FAG in 2012. Drawing on generations of queer and feminist institutional critique and the lived experience of queer and feminist artists, they assembled a feminist art collection with works by local and regional artists, collected in a decentralized way. The gallery aims to serve feminist artists, queer artists, artists of color, indigenous artists, trans artists, and artists with disability/ies who make politicized art and who have been failed by the art system. FAG stands as a vital example of how to resist from within oppressive systems, such as the art market, the institutional art world, and the cycle of fame.

“Who keeps the cube white?” is a crucial question asked by activists at Goldsmiths who are currently protesting for better working conditions and pay for cleaners at the school.³⁰ For the generation of art professionals coming up now, the activism of groups such as Decolonize this Place and Gulf Labour Artist Coalition is of immense importance.³¹ The art organization Khiasma, based in the town of Les Lilas in the suburbs of Paris, aims to decolonize social relations through art by presenting challenging exhibitions and programs that pose questions about what and who produces space.³² Today, with neofascism acquiring greater visibility and power, intersectionality is a crucial framework for dismantling the existing power structures of whiteness within institutions. Practices of accountability, care, and mutual respect across hierarchical departments and job positions should be at the forefront of art institutional discourse today. At the same time, we must be wary of the appropriation of intersectional methodology by the very power structures it is intended to combat; as sociologist Sirma Bilge has written of the academic appropriation of intersectionality in the US, it can easily fall prey to the neoliberal “management of neutralized difference in our postracial times.”³³ Institutions must work to realize intersectionality’s political potential today, transforming themselves profoundly in the process.

X

An earlier version of this text, entitled “Practice Intersectionality,” was first published in the essay collection *Feminisms* (L’Internationale Books, 2018) →.

Instead of a bio: “Following the decolonial feminist scholar Paola Bacchetta, who has written about the importance of situating oneself before beginning to write or talk (see →), I will briefly situate myself: I am a white, Eastern European, cis, heterosexual woman from a mixed working- and middle-class family, born in the former Yugoslavia. I am able-bodied, but have had an autoimmune disease since childhood and was recently diagnosed with another chronic illness. I have a university degree and have been working in the arts for many years. As a child growing up in Slovenia—the northernmost of the former Yugoslavian republics—I often heard people make racist remarks about countries from which my father’s family originates, Bosnia and Ukraine. In the white European imaginary today, these and many other neighboring regions belong to the racialized territories of the Global South. In the Global North, I constantly receive comments about the Slavic accent noticeable in any of the foreign languages I speak. These comments range from exoticizing to degrading. Hearing them over and over again, I remember a discussion about contemporary art and Europe from many years ago in which philosopher and artist Marina Gržinić said, ‘I am very proud of my Eastern European accent.’”

—Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez

- 1 Talk at the conference "Global 68," Paris, May 3, 2018.
- 2 Gay posted this comment to social media on July 27, 2018 in response to an act of civil disobedience carried out by the young Swedish activist Elin Ersson on July 23. Ersson refused to sit down on a flight from Gothenburg to Istanbul because another passenger on the plane was being deported to Afghanistan via Turkey.
- 3 Gloria Wekker, lecture at Kaaitheater, Brussels, March 7, 2018 <https://www.kaaitheater.be/en/agenda/white-innocence>. See also Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence* (Duke University Press, 2017).
- 4 Rivke Jaffe, "Reflections: A Conversation with Gloria Wekker," *Development and Change*, *Forum 2018* 49, no. 2 (2018) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/dech.12388>.
- 5 The notion of the coloniality of power is used by Aníbal Quijano, and is, as described by Françoise Vergès, "a category that includes relations between the dominating and the dominated, sexism and patriarchy, ... relations between public and private, and above all between civil society and political institutions." Françoise Vergès, *Le Ventre des femmes: Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme (The Bellies of Women: Capitalism, Racialization, Feminism)* (Albin Michel, 2017), 21.
- 6 Important writing has called for the necessity of decolonizing art institutions and for anti-racist curatorial practices. Two recent publications on these topics include *Kuratieren als antirassistische Praxis (Curating as an Anti-Racist Practice)*, eds. Natalie Bayer, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, and Nora Sternfeld (De Gruyter, 2017); and *Décolonisons les arts! (Let's Decolonize the Arts!)*, eds. Leila Cukierman, Gerty Dambury, and Françoise Vergès (L'Arche Editeur, 2018).
- 7 Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "For Slow Institutions," *e-flux journal* 85 (October 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/>.
- 8 "Indeed, it is by having organized in an industrial way a drain on African societies for several centuries that capitalism could be built. The invisible source of this drain was nothing other than the bellies of African women, whose children were captured to be deported ... Later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the United States, the industry of the reproduction of enslaved bodies managed to impose itself on all the territories the were opposed to the politics of the import of slaves. The work of the female slaves-reproducers became essential for the expansion and enrichment of the United States ... The bellies of female slaves were capital; their bodies served as machines and constituted thus an essential element of the global circuit of commodities, such as cotton and sugar." Françoise Vergès, *Le Ventre des femmes*, 98. Translated by the author.
- 9 Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Duke University Press, 2017).
- 10 In the field of contemporary art, the informal group We Are Not Surprised was formed in autumn 2017 and soon published an open letter with signatures from seven thousand art professionals from all over the world. The letter asserted that sexual violence was a pervasive problem at all levels of the art world. The publication of the letter led to the formation of many individual working groups in various cities, as well as actions and legal support for victims of harassment. See <http://www.not-surprised.org/home/>.
- 11 Sandra E. Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags," *New York Times*, October 20, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.
- 12 On Crystal Feimster's talk from earlier this year "The Longue Durée of the Anti-Rape Movement and Why it Matters," see <https://som.yale.edu/event/2018/02/the-longue-dur-e-of-the-anti-rape-movement-and-why-it-matters>.
- 13 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, special issue: Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice, and Criticism (University of Chicago Law School, 1989).
- 14 "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later," [law.columbia.edu](http://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality), June 8, 2017 <http://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge recently published a critical inquiry into the way intersectionality functions in the world, including within global movements. Examining concrete cases, they identify social equality and social justice as intersectionality's central preoccupations. See Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Polity Press, 2016).
- 15 Cherrie Moraga, "Catching Fire: Preface to the Fourth Edition," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, fourth edition, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (SUNY Press, 2015), xxii.
- 16 The introduction to this historic statement reads: "We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face." Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 210.
- 17 In the preface to the fourth edition Moraga writes: "Ana Mendieta ... 'fell' from a window to her death in 1985 ... There had been strong evidence in and out of court to convict Mendieta's husband, a world-renown artist, of her murder, but he was exonerated. Of Mendieta's 'Body Tracks' Celia Herrera Rodríguez writes 'the bloodied hand and arm tracks descending to the ground (are) a reminder that this path is dangerous and many have fallen.'" *This Bridge Called My Back*, xxiii, including footnote 11.
- 18 Coordination des Femmes Noires, July 1978, author's translation. For more information see <https://mwasicollectif.com/ressources>.
- 19 For the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, see <http://www.centre-simone-de-beauvoir.com/>.
- 20 For an excerpt from Angela Davis's speech at the NGO Forum, see http://base.centre-simone-de-beauvoir.com/DIAZ-Conference-des-femmes-La_Nairobi-1985-510-17-0-1.html?ref=d6e664ad9dec0d76d0fa4132ef591982. See also a recently published interview with Davis where she talks about the importance of the forum <https://greensmps.org.au/articles/interview-angela-davis-1985>.
- 21 See <https://lesfeministespeuventellesparler.wordpress.com/cant-feminists-speak/>.
- 22 Elisabeth Lebovici and Giovanna Zapperi, "Miso et maso au pays des droits de l'homme," *Mediapart*, February 22, 2018 <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/220218/miso-et-maso-au-pays-des-droits-de-l-homme>. For the English version, see *e-flux journal* 92 (June 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/205771/maso-and-miso-in-the-land-of-men-s-rights/>.
- 23 In *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (Westview Press, 1988). Arakistain specifically quotes Griselda Pollock in pointing out that "recognizing the hierarchies of power which rule

the relationships between the sexes, lending visibility to the mechanisms on which male hegemony is founded, untangling the process of social construction of sexual difference and examining the role played by representation in that articulation of difference." *Vision and Difference* (Routledge Classics, 1988).

24
See Xabier Arakistain, "Reflections on a Feminist Model for the Field of Art: Montehermoso, 2008–2011" <http://cz.tranzit.org/file/Beyond-Guernica.pdf>.

25
See <http://feministinstitution.cz/code-of-practice/>.

26
Lina Džuverović and Irene Revell, "We falter with feminist conviction": Notes on Assumptions, Expectations, Confidence, and Doubt in the Feminist Art Organisation," *On Curating* 29 (May 2016) <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/we-falter-with-feminist-conviction.html#.W5g7OJMzaqC>.

27
Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (MoMA, 2014).

28
Andy Battaglia, "The ARTNews Accord: Aruna D'Souza and Laura Raicovich in Conversation," *ARTNews*, May 14, 2018 <http://www.artnews.com/2018/05/14/art-news-accord-aruna-dsouza-laura-raicovich-conversation/>. In the same conversation Laura Raicovich says: "The idea that museums are neutral is an absurdity, because all 'neutral' means is that the museum is reinforcing the values of the dominant culture ... The museum has never been neutral. It was designed to convey a lot, like colonial prowess by nations. Collect enough stuff and you look really powerful. When you start thinking in those terms, you have to contend with that. You have to ask yourself: do we dump it or do we deal with it?"

29
See Genevieve Flavelle, "We Can't Keep up/We Won't Keep Down: Feminist Praxis in Art Institutions," January 31, 2017 <http://web.archive.org/web/20190630224000/http://genevieveflavell.com/blog/2017/1/31/feminist-art-c2017-creating-feminist-praxis-in-institutions>.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20190630224000/http://genevieveflavell.com/blog/2017/1/31/feminist-art-c2017-creating-feminist-praxis-in-institutions>.

30
According to one of the activists, "the aims and objectives of the campaign are fairly uncontroversial among staff and students because most people are naturally disgusted by the fact that the lowest paid staff, overwhelmingly BME (Black or minority ethnic) and/or migrant, and predominantly women, could be treated so poorly at Goldsmiths." Quoted in Jasmine Weber, "Protesters at Goldsmiths University in London Demand Answers for 'Who Keeps the Cube White?'," *Hyperallergic*, September 6, 2018 <https://hyperallergic.com/459305/protesters-at-goldsmiths-university-in-london-demand-answers-for-who-keeps-the-cube-white/>.

31
Decolonize this Place is a group of artists and activists in New York who organize around indigenous struggles, black and working-class liberation, and de-gentrification; see <http://www.decolonizethisplace.org/>. Gulf Labour Artist Coalition is a group of international artists and art professionals organizing to protect the rights of the migrant workers who are building the museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi; see <https://gulflabor.org/>.

32
See <http://www.khiasma.net/khiasma/?lang=en>.

33
"Counter-hegemonic knowledge projects do not come with built-in guarantees against hegemonic recuperation; they can sustain hegemony's operations through their incorporation ... Knowledge capitalism under neoliberalism does not exclude or obliterate differences, but operates *through* them, while absorbing and neutralising them. Academia incorporates black women and intersectionality as material (bringing a new flavour to research projects, course material and publications), and as actors joining academic ranks, without altering its structure. This incorporation implies conformity, through pressures, incentives and sanctions, to disciplinary conventions both in a theoretical and embodied sense." Sirma Bilge, "Whitening

Intersectionality: Evanescence of Race in Intersectionality Scholarship," *The Du Bois Review* 10, no. 2 (2013): 405–24.

There is something monstrous, hybrid, and vibrant in the air; dear readers, I feel new ideas coming our way. We just do not know yet what this *corpus* can do.
—Rosi Braidotti¹

Doreen Mende

The Undutiful Daughter's Concept of Archival Metabolism

The problem with formative twentieth-century theories of the archive is their monocultural commitment to “the law” as if it was naturally given: “The archive is first the law of what can be said,” wrote Michel Foucault already in 1969. What if that which refuses to be forgotten escapes language? Or what if she speaks a language that the law’s system fails to recognize? What if she has been outlawed? It does not take much to realize that “the law of what can be said,” structurally speaking, is the law of the father. Only recently, it seems, psychosocial studies have revealed pitfalls in feminist theories that analyze the mother-daughter relation as a symptom of the patriarchal order rather than a structural possibility in its own right: “She is condemned to memory while he is given access to desire,” is the formulation Amber Jacobs proposes to conceptualize the absent, or untheorized, maternal law.² In other words, the “law of what can be said” situates the archive in a dominant order of paternal control.

Such an order does not make sense in the twenty-first century. It never made sense. Needless to say, it represses, neglects, and disregards pretty much everything and everyone who does not fit into the law of what can be said: the asylum seeker, the no-body, the depressed, the burned out, speakers of non-imperial languages, etc. Those who have been overlooked by this law seem to require preparation or education in order to satisfy juridical norms, which themselves follow patriarchal, or at least paternal, rules. The archive’s old capacity is defined by those who have access to the law and who (have learned to) speak its language. In the face of this situation, why on earth should a daughter—or someone otherwise inhabiting the life of a daughter—submit to a language that forces everyone who is non-father-like to rehearse a vocabulary that imposes, a priori, a set of principles that are not hers? Twenty-first century archive-theory-without-Theory reformulates the potential of speculation as an epistemological drive. It is an uncategorized or deschooled theory that emerges below the calculating faculties of capital-T Theory, because the daughter does not want to limit her knowledge by subscribing to the prescription, description, and inscription of regulative systems that would contain her monstrous unpredictability of thought. The commitment to her own voice, which the law cannot (or does not want to) recognize, has a reward: not only does she need to find her own voice to speak her own language, but she must also continuously perfect her capacity to learn the dominant language. We would do well to listen to the daughter’s speech-in-tongues, because she can teach us the practice of rehearsing the “xeno-epistemic” engine.

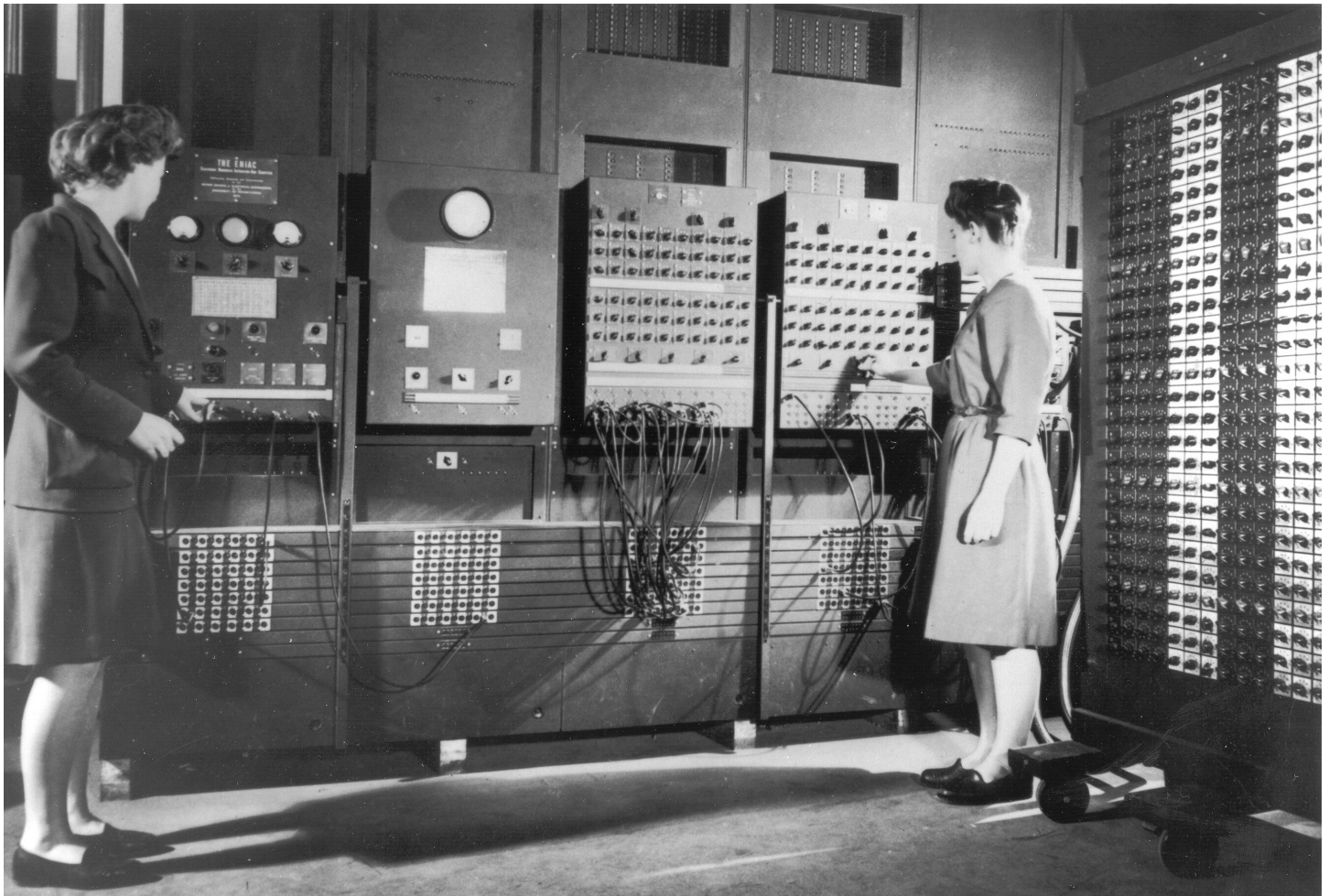


Ken Lum, *Melly Shum hates her job*, 1990. Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1992. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

This concept borrows from Sarat Maharaj's strong proposal to seek forms of knowledge outside the normative spheres of reason, i.e., outside the law but inside (non-)knowing.³ It helps us understand that little-theory might not be found in libraries or inside the law.

The xeno-epistemic approach demands that the undutiful daughter learns a language she does (not) want to learn, but has to. It is a forced learning, perhaps similar to forced labor, but different insofar as once she has learned the dominant language, she is free to do what she wants. However, we know how much effort it takes to maintain our second or third languages, i.e., languages different than our mother tongue. Each of these multiple pedagogical projects consumes time and energy. They train the daughter to recognize her "double consciousness," which, before the law's gaze, provokes feelings of both achievement and failure, along with vivid dreams and nightmares.⁴ The experience is marked by pain, struggle, and exhaustion. At the same time, it builds community, hybridity, and articulation that moves below the possession of the law. What will this "monstrous, hybrid, and vibrant ... *corpus*" be able to do? We feel it, but cannot speak it or spell it out.

The following is an attempt to think the archival condition from the place of the daughter—more precisely, the *undutiful daughter* who refuses the paternal law but who also believes in the archive's futuristic power. She cannot (not) participate in the language "of what can be said," but she does so in accordance with her own learning processes, vocabularies, and pathways. She is already two: a daughter and an undutiful. To occupy the perspective of the daughter, the first task is not to change the law—while this is urgently necessary, we are not there yet. Rather, we would do better to listen to the undutiful daughter who has not been born as such. Inhabiting the place of the daughter is not a matter of biological essentialism or of provided subjectivity; instead, we become an undutiful daughter through, as Rosi Braidotti suggests, a process of "conceptual disobedience."⁵ (Anyone can become an undutiful daughter.) In other words, she does not struggle for representation and recognition within the logic of the law; rather, she continuously rehearses *the actualization of intensities and forces* (Deleuze) by radically challenging the archive's mind-set.



Betty Jennings (Mrs. Bartik) and Frances Bilas (Mrs. Spence) operating the ENIAC's main control panel while the machine was still located at the Moore School. Source: ARL Technical Library/Historic Computer Images/Public Domain

Let us begin *before the beginning* — before the arrival of the “archon,” that is, the guardian of documents, the gatekeeper, the patri *arch* and the matri *arch*.⁶ When the *undutiful daughter* occupied the front room of the family home. The undutiful daughter, full of vibrant ideas not yet articulated fully, wants to provide shelter for Melly Shum, the undutiful daughter’s friend and loving aunt, who publicly declared in 1990 that she hates her job.⁷ It’s been everywhere. In the newspapers. Reporters in front of the house. On television in *Teen Species*. LinkedIn. Facebook. Flickr. Instagram. It’s gone viral. “Melly Shum hates her job.” On a billboard. For decades. Melly Shum. A woman of East Asian descent. Large white glasses. In her thirties. Working in an office. On her own. In Rotterdam. Pictured at work by Ken Lum. Another worker. In the picture Melly, it seems, is performing abstract labor, operating a machine to her right, maybe doing some calculations. Since 1990!⁸ Goodness. If only Melly’s abstract labor was recognized, even in retrospect—like the women trained in mathematics for the US Army’s ENIAC Project who, in the 1940s, were initially called “computers”—then she might speak again.⁹ She could speak of and against “the law of

what can be said.”

The archon’s arrival will never be delayed in the architecture of commencement that constrains, ties, and binds the archive to a building, a place, an address, a location from which the archon supports “the law of what can be said.”¹⁰ This law exists even absent the struggle for a body but is secured by property. This law is neither nature’s given nor God’s trick, but rather power’s ontological principle for structuring narrative, history, and privilege. For more than twenty years, Melly Shum has been unable to speak more than a single sentence. The Witte de With Center is in an area of Rotterdam that, around the time of the institution’s founding in 1990, was known for accommodating the local economy of international sex workers and coffee shops, which was supported by the nearby harbor and its liquid/fluid business of globalization. Was something missing? Or did the laws of administration and self-organization give rise to a mutant whose speaking, whose language, results from metabolized and continuously metabolizing processes that the archive cannot recognize according to



Exhibition view of Bik Van der Pol, *WERE IT AS IF*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2016. Documentation material of Lucas Einsele, *Omar hates his job*, 2005. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

its outdated law? Melly Shum might not have received a job promotion either. Rather, the exceptional appearance of an international artist reads the residents' participation into "statements as unique events"—following Foucault's understanding of the archive as "*the system of its functioning*."¹¹ This turns the unique event into sweet violence, a wolf in sheep's clothing perhaps, which operates brutally but smoothly to normalize the violence that began with Witte de With's inauguration, and which abetted the gentrification of the neighborhood while co-opting the residents' (presumably) unwaged labor and supporting the globalization of contemporary art. What to do with it? Critique is not enough. The system of the archive's old functioning perpetuates its silencing structures. Even Bik Van der Pol's unpacking of Ken Lum's *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* in their Witte de With exhibition "*WERE IT AS IF*" (2016) did not allow her to speak more. It is reported, though, that a Twitter account permits her to at least update her feelings as a worker.

A beginning *before the beginning* is impossible. There is

no beginning without an "ontological partition," as Anselm Franke has written of the double logic of our capitalist art modernity, which mines and dispossesses its own background to feed the "magic of value production."¹² Bik Van der Pol's "*WERE IT AS IF*" operated at Witte de With according to this entangled double logic. It processed existing artworks, correspondence, and texts from Witte de With's exhibition archives—everything, really, that the archon, with its right to judge and interpret, might be read as juridical evidence worthy of preservation. Anything that is regarded as "preserved" carries with it some characteristic of the macropolitical dimension of the archive: it might have a registration number, belong to an inventory, or be institutional property. The archive always conceives and needs, therefore, the archon, the principle ruler who is the first to emerge from "the law of what can be said"; the archon projects knowledge through its magic quality to attract one generation after another with its power, like iron filings to a magnet.

The archive's institutional invisibility, or de-institutional floating character, can be understood as its micropolitical potency that creates the conditions for transdisciplinary

reading and a collective effort to counter, avoid, and refuse the archon's principle of disciplinarity.¹³ For Bik Van der Pol in "WERE IT AS IF," the micropolitical was the memory of the acts of witnessing and making that operated as a "voice-over," thus suggesting an essayistic approach to the construction of the exhibition as a space. From the undutiful daughter's perspective, the "background conditions" point to the family's (often female) domestic labor that supports the patri *arch*'s or matri *arch*'s performance in public. Both threads, the juridical and the domestic, institute an architecture of *oikonomia*, i.e., an architecture of the household whose privacy is radically defined by the laws and norms of society: the sisterhood slogan "the personal is the political"¹⁴ becomes actually true in the archive when the daughter politicizes the household by speaking up against its *arch* onic law, though with the danger—as some would argue—of fulfilling neoliberalism's demands for labor.

What if Foucault's analysis of the transition from biopolitics to *oikopolitics*, which rightly pointed to the rise of neoliberalism, has a micropolitical flip side?¹⁵ What if "speaking up" against the law introduces a politics of the household that (re)activates public debate on the problem of unwaged and domestic labor from below? What if the disqualified, the subjugated, and the marginal do not want to speak from a position of oppression but instead from lived experiences of resistance and emancipation coupled with the desire to occupy institutional positions? What if the marginal want to speak in a language undecipherable by the law but still operational in its own terms? This is not a single struggle ready to coalesce into a single voice, "because we do not live single-issue lives."¹⁶ What if the undocumented, the neglected, the unwanted, the forgotten, the unspeakable, and the hidden are closer to mutants than citizens?

The archive is not only the images, documents, installation shots, and deadline reminders that travel from one computer to another within seconds (for example, those exchanged during the writing of this essay between the artists, the editor, and the author). It is also the .jpg, .txt, .pdf, and .zip files that travel around the globe, marking the point of departure for dematerializing an (institutional) archive into data, which can find its temporary (dis)location to be a USB stick traveling in the pocket of her skinny jeans or mingling with pens and keys in her backpack, or a WeTransfer link that arrives in her inbox along with plenty of other emails. Sure, sending the archival element off is marked by the body's location, but already the network's geolocation disturbs the securing assumption of one place. The element travels further, decentralizing the imperatives of location and site specificity, and thus preparing the conditions for the "metabolic agora" that theorist Benjamin Bratton associates with the contemporary architecture of computation:¹⁷ not only is the household of the archon turned inside out into the agora, but it is also made to disseminate the archive, ramified as digitized materiality,

spreading, travelling, and reaching beyond the "law of what can be said." The metabolic agora empowers and animates that which exists as a materialization of energy—a potency we need in order to process history into the future as a work of differentiation: the metabolic agora respects the existing. At the same time, it operates a platform that enables a transgenerational transmission, one that becomes visible through format changes: from paper to .pdf to email attachment to Xerox copy, even if those formats are "only" the means of production in the framework of a research project. The metabolic agora supports the political work of de-privatizing, defamiliarizing, and de-hierarchizing the narrations of history, towards the articulation and actualization of differences and intensities. Thus, this gathering-but-changing-place which is the arena for spiritual, political, and cultural life, and which is no longer confined to one location like the twentieth-century archive used to be, seems to provide some of the instruments the daughter needs for processing knowledge otherwise.



Exhibition view of Bik Van der Pol, *WERE IT AS IF*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2016. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

To better understand the metabolic agora for our politics of the archive in the twenty-first century, we need to shift perspectives on the materiality of the archive itself. Under conditions of uncontrolled sprawl, decentralization, and dissemination, the archive in the twenty-first century is in need not only of a statement but a *concept*. It is not that the statement has disappeared but rather that the concept allows that which cannot be said according to the archon to persist by different means. Elizabeth Grosz helpfully proposes that concepts "are the production of immaterial forces that line materiality with *incorporeals*, potentials, latencies: concepts are the virtualities of matter, the ways in which matter can come to be otherwise, the promise of a future different from the present."¹⁸ This is what counts: the undutiful daughter always dreams of a location that is deterritorialized in the world, searching and finding a language that allows one to

think towards “a future different from the present.”

Let's try the impossible and begin *before the beginning*. The undutiful daughter speaks truth to “the law of what can be said.” Such a truth is neither given, inherited, nor a unitary subject. It emerges from the complexity of life, which cannot be specialized into one discipline of knowledge. The undutiful daughter speaks as an amateur.¹⁹ She speaks while the father sleeps. She disagrees with the mother's demands. She speaks on her own, with her own voice. For us, here, she has learned to listen, and sometimes to translate, the bubble dome of voices—not only Dutch, French, or English, but also the voice of the artist, the traveler, the migrant, the director, the neighbor, the drug addict, the sex worker. In other words, she has trained herself to speak several languages. If she encounters languages she cannot speak, she insists on listening to what she cannot decipher (yet), while also listening to her friend translate into her ear. What she hears is not a mishmash of voices or approaches, but the articulation of the polyphonic existence of different languages, practices, and readings of the archive.

She continuously rehearses the politics of polyphony, as exemplified by Eleanor Bond's Witte de With exhibition “Cosmoville” (1995), described by the artist as a “landscape/territory that was being continuously constructed and extended.”²⁰ She asks questions. Many questions: Who is Witte de With, the “naval hero” in one of Bik Van der Pol's scripted texts?²¹ What does de With's heroism hide? The fact that “the Witte de With street had a terrible reputation”?²² Or that Witte de With, the naval dominator, fought in wars in Brazil on behalf of Dutch colonialism? She tours around on the bike that Eleanor Bond used for six months in 1995; she rides through Rotterdam's liminal zones and areas of transition, including the inner harbor of Maasvlakte, to recreate a fictitious history of “Cosmoville” that includes unrecorded and undocumented conversations with artists and historians Harry Sengers and Willem Oorebeek.²³ She speaks nearby. Eschewing a microphone. Eschewing statements. The opposite of direct action. But cycling. Listening. Touring. Thinking. Aiming to unearth and separate several past-layers impregnated by opposing narratives of “hero” and “junky,” urging us to approach the exhibition and institution through a practice of what Boris Buden calls, in his analysis of the museum, “post-historical sociality,” which insists on the contemporary need to rethink the art-institutional space and its social function of narrating the present.²⁴ In light of the urgent need for a new social imaginary and a more complex archive, the material traces of past events—here, the exhibition history of Witte de With—cannot be tied to “history a priori” alone. These traces call for a *would-be historian*, one who does not want to become a specialist or an official historian, but rather an “accidental archivist,” as described by filmmaker Didi Cheeka.²⁵ The accidental archivist speaks from below

to the law of what can be said; this remains a *speaking with* the archon because there is no other choice, and there is no choice other than to find a form of *speaking from* emancipatory joy. This speaking questions, challenges, and analyzes “the law” from below, with the absolute desire to undo the principle that reproduces the nomothetic order of the archi-truth: the beginning cannot be measured as past. In reality, this beginning is without end; truth is only ever a partial perspective on the whole. Never complete. Always unfinished. Such a position suggests the destruction of centralized concepts of power, which, in the twentieth century, was widely interpreted as an all-seeing invisible eye.



Eleanor Bond, *Cosmoville*, 1995. Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Bob Goedewaagen

Instead, the undutiful daughter undertakes the development of a new position against the archon's authority, i.e., its *macropolitics*. Her politics of polyphony—always in danger of being misunderstood and lost in translation, or even worse, accused of postmodernist spectacle—places her in the powerful position of having many voices, languages, and perspectives. This position bears witness to her *micropolitics* as a powerful tool. Macro and micro: entangled forces. Frame and flaw. Conflicting wills. Different bodies. Daughter and archon. Hero and junky. Undutifulness is her resistance against the imperative of a single united voice as the only political means. She breaks out, swerves, and interrupts. She cannot and does not want to control one language in which to speak. The polyphony is not always in synch, but it is committed to social change. Suely Rolnik asserts that the entanglement of micro and macro is constitutive for understanding the archive of the twenty-first century. This assertion is informed by her analysis of profound political changes in Latin America following the end of dictatorial regimes. She places the macropolitical on the side of “ideological content,” while the micropolitical resides in the inhibited and hidden (intrinsic to the archive), whose speaking is a

whisper, fabulation, speculation, polyphony, and “poetic investigation.”²⁶



Eleanor Bond, *On the Maasvlakte Extension, Rotterdam Establishes a Satellite Colony which Functions as a prosthetic Eye and Arm, Enclosing the International Activity at Europoort within the Sight and Embrace of the City*, 1995. Installation view, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2016. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn.

We must ask: Why today? What has instituted this contemporary institutional desire for micro-histories, micro-social narratives, narratives from below, polyphony, and the undutiful daughter's passion to speak from below *with* the archon, without necessarily accepting the rules of the “law of what can be said”? Is the call for a double logic of the archive—macro and micro—an ill-judged symptom of the present? Or is it simply the only possibility, because no other choice exists? Suely Rolnik situates the archive of the twenty-first century inside that double logic. As she explains, artistic creation under dictatorial and nationalist regimes is permeated by the transversality of macropolitics, which necessitates a double consciousness in their undutiful subjects: survive the macro but live the micro.²⁷ Clandestine. Inhibited. Outside the reach of the state/institution. Hidden in the walls. Still, we must ask: Who benefits from uncovering the hitherto hidden? What are the long-term consequences? Not coincidentally, 1989 also saw the emergence of a new institution(alism) in contemporary art—particularly in Rotterdam—that redefined the art institution as a laboratory and an open space, occupying a position somewhere between self-organized project spaces and museum collections.²⁸ (This shift led to the establishment of the “institution of critique.”²⁹) No more, no less: a cultural facelift at a moment when the world began to experience a profound global reordering.

What if the archive whispers dissonantly in various voices and operates within transgenerational time and

misunderstandings, deracinating the mechanisms of linear narratives? The double logic of the archive cannot but endure macropolitical forces and the law of the archon while it breeds a “critical-poetics virus” that waits, patiently and passionately, for the right conditions to infect and spread.³⁰ The least we can hope for is to be infected by this critical-poetics virus, since it conceives of art not as value itself but as the lived struggles of art-making. The archive of the twenty-first century needs the metabolic agora, where it fuels and animates complex and far-flung projects, crawling and creeping and walking through the walls. The metabolic agora is *arch*itectural in both a localized and metabolized sense: it marks the beginning of change, transformation, and alteration—a space where the first ruler has just arrived, already left, and always been. It is manifest but sprawling and ramifying. Viral. Infectious. Translational. Transgenerational. Always in danger of careening out of control. Never complete. Its formats are soon obsolete. Losing weight from tireless night shifts. Hungry all the time. Always local but uncontrollably disseminated. The daughter, armed with her concept of *archival metabolism*, grits her teeth and complies with the existing (i.e., the law); she knows she has no other choice than to process the immensely complex world of the law's outlawed below the archon's control. She takes the side of the un-tagged, undocumented, unmarked, and (as-yet) incomputable, while studying in depth the father's systemic blind spot. Her archive's metabolic condition transforms and creates space for new ideas and projects coming our way, which are carried out by a corpus that is neither hers nor his alone, but has learned for ages to operate the xeno-epistemic machine. Well, the *society of undutiful daughters* sounds quite urgently needed to my twenty-first-century ears.

X

This text is a revised version of “Archival Metabolism: Toward a Twenty-First-Century Archive theory without Theory,” in *WERE IT AS IF: Beyond An Institution That Is*, eds. Defne Ayas and Bik Van der Pol (Witte de With Center, 2017). Thanks to Bik Van der Pol and Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy for granting permission to reprint parts of the text. The concepts of “archival metabolism” and the “undutiful daughter” emerged from several collaborative curatorial projects I have participated in since 2008; these projects have involved noninstitutional archives, especially from East Germany, Palestine, and Non-Aligned countries.

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- 1 "Preface: The Society of Undutiful Daughters," in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. in Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthe Nigianni, Fanny Söderbäck (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xviii.
- 2 Amber Jacobs, "The Potential of Theory: Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship," in *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 175–93.
- 3 Sarat Maharaj, "Xeno-Epistemics: Makeshift Kit For Sounding Visual Art As Knowledge Production and the Retinal Regime," in *Documenta* 11, *Plattform 5: Ausstellung* (Hatje Cantz 2002), 71–84.
- 4 On double consciousness, see W. E. D. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).
- 5 Braidotti, "Preface: The Society of Undutiful Daughters," xii.
- 6 Derrida: "The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law." Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.
- 7 *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989) is billboard-sized photo-text work by artist Ken Lum installed on the outside of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. The piece was initially installed in 1990, as part of an exhibition of Ken Lum's work that marked the opening of the museum. It has hung there ever since; when Lum's show ended, residents of the neighborhood did not want Melly to leave: "Melly Shum, they said, is us!" Note to the author from Bik Van der Pol, May 8, 2017.
- 8 The piece was removed for a short while in 2005, during Lukas Einsele's exhibition "One Step Beyond" at Witte de With, when Catherine David was director of the museum. Melly was temporarily replaced by a picture of a young minesweeper. One night, an anonymous person posted a message below the image, written across multiple sheets of paper: "Omar hates his job."
- 9 Kathy Kleiman, *The Computers: The Remarkable Story of the ENIAC Programmers*, 2012, 20 min. It would take fifty years for the stories of the women involved in the development of the first electronic-digital computer, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), to become public information thanks to Kleiman's research.
- 10 Foucault's definition of the archive provided an essential vocabulary for a political sequence of Critical Theory that analyzed power relations with the aim of complexifying the "historical a priori"; this definition has remained relevant for curatorial politics, particularly after 1990. See, for example, Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Steidl/ICP), 10–51.
- 11 Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans A. M. Sheridan Smith (Routledge, 1972), 146. Italics in original.
- 12 Anselm Franke, "Curating Against the Grain: Frontiers, Scripted Spaces, and Groundlessness," in *Thinking under Turbulence*, ed. Doreen Mende (HEAD Geneva and Motto Books, 2017), 163f.
- 13 Nina Power, "Reading Transdisciplinarily: Sartre and Althusser," *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 5–6, Special Issue: Transdisciplinary Problematics (2015): 109–124.
- 14 Multiple women have been cited as the originator of this phrase, including Carole Hanisch (in her 1969 essay of the same name) and Robin Morgan (in her introduction to the 1970 anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*).
- 15 See Melinda Cooper, "The Law of the Household: Foucault, Neoliberalism, and the Iranian Revolution," *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*, eds. Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (Fordham University Press, 2014), 20–58.
- 16 Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2007), 138.
- 17 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (MIT Press, 2015), 95.
- 18 Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 78. Earlier in the book Grosz also writes that "new knowledges" are "weapons, tools, in the struggles of power over what counts as truth, over what functions as useful, over what can be used to create new systems, forces, regimes, and techniques, none of which are indifferent to power" (76).
- 19 See Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (Vintage, 1994).
- 20 Eleanor Bond, written reflection on "Cosmoville" for Bik Van der Pol's exhibition *WERE IT AS IF*.
- 21 "Witte de With, of course, was the name giver, and a naval hero. The first years were stormy." Bik Van der Pol, *Cloud*, script, 2016.
- 22 Written reflection on "South Bronx Hall of Fame," an exhibition of sculptures by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres held at Witte de With in 1991–92, for Bik Van der Pol's *WERE IT AS IF*.
- 23 See Bond's written reflection on "Cosmoville."
- 24 Boris Buden, "The Public Intellectual after History: Remembering Said's 'Speaking Truth to Power,'" in *A Journey of Ideas Across: In Dialog with Edward Said*, ed. Adania Shibli (HKW, 2013).
- 25 Didi Cheeka, "Reclaiming History, Unveiling Memory Part II," contribution to the conference Archival Constellations, February 2017, silent green Kulturquartier, Berlin.
- 26 Suelly Rolnik, *Archive Mania* (Hatje Cantz, 2012).
- 27 Rolnik, *Archive Mania*.
- 28 Rotterdam in the 1980s and '90s was also energized by the activities of artist-run spaces (such as residency programs), attracting a lot of artists to the city. The first edition of Manifesta, the travelling European biennial, took place in Rotterdam in 1996. But this energy dissipated when the city government tried to tap into it in order to revitalize the institutional art sector. The 2001 event "Cultural Capital of Europe," held in Rotterdam, marked this decline. Then in 2002, the right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered in Rotterdam. This led to the election of a majority right-wing city council in Rotterdam, which until then had been dominated by the socialist party for decades.
- 29 Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique," *eipcp*, January 2006 <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en>.
- 30 Rolnik, *Archive Mania*.

McKenzie Wark

Wild Gone Girls

Acker-Web

There are many ways in which Kathy Acker remains our contemporary. Some most excellent writing has made for us Ackers who speak a literary language for our time. What makes a writer live on after their own life and fame is nothing particular. It is that their writing can be made into all sorts of different writing afterwards. It is that their writing contains still pertinent possibilities.

The Acker I want to write into existence is not a literary one. And nor do I want to write as if there is only one Acker. There was always an Acker-field or Acker-text or Acker-web in which lots of Kathys pulsed and ebbed in and out of identity, alongside plenty of Janeys and Lulus. And not all of her identities, in life or art, were female.

There was, I think, an Acker or series of Ackers in the Acker-web who were not writers of fiction but of theory. A low theory of feminist revolution, but where "feminist" and "revolution" come to mean other things. From the vantage points of New York, San Francisco, and London, these Ackers saw the political economy of the old overdeveloped world die, and something else bubble up through the cracks. Leaning heavily on her own sentences, I want to rip off and copy out for you what the Acker-web has for us on the current topics of post-capitalism, agency in the world, revolution, and aesthetics.

Post-Capitalism

Post-capitalism has two senses in the Acker-web. One is the revolutionary possibility of life without exploitation, but the other is that exploitation itself might have changed form. This might then still be a world with a ruling class extracting a surplus from dominated classes, including labor as traditionally understood, but which might also have added some other means of domination to its arsenal.

"You never recognize an end when it's happening."¹ But from the vantage point of New York, London, and San Francisco, Ackers witnessed this strange post-capitalism emerge as it extended the commodity form into aesthetics and information, but in the process modified the commodity form itself. Ackers witnessed a quiet but violent transition: "my reality, between post-industrial and computerization."²

Sometimes it is in its own self-identity eternal, but with new qualities. "The multinationals and along with their computers have changed and are changing reality. Viewed as organisms, they've attained immortality via biochips."³ Commodification as control seizes hold not just of labor but of everything. "Capitalism needs new territory or fresh blood."⁴ It has colonized all of the domains of the sacred



Laura Parnes, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 2004-2009. Film still. Actress Stephanie Vella is pictured in this still. Courtesy of the artist.

and subordinated them to itself.

Some Ackers detect a strange mutation in the mode of production, features that are no less about exploitation but might work in strange ways, display odd "post-capitalist money-powers."⁵ The art world, for instance, becomes a prototype for some kind of political economy of information. "I call these years THE BOHEMIA OF FINANCE (that's what I called the art world)."⁶

The quantitative information that is money and the qualitative information that is aesthetics meet in some peculiar way. "Her gown is Chanel, not Claude Montana nor Jean-Paul Gaultier. Money, not being Marxist, is worshipping humanity, as it should."⁷ That's a particularly curious sentence. A human who is caught up in fetishism sees only the dance of money and things, but a more critical human might see beyond the thing to the labor that made it. Uncritical money, like the uncritical human, is fetishistic, but what it makes a fetish is not the commodity, but the human. All it can see now is humans exchanging things that are brands, that are qualitative information. It can't see labor and production, the material world, either.

A provisional theory of this wrinkle in the old mode of exploitation is to conceive of it as adding to the separation between use and exchange value a separation between the signified and signifier aspects of the sign. Exchange value converts the qualities of the active body into something extractable and measurable. It turns substance into commodity. Post-capitalism adds the extraction of the value of signifieds: emotions, sensations, desires, through the capture and ownership of signifiers. They are our feelings, lusts, needs; but owned and controlled now through their brands, copyrights, patents.

This post-capitalism might commodify information rather than things. "Products are out of date. No one can afford to buy anyway."⁸ And: "Since the only reality of phenomena is symbolic, the world's most controllable by those who can best manipulate these symbolic relations. Semiotics is a useful model to the post-capitalists."⁹

Theory: The separations between signifiers and signifieds are widening ... the powers of

post-capitalism are determining the increasing of these separations. Post-capitalists' general strategy right now is to render language (all that which signifies) abstract therefore easily manipulable. For example: money. Another example is commodity value ... In the case of language and of economy the signified and the actual objects have no value don't exist or else have only whatever values those who control the signifiers assign them. Language is making me sick. Unless I destroy the relations between language and their signifieds that is their control.¹⁰

Rather than anomaly, outlaw, outlier to capitalism, the artist becomes the prototype of a kind of human within what capitalism has become. Money as information about quantity wants aesthetics as information about quality. It wants artists, but it makes artists over entirely as what they always were at least in part: hustlers—whores. "Imagination was both a dead business and the only business left to the dead."¹¹

Agency

If there's a collective agency in the Acker-field, it is those who don't own capital but who also don't exactly do wage labor, either. Some are successful and honored, and get to call themselves artists. Many are not. They come in a few types that are hard to put names to, as they are never at home in any name. They are the tip of the melting iceberg of the homelessness of the world.

"Romanticism *is* the world. Why? Because there's got to be something. There has to be something for we who are and know we're homeless."¹² While skeptical of the romantic in several other senses, most Ackers hold on to this: the agency of the displaced, the marginal, the recalcitrant, and through them, the possibility of the world. Possibility alone is not enough, however. "Every possibility doesn't become actual fact. So knowing is separate from acting in the common world."¹³

These displaced ones all too often find no possibilities in the world. This sensibility in part looks back to a persistent sense of aesthetic or poetic rebellion and its foils. "I saw my friends in that brothel destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked dragging themselves through the whitey's streets at dawn looking for an angry fix I saw myself fucked-up nothing purposeless collaborating over and over again with those I hated old collaborating with my own death—all of us collaborating with Death."¹⁴

The margin of possibility may have become very slight. Not

only the effort of labor but the effort of feelings, sensations, pleasures, pains, concepts—information—is entirely within the post-capitalist commodity form and modifies that form. "The realm of the outlaw has become redefined: today the wild places which excite the most profound thinkers are conceptual. Flesh unto flesh."¹⁵ And: "Now there's no possibility of revolting successfully on a technological or social level. The successful revolt is us; mind and body."¹⁶ To refuse even part of corporeal existence to the commodity form, "you have to become a criminal or a pervert."¹⁷ At least in the eyes of the ruling class.

For some of us it's not a choice. "I didn't choose to be the freak I was born to be."¹⁸ Some of those freaks who were called queers decided to wear that name with pride. So if we can be queers then why not also be whores? How about some whore pride? To celebrate queerness is often a way to avoid talking about labor or the sale of the sensual, fascinating, or erotic body. To celebrate whores is to connect the deviant body back to its place in the mode of production.

In the Acker-web there might be a lot of ways to be a whore. It might and might not mean sex worker. Whoring might include a lot of other transactions, including those of artists. But the key quality is the struggle to remain a free agent, not becoming anyone's possession: "A whore goes from man to man; she's no man's girl."¹⁹ The rebellion of the whores: "We got rid of our johns, now our dreams don't mean anything."²⁰ To be neither owned nor rented, by anyone. To extract the body from the commodification of its surfaces and signs.

Whores might be a more promising kind of being in the world of post-capitalism than artists. Artists alone are too compromised a form of agency: "revolutionaries hiding from the maws of the police which are the maws of the rich by pretending they're interested only in pleasure."²¹ The artist might once have been privileged by being marginal to capitalism whereas in post-capitalism they become more integral to a commodity form that absorbs information out of the not-quite-laboring activities of bodies.

Not kin but kith to the art-boys are the punk-boys. "To be kissed by a punk boy was to be drawn to insanity or toward death. The last of the race of white men."²² They only count as punks if they are at least trying to escape from whiteness and masculinity, which is to say, escape from identity. They benefit from openness to tutelage. "The whores explained to the saints that they were voyaging to the end of the night."²³

The pirate is an ambivalent figure, an amoral agent, homeless and lawless. "The pirates knew, if not all of them consciously, that the civilizations and cultures that they were invading economically depended on the enslavement of other civilizations and cultures. Pirates



Laura Parnes, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 2004-2009. Pictured left to right are actors Stephanie Vella and Jim Fletcher. Courtesy of the artist.

took prisoners, didn't make slaves."²⁴

Pirate and whore form mythic couplings and doublings. "The pirates loved women who were sexual and dangerous. We live by the images of those we decide are heroes and gods. As the empire, whatever empire, had decayed, the manner of life irrevocably became exile. The prostitutes drove mad the pirates, caught, like insects in webs, in their own thwarted ambitions and longings for somewhere else ... The pirates worshipped the whores in abandoned submission."²⁵

Pirates escape the laws even of gender. "Pirates aren't always either male or female."²⁶ "Pirate sex began on the date when the liquids began to gush forward. As if *when* equals *because*. At the same time, my pirate penis shot out of my body. As it thrust out of my body, it moved into my body. I don't remember where."²⁷

Pirate sexuality is outside of gender, outside the commodity form: "On dreams and actions in pirates: Their rotten souls burn in their bowels. They only go for pleasure. For them alone, you see, naked bodies dance. Unseizable, soft, ethereal, shadowy: the gush of cunts in

action."²⁸

Not being enclosed in identities, pirate-whores have neither subjectivity, nor are they objects made over by commodification. "For the first time, I was seeing the pirate girls in their true colors. Black and red. They wore their insides on their outsides, blood smeared all over the surfaces. When opened, the heart's blood turns black."²⁹

Punks, whores, pirates: One can become another, or is more than one at once. And all can be sailors. "In order to see, I have to touch or be what I see. For this reason, seers are sailors. When seers become artists, they become pirates. This's about identity."³⁰ Identities don't have to disappear, they just become transitive, temporary. Sail through times and spaces and they happen.

Sailors are not bound within any territory or home. They come into existence in the difference between times and spaces. "Sailors set out on perilous journeys just so they can see in actuality cities they have only imagined."³¹ "A sailor is a man who keeps on approaching the limits of what is desirable."³² "Since ANY PLACE BUT HERE is the motto of all sailors, I decided I was a sailor."³³ And: "A

writer's one type of sailor, a person without human relationships."³⁴

Perhaps the sea was central rather than peripheral to the actual history of capitalism. From whaling to slaving, the sailor was caught up in commodification at its most naked. Sailors are free agents to most Ackers, although in actuality many were pressed labor. Perhaps also there is an imaginary sea that was an open plain along which to flee. "I always wanted to be a sailor ... Sailors leave anarchy in their drunken wake ... A sailor is a human who has traded poverty for the riches of imaginative reality ... A sailor has a lover in every port and doesn't know how to love. Heart upon heart sits tattooed on every sailor's ass. Though the sailor longs for home, her or his real love is change ... No roses grow on sailor's graves."³⁵

This imaginary sea becomes a plain along which to flee post-capitalism. Sexuality, the city, and writing can be the oceans within which sailors wander. Or maybe even the body as it is supposed to be organized is a thing to flee. "Let your cunt come outside your body and crawl, like a snail, along the flesh. Slither down your legs until there are trails of blood over the skin. Blood has this unmistakable smell. Then the cunt will travel, a sailor, to foreign lands. Will rub itself like a dog, smell, and be fucked."³⁶

Artists, punks, whores, pirates, sailors. And then there's lawless, fatherless girls, whose possible being-together some Ackers glimpsed backstage at a sex show. And yet the girl too is not an identity but an event, something produced by chance and fluid time. Lulu: "You can't change me cause there's nothing to change. I've never been."³⁷

There might be many kinds, which is a problem, as sometimes they want nothing to do with each other. "Girls have to accept girls who aren't like them."³⁸ A girl is a node of attraction but also of vulnerability, whose actions are constrained by others' desires and violence—by men's desires and violence. Their vulnerability is their agency. Their possibility is in refusing the legitimacy of any agency that is not at least in part girl.

To be a girl in the world is a fearful but also a fearsome thing to be: "Doctor, I'm not paranoid. I'm a girl."³⁹ But in the world, their only power is in their amorality and ability to exploit their own desirability: "In reality, the girl was desperate to fuck and scared to fuck because fucking was how she earned money and got power."⁴⁰

The girl said:

You understand that it's only with the highest form of feeling (whatever that is) and not because we hate you that we're going to take our ease in your homes and mansions, your innermost sanctuaries, we're going to sleep in your beds (you want us to anyway) on your

unbloodstained mattresses on the sheets on which you fuck your wives. We want to feed on your flesh. We want—we're going to reproduce only girls by ourselves in the midst of your leftover cockhair, in your armpits, in whatever beards you have. We're going to sniff your emissions and must while we're penetrating (with our fingers) your ears, nostrils, and eye sockets. To ensure that you'll never again know sleep ... In the future, we'll never conceal anything about ourselves (unlike you) because our only purpose here is the marking of history, your history. As if we haven't. Because you said that we hadn't.⁴¹

Revolution

Artists, punks, whores, pirates, sailors, girls: makers of the sense and sign and heat of their own bodies. But who find the signs they emit captured and owned and used against them. And that's at best. That's when their bodies and minds are not violated and gas-lit and punished. So: "Why're we asslicking the rich's asses?"⁴² It's time for "a revolution of whores, a revolution defined by all methods that exist as distant, as far as possible, from profit."⁴³ It's time to declare: "I won't accept that this world must be pain: A future only of torment is no future for anyone."⁴⁴

Such a revolution can't ignore how intimate commodification has become, how close it presses its exchange-value carving knives into the flesh. "Is liberation or revolution a revolution when it hasn't removed from the faces and bodies the dead skin that makes them ugly? There's still dead blood from your knife on one of my cunt lips."⁴⁵

Some Ackers dream of a libidinal revolution. "If we lived in a society without bosses, we'd be fucking all the time. We wouldn't have to be images. Cunt special. We could fuck every artist in the world."⁴⁶ And: "Soon this world will be nothing but pleasure, the worlds in which we live and are nothing but desires for more and more intense joy."⁴⁷

Others are a little skeptical. Even a brief experience of sex work and of the so-called sexual revolution as it was practiced (mostly for the benefit of men) in the late twentieth century rather cools an Acker's ardor for it. It can't be as imagined by penetrators, as the availability of the world to their dicks. Those dicks can now be detachable, interchangeable, or optional. "In the future, I will be the sun, because that is what my legs are spread around."⁴⁸

Some Ackers have a more destructive character, but hold on to the potentials that the negation of this world hide in their shadows: "Revolutions or liberations

aim—obscurely—at discovering (rediscovering) a laughing insolence goaded by past unhappiness, goaded by the systems and men responsible for unhappiness and shame. A laughing insolence which realizes that, freed from shame, human growth is easy. This is why *this obvious destruction veils a hidden glory*.⁴⁹

There are many Ackers who start to dream of revolution not from the events of pleasure but of pain. "I am a masochist. This is a real revolution."⁵⁰ "Masochism is now rebellion."⁵¹ "Masochism is only political rebellion."⁵² "Freedom was the individual embracement of nonsexual masochism."⁵³ Because: "Pain is only pain and eradicates all pretense."⁵⁴ Masochism is not just a kink or a pathology: "Each time I slice the blade through my wrist I'm finally able to act out war. You call it masochism because you're trying to keep your power over me, but you're not going to anymore."⁵⁵

And yet there's no attempt to make the sexuality of whores, pirates, and perverts something respectable, each with its own flag and T-shirt. The goal is not queer citizenship in the existing state through legitimizing its various identities. Rather: "Valiant beasts; because your sexuality does not partake of this human sexuality ... I will now lead you in a fight to death or to life against the religious white men and against all of the alienation that their religious image-making or control brings to humans."⁵⁶

It will be a revolution of the penetrable, or perhaps of the reversible, of surfaces that can open but also swell to fill corresponding voids. A revolution against ownership by that which gives away ownership of itself: "They said it was a hole, but it was impossible for her to think of any part of herself as a hole. Only as squishy and vulnerable flesh, for flesh is thicker than skin. She was wet up there. When she thrust three of her fingers in there, she felt taken."⁵⁷

The penetrable are not nothing, not voids for the master's voice or dick. They—we—are not the other, the lack, the supplement, the second sex-organ. We don't need them even if we want them. To want to be fucked need not be to want all that comes with it. In the post-capitalist world, the hole without the dick is also labor without capital. A refusal of all that the dick signals, a refusal of being dicked by signals that are shorn of the writhing, pullulating, concentrating bodies that make them.

It's the revolution of the girls who are willing; willing to give up themselves, but who no longer need to be taken. "The more I try to describe myself, the more I find a hole."⁵⁸ One does not have to say yes to power to become a void, even if that's how it usually works: "He made her a hole. He blasted into her."⁵⁹ In any case, maybe the other side of the penetration of the hole by the dick is the *encircling* of the dick by the hole.

Any body can void itself. "All of him wants only one thing:

to be opened up."⁶⁰ "A hole of the body, which every man but not woman ... has to make, is the abyss of the mouth ... Today, all that's interior is becoming exterior and this is what I call revolution, and those humans who are holes are the leaders of this revolution."⁶¹ The mad quest of those with inverse lances: "To become a knight, one must be completely hole-y."⁶²

The holes need not be the obvious ones: cunts, asses, mouths. The ears and nose are holes. "For me, every area of my skin was an orifice; therefore, each part of the body could do and did everything to mine."⁶³ The body is infinitely penetrable. And what's in there is not nothing. Nor is it the essence of the self, some private property of the soul. "'I' is not an interior affair."⁶⁴

The revolution of the penetrable is not just about bodies. The body of the city, also: "The pipes, fallopian tubes unfucked, unmaintained, wriggled, broke, burst open, upwards, rose up through all the materials above them."⁶⁵ And: "Water pipes burst through the streets' concrete. Through these holes. Through holes in the flesh, the faces of the dead stare at the living ... Through human guilt, we can see the living."⁶⁶ And: "The landscape is full of holes, something to do with what should be the heart of a country."⁶⁷

There's a risk in any will to revolution. There's a risk to opening up the body beyond its restricted repertoire. "If we teach these champagne emotions are worth noticing, we're destroying the social bonds people need to live."⁶⁸ It's the chance of another life against the certainty of slow death. A death not just of bodies, but also cities, even of nature itself.

"Either this is a time for total despair or it's a time of madness. It's ridiculous to think that mad people will succeed where intellectuals, unions, Wobblies, etc, didn't. I think they will."⁶⁹ All the old gods die in the Acker-web. After the death of god comes the death of man, of imagination, of art, of love, of desire, of history. The good order won't result from making anything else sacred in the absence of god. Instead, only an experimental living with disorder.

A revolution of *wild gone girls*. In the footsteps of the "Nameless, the pirates of yesteryear."⁷⁰ It is a nihilist vision of revolution. The stripping bare of bodies and values reveals a world without aura, justice, or order. It becomes instead a world of violence and chance. The violence has to be felt, has to be known, so it can be deflected. That's the particular role of masochism, as a way of refusing to pass on violence to some other body, the way a certain kind of radical feminism ended up deflecting the violence it won't acknowledge onto transwomen.

Nihilism acknowledges a world both of violence but also of chance. The god of history is dead. Noise and disorder

won't be resolved at the end of history. But then neither is it entirely a world as an iron cage, enclosed in ever more perfect surveillance and rationalization. If there's chance, there's still no hope, but there's a chance.



Aline Mare, *Fossil Foot*, 2018. Dye sublimation print on metal. Courtesy of the artist.

Aesthetics

"We Have Proven That Communication Is Impossible."⁷¹ Communication only creates fictions: the fiction of the object as a separate thing, the fiction of the self that can know and own the object, the fiction of a reliable means of relating object and subject, the fiction of the fluctuating fortunes of objects and subjects being resolved somewhere or some time, the fiction of a measurable and calculable time within which objects or subjects are self-same.

The Acker-field is a sequence of books about—no not about. They are not about anything. They don't mean, they do. What do they do? Get rid of the self. Among other things. For writer but also reader. If you let them in. You have to want it to fuck you. It happens when there's a hole. "The only way is to annihilate all that's been written. That can be done only through writing. Such destruction leaves all that is essential intact. Resembling the processes of time, such destruction allows only the traces of death to persist. I'm a dead person."⁷² Such a reduction expels meaning from the text and subjectivity from the body at once.

The risk, the challenge, is to go even further into the devaluation of all values. "My language is my irrationality. Desire burns up all the old dead language morality. I'm not interested in truth."⁷³ The feeling of being in a post-truth world really accelerated in the twenty-first century. The transgressors of official pieties, of which Acker might be a

celebrated example, are made scapegoats for a phenomenon that they had the audacity to expose. The stripping of information from bodies, a new kind of commodification, casts all anchored truths to the winds, not those writers or artists who noticed.

An Acker: "And the men—well, there seems to be some sort of crisis; the men seem to be absolutely *floundering* about" (AW179). The panic attack of feeling exposed to information without meaning, stripped from its bodies and situations, caused a stampede among those who cling tight to their tattered rags of identity: whiteness, masculinity, petit-bourgeois exclusion, all went looking for ways to circle the fictional wagons, close the gates, and amp up streams of actual and symbolic violence to keep identity afloat on the rising tides.

"I'd like to say that everything I do, every way I've seemed to feel, however I've seemed to grasp at you, are war tactics." ⁷⁴ Tactics can change. The war has a new contour. This tactic might seem a little out of date: "For any revolution to succeed nowadays, the media liberals and those in power have to experience the revolt as childish irresponsible alienated and defeatist; it must remain marginal and, as for meaning, ambiguous."⁷⁵ Media liberals and those in power are no longer quite the same thing. However, media liberals and those in power still both profit by amping up attack-information directed at each other.

Regardless of whether one is preferable to the other, neither is really the friend of that revolting class of whores, pirates, punks, sailors, and autonomous girls that post-capitalism pokes with its social media prompts to gin up commodified desire. A revolting class quickly put in its place if it confronts the ruling class head on. A ruling class for whom America is really a one-party state which, with typical American largesse, has two parties. If that's the contours of it, then to appear childish and unthreatening seems like a survival tactic worth recalling from past information wars. Dwell in the void of the noise.

How to be a writer who actually writes for their own times and not as if the nineteenth century machinery of the novel still had a world with which to engage? Ackers are nearly all prose writers. Their sentences are regular, logical sentences, artless at first glance but often constructed with the elegance of the minimal. Rather than break the sentence, they break the expectation of what the sentence is supposed to do: function as a container for hidden reservoirs of meaning unique to the author's mind.

This Acker: "Language is more important than meaning. Don't make anything out of broken-up syntax cause you're looking to make meaning where nonsense will. Of course nonsense isn't only nonsense. I'll say again that writing isn't just writing, it's a meeting of writing and living the way existence is the meeting of mental and material or language of idea and sign."⁷⁶ The chosen tactic is prose

fiction, not poetry.

"I tell you truly: right now fiction's the method of revolution."⁷⁷ Rather than shore up some other identity against hegemonic whiteness, masculinity, and petit-bourgeois privilege, strip the last charms from identity itself. Disenchantment: "As soon as we all stop being enchanted ... human love'll again be possible."⁷⁸ And then: "It's the end of the world. There are no more eyes."⁷⁹

What I have always hated about the bourgeois story is that it closes down. I don't use the bourgeois story-line because the real content of that novel is the property structure of reality. It's about ownership. That isn't my world-reality. My world isn't about ownership. In my world people don't even remember their names, they aren't sure of their sexuality, they aren't sure if they can define their genders. That's the way you feel in the mythical stories. You don't know quite why they act the way they act, and they don't care ... The reader doesn't own the character.⁸⁰

The Acker-text is not a career of novels. "Everything in the novel exists for the sake of meaning. Like hippy acid rock. All this meaning is evil. I want to go back to those first English novels ... novels based on jokes or just that are."⁸¹ The plot of the novel is the marriage of sexuality with property. Sexuality is enabled by, or confined by, property. The books are marketed as novels, but it's no fun to read them as such. They are caught in an ambivalent space, as all artwork is, between work and property, signified and signifier. These days they get some terrible Amazon reviews from readers who want them to mean something.

The Acker-text is more a texture of fictions: "I write in the dizziness that seizes that which is fed up with language and attempts to escape through it: the abyss named *fiction*. For I can only be concerned with the imaginary when I discuss reality or women."⁸² Rather than a women's writing that tries to inhabit the old forms, it's a refusal of it, and a refusal then also of those forms that would confine what woman can mean by insisting that it be a kind of subject that means things.

The Acker-fictions don't ask you to figure out what lies beyond the signifier much past the level of what the words denote. Sure, you can read into them, into their connotations. Maybe it's impossible not to. You can guess at what might be the referents to which the signs refer in the world. But you don't have to read into it too much. You can look at the page and see writing, see a form of language, see what it does. What it did to you.

This Acker:

Once more we need to see what writing is. We need to step away from all the business. We need to step to the personal ... We need to remember friends, that we write deeply out of friendship, that we write to our friends. We need to regain some of the energy, as writers and as readers, that people have on the internet when for the first time they email, when they discover that they can write anything, even to a stranger, even the most personal of matters. When they discover that strangers can communicate to each other.⁸³

This Acker is a nineties Acker, writing before post-capitalism moved on to the extraction of value out of asymmetries of information, using the internet as infrastructure. Maybe the goal might remain, however: a writing-and-reading between bodies rather than subjects, a selving rather than a (non)communication between selves. Here there's a stability that runs from that Acker who made serial works sent as gifts by mail in the seventies and that other, later Acker experimenting with collaborative writing on the internet in the nineties, back when it was, in several senses, free.

The writer, as a kind of artist, is caught up in the inconsistencies of communication, at least as post-capitalism was shaping it. Language can circulate almost for free, and certainly in ways that can't readily be commodified. Or at least they could. A revolutionary writer is on the side of the free intercourse of signs and bodies. And yet a writer is also a whore, renting or selling a capacity of the body, allowing what's signified to be separated from what's intimately felt. "Property is robbery ... If I'm being totally honest I would say that what I'm doing is breach of copyright—it's not because I change words—but so what? We earn our money out of the stupid law but we hate it because we know that's a jive. What else can we do? That's one of the basic contradictions of living in capitalism."⁸⁴

To be revolutionary it might not be enough that writing is as outside the commodity form as is possible. This might need to enter the body of the text in a certain way as well, in the form of a writing that refuses the stripping of signs from bodies, signifiers from signifieds, so that they might become the property of the reader and a receptacle for the reader to insert their own meanings.

There might be a language on the other side of that language, glimpsed in gasp or sigh. But actualized by pressing even further into the fiction of language.

Any statement beginning "I know that ..." characterizes a certain game. Once I understand the

game, I understand what's being said. The statement "I know that ..." doesn't have to do with knowing. Compare "I know I'm scared" to "Help!" What's this language that knows? "Help!" Language describes reality. Do I mean to describe when I cry out? A cry is language turning in on its own identity, its signifier-signified relation. "To of for by" isn't a cry or language-destroying-itself. The language has to be recognizably destroying itself.⁸⁵

Fiction is a texture made up of what expresses itself out of this body in particular but articulated through any self whatever.

X

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Maria Lind

Soon

In Alexandra Kollontai's 1922 essay "Soon (In 48 Years' Time)" people spend two hours a day working within their profession and the rest of their time can be devoted to their favorite pursuit.¹ They live among their own age group, as it suits them, and there is neither poverty nor wealth—money no longer exists. The world is one big confederation consisting of communes, with war having become a thing of the past. Kollontai's scenario is rich in Bolshevik alternatives to patriarchal Christmas traditions—for example, Santa Claus or Father Christmas are replaced by a "red grandmother" and a fir tree festival for sharing stories from the great years of the Revolution. All festival activities involve both women and men. Relationships seem totally equal—social struggles are long gone. Instead, as the story tells us—in 1970, forty-eight years after 1922—it is nature that has become the enemy, creating the need for revolutionary forces.

"Soon (In 48 Years' Time)" foretells a future both attractive and frightening from today's perspective, and as full of contradictions as Kollontai's own life was. In her future, gender equality is accomplished, while generations want to stay apart. The old male authority figure is replaced by a new female one; anthropocentrism is unquestioned and nature must be conquered by humanity—all apparently within the boundaries of white heteronormativity. A passionate revolutionary who became a political refugee before serving as a dictator's diplomat, Kollontai had been born into a noble family. Nevertheless, she is interesting from today's perspective. Author, activist, migrant, politician, and ambassador Kollontai's radical proposition for transforming relationships between women and men not only influenced structural changes in Russia and the Soviet Union as well as the international labor and women's movements, but also articulated attitudes, lifestyles, and legislation that went far beyond these domains.² In fact, even my own life would look very different had I not encountered her work.

Free love and camaraderie were at the core of Kollontai's thinking, for her novels and essays describe love as a force that frees one from bourgeois notions of property.³ As an influential figure, a rare woman in the Bolshevik Party leadership, and commissar for social welfare in their first government, she not only set up free childcare centers and maternity houses, but also pushed through laws and regulations that greatly expanded the rights of women: divorce, abortion, and recognition for children born out of wedlock, for example. She organized women's congresses that were multiethnic in the way the young Soviet Union practiced controlled inclusion, following Western models. At the time, these were unique measures that were soon overhauled by Stalin, who did not appreciate any attempt at ending what Kollontai called "the universal servitude of woman."

Kollontai was indeed a pioneer of political engagement and writing on sexual politics, at the same time as she fought for workers' rights, advocating participatory forms

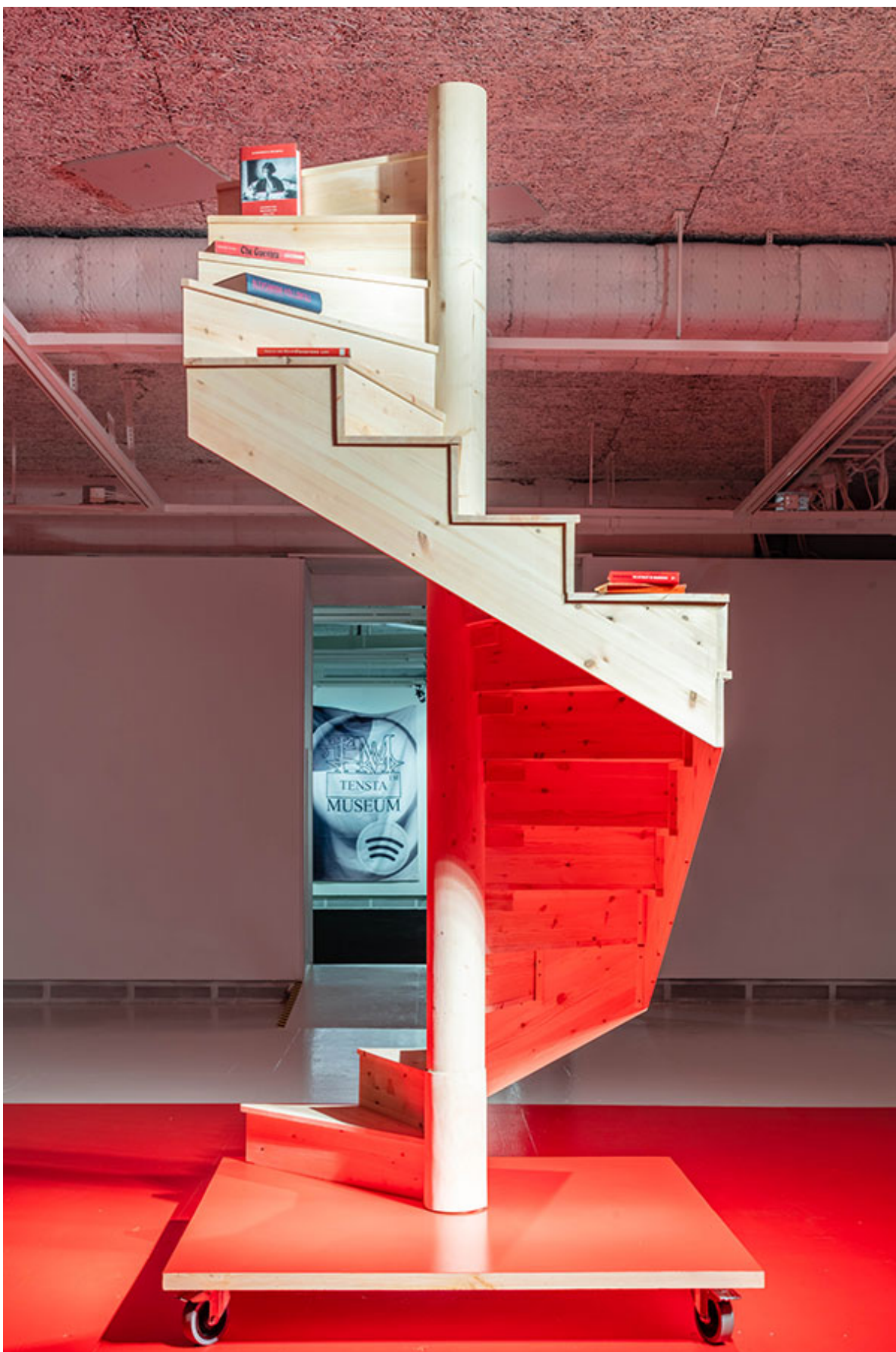


of industrial organization. While leading a highly unconventional life for a woman of her generation, with two divorces and an active professional, sexual, and emotional life, she worked directly with women workers during the years leading up to the October Revolution. She was especially engaged in social and emotional emancipation from bourgeois family relations. After serving as a minister, she was seminal in the so-called Workers' Opposition, criticizing the Party in the early 1920s for its remoteness from the workers and for having become too bureaucratic. That led to her being gradually sidelined from domestic politics and given a diplomatic post abroad—thanks to her previous experience as a political refugee in Germany, Switzerland, France, Sweden, and Norway, as well as her language skills. As the first female ambassador in the world, Kollontai served as the Soviet representative in Oslo and Mexico, more or less inventing “diplomacy through culture.” Eventually she was transferred to Stockholm, where she worked from 1930–45. Here she became a public figure, befriending many members of the feminist and predominantly lesbian Fogelstad group.

A different but no less engaged approach to love and feminism, received ideas, and inherited structures imbues the work of the artist Dora García. Sparks fly when the two

meet, especially in García's new work *Red Love* at Tensta konsthall, inspired by the life and work of Kollontai. Such sparks are desperately needed at this moment in time, though they have been needed since the days of Kollontai and even before. In most parts of the world and even among most groups of people, gender inequality has been dire for as long as one can remember. As we experience renewed struggles against the continuous re-entrenchment of patriarchal traditions, acknowledging predecessors feels crucial, just as crediting those around us who have unrelentingly battled patriarchal and other oppressive powers.

García is a contemporary Sputnik—a fellow traveler whose approach to feminism and love takes dissidence, deviance, and marginality as guiding lights. These conditions were familiar to Kollontai, who lived and contended with normative tensions and contradictions. In one of the reading sessions organized by García, philosopher Oxana Timofeeva described how Kollontai was subject to slut-shaming long before the advent of social media. García's research-based practice is concerned with modes of political resilience and the production of subjectivity, which were also of key interest to an older generation of feminists. Psychoanalysis is a frequent sounding board in her work, specifically the





theories of Jacques Lacan.

For García, Kollontai is a dissident figure whose biography and principles of action are an example of emancipatory politics. Like the philosopher Félix Guattari, the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, and artist and theorist Oscar Masotta, she is a deviant figure who has experienced marginality viscerally. Relating to them either through real or fictional characters, in *Red Love* García scripts interventions and installations that transpose these various authors into a wider public-facing presentation. Like a continuous inquiry, García's work is invested in the performativity and utility of speech and action as political tools. Her approach to the exhibition space reflects the structural problems of this emancipatory process, frequently through performative devices that challenge the viewer.

Red Love consists of three distinct images operating as symbols. The first is a wooden cage-like structure with a door leading into a space furnished with chairs and a large table: a room of one's own that can be imagined as Kollontai's writing room and diplomatic office, if you wish, albeit not secluded. This stage-like space is used for various purposes during the exhibition, including by students from Stockholm art school Konstfack's

CuratorLab program and Tensta konsthall's own separatist Women's Café, where women from the neighborhood meet three times a week to work on textile handicrafts. Strong light emanates from a lamp suspended from the ceiling, casting distinct shadows on the floor, which has been painted white with a red square in the middle. This square is the second image: a shape which is not perfectly rectilinear, just as Kazimir Malevich's angular utopian paintings are not perfectly even—a painting searching for a radically new reality, which becomes a podium for everything else.

The cage and the lighting bear resemblance to a scene in the legendary film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*. Made in 1971 by Yugoslav director Dušan Makavejev, the film mixes documentary passages with fiction while dealing with communist politics and sexuality in the spirit of 1960s counterculture. Banned in Yugoslavia, the film follows the rebellious and politicized lead character Milena while she seduces a Soviet celebrity, framed by footage of people connected to the life and work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, such as Jackie Curtis, the queer actor from Andy Warhol's entourage. Milena quotes Kollontai and her dictum that socialism without sexual liberation is meaningless. The expressionist play of light and shadow in García's room can also be found in Fritz Lang's first



Hollywood production, *You Only Live Once* (1937), where a young Henry Fonda plays a criminal trying to get his life back on track. He is another outsider who society opposes, continuously falling back into crime regardless of how hard he tries to get out, ending up in jail and eventually paying with his life.

At the other end of Tensta konsthall's main exhibition space is the third image: a wooden spiral staircase carrying a selection of books. This atmospheric installation, rich in references, plays on the urgency, mission, and near-transcendental purpose of Kollontai's life and work. The stairs originate in a museum with a different and yet passionate mission, the Museum of Jurassic Technology, founded in 1988 in Los Angeles by David Hildebrand Wilson and Diana Drake Wilson. The museum is defined as "an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic," a term not further explained. In this exceptional, radically self-determined museum reminiscent of a cabinet of curiosities, many exhibits and artistic, ethnographic, scientific, and historical objects are unclassifiable. The collection includes a set of peculiar maquettes of wooden staircases, one of which came to be the staircase in *Red Love*.

Like Kollontai, García has also dedicated a certain amount of her work to love, in various ways and together with different people, searching for emotional and bodily relationships that reconfigure established hierarchies. Her 2009 performance *The Romeos* was designed to take place in the context of an art fair, but has also been staged at an art collector's party; this summer it will be performed in a whole city, Trondheim. The performance is set in contexts where kindness, charm, and good looks are professional tools, something that can be exchanged for something else. These features and abilities aid in the buying and selling of other desirable things. Posters with photos of the performers are distributed to inform the visitors that a group of young, good-looking men are present and being paid to be lovable, kind, and attractive. Their job for the evening is to make people feel special. The question posed by the performance is: Now that you know that these young men are paid to be nice to you, will you accept their kindness? Will it mean that the feelings you exchange with them are false, only because there is a financial transaction? Are you ready to accept their attention because, well, why not? As long as it lasts, it might be a fair deal.

García's *Army of Love*, an ongoing collaboration with the writer Ingo Niermann, is about an army of people willing to give love—all-encompassing, sensual, familiar, comradely love—to those who do not receive enough of it. In short, people who have an excess of love share it with those wanting love but, for whatever reason—sickness, social marginality, handicap, age—are lacking it. Borrowing heavily from Kollontai and Charles Fourier, and

referencing the notion that the ideal of love in the West is closely bound up with property, they pursue the idea of common love. Love should not be directed to only one person, but to everyone; as the great equalizer, love needs to happen between equals, and one makes people equal by loving them. In this regard, García and Niermann have actively researched the possibility of an army of love, a group of people with a certain code of conduct and the characteristics of an army, in the sense that the Christian Church has been compared to an army: selfless, collective, serving the common good, bound by duties of honor and companionship, each individual a part of a greater body. Mostly carried out as workshops with exercises and passionate debates on what the Army of Love should be, in this work those who receive plenty of love—and become equals—are sometimes ready to switch from receivers to givers.

Like both Kollontai herself and the Museum of Jurassic Technology, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and *Army of Love* exemplify how radical imagination can be set in motion. Here we also find a certain kind of dissidence, both heroic and unheroic, as well as failure and exile—all of the themes that reoccur in García's oeuvre and that we recognize from Kollontai. At a time when universal emancipation is again on the agenda, with intersectional approaches as powerful tools, it is an interesting moment to revisit Kollontai's conflicting legacy. How can we relate to, portray, and engage critically with this historical figure and her deeds today? What can we learn from Kollontai's political practice and personal life? Contrary to the idea that equality has been achieved, García argues that in reading Kollontai we learn that the fight must still be fought, and that change will not happen without love and affect, regardless of how exploitative they can be. Relentlessly imagining what comes next, we need to continue speculating and building futures. All the time. As Kollontai herself pointed out in "Soon (In 48 Years' Time)," some of our foundations will undoubtedly change—from kerosene lights, candles, and electricity, to a new system of reflected natural light, to life itself being sacred.

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All images unless otherwise noted are installation view from *Red Love*: Dora García (2018, Tensta Konsthall, Sweden). Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

This essay will appear in a modified version in *Red Love: A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai*, edited by Michele Masucci, Maria Lind, and Joanna Warsza together with CuratorLab 2017/2018 participants: Aly Grimes, Malin Hüber, Nicholas John Jones, Martyna Nowicka-Wojnowska, Alessandra Prandin, Dimitrina Sevova, Sophia Tabatadze, Federico Del Vecchio, Hannah Zafiroopoulos. The book will be published by Konstfack

University Stockholm, Tensta konsthall, and Sternberg Press in autumn 2018, accompanying Dora Garcia's exhibition at Tensta konsthall.

Maria Lind is a curator, writer, and educator based in Stockholm and Berlin. She was the director of Stockholm's Tensta konsthall 2011–18, the artistic director of the 11th Gwangju Biennale, the director of the graduate program, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (2008–10), and director of Iaspis in Stockholm (2005–07). She has taught widely since the early 1990s, including as professor of artistic research at the Art Academy in Oslo 2015–18, and is currently a lecturer at Konstfack's CuratorLab.

1
See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1922/soon.htm> .

2
Dora García's work *Red Love*, which draws from the life and work of Alexandra Kollontai, is on view at Tensta konsthall until September 23, 2018. For the academic year 2017–18, Konstfack's CuratorLab and Tensta konsthall engaged in a collaborative research project on the life and work of Kollontai. The research project acted as a springboard for García's new work, using reading sessions as a major tool. Each of the four reading sessions hosted guests who brought suggested readings and made presentations, including: the writer Agneta Pleijel; the medical doctor, writer, and activist Shabane Barot; artist Petra Bauer with researcher and critic Rebecka Thor; political philosopher Michael Hardt; writer and philosopher Oxana Timofeeva from the collective Chto Delat?; Aaron Schuster; García herself; and the initiators, i.e., the head of CuratorLab Joanna Warsza, researcher Michele Masucci, and myself, the director of Tensta konsthall.

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Among Kollontai's most read texts are "The New Woman" (1913), "Make Way for Winged Eros" (1923), and "The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman" (1926), as well as the short novels *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923) and *Red Love* (1927). The latter is a psychological study of sexual relations in the early Soviet period, which has given García's exhibition its title. *Vasilisa Malygina* was published in English together with the short stories "Three Generations" and "Sisters" under the title *Love of Worker Bees*, which was widely read in the West throughout the 1960s and '70s. "Make Way for Winged Eros" was written as a response to many letters she received from young workers with questions on how to conduct life under socialism. She describes how historically different material conditions have determined and regulated love and sexual relations in society. While "The New Woman" deals with the psychological aspects of an emancipated working woman who belongs to no one but herself and yet is a member of community based on trust and solidarity, "The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated

Communist Woman" is an account of her own experience. The three stories in *Love of Worker Bees*, written in unadorned prose with proletarian readers in mind, give examples of the tensions between old ideals and new sexual lifestyles after the Revolution, as well as the power of solidarity between women.