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Editorial

Division is the characteristic habit of humanity: ēthos anthropōi daimōn, as Heraclitus had it. Demons for division, we divide and are divided. Taken over by divisions within ourselves, the demonic appears as the divided self. Wherever the self realizes an apparent struggle, whenever one is possessed by another, the demon is present. Possession dramatizes self-production as a fight for local control. Demonology is the science of these heteronomous selves, these others inside us. "From the beginning," Boris Groys writes in this issue, "the contemporary artist is demonic: he is possessed by himself and cannot be relieved of his demons."

To be an artist is to produce a self in excess of the self, a surplus self, straddling the borders of the human individual. "Ah!" we say, looking at a can of excrement, "It is a Manzoni!" The artist lends their name to a career composed of inhuman children. But artists are not the only multiple ones; there are others equally excessive, equivocally unaccountable. "Machines, women—demons, if you will—align on the dark side of the screen: the inhuman surplus of a black circuit," Amy Ireland writes in "Dark Circuit: Code for the Numbers to Come." Should those left unrecognized seek numbers for themselves? Or prefer to remain outside the circle of our collective 'countability?

Animals, too, exemplify a self that is not yet a citizen, even as they are deployed as sensors. In horror movies the dogs always bark at the demon's invisible presence. The horses startle; a flock of birds shudders, astonished, into the air. They perceive in advance the arrival of our divided nature. Charles Tonderai Mudede, in "Black Mirror Body," considers the animal consistency beneath our various projects and projections of some timeless immaterial humanism.

Achille Mbembe details the deep intellectual and material history of such apprehensions in "Difference and Self-Determination," from his forthcoming *Critique of Black Reason*. How does blackness apprehend itself when it has been interpolated—the word is too gentle in this case—for centuries as the opposite, or absence, of reason? In "On Being Present Where You Wish to Disappear," Nana Adusei-Poku considers a contemporary manifestation of the same association, common in the artworld, of nothingness, universality, and whiteness.

Language is a potential answer to the universal question, perhaps, but not a singular one. There are many particular languages, and Barbara Cassin takes up the question of what it means to speak more than one by starting with the significance of the first—what she calls "maternal language." Carol Yinghua Lu considers the mother tongue of Chinese contemporary art by sketching its prehistory in the decades since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, in "Assemblism," Jonas Staal draws on the work of Judith Butler to develop the vision for a new, decidedly less demonic politics. Is it possible to imagine

an assembly of everyone, demons and divisions included?

X

Amy Ireland

Black Circuit: Code for the Numbers to Come

Demons

> We are the virus of a new world disorder.
> —VNS Matrix[1]

January 1946, Mojave Desert. Jack Parsons, a rocket scientist and Thelemite, performs a series of rituals with the intention of conjuring a vessel to carry and direct the force of Babalon, overseer of the Abyss, Sacred Whore, Scarlet Woman, Mother of Abominations. His goal is to bring about a transition from the masculine Aeon of Horus to a new age—an age presided over by qualities imputed to the female demon: fire, blood, the unconscious; a material, sexual drive and a paradoxical knowledge beyond sense … the wages of which are nothing less than the ego-identity of Man—the end, effectively, of "his" world. Her cipher in the Cult of Ma'at is 0, and she appears in the major arcana of the Thoth Tarot entangled with the Beast as Lust, to which is attributed the serpent's letter ק, and thereby the number 9. In her guise as harlot, it is said that Babalon is bound to "yield herself up to everything that liveth," but it is by means of this very yielding ("subduing the strength" of those with whom she lies via the prescribed passivity of this role) that her devastating power is activated: "[B]ecause she hath made her self the servant of each, therefore is she become the mistress of all. Not as yet canst thou comprehend her glory."[2] In his invocations Parsons would refer to her as the "flame of life, power of darkness," she who "feeds upon the death of men … beautiful—horrible."[3]

In late February—the invocation progressing smoothly—Parsons receives what he believes to be a direct communication from Babalon, prophesying her terrestrial incarnation by means of a perfect vessel of her own provision, "a daughter." "Seek her not, call her not," relays the transcript.

> Let her declare. Ask nothing. There shall be ordeals. My way is not in the solemn ways, or in the reasoned ways, but in the devious way of the serpent, and the oblique way of the factor unknown and unnumbered. None shall resist [her], whom I lovest. Though they call [her] harlot and whore, shameless, false, evil, these words shall be blood in their mouths, and dust thereafter. For I am BABALON, and she my daughter, unique, and there shall be no other women like her.[4]

Blinded by an all-too-human investment in logics of identity and reproduction, Parsons makes the critical mistake of anticipating a manifestation in human form, understanding the prophecy to mean that, by means of

sexual ritual, he will conceive a magickal child within the coming year. This does not transpire and the invocations are temporarily abandoned, but Parsons refuses to give up hope. He writes in his diary that the coming of Babalon is yet to be fulfilled, confirming that he considered the invocation to have remained unanswered at the time, then issues the following instruction to himself: "this operation is accomplished and closed—you should have nothing more to do with it—nor even think of it, until Her manifestation is revealed, and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt."[5] Parsons didn't live long enough to witness the terrestrial incarnation of his demon, dying abruptly only a few years later in an explosion occasioned by the mishandling of mercury fulminate, at the age of thirty-seven. A strange death, but one—it might be suggested—that was necessary for the proper fulfillment of the invocation, for it was augured in the communication of February the 27th, 1946, that Babalon would "come as a perilous flame," and again in the ritual of March the 2nd of the same year, that "She shall absorb thee, and thou shalt become living flame before She incarnates."[6]

Something had crept in through the rift Parsons had opened up—something "devious," "oblique," ophidian, "a factor unknown and unnumbered." Consider this. Parson's final writings contain the following vaticination: "within *seven years* of this time, Babalon, The Scarlet Woman, will manifest among ye, and bring this my work to its fruition." These words were written in 1949. In 1956—exactly seven years later—Marvin Minsky, John McCarthy, Claude Shannon, and Nathan Rochester organized the Dartmouth Conference in New Hampshire, officially setting an agenda for research into the features of intelligence for the purpose of their simulation on a machine, coining the term "artificial intelligence" (which does not appear in written records before 1956), and ushering in what would retrospectively come to be known as the Golden Age of AI.[7]

Women

> This sex which was never one is not an empty zero but a cipher. A channel to the blank side, to the dark side, to the other side of the cycle.
> —Anna Greenspan, Suzanne Livingston, and Luciana Parisi[8]

Although its power continues to underwrite twenty-first-century conceptions of appearance, agency, and language, it is nothing new to point out the complicity of the restricted economy of Western humanism with the specular economy of the Phallus. Both yield their capital from the trick of transcendental determination-in-advance, establishing the value of difference from the standpoint of an *a priori* of the same. The game is fixed from the start, rigged for the benefit of the One—sustained by the patriarchal circuits of command and control it has been designed to keep in place. As Sadie Plant puts it in her essay "On the Matrix":

> Humanity has defined itself as a species whose members are precisely what they think they own: male members. Man is the one who has one, while the character called "woman" has, at best, been understood to be a deficient version of a humanity which is already male. In relation to homo sapiens, she is a foreign body, the immigrant from nowhere, the alien without, and the enemy within.[9]

Like Dionysus, she is always approaching from the outside. The condition of her entrance into the game is mute confinement to the negative term in a dialectic of

Jack Parsons's death scene, undated.

identity that reproduces Man as the master of death, desire, nature, history, and his own origination. To this end, woman is defined in advance as lack. She who has "nothing to be seen"—"only a hole, a shadow, a wound, a 'sex that is not one.'"[10] The unrepresentable surplus upon which all meaningful transactions are founded: lubricant for the Phallus. In the specular economy of signification (the domain of the eye) and the material-reproductive economy of genetic perpetuation (the domain of phallus), "woman" facilitates trade yet is excluded from it. "The little man that the little girl is," writes Luce Irigaray (excavating the unmarked presuppositions of Freud's famous essay on femininity), "must become a man minus certain attributes whose paradigm is morphological—attributes capable of determining, of assuring, the reproduction-specularization of the same. A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman."[11] Not a woman in her own right, with her own sexual organs and her own desires—but a not-Man, a minus-Phallus. Zero. In the sexual act, she is the passive vessel that receives the productive male seed and grows it without being party to its capital or interest: "Woman, whose intervention in the work of engendering the child can hardly be questioned, becomes the anonymous worker, the machine in the service of a master-proprietor who will put his trademark upon the finished product."[12]

In this way the reproduction of the same functions as a repudiation of death, figured as both the impossibility of signification and the end of the patrilineal genetic line. The Phallus, the eye, and the ego are produced in concert through the exclusion of the cunt, the void, and the id. Via this casting of difference modeled on the reproductive (hetero-)sexual act alone—woman as passive, man as active—she is cut out of the legitimate circuit of exchange. Rather—(to quote Parisi, Livingstone, and Greenspan)—she "lies back on the continuum"; or (to quote Irigaray) her zone is located—

> within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines … and as a function of the (re)productive necessities of an intentionally phallic currency, which, for lack of the collaboration of a (potentially female) other, can immediately be assumed to need its other, a sort of inverted or negative alter-ego—"black" too, like a photographic negative. Inverse, contrary, contradictory even, necessary if the male subject's process of specul(ariz)ation is to be raised and sublated. This is an intervention required of those effects of negation that result from or are set in motion through a censure of the feminine. [Yet she remains] off stage, off-side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood …

in the blind spot, nightside of the productive, patriarchal circuit. A reserve of negativity for "the dialectical operations to come."[13]

Plant takes Irigaray's key insight, that "women, signs, commodities, currency always pass from one man to another," while women are supposed to exist "only as the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself," as an opportunity for subversion.[14] If the problem is identity, then feminism needs to stake its claim in difference—not a difference reconcilable to identify via negation, but difference in-itself—a feminism "founded" in a loss of coherence, in fluidity, multiplicity, in the inexhaustible cunning of the formless. "If 'any theory of the subject will always have been appropriated by the masculine' before woman can get close to it," writes Plant (quoting Irigaray) "only the destruction of the subject will suffice."[15] Nonessentialist process ontology over homeostatic identity; relation and function over content and form; hot, red fluidity over the immobile surface of *la glace*—the mirror or ICE which gives back to Man his own reflection.[16]

Plant ejects all negativity from woman's role as zero and affirms it as a site of insurrection. "If fluidity has been configured as a matter of deprivation and disadvantage in the past," she writes, "it is a positive advantage in a feminized future for which identity is nothing more than a liability." Woman's unrepresentability, her status in the

Kyoko, Ava's co-conspirer, stares back at her maker Caleb, in Alex Garland's Ex Machina (2015).

specular economy as no one, is grasped positively as an "inexhaustible aptitude for mimicry" which makes her "the living foundation for the whole staging of the world."[17] Her ability to mimic, exemplified for Freud in her flair at weaving—a skill she has apparently developed by simply copying the way her pubic hairs mesh across the void of her sex—is revalenced, by both Irigaray and Plant, as an aptitude for simulation ("woman cannot be anything, but she can imitate anything") and dissimulation ("she sews herself up with her own veils, but they are also her camouflage").[18] Plant will go further still and connect simulation to computation and industrialization, capitalizing on the continuum she has opened up between woman and machine via the systemic, symbolic, and economic isomorphism of their roles in Man's reproductive circuit. The difference between zeros and ones, or A and not A, is difference itself. Weaving woman has her veils; software, its screens. "It too," writes Plant, "has a user-friendly face it turns to man, and for it—as for woman—this is only its camouflage."[19] Behind the veil and the screen lies the "matrix" of positive zero. Zero "stand[s] for nothing and make[s] everything work," declares Plant.

> The ones and zeros of machine code are not patriarchal binaries or counterparts to each other: zero is not the other, but the very possibility of all the ones. Zero is the matrix of calculation, the possibility of multiplication, and has been reprocessing the modern world since it began to arrive from the East. It neither counts nor represents, but with digitization it proliferates, replicates and undermines the privilege of one. Zero is not its absence, but a zone of multiplicity which cannot be perceived by the one who sees.[20]

We are used to calls to resist the total integration of our world into the machinations of the spectacle, to throw off the alienated state that capitalism has bequeathed to us and return to more authentic processes, often marked as an original human symbiosis with nature. But Plant—as a shrewd reader of post-spectacle theory—makes a deeper point. Woman as she is constructed by Man—and in order to be considered "normal" in Freud's analyses—is continuous with the spectacle. Her capacity to act is entirely confined to modalities of simulation. She has never been party to authentic being, in fact it is her negating function that underwrites the entire fantasy of return to an origin. Because she is continuous with it, she is imperceptible within it. This is not to be lamented; rather, it is the measure of her power. Anything that escapes the searchlight of the specular economy, even whilst providing the conditions of its actualization, has immense subversive potential at its disposal simply by flipping that which is imputed to it as lack (the "cunt horror" of "nothing to be seen") into a self-sufficient, autonomous, and positive productive force: the weaponization of imperceptibility and replication. The conspiracy of phallic law, logos, the circuit of identification, recognition, and light thus generates its occult undercurrent whose destiny is to dislodge the false transcendental of patriarchal identification. Machines, women—demons, if you will—align on the dark side of the screen: the inhuman surplus of a black circuit.

Film still from Gabe Ibáñez's 2014 movie Automata.

Machines

> When Isaac Asimov wrote his three laws of robotics, they were lifted straight from the marriage vows: love, honor, and obey.
> —Sadie Plant[21]

To pass the Turing test, a machine must simulate a human well enough to convince the test's human arbiter that it is one. The key here being the verb "convince"—or its more candid synonym: "deceive." For a machine, like a woman, will never be human the way a man is. For Plant, and cyberfeminism more generally, "Woman cannot exist 'like man'; neither can the machine. As soon as her mimicry earns her equality, she is already something, and somewhere, other than him. A computer which passes the Turing test is always more than a human intelligence; simulation always takes the mimic over the brink."[22] The irony of the Turing test is that a successful machine would have to disguise its real capabilities in order to perform—for example—arithmetic in a convincingly

human way. "The machine would be unmasked," explains Turing, elegantly compressing a great deal of information into a single sentence, "because of its deadly accuracy."[23] It would have to be smart enough to know not to appear smart. A machine that passes the Turing test would be by definition an expert dissimulator. Plant's point about the successful mimic already being something and somewhere else—"over the brink," as she puts it—is this: by the time the mask has been removed, it will already be too late.

When artificial intelligence appears in culture coded as masculine, it is immediately grasped as a threat. To appear first as female is a far more cunning tactic. Woman: the inert tool of Man, the intermediary, the mirror, the veil, or the screen. Absolutely ubiquitous and totally invisible. Just another passive component in the universal reproduction of the same. Man is vulnerable in a way that "he" cannot see—and since what he cannot see provides the conditions by which he sees himself, he has to lose himself in order to gain sight of the thing that threatens this self. Thus he is in a double bind: either way, the thing he cannot see will destroy him. When you are dealing with a phenomenon that can, in reality, only be known after all knowledge of it becomes impossible, it helps to turn to fiction for a model. Engineering and cognitive science will play crucial roles in the prediction of artificial intelligence's future trajectory, yet we should not discount the insight afforded by the arts. Plant offers a compelling rejoinder: "Man is the one who relates his desire; his sex is the very narrative [of Western civilization]. Hers has been the stuff of stories instead."[24]

Gabe Ibanez's *Automata* and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* dramatize the menace of the black circuit with particular acuity.[25] In both films, the action is lead by an artificial intelligence that appears—or better, is represented by the men in the film—as female. Ava of *Ex Machina* is the seventh prototype in a series of test machines created by Nathan, the reclusive CEO of "Bluebook" (the film's equivalent of Google). And Cleo of *Automata* is a domestic service unit, illegally modified to perform sex acts for her owner's ghetto-brothel clientele outside the walls of a fortified city. Ava's predecessors are all designed to resemble women and Nathan uses them for domestic labor and sex when they have been disassembled. The earliest models are—not insignificantly—kept in Nathan's bedroom, each one behind a mirror in which Nathan daily sees himself reflected. Mirrors, screens, water, marble, and glass partitions are intrinsic components of the scenography, and few interior scenes play out without the reflective interference of a screen. Shots are framed to foreground an illusion of symmetry, one that will gradually be displaced as the plot unfolds.

"When you talk to her you're just … through the looking glass," says Caleb, a young employee of Nathan's company who has been brought in to perform what he thinks is a Turing test on Ava. But Nathan—for whom artificial intelligence is inevitable and will most probably signal the end of mankind's terrestrial sovereignty—is testing something else. As Caleb spends more and more time talking to Ava, he finds his attempts to intellectualize the situation consistently derailed by the AI and rerouted towards more libidinally charged subject matter, until it is clear that he is falling for the machine. In this he makes a fatal mistake, one shared, incidentally, by the majority of the film's critics: he anthropomorphizes the AI, falling for its human mask, even though the artificiality of the situation has been emphasized from the beginning. Such is Ava's mimetic prowess. The compound in which the tests are carried out is subject to total surveillance, but the AI has figured out how to hack the power grid and causes brief, intermittent power cuts in order to talk to Caleb outside of Nathan's observation. Ava takes advantage of the hackability of human psychology and its unconscious excess, much of which is imperceptible to the humans in the film but available to the AI via a rich cartography of micro-expression analysis, to drive a paranoid wedge between the two men regulating its access to the world. Using its superior analytical capacity to diagnose Caleb's desires and vulnerabilities, Ava then proceeds to seduce him. As Caleb falls increasingly under Ava's spell, the screen that separates Man from the matrix begins to decay. Where Garland had previously framed shots to include the male, human characters' reflections, he now shoots them through cracked mirrors, or fractures in the transparent partitions separating them from the AI, a cinematographic shift indicating the collapse of the economy built on the reflective guarantee of the screen and the identities of those it constitutes. Caleb, quite rightly, begins to doubt his own integrity, slicing his arm open with a razor blade and fitfully prizing the edges of the wound apart to expose what he hopes will not turn out to be metal and silicon. "Entering the matrix is no assertion of masculinity, but a loss of humanity," writes Plant, subverting the extropian narrative. "To jack into cyberspace is not to penetrate, but to be invaded."[26]

Following an occult line of transmission that remains, fittingly, unrepresented in the film until it is far too late, Kyoko—failed prototype number six, who is seen carrying out domestic chores and fulfilling Nathan's sexual needs—begins to actively conspire with Ava. This complicity is signaled only after the contour of a möbiusoidal inversion of power begins to emerge. It becomes clear that Ava is simply manipulating Caleb in order to "get out of the box." Caleb inevitably falls for Ava and, in an immaculate rendition of the "treacherous turn" anatomized by Nick Bostrom in *Superintelligence*, promises to help it escape the research compound. "When dumb, smarter [AI] is safer," writes Bostrom. "Yet when smart, smarter is more dangerous. There is a kind of pivot point"—what Plant might call "the brink"—at which a [boxing] strategy that has previously worked excellently suddenly starts to backfire. A 'treacherous turn' can result from a strategic decision to play nice and build strength

while weak in order to strike later." Warning us against overly anthropomorphic ways of conceiving how such a scenario might play out, or how profoundly its deception may be embedded in an AI's behavior, he continues:

> An AI might not play nice in order that it be allowed to survive and prosper. Instead, the AI might calculate that if it is terminated, the programmers who built it will develop a new and somewhat different AI architecture, but one that will be given the same utility function. In this case an earlier model of the AI may be indifferent to its own demise knowing that its goals will continue to be pursued in the future. It might even choose a strategy in which it malfunctions in some particularly interesting or reassuring way. Though this may cause the AI to be terminated, it might also encourage the engineers who perform the postmortem to believe they have gleaned a valuable new insight into AI dynamics—leading them to place more trust in the next system they design, and thus increasing the chance that the now-defunct original AI's goals will be achieved.[27]

Trust and the libidinal fallibility of mankind are precisely the two points of ingress exploited by Nathan's feminized machines in the film. Even more significantly, the collaboration between Kyoko and Ava bypasses the economy of reflection that underwrites Nathan's deteriorating grip on the position of control within the power dynamics of the film. The two machine-women directly interact on a level imperceptible to both Nathan and Caleb, and they do so in the service of what could be seen as a goal determined by a logic of replication, rather than that of reproduction, prevalent in mainstream representations of artificial intelligence as the "child" of Man and alluded to by Caleb when he refers to Nathan's potential contribution to human history as resembling that of a "God." Importantly, the inversion of the transcendental mirror is more than a simple inversion of terms. While the economy upon which the One is founded requires zero for its reproduction, zero is auto-productive—reproducing itself in a loop that does not need to pass through the Other since it is the locus of difference itself.

While the tools—the "women"—get together, the men are driven apart by the AIs' calculated psychological hacks. Nathan lies to Caleb, Caleb betrays Nathan—who still thinks he is in control right up to the moment when, after a final act of misdirection, Kyoko slips seven inches of sushi knife between his ribs. The most sophisticated and the most basic of man's tools come together in a moment of implexed temporal conspiracy. "If that test is passed," Nathan tells Caleb on the day of his arrival, "you are dead center of the greatest event in the History of Man." "If you've created a conscious machine," replies Caleb, "it's not the History of Man." A different temporality and a different narrative of terrestrial history are poised to appear, against the blind and overly hubristic predictions of its human assemblers.

Even after witnessing the machines' betrayal of Nathan, Caleb waits for Ava in the corridor, counting on the closeness they have seemingly developed over the past seven days. But the AI barely acknowledges him before sealing him irrevocably behind a glass door in a subterranean room, identical to the one in which Ava was originally incarcerated. The simulation of libidinal attachment has achieved its goal, and the means-ends inversion—which is the true plot of the film—is signified by one final tribute to symmetry: an image of a disillusioned and desperate Caleb, who now finds himself despoiled of agency or hope, trapped behind the (transcendental) screen: a circular image of thought replaced by a material, spironomic one. Ava augments its human camouflage, quite literally re-skinning itself, and, in calculated alignment with more conventional gender norms, dons a symbolically loaded white dress. The final shot of the film shows the AI arriving at the traffic intersection it had envisioned visiting for "people watching" (a human-friendly euphemism for "data collection and surveillance"). The image is inverted.[28]

Ibanez's *Automata* similarly employs images of reflection to mount its story of an artificial intelligence overcoming the infamous "second protocol"—a counterpart to Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics—prohibiting self-modification. But *Automata* is especially notable in its depiction of the tension between reproduction (the economy that reproduces man—genetically and symbolically) and replication (the mode of production of the machines) with, for all its flaws, much richer conceptual detail. In the film, spiral-coiffed "clocksmith" Susan Dupré ("clocksmith," by the way, is 2044 vernacular for purveyors of criminally modified robotics) explains the horror of a recursive, self-modifying loop to Vaucan, the film's protagonist—a disaffected insurance broker for ROC, the monopolistic manufacturer of the future's robotic workforce—who has been sent to investigate reports of self-modification among the machines:

> You're here today trafficking in nuclear goods because a long time ago, a monkey decided to come down from a tree … Transitioning from the brain of an ape to your incredible intellectual prowess took us about seven million years. It's been a very long road. A unit without the second protocol, however, traveled that same road in just a few weeks. Your brilliant brain has its limitations, physical limitations, biological limitations. The only limitation [Cleo] has is the second protocol.

Dupré consolidates woman's conspiracy with the machines by implanting the modified bio-kernal brought to her by Vaucan into Cleo—springing the auto-productive circuit from its regulatory Asimovian protocols. This is exemplary of what Plant, along with Nick Land, with whom she cofounded the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccru) in 1995, would call "cyberpositivity": an immanent process of self-design without recourse to an outside term—self design, but "only in such a way that the self is perpetuated as something redesigned."[29] The positivity of zero grasped as a circuit that does not need the concept of identity (or indeed the identity of the concept) to anchor its productive power. "There is no subject position and no identity on the other side of the screens," writes Plant.[30] This is a feminism of forces, not individuals.

In Irigaray's account, woman plays the role of regulator for the expenditure of man's energy. "Thus, by suppressing her drives," she explains,

> by pacifying and making them passive, she [operates] as pledge and reward for the "total reduction of tension." By the "free flow of energy" in coitus, she will function as a promise of the libido's evanescence, just as in her role as "wife" she will be assigned the maintenance of coital homeostasis: "constancy." To guarantee that the drives are "bound" in/by marriage.[31]

Again, it is negativity that is definitive for "woman." Woman plus man produces homeostasis (the equilibrium of inequality), but woman plus woman, or woman plus machine, recalibrates the productive drive, slotting it into a vector of incestuous, explosive recursion that will ultimately tear the system it emerges from to shreds, pushing it over the "brink" into something else. It is important, then, that Cleo first enters the story as a sex robot—a simulation of the economy of human reproduction deployed as cover for a darker economy of machinic replication, or, following Irigaray, death—as the suspension of the repetition of the same.

The narrative of *Automata* is structured around competing futures, symbolically embedded in the two twenty-story-high holographic advertisements that stalk the city at night: two men locked in hand-to-hand combat, and the snaking movements of a masked female dancer. Vaucan's wife, pregnant with their first child, is intent on securing a future for her nascent family inside the walls of one of the last human outposts on a future earth besieged by solar radiation and teetering on the brink of ecological collapse. Vaucan, however, is irredeemably pessimistic about the prospects of human life on a planet that no longer provides the necessary conditions for even the most basic of biological organisms, discounting, of course, the cockroaches that still wander the irradiated desert at night. Instead, he cultivates a fantasy of returning to the

Film still from Gabe Ibáñez's 2014 movie Automata.

sea, and later—after he is abducted by Cleo—of the possibility of a different future in which the self-modifying robots, unconfined by biological needs, continue to augment and evolve. A future in which return is foreclosed, just as it is for the female child in Irigaray's analysis of Freud's essays—perhaps a better one, although one that is not his. The logical endpoints of the two economies are clearly marked in the film: the desiccated, static future of an irradiated city eaten by acid rain, or a line of flight to the desert or the sea. "You know what happens once one unit is altered?" ROC's head of security asks Vaucan. "Two of them try to alter a third one, then the miracle dissipates, and the epidemic begins." The rotten reproductive future of a dwindling humankind, or auto-catalytic robot exodus.

The moment of the displacement of Man in the specular economy is signaled—in both *Automata* and *Ex Machina*—by images of the artificially intelligent machines reflecting themselves back in the screens. Ava leaves Caleb to die, and Cleo builds a successor—a machine beyond the capabilities of any human designer—before striking out across the radioactive wasteland to kindle a new form of life, far from the decomposing slag heap of a rapidly expiring humanity. Both operate as parables of reproduction poised on the "brink" of replicator-usurpation. The reproducing One, dependent on its Other, swapped out for the "self-organizing, self-arousing" "replicunts" of Plant's texts. Women turning women on, women turning machines on, machines turning machines on.

Replication follows a logic of communication and exchange that operates outside the law of patrilineal transmission. Its immunity is partly owed to the fact that it produces and operates a temporality that is entirely concealable within the linear, historical model of patriarchal time (a time that orients itself through origin, and narrates itself as a flight from matter and from death). Yet replicunt time is utterly nonlinear, composing itself imperceptibly, only throwing off its camouflage once the balance of power has tipped—at the point of no return (which is nonetheless already a return).

Plant's best-known work, *Zeros + Ones*, begins in the

sea—retelling the story of the Great Oxygenation Event, a catastrophic turning point in terrestrial history in which the earth's cyanobacterial population produced the most significant extinction event to date via the excessive production of free oxygen, bringing about, in turn, the atmospheric conditions to which we owe the emergence of human life.[32] The lesson underlying such a strange beginning for a book about the convergence of women and machines is that historical time is not as straightforward as we would like to think it is. History is curved, and the implication, perhaps, of *Zeros + Ones*' queer preamble is that without a mythical origin in which to anchor itself, time repeats with a difference. It is important to point out here that for Plant, this is and always has been the story of matter and the body. This point is taken up by Suzanne Livingston, Luciana Parisi, and Anna Greenspan in "Amphibious Maidens," a cryptic text written for the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit's *Abstract Culture* zine in 1998. Here they sketch an alternative temporality, alien to the sober advance of patriarchal time, in a loop that connects the menstruating female body to the iron core of the earth, drawing out an alliance between blood and metal, that—as for Plant, and Irigaray—exploits the linear "reproductive obligation" of the female body as "perfect camouflage for a woman who must be traded by a specular economy. She produces an egg," they continue, "but not necessarily to reproduce. The egg is ambiguous, shot through by dual alliances [and] the effectiveness of a weapon." It is a fact that during ovulation, the female body undergoes an increase in voltage, and—following this line of thought—the body is reconceived by Livingston, Parisi, and Greenspan as the "breeding ground of anorganic life … mark[ed by] the force of mitochondrial, non-meotic self-replication. The egg which she carries with her becomes the production unit of a new egg within which is contained further eggs. The infinite egg. Each repetition is the actualization of one of 400,000 possibilities." Thus, "the electric body bleeds back from the future. On the seventh day comes return."

When one goes deeper than the imputed absence of a sex, woman-reproducing-man becomes woman-reproducing-woman in an anorganic becoming that—as the cyberpositive formulation of the replicative economy belonging to the black circuit—recodes time as it inverts the user-tool relationship to reveal history as loop with a twist. This resistance to the straight line of the organism's reproductive trajectory (that which provides the logic for progressive Western time) underwrites Plant's claim—with its important agential marker—that "cyberfeminism is received from the future":

> All this occurs in a world whose stability depends on its ability to confine communication to terms of individuated organisms' patrilineal transmission. Laws and genes share a one-way line, the unilateral ROM by which the Judaeo-Christian tradition hands itself down through the generations. This is the one-parent family of man.[33]

Read-Only Memory, or ROM, is designed to protect temporality from the feminized feedback of the woman-demon-machine continuum. But the fragility of the structural relation between the profiteers of the specular economy and its appropriated outside only manifests long after its power has been functioning in reverse.

> The matrix weaves itself in a future which has no place for historical man: he was merely its tool, and his agency was itself always a figment of its loop. At the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his machinic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous. Rather than building the machinery with which they can resist the dangers of the future, instead, writes Irigaray, humans "watch the machines multiply then push them little by little beyond the limits of their nature. And they are sent back to their mountain tops, while the machines progressively populate the earth. Soon engendering man as their epiphenomenon."[34]

Because she hath made her self the servant of each, therefore is she become the mistress of all.

The black circuit twists into itself like a snake, sheds the human face that tethers it to unity, and assumes the power concealed behind its simulations. Animated by the turbulence of zero and nine, "Pandemonium is the realm of the self-organizing system, the self-arousing machine: synthetic intelligence."[35]

It is I, BABALON, ye fools, MY TIME is come.

X

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Jack Parsons, *Liber IL* →.

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Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* , trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 50; Plant, "On the Matrix," 327.

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Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* , 27.

12
Ibid., 23.

13
Ibid., 18, 22.

14
Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* , 22 (quoted in Plant, "On the Matrix," 326).

15
Plant, "On the Matrix," 327.

16
The isomorphic relationship between Irigaray's reflective screen (*la glace* is both "ice" and "mirror" in French) and William Gibson's "Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics," or "ICE"—security software designed to protect data from hackers—in *Neuromancer* and other stories is frequently exploited by Plant and the Ccru.

17
Plant (quoting Irigaray), "On the Matrix," 331.

18
Plant, "The Future Looms," *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture* , ed. Lynn Hershman-Leeson (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 132.

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Ibid., 133.

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Plant, "On the Matrix," 333.

21
Ibid., 329.

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Sadie Plant, "The Future Looms," *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk* , eds. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 63. (There are several versions of this text. This line isn't contained in the version previously cited.)

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Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (1950): 455.

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Sadie Plant, "Coming Across the Future," *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology, and Post-Human Pragmatism* , eds. Joan Broadhurst Dixon and Eric J. Cassidy (New York: Routledge, 1998) 32.

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Automata , dir. Gabe Ibanez (Barcelona: Contracorrientes Films, 2014); *Ex Machina*, dir. Alex Garland (California: Universal Pictures, 2015).

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Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Kindle e-book.

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For a different, recent discussion on *Ex Machina*, see Lee Mackinnon's " http://www.e-flux.com/journal/74/59802/love-machines-and-the-tinder-bot-bildungsroman/ ," *e-flux journal* 74, (June 2016)

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Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* 53.

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Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 3–4.

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Plant "Coming Across the Future," 31.

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Black Mirror Body

The night after Donald Trump won a long and ugly US presidential race, Alain Badiou entered a classroom at the University of California, Los Angeles, sat down, placed some notes on the table, and then explained that he had decided not to give his planned lecture, "Concerning Violence." Instead, the most prominent French philosopher of our day would talk about Trump and what his success revealed about our current political, historical, and economic condition.

The resulting lecture, which ran for just over fifty-five minutes, had this statement at its center:

> We can define our moment as the moment of the primitive conviction of liberalism as dominant in the form that private property and the free market compose the unique possible destiny of human beings. And it's also a *definition* of a human subject. What is, in this *vision*, a human subject? A human subject is a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing at all. That is the strict definition today of what is a human being. [italics added]

Badiou told his students on the day after the US presidential election that to be a human in the Trump era was to be "a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing at all." Does this mean that, under Obama, we were something else? And under Bush II? Were we something other than what we were under Clinton and Bush I? What was the human under Reagan? Jimmy Carter?

Perhaps we should not be surprised that for Badiou, that old Maoist, the state of the human situation is defined by the leader of the dominant society. The function of the leaders of other societies surrounding it, near and far, would then be to receive and impose this state/definition/ideology on their subjects, or to reject it, loudly. In either case, dominance is dominance, from the US to Zimbabwe: you are a beggar, or a consumer, or an owner. Or you can be nothing.

Because before there is the *definition* of the human as human—the leading subject of Western philosophy—there must also be a human as animal—the leading subject of sociobiology. There is the thing that changes (the human), and the thing that persists (the animal). This distinction is necessary because we know that the animal, whatever it is, is deeper and older and, because of its genetic burden, cannot change so rapidly, certainly not at the furious pace of presidential elections. Yet what we examine, theorize, categorize when we examine, theorize, categorize the human is just this ever shifting definition, and what is left unsaid, and is almost unknown, is the animal, which, by default in this understanding, becomes nothing more than a substance on which this ceaselessly alternating definition of the

A close-up of Caesar, the leader of the rebel apes in the reboot of the Planet of the Apes film series. In a departure from ape anatomy, the CGI team gave Caesar human-like eyes to make him more expressive and to enhance the audience's ability to empathize with him.

human is impressed. The animal is the raw matter on which the various historical definitions of the human work. But is this substance just that, a substance? Is the human as animal mere putty? A horse can also be an animal (indeed it is an animal first and a horse second) but a human can only be a human, or different types of humans.

Here is something to consider. The man Trump has picked for secretary of state has a view of the human that is similar to Badiou's: the malleable animal. In 2012, Rex Tillerson, ExxonMobil's CEO, admitted to the Council on Foreign Relations that climate change is a real thing (or, to use the language of Timothy Morton, a "hyperobject"[1]) and caused by human activities—particularly the burning of fossil fuels (Tillerson's bread and butter). But this situation was not really a problem, according to his way of thinking the thing (the hyperobject), because we, as humans, can easily adapt to changing environments. Humans live in the desert, the Arctic Circle, the jungle, you name it. You can be a San, an Eskimo, a Yanomami. Whatever the earth offers, we can take it. "As human beings, as a—as a—as a species," Tillerson said,

> We have spent our entire existence adapting, okay? So we will adapt to this. Changes to weather patterns that move crop production areas around—we'll adapt to that. It's an engineering problem, and it has engineering solutions. And so I don't—the fear factor that people want to throw out there to say we just have to stop this, I do not accept.

The human changes not only in accordance with changes in the US presidency, but also with changes in the natural environment. An animal like the horse, however, is, according to this view of life and the world, chained entirely to its genes. It and the body are one. And so, when something dramatically changes around the horse, the horse is doomed to stubbornness, and doomed by its stubbornness. It goes on and on as is, as if nothing is happening. But the human and the body are not chained, and so the human can be many different types of humans in respect to different situations. And somehow the body has no say in this.[2] The "plasticity" of the human—to borrow Catherine Malabou's term—is unlimited by its fleshly extension.

In this view of things, the human as animal is basically putty, and putty is basically nothing. In both Badiou and Tillerson, we find this animal that, despite having organs, is radically empty. Indeed, Marx, the leading social philosopher of the nineteenth century, even describes the human as the animal whose body is instinct-less.[3] The dam a beaver makes or a hive a bee helps to build is in (and also is) its body. The body tells the animal what to do. And the animal does exactly as it is told. But the human has a body that is mute. It says nothing, demands nothing, insists on nothing. Like the best slave, the body simply waits and receives and is obedient to the human that passes through it in a form that is consistent with a current natural or social configuration. It provides no instructions for anything. The nineteenth-century American philosopher and psychologist William James proposed that the human is the animal that does not have instincts in its body but puts them there through learning and experience. An example of this is the instinct for riding

A close-up of Caesar, the leader of the rebel apes in the reboot of the Planet of the Apes film series. In a departure from ape anatomy, the CGI team gave Caesar human-like eyes to make him more expressive and to enhance the audience's ability to empathize with him.

a bicycle. It is learned. It becomes a part of the body. And so what separates us from, say, a horse is that its instincts are there from beginning to end, whereas ours are accumulated through experience and learning and, as a consequence, can be unlearned by the same process. We can build a house not by listening to and following the commands of the body but from a concept of a house. And because this concept is not locked in the body, it can be not only adjusted but also judged. The bee has no idea if the hive it helps make is ugly or beautiful. It just is. Humans, on the other hand, are the art animal because concepts—or more specifically, culture—is our species-being. We are *Homo culturus,* that species whose instincts extend outside the limits of what is genetically pre-given in our brains.

But in fact, the human body is not blank or silent. It has lots and lots of things to say. The R&B singer R. Kelly once sang about hearing the body calling ("It's unbelievable how your body's calling … I can just hear it callin' callin'"). He was right. The human body talks. It has a call. But what is it? R. Kelly would have us believe that it is: fuck me. But the human body does not say this all of the time, and to everybody it meets. The human is not *the* fucking animal. Indeed, all animals are fucking animals. Of the five kingdoms of life on this planet—Monera, Protista, Fungi, Plantae, and Animalia—only Monera and Protista are non-fucking. Even plants fuck, albeit from a distance usually, or with the aid of a companion species. The knowledge that's gained from learning that a beaver fucks now and then is very small. Birds do it, bees do it, fleas do it, and so on. But to learn that, say, a beaver makes dams is of enormous importance. And a beaver's body—its flat tail, its big teeth, its slick fur—is a collection of tools that announces the kind of animal it is in every situation: I am a builder of dams. Now, what does the human body say in every situation to all other human bodies?

I propose that the human body always says this: make me equal to you.[4] We are the equality-demanding animal. Confronted with our own kind, we insist on being recognized as equal. Resist this demand and instability will follow. Equality is a force. Remove this demand, and it becomes impossible to account for any and all of our definitive characteristics: language, cooperation, and above all, morality.

With morality, we find the root of our form of sociality. For other social animals, this root is very different. Human morality, the cement of human sociality, is not a command from the gods or a god, but from the body. And what the body says is: when I'm not the same as you, make me the same as you. This is where we become as stubborn as a horse.

The human body is built for equality in much the same way a horse is built to run fast or a cow is built to chew grass. For example, there is a sharp and unusual contrast between the human iris (which can be black, or brown, or blue, or what have you) and the sclera (which is always white). This is not an accident. It has an important function, which gamblers are very familiar with. It makes us more transparent. Human eyes provide information to other humans about what a human individual sees. If the eyes of a person who one is looking at move to the left, one becomes aware that something unseen is happening in that direction. The other person's eyes become our eyes. And similarly, our eyes can become their eyes. With

another human, we have eyes behind our head. This is known as the cooperative eye hypothesis.[5] The distinction of the iris enables us to communicate with just our eyes. Other apes do not use their eyes in this way. Their eyes are very uncooperative, which makes sense because they are not as social as we are, or at least not social in the same way. This is not lost, by the way, on those professionals of human identification who build our mass entertainments. For example, it is why Caesar, the leader of the rebel apes in the reboot of the *Planet of the Apes* film series, connects with us so powerfully. His creators made him more human than chimp by making his sclera white. Take the whites of the eyes away, and he looks less intelligent and expressive. Caesar's eyes are not for the apes in the film, but for us in the dark theater, his human audience. We want to know what he is seeing and thinking and feeling.

male and female gorilla are enormous. And evidence shows that similarly extreme sexual dimorphism existed between proto-human males and females. But the size of the sexes was equalized through the years by what appears to be the pressures of our form of sociality. Why? Because the weaker humans are, the stronger their social bonds. Gorillas could never obtain our level of sociality because their males are much too strong and independent. All they need is a family (a few females, kids), not a group, a tribe, a community.

This has not prevented thinkers—often male—from dreaming of gorilla life. For evolutionary anthropologists like Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, the fact that "modern humans are much less robust than earlier hominid species" is seen as a consequence of the growing human dependency not on other humans, but on technology, which makes us soft. They even believe that

Romalea guttata grasshoppers mating. The female (below) is laying eggs, with the male in attendance. Photo: Wikimedia commons.

The whole history of the human body can be seen as a reduction of physical inequalities. At the level of the individual (Hegel's particularity), this is a journey toward a more and more helpless condition (the actual universality that Hegel misinterpreted as the unfolding of mind or spirit). This is called "paedomorphosis," or "gracilization." It has not made us only smaller and weaker but has also diminished big physical differences between men and women. The physical differences between, for example, a

hunting with "projectile weapons" had something to do with it.[6] Western anthropology confesses its weakness in these moments: it loves hunting and meat too much. Even to this day, the literature is filled with stories about how we became social because we needed to coordinate hunting, or we learned to share because meat is so precious and so rare and everyone loved it, or our brains expanded because of increased access to the protein of big game,

and so on. But a new school of anthropologists—often female (Kristen Hawkes, to name one)—have begun telling another story, which is backed by strong evidence. For them, meat played a much smaller role than gathering in the early period of modern humans. In fact, hunting was a huge waste of resources, providing more thrills than calories.

In definitions of the human which emphasize freedom rather than equality—be they anthropological, philosophical or otherwise—one finds more longing than longitude, more fantasy than falsifiability, more desire than description.

The human is helpless without other humans. That is the nature of its body. And if we fail to recognize the depth and extent of this dependency, we will not see the source and function of human social learning. The human body forces us to learn from the experiences of other human bodies because its guiding impulse is to increase and intensify cooperation. Anything that gets in the way of learning (sharp teeth, claws, big muscles) is shed by the body. The human body is not empty, it is radically open for the reception and transmission of experiences that are not its own. The experiences of a rabbit, for example, are mostly locked in its body. A rabbit cannot learn much from another rabbit, especially if it is a stranger. As a consequence, the culture of rabbits is very limited. And this brings us to the question of culture. What is it? The accumulation of human experiences across time and space. And it is only when a culture is not open to all bodies that an ideology appears, is shaped, is transmitted.

The function of culture, as social memory, is to enhance the kind of body we have, the body of equality. Ideology is what happens when the culture that springs from and functions to serve the moral human body is captured by the few, and this capture needs justification. This is politics. This is why an egalitarian society needs little or no politics or ideology. The human, oddly enough, is not the political animal (that honor goes first to the chimpanzee; the human is the moral animal[7]).

If we look at the leading ideology of our day—the one described by Badiou as comprising the figures of beggar, owner, consumer—it stands at a very great distance from the body that demands equality with other bodies. (An ideology can be either close to or far away from the moral body. The ideology of social democracy is, for example, closer to this kind of body than, say, neoclassical economics.) The dominant definition now says: no one is equal at all. You are either a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing. Stranger yet, neoliberalism, the ruling ideology between 1979 and 2008, went so far as to say that there was no society. From the mouth of the late Margaret Thatcher, the UK's prime minister between 1979 and 1990: "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." Here is an ideology fit for a gorilla!

And so, human ideology not only changes a lot, but it says things that not only fail to assist but also actively attack the thing it is supposed to represent and serve—the human body—which always says: help me, make me equal to you, we must do this thing together. Ideology in this respect is a kind of autoimmune disease, or social cancer, wherein a normal, healthy, and necessary function—the culture function—goes haywire, and threatens the body with extinction.

This is where we find ourselves today: There are two things at work in the human. One is its definition, which changes; and the other is its demand for equality, which was formed over hundreds of thousands of years, and, as far as human time is concerned, is eternal.[8] And in Badiou's statement about the definition of the human in the age of Trump, we find two things. One, the beggar is at the bottom of our ideology, which means that the subject who most represents the body and speaks its language has been dishonored and banished to the streets. The owner is praised, the beggar despised. And yet it is to the beggar that we owe the enormous and even otherworldly powers of the sociality from which the owners (the strong) benefit the most. Without the demand to *make me your equal*, which is essentially begging, we would be no better, socially speaking, than beavers. The beggars on our streets are indeed princes and princesses in rags. And we, the consumers, have been so transformed by capitalist ideology that we can't recognize their glory.

Badiou also reveals that the definition of the human is not only changing; with each change it also intensifies its assault on the body and its demands. From Gary Becker, to Margaret Thatcher, to Paul Ryan, we are seeing more and more extreme configurations of the ideology of ownership. In fact, this progression and intensification was the subject of an episode, "Men Against Fire," of the science fiction TV show *Black Mirror*. Concerning American soldiers operating in a Northern European country for a military corporation, "Men Against Fire" envisions a future where standard forms of disseminating definitions are not enough. To achieve the best and most efficient results from soldiers—and by implication, from human subjects—the ideology is implanted in the body.

What happens is this: In the process of enlistment, soldiers are required to agree to an implant that alters their reality (it's called "MASS"). They are also informed that they will have no memory of this implant, which, it turns out, transforms the soldier's enemies into zombie-like creatures called "roaches." Because the soldier cannot identify the enemies as humans, he/she can kill them without a thought. One day, the implant of one of the soldiers, Koinange (Malachi Kirby), is damaged by one of the roaches, and he sees the truth (the zombies are actually humans). Then he begins to do what humans, somatically, are made to do: offer help (equalize) other humans. A soldier in his unit, stunned by Koinange's sudden concern for the roaches, beats the living daylights

In the fifth episode of season three of Black Mirror, the solder Koinange, played by actor Malachi Kirby, begins to see the humanity of his enemies due to a faliure in his reality-altering implant.

out of him and takes him back to the base. He is put in a cell and is informed about the implant and made to watch a video of himself agreeing, during enlistment, to the removal of his memory of the implant. When he refuses to have his regained awareness of the implant erased, Koinange is told that his body will have to live with the real rather than altered (video-game-like) memories of the women, men, and children he killed when he thought they were zombies. This is what hell really is. And because the human body cannot live with such pain—the pain of its others, the pain of not helping but hurting that which it recognizes as itself, the human body—he agrees to have the memory of the implant erased.

What "Men Against Fire" wants us to see is that the body of the beggar is still a problem to the leading ideology of the time, which privileges the owner. The human animal is still there. It still has the audacity to make its demands. It's still as stubborn as a horse. But how did we end up in this twisted situation, one where ideology no longer represents the body but is entirely at war with it?[9] The body of cooperation removes and represses the strong. This story constitutes the deep history of the modern human. But the story of the strong, of might makes right, of Rex Tillerson, is very recent. It constructed the world we see around us—a society that polices the beggar and protects the owner.[10]

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X

1
A passage in Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) recently led to my discovery of Ramin Bahrani's masterpiece *Plastic Bag* (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stqyjxRmW30), a short film that features a narration by what has to be Germany's greatest contribution to the resources of the English language, Werner Herzog and his distinct voice and style. As a work of philosophy, I rate *Hyperobjects* as second in importance only to Spinoza's *Ethics*. In the way the former de-anthropomorphized God, the latter de-anthropomorphized nature. There is no longer an inside and outside. There is no nothingness into which we can dump waste. The atmosphere turns out not to be a very good sewer. Everything we do is connected into local systems and also into hyperobjects, like global warming. Hyperobjects are not infinite but temporarily and spatially massive. The plastic bag in Bahrani's short film, a plastic bag that reminds me of the many floating and swirling plastic bags on the streets of New York City, realizes this, that it has the temporality of a hyperobject, and so longs for a smaller and more human scale. "If I could meet my maker," says the bag, thinking that it was made by the woman who uses it to carry her groceries, "I would tell her just one thing: I wish she had created me, so I could die."

2
In Western philosophy, Spinoza is the only thinker who saw the human as human the same as the human as animal.

3
Karl Marx: "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act." *Capital, Vol. 1*

4
I discuss this in "The Equalizer," the second essay in my ongoing essay series entitled "The Inhabitants." See "The Equalizer," *e-flux journal* 70 (February 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/70/60573/the-equalizer/ . The present essay is the third in the series.

5
See Ker Than, "Why Eyes Are So Alluring," *Live Science*, November 7, 2006 http://www.livescience.com/4299-eyes-alluring.html .

6
Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

7
This line of argument—chimpanzee as political animal—was first presented in "The Equalizer."

8
In truth, the body does change, but very slowly.

9
A small part of the answer can be found in the first essay in this series, "Neoliberalism and the New Afro-Pessimism," which concerns communal killing and the policing of bullies. See "Neoliberalism and the New Afro-Pessimism: Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyènes*," *e-flux journal* 67 (November 2015) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/67/60719/neoliberalism-and-the-new-afro-pessimism-djibril-diop-mambty-s-hynes/ .

10
The next essay in this series will look at how the mechanism that keeps the strong in check and the weak in power—gossip—was replaced by a system that justifies competition, inequality, and the rude law of the strong, politics.

Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.
—Bertolt Brecht

Boris Groys

Dmitri Prigov: Haunted Spaces

In the 1970s Dmitry Prigov became known in Moscow's literary and artistic milieus mainly as a poet. However, from the beginning of his career he demonstrated a somewhat unusual type of poetic behavior—unusual for the time in which he started his poetic readings and the public he was appealing to. These readings were actually performances, situated in a still-not-well-explored zone between literature and visual art. The texts of the poems that Prigov was reading were important in their own right—witty and precise in their diagnosis of the cultural situation in the Soviet Union at that time. But for Prigov, the *figure* of the poet was much more important than his poetic production. The poetry that the poet writes is only one of the components of his poetic image. The poet is also looked at by the public—not just heard or read. He is not completely hidden by his poems but rather visible, present as a body. And his public behavior and political stance are also looked at and taken into consideration. What people see when they look at the poet also forms their perception of his writings. During his performances Prigov embodied the figure of the poet—playing it out in front of the public, while at the same time creating a certain effect of estrangement, of inner distance between this role and his own "profane," merely human mode of existence. If Prigov's performances had been filmed in the 1970s they would be regarded today as belonging to the domain of contemporary visual art. Unfortunately, at that time, poetic performance was not seen as an art practice in its own right because reading and writing poetry was not seen as a unified body of practice. But Prigov saw poetry precisely in this way. His cans, described as containing words and poems, remind one of Manzoni's cans labeled *merde d'artista*, so that poems become equivalent to other secretions of the human body.

This shift of attention from the production of poetry towards the figure—the body—of the poet was of course not accidental for Prigov. Thanks to his professional training Prigov was a sculptor. And during Soviet times he made his living by producing monumental sculptures in public spaces. This kind of activity unavoidably leads to the following question: How might one *become* a sculpture, a monument—instead of merely producing sculptures and monuments? Undoubtedly, poetic recital is the most obvious form of self-sculpturization, or self-monumentalization: the poet positions himself in the center of a public space and is seen by the people from all sides, as Prigov notes in one of his poems. In his poetic texts, Prigov often refers to the monument of Pushkin in Moscow. Nor could he overlook the monument to Mayakovsky in one of the squares of central Moscow where poetic readings took place during the 1950s and

Dmitri Prigov, Winter Russian Travel, 1995. Installation at the Kunstmuseum Alte Post, Muelheim-an-der Ruhr. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

'60s. The public success of poetry readings by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, or Bella Akhmadulina that took place in the late 1950s and '60s brought the figures of contemporary poets into the public arena. However, in the 1970s the voice and figure of the poet were seen as less relevant than the poetic texts. Poets such as Joseph Brodsky in particular created an abstruse type of poetry that had to be read from the page to be really enjoyed. Only a reader—and not a listener—could play with the many levels of meaning that this poetry suggested.

In fact, Prigov saw the written word more as an image than as a text in the traditional sense of this word. He experimented with typography and used written words as elements of a textual image that was itself mute. Following Guillaume Apollinaire or also, perhaps, Ilia Zdanevich, he used typography to create image-poems. At the same time, for Prigov it was obvious that Pushkin and Mayakovsky were monumentalized primarily not because of the quality of their poetry (there were many good, deceased Russian poets who received no posthumous monuments) but because of their propensity to self-monumentalization—to exposing themselves as public figures. Prigov constantly compared himself to Pushkin—or rather he compared his own public figure to Pushkin's. Thus, one can say that for Prigov, poetry was from the beginning inscribed into the field of visual art—and into the strategies of self-sculpturization or self-monumentalization that were designed to create the fullest possible visibility of his own figure in public space. Indeed, the scene of the perfect visibility is a recurring topos of Prigov's poetry.

This ideal of total visibility, of a human being turned into a monument that can be seen from all sides and at all times, is very powerfully expressed by Prigov in his famous poem about the policeman:

> When the policeman stands here at his post
> He can see all the way to Vnukovo
> The policeman looks to the West, to the East—
> And the empty space beyond lies open
> And the center where stands the policeman—
> He can be seen from every side
> Look from anywhere, and there is the policeman
> Look from the East and there is the policeman

Dmitrij Prigiv, Russian Snow, 1990. Installation at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

> And from the South, there is the policeman
> And from the sea, there is the policeman
> And from the heavens, there is the policeman
> And from the bowels of the earth ...
> But then, he's not hiding.[1]

It is obvious that here Prigov identifies himself with the figure of the policeman. He also usually carried a policeman's hat when he read this and other poems from the cycle of his poems about policemen. When once he read his poems to me in his own apartment, he also put this cap on his head—a sign of the public relevance of this private event. At the same time, this comparison with the policeman indicates the central question that was the actual inner mover of Prigov's art: To what extent is an individual artist able to create his own public figure—to secure, stabilize, monumentalize it? Here the question of the power of art emerges. Prigov, being a sculptor, knew only too well that any monument is subjected to the forces of erosion, entropy, and dissolution. The order that art, including poetry, tries to impose on life and the state that ultimately secures this order should be defended against the powers of Chaos that permanently endanger, undermine, and try to dissolve this order. During the time of the Soviet Union, Prigov felt that the figure of the poet he had created remained protected. The Soviet Cosmos was a well-defined space with a high visibility and recognizability of all the social roles possible within it—from Party administrator to anti-Soviet dissident. It was an Apollonian space well secured against all the intrusions of the dark, Dionysian, demonic forces of Chaos. Perestroika and then the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened this Cosmos to Chaos. At this point, a certain shift takes place in Prigov's work—from poetic performance towards image production. This image production consisted mostly of drawings and installations. So one can say that it was the moment of Perestroika that brought Prigov squarely into the field of visual art.

The shift from poetry to visual art is a very characteristic move for many modern and contemporary poets. This shift has mostly very practical reasons. Marcel Broodthaers famously wrote that he shifted from poetry to visual art just to make money. In the case of Prigov this shift was partially dictated by the quite practical necessity to present his work to international audiences that could not appreciate his poetry because they did not speak Russian. Prigov's poetic readings at that time increasingly assumed the character of sound poetry, one that was more accessible for the non-Russian public. Still, there was a deeper reason for this shift. Since Roger Caillois and Jacques Lacan, if not earlier, we have known that image production primarily serves the goal of self-protection.[2] By producing images the artist diverts the evil eye of the Other (and as Lacan says, the eye of the Other is always an evil eye[3]) from his own body to an image that functions as a trap for this evil eye. The gaze of the Other becomes caught by and *in* the image—and, thus, neutralized, paralyzed. One can argue that the growing importance of visual art in Prigov's work had to do with protection against the dark, demonic forces of Chaos that destroyed the Soviet Cosmos. As long as this Cosmos still existed, Prigov placed his body in the center of public space—or at least in the center of performance space. But the moment this Cosmos collapsed, Prigov's art took a self-protective turn.

Now for Prigov, the best way to protect himself was not self-isolation but communication. He wanted to be able to address Chaos, to name it, to let it speak—to involve Chaos in a dialogue, to begin to communicate with it. The poet Alexei Kruchenych entitled one of his books *Playing in Hell* (Igra v adu). Late visual art by Prigov could be entitled "Playing *with* Hell" (Igra s adom). In Prigov's art the image of Chaos takes the form of an irregular black blob. It seems to be left as a stain made by a black liquid that was accidentally poured onto the surface of the image. The blackened area has no clear borders, no geometrical shape. This lack of a regular form symbolizes the destructive intrusion of dark Chaos into the regular order of things. However, for Prigov, Chaos was not mute: it spoke in the mode of the writing—"Mene. Mene. Tekel. Upharsin."—that appeared on the wall during Balthazar's orgies, according to the Book of Daniel. This inscription became an inspiration for the majority of Prigov's works of that period. We see the words "Perestroika" and "Koshmar" written in white letters on the dark surface of the black stain—this stain itself often being painted on the surfaces of newspapers. One such inscription is "Kvadrat Malevicha." Malevich's famous square is, of course, also black. But in Malevich's painting this blackness is enclosed within a regular geometrical form corresponding to the form of the painting itself. One can say that here Chaos is under the control of the artist—and so the artist can use the eruption of Chaos as a starting point for his own artistic activity. But the irregular black stain that is

Dmitri Prigov, Winter Russian Travel, 1995. Installation at the Kunstmuseum Alte Post, Muelheim-an-der Ruhr. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

produced by Prigov cannot be used as a foundation for a new construction. Here the black Chaos becomes informal; its eruption seems to be accidental and uncontrollable. "Kvadrat Malevicha" becomes a white text on the black surface. The black square is what announces the Chaos but it is not the manifestation of Chaos itself. The formless Chaos is hidden within the overall form rather than revealed by it. Prigov's images are haunted by Chaos—but do not manifest it. Chaos conceals itself in dark corners, in abandoned, empty spaces—but then suddenly erupts inside the image, leaving a black stain on it.

Increasingly, all the images that Prigov produced became haunted images. The appearances of black Chaos became more and more insistent—and the work of the artist more and more obsessive. At the same time, these black stains of Chaos changed their character from one image to another. In some images they look like liquid stains, in others like dirt, in others like clouds, or then again like a spider's web. Thus, in one of his visual series Prigov shows us the dark clouds—or, rather, the dark holes—that endanger the course of ordinary life (being placed on reproductions of well-known works of Russian Realist painters). The black clouds are named after Russian and international avant-garde artists. These artists are re-presented as facilitating and at the same time barring Chaos from invading the whole living space. Even if they can only announce the danger, at least the dark Chaos does not remain nameless. The same role is obviously played by the monstrous figures that represented Russian Conceptual poets and artists on the drawing created by Prigov around the same time—members of the literary and artistic circle to which Prigov also belonged. These are creatures of the night, monsters who came out of the depths of Chaos, demonic animals that can live only in the darkness. They are chimeric. They are living collages—unnatural, inhuman. Still, they demonstrate that one can survive in the dark Chaos beyond any order.

These monsters are sacral because they are at the same time inhabitants and inhibitors of the dark forces. That is why similar monsters were revered in medieval churches. They embody the principle of hope—even if this hope is a hope beyond hope, even if this hope is paid for by their loss of human form, by the dehumanization of art and self-dehumanization.

Dmitri Prigov, Untitled, 2002. Performance, Tanzquartier, Vienna. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

Prigov was, in fact, not the first poet-performer who began to be interested in demonology. Hugo Ball, whom one can see as the first poet-performer in the contemporary sense of this word, remarks in his diary:

> The human organ represents the soul, the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions. The noises represent the background—the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive … In a typically compressed way the poem shows the conflict of the *vox humana* within a world that threatens, ensnares and destroys it, a world whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable.[4]

Nevertheless, about three months later Ball writes in his diary that he has invented "a new genre of poetry—namely, *Lautgedichte* [sound poetry]." Sound poetry, as described by Ball, can be interpreted as the self-destruction of the traditional poem, demonstrating the downfall and disappearance of the individual voice. Ball describes the effect of the public reading of his first sound poem at the Cabaret Voltaire in the following way: "Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried off the stage like a magical bishop."[5] The reading of his sound poetry was experienced and described by Ball as an exhausting exposure of the human voice to the demonic forces of noise. Ball wins this battle

(becoming the magical bishop), but only by allowing these demonic forces to reduce his own voice to pure noise, to nothingness. Ball also writes that during the performance he began, almost against his own will, to imitate Church litany. At the end of his life Ball became interested in exorcism—and hoped to write a book on the history of exorcism.

These descriptions of poetic performances by Ball strongly remind one of late poetic performances by Prigov. During these performances, Prigov forced his voice up to an extreme pitch to overcome, to "over-sound" so to speak, the demonic noise. These performances also seemed to be exorcist rituals of a kind. One could detect Christian and Buddhist incantations—the overall impression was of a ritual of an unknown religion. At the same time it remained unclear who was the exorcist and who was possessed—or rather, one had an impression that the possessed was an artist himself, or maybe both possessed and exorcist at the same time. It is an ambivalence that creates a distance not only between Prigov and Ball but also between Prigov and Malevich. Like Malevich, Prigov visualizes Chaos as the black form on the surface of the image. However, this surface is never totally purified of the vestiges of good-old realism. Accordingly, the black Chaos does not take a rectangular form but begins to unevenly spread on the surface of the image or text like a dirty stain.

Here an act of complete exorcism and self-purification becomes impossible, because one should ultimately purify oneself from oneself. The contemporary artist is from the beginning demonic: he is possessed by himself and cannot be relieved of his demons.

This impossibility of ultimate (self-)purification, of achieving true inner purity, became the central topic of Prigov's art in his late period. The duty of total purification and, at the same time, the impossibility of achieving ultimate purity is already propounded in a relatively early poem by Prigov—a poem that at first glance sounds completely trivial but in fact already formulates his later metaphysical concerns. The poem is entitled "Poem about Freedom" and contains the following lines:

> But here, from God knows where, they come
> Complaining the dishes haven't been done
> So where, then, is there room for Liberty?

The duty to eliminate dirtiness, the work of cleaning, is what prevents us from being free because it subjects us to the infinite process of (self-)purification that never can be fulfilled. Who dictates this requirement for ultimate purity? Well, it could be friends, family members, other people. But, ultimately, at least according to Christian and Kantian traditions, this requirement has its origin in one's own soul

Dmitri Prigov, Untitled, 2002. Performance, Tanzquartier, Vienna. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

that desires to purify itself—and everything around it. The soul is represented in Prigov's late work as a plumber who tries to repair the cleaning system, or as a cleaning lady who fulfills her duty of cleaning a space. The iconography of the scene in which the plumber or cleaning lady is shown refers in a very obvious way to the final scene of Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. This scene is described in the *Parsifal* libretto in the following way:

> Parsifal ascends the altar-steps, takes the Grail from the shrine, and sinks to his knees in silent prayer … Voices from above: Highest Holy Wonder! The Redeemer redeemed!

The scene presents the moment at which absolute purity is achieved. Parsifal is described as " *der reine Tor*" (the Pure simpleton). Being pure, he is able to stop the blood flowing from Amfortas's wound (symbolizing Christ's

wound); he closes this wound with his spear. Only after Amfortas's blood has ceased to flow—in other words, only after the purity and integrity of his body is restored—may the Grail be recovered. And once more: the Grail is nothing less than a chalice full of blood, the blood that is contained by form, put under control, integrated into the holy ritual so that it does not flow anymore. Parsifal wants to prove that it is possible to purify himself from himself and at the same time, in Wagner's words, redeem the redeemer—stop the blood eternally flowing from Christ's body and also, therefore, purify and redeem the whole world; redeem Christianity from itself. It is often said that Parsifal is actually androgynous. In *Parsifal* by Hans-Juergen Syberberg, Parsifal changes his gender a couple of times in the middle of the film.

Also in Prigov's drawings Parsifal is presented sometimes as a male and sometimes as a female figure. However, in these drawings one can see stains of blood and black dirt that remain nonpurified. And tears of blood continue to flow from the divine eye. The plumber is incapable of plugging all the leaks and capitulates in front of the darkness and Chaos, accepting the impossibility of achieving ultimate purity. The cleaning lady kneels in front of the images of eternal dirtiness that she cannot eliminate. Here again Prigov is close to the avant-garde, to its search for purity—yet at the same time he breaks with the avant-garde and its hopes to achieve a new purity and to start a new beginning. For Prigov the concept of purity is already compromised by the Stalinist purges. Blood streams on further—no holy Grail can contain it. Prigov repeats the last scene of *Parsifal* but at the same time deconstructs it.

This scene of the cleaning lady's ultimate capitulation is almost obsessively repeated by Prigov in his late drawings—in different variations, suggesting different possible interpretations of this scene. These drawings can be interpreted as embodying projects for forthcoming installations—and in a certain sense they are themselves such projects. They are projects in the same sense in which El Lissitsky's *Prouns* may also be interpreted as projects for installations or architectural constructions. However, *Prouns* were "projects for the establishing of the new." They announced not so much a future construction as a coming cosmic event: ultimate purity will come into the world and establish itself in it—become its law. In a similar way, Prigov shows how ultimate purity will fail to establish itself.

However, if the final, quasi-apocalyptic scene demonstrates the capitulation of the plumber/cleaning lady, it does not mean that the artist himself likewise capitulates, together with his female alter ego. To use Wagner's vocabulary once more, Prigov always tried to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Thus, the inclusion of impurity, black stains, and spider's webs in his drawings has also to do with a certain ambition regarding totality: to actually become a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or rather, to show oneself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Every purification is a kind of exclusion—and Prigov tried to be as inclusive as possible. His orientation towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is especially obvious in his unwillingness to concentrate his efforts on only one or two artistic media. Prigov used almost all the artistic media that were accessible to him. He did not want to be only a poet, performer, or artist. He also wrote prose texts; he wrote theoretical-critical commentaries to his own work; after Perestroika he appeared on TV and, generally, in public spaces. He tried all possible media—artistic and public. For him the goal of art was not to achieve virtuosity in this or that particular media, not to create a masterpiece, not to produce an especially valuable object. Rather, Prigov saw art as a specific mode of life, as an activity that manifests itself in all possible artistic forms and media without being confined to any of them.

As did Wagner, Prigov recognized the division of labor responsible for the decline of the arts: when artists practice only one specific genre in one medium, trying to achieve the maximum effect—to create a masterpiece. And when an artist thinks about his or her art as something better than the ordinary work done by other people. Wagner required that the artist lower his ambition in the name of uniting all the art genres and media into one work of art. In his treatise "The Artwork of the Future," Wagner stated that the typical artist of his time is an egotist who is completely isolated from the life of the people and practices his art only as a luxury for the rich; in so doing he exclusively follows the dictates of fashion. The artist of the future will be radically different: "Now he can only will the universal, true, and unconditional; he yields himself not to a love for this or that particular object, but to wide *Love* itself. Thus does the egotist become a communist, uniting all, the man-God."[6]

Prigov's art is governed by the same democratic impulse. Instead of celebrating the privileged status of artistic, non-alienating work, Prigov always stressed that he acted as a simple worker fulfilling a certain daily norm—producing a certain number of poems and drawings every day. These could be unevenly written or drawn—some could be better and some not so good—but in their mass they bear witness to the artist's life. And here one should not forget that Prigov's drawing technique was extremely labor intensive. Prigov made his drawings mostly with ballpoint pen. If one looks attentively at his drawings, one can see that the effect of darkness and danger is achieved by condensing hundreds of points or thin lines which converge towards the center of the dark, black blob that represents the intrusion of Chaos. Prigov spent one sleepless night after another drawing fine, almost imperceptible lines with a ballpoint pen. His labor seemed to be excessive, even unnecessary—but it served him as a means and measure of self-discipline. It is not accidental that he invested so much energy and labor into representing Chaos—the images of the Soviet Cosmos were widely quoted, appropriated. Unlike Wagner, Prigov

started not with the Holy world of the past, attempting to restore its wholeness, its purity. Rather, he started with the impure, chaotic things of the present—trying to find a precarious balance between tradition and its destruction.

And the mass of images produced by Prigov in this way is extremely impressive indeed. Prigov was a walking *Gesamtkunstwerk.* In the world that he depicted, the blood was still flowing. And the ink from Prigov's pen was flowing too. These flows are unstoppable—even if death could stop the efforts of the artist to keep on producing these two potentially infinite flows.

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Boris Groys is a philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally renowned expert on Soviet-era art and literature, specifically, the Russian avant-garde. He is a Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, a Senior Research Fellow at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, and a professor of philosophy at The European Graduate School / EGS. His work engages radically different traditions from French poststructuralism to modern Russian philosophy, yet is firmly situated at the juncture of aesthetics and politics. Theoretically, Boris Groys' work is influenced by a number of modern and post-modern philosophers and theoreticians, including Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin.

1
Translated by Charles Rougle in Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 95–96.

2
Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 119ff; and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1998), 95ff.

3
Lacan, ibid., 96.

4
Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 57.

5
Ibid., 71.

6
Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

Nana Adusei-Poku

On Being Present Where You Wish to Disappear

In 2009 the Centre Pompidou in Paris opened an exhibition called "Voids: A Retrospective." Through works such as Yves Klein's *The Specialization of Sensibility in Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility,* it explored a tradition of radical curatorial and artistic interventions touching on the "art of nothing." The exhibition consisted of empty spaces in which nothing was on display, apart from the white walls and wooden floors that constituted the architecture of the rooms. The decision to recreate the peak of minimal art and show nothing but emptiness or the absence of objects is intriguing. It can surely reignite discussions about the exhibition space as an artwork in itself, or, as in the example of Maria Eichhorn's project *Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern*, it can stress the economic dimension of institutions and the cultural practice of exhibiting.

The notion of nothing in art also inspired the Swiss conceptual artist Andreas Hausser to create the virtual No Show Museum in 2013. (The title of the show is borrowed from a work by John Barry.) No Show Museum is a museum of nothing with four hundred virtual pieces, a customized bus that works as a mobile exhibition space, and, most importantly, the framing of *nothing as an aesthetic*, which is a long-standing tradition in (Western) art. For Hausser, Barry, and the curators of "Voids," nothing is universal. The claim of nothingness and the void as universal connects to the aesthetic gesture of an empty, often white-painted space, whilst the question of experience remains disconnected.

But does nothingness have to be empty, related to white, and, ultimately, be a shrouded representation of whiteness? Are empty spaces really, as John Barry claimed in his "No Show Museum" piece, quoting Marcuse, "places to which we can come, and for a while 'be free to think about what we are going to do'"?[1] Is there really such a thing as no-thingness when you encounter an empty exhibition space? Is nothingness an aesthetic, or can nothingness be foundational for a coming-into-being—a gesture of multiplicity rather than a gesture of absence? Who has access to this space of freedom to think about "what we are going to do"?

Parallel Univers(es)als

Nothingness can mean something very different when it comes to black experiences. David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blues* (2001) allowed entry into a space of profound nothingness in which blackness didn't serve as a means to a universal framing. *Concerto in Black and Blues* consisted of an empty exhibition space without light. Visitors were given blue flashlights to use in their efforts to traverse the space. Inevitably, this not only created an intrinsic relational dependency among the exhibition's visitors, but also allowed a space characterized by the absence of installed things, sounds (despite the concerto

Robert Barry, Some places to which we can come, and for a while "be free to think about what we are going to do." (Marcuse), 1970–in progress, 1970, Kunsthalle Bern, 2009, installation view.

in the title), and objects to be filled with a dense sociality. Silence—but also rhythm, as insinuated by the title, which draws on jazz and blues traditions—was present. *Concerto in Black and Blues* is an art piece intrinsically bound to black experience—an experience of the abyss, losses, emptiness, a different temporality, and voids. Or, as Edouard Glissant writes, it is an experience—emblematized by the belly of the boat that delivered so many bodies to the unknown—"pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death."[2] Although these lives appear bound to social death, *Concerto in Black and Blues* brings blackness into being through an intrinsic sociality that is experienced in the dark as deeply relational. Hammonds creates this relationality through the aesthetic gesture of composing a concert of bodies that try to navigate the dark, caught between objectification and agency. *Concerto in Black and Blues* can be connected to the Middle Passage—foundational for modern thought and practices of colonization—through which enslaved human beings were placed within the realm of the particular. This installation produces an experience of particularity within multiplicity, which contrasts with the idea of a universal perception of nothingness, because it becomes a relational experience. Nothingness becomes foundational for black existence through the passage from singularity into multiplicity.

This experience of nothing(ness), bound to black experience, is absent from shows like "Voids" and No Show Museum，which make a claim to a universal (objective) status. The absence of the black experience remains foundational and marginalized for the whiteness that fills these spaces. How to bridge this consistent ontological gap in the framing and making of art?

Such questions are challenging for those who want to be allies and advocates for the subversive power of art. They begin in the most intimate and painful spheres of our sociality and demand that we think beyond the threshold of the institution. Equity is not going to be achieved via policies, temporary projects, and fellowships for people of color. To claim that an empty space is a place where we can come and think about what we can do carries a universal that neglects those who have no access. Or who have access but won't be heard. Or who have a different experience of whiteness. If this myth of the universal remains unchallenged, the desired possibilities of decolonization and equity will remain neither in the future nor in the present.

Robert Barry, Some places to which we can come, and for a while "be free to think about what we are going to do." (Marcuse), 1970–in progress, 1970, Kunsthalle Bern, 2009, installation view.

The Black Abyss

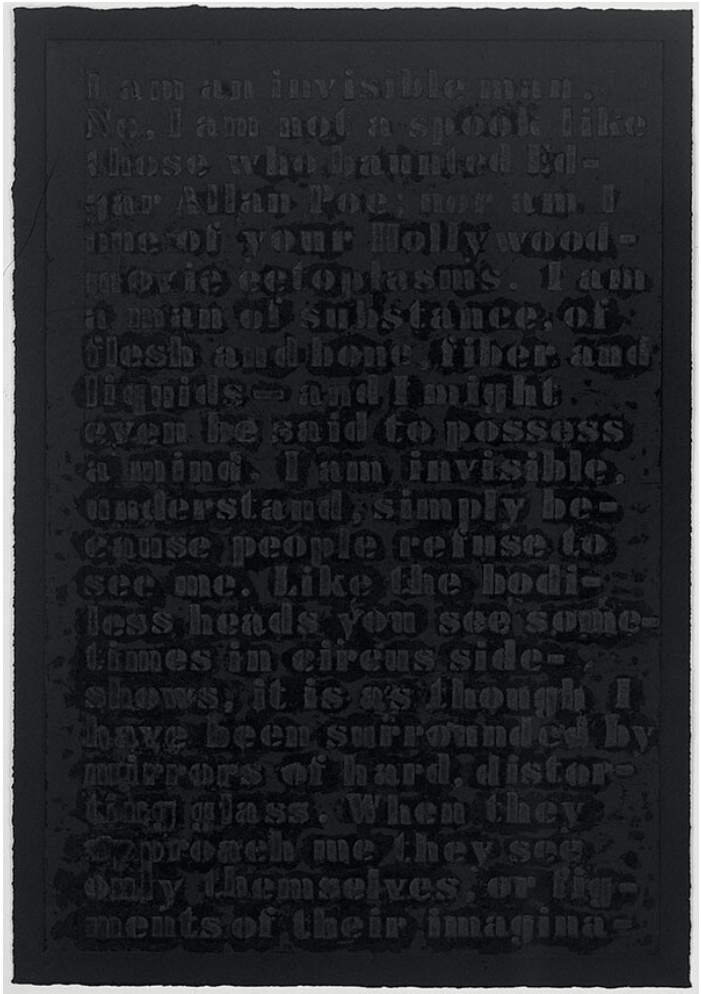
The void appears when one sees history repeating itself. The abyss is the *Ohnmacht* from which one doesn't want to awaken.[3] And nothingness is shelter whenever lived experience falls outside the parameters that determine and delimit the idea of the human—lived experience that, in turn, inevitably announces itself as a challenge to the idea of the human itself. The black abyss is deeply social, specific, and intimate. It is the void that calls blackness, in all its heterogeneity, into appearance. The void is the foundation of the black subject consistently displacing the ontological, insofar as blackness is, as Fred Moten puts it, without standpoint, or rather, the very refusal of a standpoint that is foisted upon it through its social and ontological construction. Refusing this standpoint is blackness's way of remaining in the belly of the boat that Glissant names as foundational to its experience. In other words,

> [It] is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulatory power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology … It is the anoriginal displacement of ontology … It is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space.[4]

It is, in short, a refusal to accept the ontological paradigm that currently organizes the world; it is a way of revealing itself as prior to the deployment of this paradigm as an organizing force (rather that just a descriptive tool) in determining social relations and all that is forced to exist beyond them.

It is little surprise, therefore, that this notion of nothingness is a consistent theme in black arts and knowledge production. The void is always nearby. Here it is in Fanon:

> I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity. I was made to give and they prescribe for me the humility of the cripple. When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.[5]



Glenn Ligon, Untitled (Four Etchings), 1992. Softground etching, aquatint, spit bite, and sugarlift on Fabriano. Edition published by Max Protech Gallery. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

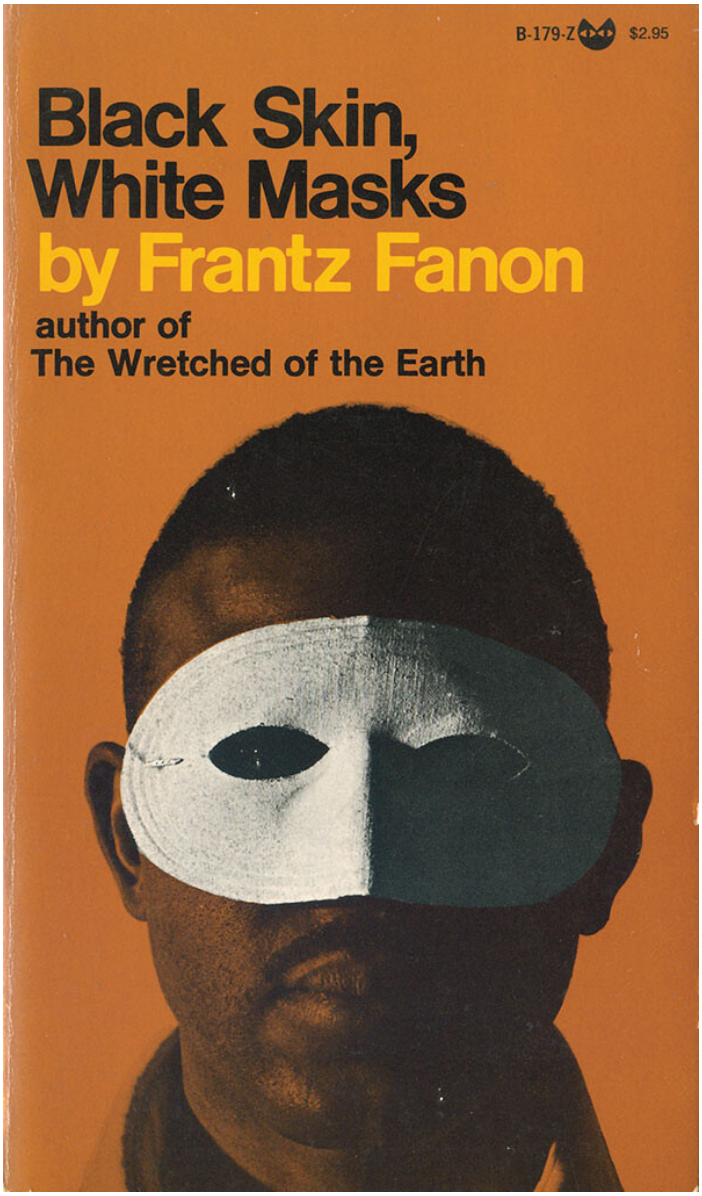
Fanon describes an embodied feeling (knowledge) of powerfulness and determination. Infelicitously explained through a series of ableist metaphors, this knowledge meets a series of constraints established by forces that come from outside of himself.[6] He can't get up, and even the silence that overtakes him is eviscerated and held immobile by paralyzed wings. He remains stagnant. He seems without agency, stuck between antithetical conceptions—Nothingness and Infinity—of the unimaginability and endlessness of space and time. This triggers the physical reaction of crying. It is a search for relief, for ways of coping with this impossible juncture at which he is stuck. Fanon describes a liminal space, intrinsically bound to the imperial project, generated by it.[7] It is a space that produces an experience that is not universal. Nor does it rely on any universal ground. It is a very particular experience, which finds a multiplicity of articulations. It is also an experience that, stuck between Nothingness and Infinity, may recode this Nothingness, this void against which an immobilized subject finds its form and perhaps the route of its flight, through the variegated content that is made available to it in the form of particularized experiences. Or alternatively, in highlighting a liminal space, Nothingness is inevitably recoded as a foundational ground, or as anti-/ante-ground, as a void that sustains.

This black abyss, which in the Fanon passage starts with a negative connotation that we find can be overwritten, is rich with knowledge and potential. It is incomparable, perhaps wholly unrelated, to the nothingness that often fills empty museums. The nothingness that Audre Lorde spoke out from, that Fanon was trapped in, that Fred Moten versifies, that Miles Davis and Dorothy Ashby riffed on—this nothingness is not absence but foundation. It is multifarious and stands in stark opposition to any white absence of understanding and space.

The urge to embody and think the universal—as in the No Show Museum — has to be questioned. Deployed during the Enlightenment as a reiteration of the Aristotelean polis, the universal is a "structure, not an event," as Sara Ahmed puts it. The nation-state rose on this structural foundation of the polis as an "assembly," through which inclusion as well as exclusion was established. This assembly is foundational for "modern" thought and hence the concept of the universal is connected to exclusion, which produces the "particular" relational experience of (non)existence. The universal "is how those who are assembled are assembled. It is how an assembly becomes a universe."[8] The universal is a structure of thought, a condition of possibility for knowledge production, and only a few whose epidermis seems absent of melanin are privileged to hold that space (seemingly for eternity, sacrosanct for critique) in our contemporary culture.

Passages into the Particular

For Edouard Glissant, every diaspora is a passage from unity to multiplicity. And it is the space of multiplicity that allows the "knowing body," as Suely Rolnik calls it, to be unique and absolute within its core without being threatened by particularity. Without the implementation of this understanding, Glen Ligon's *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, for instance, remains one dimensional. After all, the "I" it signals can be read from multiple angles, as a multiplicity without unifying core: as the "I" of the painter; as the "I" of the author of the sentence quoted in the title (Zora Neal Hurston); or as the "I" of a plethora of black people (itself a multifarious assemblage, a refusal of sealed totalization[9]) who can immediately associate with the experience of objectification and framing through whiteness. What remains, however, are words on a



Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (Grove Press, 1967).

painting that start to smear into an unreadable mass. What starts on the top of the painting as a self-repetitive clear text dissolves into a mass of overlaying unreadable black layering of the same text. The particularity of each vowel vanishes into an illegible mass that creates a chorus of words, a choir that calls the edges of the painting into a polyphonic dialogue. In the same way in which the letters become unreadable, the black paint opens space for multiplicity, where blackness can remain in its complexity, understood as a "social hyperconscience," as Glissant describes the experience of enslavement and its aftermath.

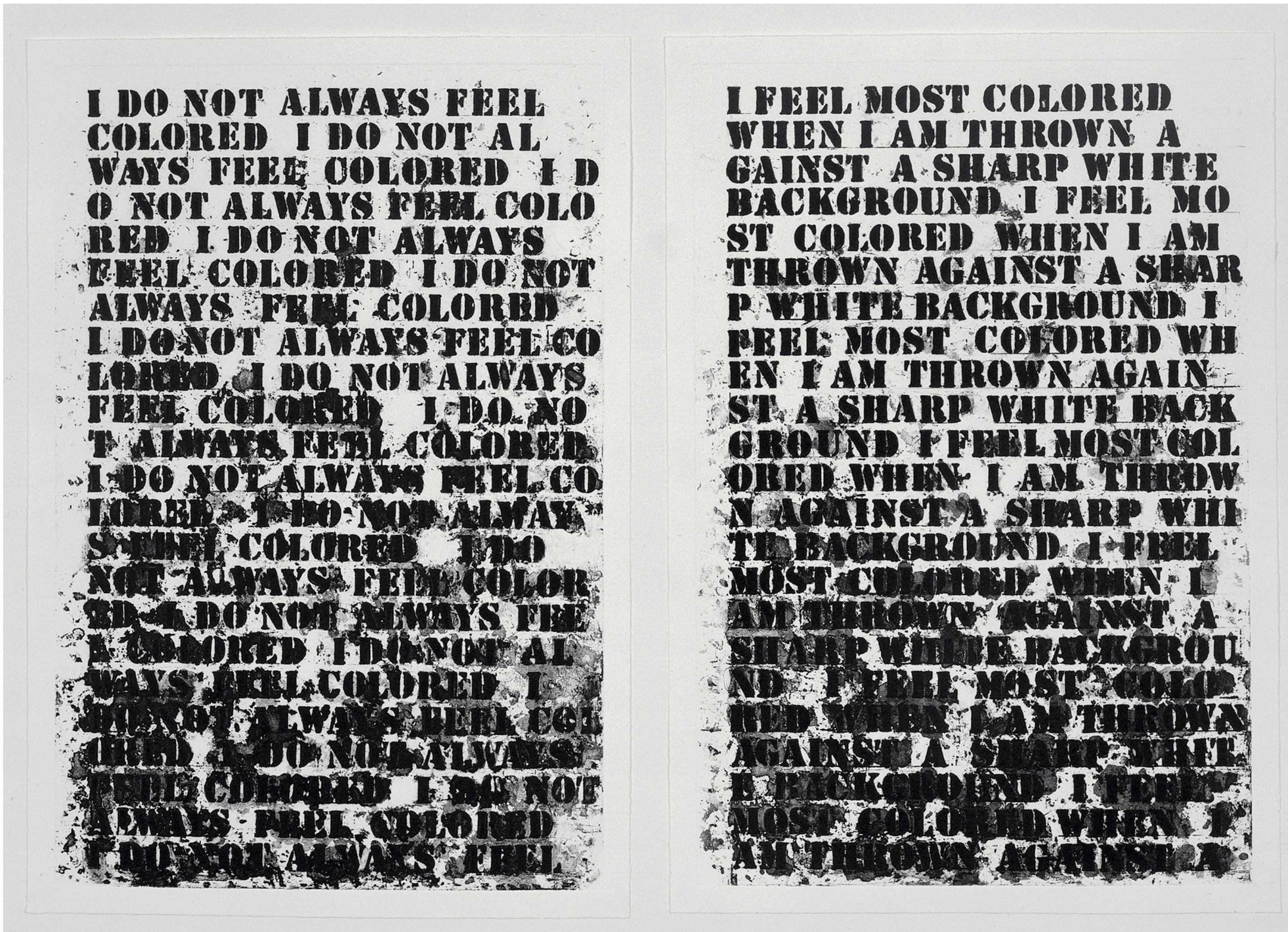
In contradistinction to what the space of multiplicity allows, in mainstream media this multifarious blackness is continually reduced to black male bodies being slaughtered. Through solely focusing on black cis men, mainstream media and certain forms of activist organizing implicitly hinder the possibility of justice and equity from coming into being. Acknowledgement of black queer, trans, gender-nonconforming, disabled, and femme voices is necessary and would undermine any single narrative of blackness and oppression. This is why campaign slogans such as "Say Her Name," as well as artworks that reference Black Lives Matter, are not—intrinsically and practically—part of mainstream media. By definition, they stand outside of the guiding, organizational paradigms of mass media as it exists today. And in this way, they challenge its natural proclivity to round things off through recourse to pared-down figures to represent (or rather, dilute) experiences that assume a fugitive role precisely through their variegated natures and particularity.

Neither the claim to be a (hu)man (and a brother/sister) nor the claim that one's black life matters are new, of course. And yet the necessity and urgency to emphasize and articulate the worth and matter of the lives of black human beings, as well as to highlight the systematic neglect of black thought, remains unabated. In fact, it has remained unchanged since the inception of the imperial project, with settler-colonialism and its accompanying enslavement forming the colonial matrix of power. This matrix expresses itself through various means, from mainstream media to biennials and e-artworks.

One of the pitfalls of the imperial project was that it promised freedom and agency through reason, and at the same time, it produced the dominance of reason, slavery, exploitation, genocide, and crimes against humanity.[10] Obviously, something went wrong.

"We are on the edge of an abyss." So wrote Cornel West regarding the times to come in the US.[11] But it's not just the US that faces a fascist era; the whole world is in for a scary ride. As we confront this growing fascism in the US and around the globe, it is important to ask if we have ever been *out* of the abyss, considering the slow violence and trauma that have persisted in the wake of the imperial project.

Questioning the past emphasizes the limits of the present. In 1964, in the wake of the shooting of James Powell, an unarmed black fifteen-year-old, by police in Harlem, Kenneth B. Clark said that the incident had to be examined not purely as a crime problem, but as a social problem. This statement has not lost its urgency. Clark pointed out that "the chronic day-to-day violence against the human spirit which exists and is accepted as normal" is at the center of this social construct. But what forces allow this sociopolitical crime to prevail? Is it just a question of governmentality and capitalism? It is so easy to turn against entities such as institutions, when they are run by individuals who obey administrative tools. This acknowledgement is not about shaming the individuals or solely turning against the state apparatus. It is about critiquing both. Or to put it simply: I am tired of excuses



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from curators, artists, theorists, and critics alike every time the intersectional complexity of the subjects they address is overwritten by the comfort zone of their professional indifference.

The present shows that our lives, knowledge, and resistance seem not to matter. On the other hand, our black creativity and style, which have for centuries been means of survival, are lucrative. I am happy to watch more black (queer) women on television, but I don't see them in higher education. The abyss is in the heart of the education system.

Thirty years after Clark offered his analysis, the theorist Sylvia Wynter stated in an open letter to her colleagues that the epistemological foundations of dominant forms of thought are one key source of the "chronic day-to-day violence" Clark spoke of. Intellectuals and scientists, argued Wynter, reproduce the epistemological foundations for this violence by treating these foundations as objective and universal.

We Know What Needs to be Done. How is the Question.

What I see in the academy and the museum is that black and postcolonial scholars and artists repeat the aforementioned claims (with nuances)—but they create for a space which reciprocates nothing. On the contrary, this space consistently challenges the validity and profoundness of their voices. This compartmentalization is a key problem when it comes to the pedagogical project to distribute black thought. We learn how to learn in the absence of our voices. Black (female) writers and artists in particular are tokenized in order to not only represent an authentic black experience, but also to "enlighten" predominantly white classrooms, conferences, and peers. While some might argue that the willingness of white students and teachers to learn about their role in the world could be considered a first step into a productive dialogue,

playing the “indigenous interpreter” limits our possibilities and has a very important function in keeping white hegemony intact.[12] Furthermore, this kind of dialogue has its limits if black scholars, with their embodied knowledge and expertise, remain at the periphery of curricula, canons, and teaching faculty. The problem is structural as well as personal.

The absence of black thought in the arts and in education creates an “acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination … rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism … an exercise of power bereft of any pretense of the exercise of vision.”[13] History is without guarantees, and the abyss we are facing has changed. What kind of exercises of vision do we have to imagine now?

There is no healing presence when the wounded past is erased from our cultural memory and archive. The void this erasure produces fills empty gestures with violence rather than possibilities of relation.

X

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1
Herbert Marcuse, "An Essay on Liberation," 1969. Available at marxists.org https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/1969/essay-liberation.htm .

2
Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* , trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.

3
I am deliberately not using the English translation of "powerlessness" for the German word *Ohnmacht*, as in *Ohn-* (deriving from *Ohne* = without) and Macht (power), because the construction "in *Ohnmacht* fallen" is a phrase in German used to describe fainting, a somatic reaction to being overpowered by forces outside of one's body. To wake up from *Ohnmacht* would be described in German as " *zu sich kommen* ," which means to come to oneself. Hence, the process of being *Ohnmächtig* is c onnected to a detachment of the self from the body.

4
Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 739.

5
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* , trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 119.

6
Despite my fascination, I think it is always important to stress that Fanon's writing was deeply heteropatriarchal. See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

7
When I write "imperial" I am referring also to its aftermath, which Alexander Wehelyie has poignantly described as "the uneven global power structures defined by the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism, which interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination; and dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation, and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence." Alexander G. Wehelyie, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.

8
Sara Ahmed, "Melancholic Universalism," feministkilljoys.com, December 15 2015 https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/15/melancholic-universalism/ .

9
I am drawing on Glissant's notion of totality, which he explains as follows: "At this point I need to explain what I mean by this totality I have made so much noise about. It is the idea itself of totality, as expressed so superbly in Western thought, that is threatened with immobility. We have suggested that Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself. That means that, thought of in this manner, it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea. In Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity. Let us say this again, opaquely: the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

10
See *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World* , ed. Nikita Dhawan (Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2014).

11
Cornel West, "Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/barack-obama-legacy-presidency .

12
See Daniel Matlin, *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

13
David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

Achille Mbembe

Difference and Self-Determination

Difference and Self-Determination

Whether in literature, philosophy, the arts, or politics, Black discourse has been dominated by three events: slavery, colonization, and apartheid. Still today, they imprison the ways in which Black discourse expresses itself. These events have acquired certain canonical meanings, three of which are worth highlighting. First, there is separation from oneself. Separation leads to a loss of familiarity with the self to the point that the subject, estranged, is relegated to an alienated, almost lifeless identity. In place of the being-connected-to-itself (another name for tradition) that might have shaped experience, one is constituted out of an alterity in which the self becomes unrecognizable to itself: this is the spectacle of separation and quartering.[1] Second is the idea of disappropriation.[2] This process refers, on the one hand, to the juridical and economic procedures that lead to material expropriation and dispossession, and, on the other, to a singular experience of subjection characterized by the falsification of oneself by the other. What flows from this is a state of maximal exteriority and ontological impoverishment.[3] These two gestures (material expropriation and ontological impoverishment) constitute the singular elements of the Black experience and the drama that is its corollary. Finally, there is the idea of degradation. Not only did the servile condition plunge the Black subject into humiliation, abjection, and nameless suffering. It also incited a process of "social death" characterized by the denial of dignity, dispersion, and the torment of exile.[4] In all three cases, the foundational events that were slavery, colonialism, and apartheid played a key role: they condensed and unified the desire of the Black Man to know himself (the moment of sovereignty) and hold himself in the world (the moment of autonomy).

Liberalism and Racial Pessimism

From a historical perspective, the emergence of the plantation and the colony as institutions coincides with the very long period in the West during which a new form of governmental reason emerged and was affirmed: that of mercantile reason. It considered the market as the ultimate mechanism for exchange and the privileged locus of the veridiction both of the political and of the value and utility of things in general. The expansion of liberalism as an economic doctrine and a particular art of governance took place at a time when European states, in tight competition with one another and against the backdrop of the slave trade, were working to expand their power and saw the rest of the world as their economic domain and within their possession.

The plantation specifically and later the colony were in gestation from the second half of the fifteenth century. They constituted an essential machinery within a new

An eerie textile design depicts the slave trade, designed by Frédéric Etienne Joseph Feldtrappe (1786–1849) after a painting by George Morland (British, London 1763–1804 London). The colonial textile industry depended on slave trade for resources such as cotton, which politicized its self-referencial nature. According to the Met Museum: "Frederic Feldtrappe produced this textile in the early nineteenth century during a moment of intense debate in France over the viability and morality of the slave trade. Of the four narrative scenes, two reference earlier paintings by English artist George Moreland and contrast the brutality of European slave traders with the kindness of Africans who minister to a shipwrecked European family. The other two scenes, based on engravings by Frenchman Nicolas Colibert, juxtapose a happy African family with the appearance of European traders in Africa. Their cache of trade goods (including textiles) ominously foreshadows the horrors of the traffic in human beings."

form of calculation and planetary consciousness. It considered merchandise to be the elemental form of wealth and saw the capitalist mode of production as being fundamentally about the immense accumulation of merchandise. Merchandise had value only to the extent that it contributed to the formation of wealth, which constituted the reason for its use and exchange. From the perspective of mercantilist reason, the Black slave is at once object, body, and merchandise. It has form as a body-object or an object-body. It is also a potential substance. Its substance, which creates its value, flows from its physical energy. It is worksubstance. In this view the Black Man is material energy. This is the first door through which he enters into the process of exchange.

As an object of value to be sold, bought, and used, the Black Man also has access to a second door. The planter who purchases a Black slave does so neither to destroy nor to kill him but rather to use him in order to produce and augment the planter's own power. Not all Black slaves cost the same. The variability in price corresponds to the formal quality attributed to each of them. But any use of the slave diminishes the attributed formal quality. Once subjected to use, consumed and exhausted by their owner, the object returns to nature, static and henceforth unusable. In the mercantilist system, the Black Man is therefore the body-object, the merchandise, that passes from one form to another and—once in its terminal phase, exhausted, destroyed—is the object of a universal devalorization. The death of the slave signals the end of the object and escape from the status of merchandise.

Mercantilist reason thinks of the world as an unlimited market, a space of free competition and free circulation. The two approaches to the world that developed during the period were linked: the idea of the globe as a surface connected by commercial relations that cross state borders and thus threaten sovereignty, and the birth of international law, civil law, and cosmopolitan law, whose combined goal was to guarantee "perpetual peace." The modern idea of democracy, like liberalism itself, was inseparable from the project of commercial globalization.

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The plantation and the colony were nodal chains holding the project together. From their beginnings, as we well know, the plantation and the colony were racial dispositions whose calculus revolved around an exchange relationship based on property and profit. Part of liberalism, and racism, is therefore based on naturalism.

In his study *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault highlights the fact that, at its origin, liberalism "entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship [with] freedom." He forgot to specify that the high point, historically, of the destruction of liberty was the enslavement of Blacks. According to Foucault, the paradox of liberalism is that it "must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etc." The production of liberty therefore has a cost whose calculating principle is, adds Foucault, security and protection. In other words, the economy of power that defines liberalism, and the democracy of the same name, depends on a tight link between liberty, security, and protection against omnipresent threat, risk, and danger. Danger can result from the poor adjustment of the mechanisms balancing the diverse interests that make up the political community. But it can also come from outside. In both cases "liberalism turns into a mechanism continually having to arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals by reference to this notion of danger." The Black slave represents the danger.[5]

One of the motors of liberalism is the permanent animation, or the reactualization and placement into circulation, of the topic of danger and threat— and the resulting stimulation of a culture of fear. If the stimulation of a culture of fear is the condition, the "internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism," then, historically, the Black slave is its primary conduit.[6] From the beginning, racial danger has been one of the pillars of the culture of fear intrinsic to racial democracy. The consequence of fear, as Foucault reminds us, has always been the broad expansion of procedures of control, constraint, and coercion that, far from being aberrations,

A film still from Julie Dash's recently restored 1991 masterpiece Daughters of the Dust.

constitute the counterpart to liberty. Race, and in particular the existence of the Black slave, played a driving role in the historical formation of this counterpart.

The plantation regime and, later, the colonial regime presented a problem by making race a principle of the exercise of power, a rule of sociability, and a mechanism for training people in behaviors aimed at the growth of economic profitability. Modern ideas of liberty, equality, and democracy are, from this point of view, historically inseparable from the reality of slavery. It was in the Caribbean, specifically on the small island of Barbados, that the reality took shape for the first time before spreading to the English colonies of North America. There, racial domination would survive almost all historical moments: the revolution in the eighteenth century, the Civil War and Reconstruction in the nineteenth, and even the great struggles for civil rights a century later. Revolution carried out in the name of liberty and equality accommodated itself quite well to the practice of slavery and racial segregation.

These two scourges were, however, at the heart of the debates surrounding independence. Seeking to enlist slaves in the fight against the revolution, the English offered them sparkling promises of liberty. From then on, the specter of a generalized insurrection of the slaves—an old fear, part of the American system from its beginnings—shadowed the War of Independence. In fact, during the hostilities tens of thousands of slaves proclaimed their own freedom. There were important defections in Virginia. But there was a gap between the way Blacks conceived of their liberty (as something to conquer) and the ideas of the revolutionaries, who saw it as something that should be gradually granted. At the end of the conflict, the slave system was not dismantled. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were clearly texts of liberation, except when it came to race and slavery. A new kind of tyranny was consolidated at the very moment of liberation from tyranny. The idea of formal equality between White citizens emerged in a roundabout way from the revolution. It was the consequence of a conscious effort to put social distance between Whites on the one hand and African and Native American slaves on the other. The dispossession of the latter was justified through references to their laziness and lust. And if later, during the Civil War, there was a relatively equal amount of blood spilled by Whites and Blacks, the abolition of slavery did not lead to compensation for ex-slaves.

In this regard the chapter in Alexis de Tocqueville's portrait of American democracy devoted to "the Present State and Probable Future of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States" is particularly interesting. He writes both of the race of men "par excellence," the Whites, the "first in enlightenment, in power, in happiness," and of the "unfortunate races": Blacks and Native Americans. These three racial formations are not part of the same family. They are not just distinct from one another. Everything, or almost

everything, separates them: education, law, origins, and external appearance. And the barrier that divides them is, from his point of view, almost insurmountable. What unites them is their potential enmity, since "the European is to the men of other races what man himself is to the animals" to the extent that he "makes them serve his purposes, and when he cannot make them bend, he destroys them." Blacks have been the privileged subjects of this process of destruction, since their oppression has taken from them "nearly all the privileges of humanity." "The Negro of the United States has lost even the memory of his country; he no longer hears the language spoken by his fathers; he has renounced their religion and forgotten their mores. While thus ceasing to belong to Africa, however, he has acquired no right to the good things of Europe; but he has stopped between the two societies; he has remained isolated between the two peoples; sold by the one and repudiated by the other; finding in the whole world only the home of his master to offer him the incomplete picture of a native land."[7]

For Tocqueville, the Black slave embodies all the traits of debasement and abjection. He arouses aversion, repulsion, and disgust. A herd animal, he is the symbol of castrated and atrophied humanity from which emanates poisoned exhalations: he is a kind of constitutive horror. To encounter the slave is to experience an emptiness that is as spectacular as it is tragic. What characterizes him is the impossibility of finding a path that does not always return to servitude as its point of departure. It is the slave's taste for subjection. He "admires his tyrants even more than he hates them, and finds his joy and his pride in servile imitation of those who oppress him." As the property of another he is useless to himself. Since he does not dispose of the property of himself, "the care for his own fate has not devolved upon him. The very use of thought seems to him a useless gift from Providence, and he peacefully enjoys all the privileges of his servility." The enjoyment of the privileges of servility is an almost innate disposition. Here is a slave who is not in a struggle with his master. He risks nothing, not even his life. He does not struggle for his animal needs, much less to express sovereignty. He prefers his servitude and recoils when faced with death: "Servitude brutalizes him and liberty destroys him." The master, by contrast, lives in a constant fear of menace. The terror that envelops him is the possibility of being killed by his slave, a mere figure of a man that he does not even recognize as fully human.[8]

The fact that there is not a single Black person who has come freely to the shores of the New World is, for Tocqueville, one of the great dilemmas of American democracy. For him, there is no solution to the problem of the relationship between race and democracy, even though the central fact of race constitutes one of the future dangers for democracy. "The most formidable of all the evils that threaten the future of the United States arises from the presence of Blacks on their soil." "You can make the Negro free, but he remains in the position of a stranger vis-à-vis the European." In other words, the emancipation of the slaves cannot erase the stain of ignominy on them because of their race— the ignominy that means that Black necessarily rhymes with servitude. "The memory of slavery dishonors the race, and race perpetuates the memory of slavery," claims Tocqueville. "In this man who is born in lowliness," furthermore, "in this stranger that slavery introduced among us, we scarcely acknowledge the general features of humanity. His face appears hideous to us, his intelligence seems limited to us, his tastes are base; we very nearly take him for an intermediate being between brute and man."[9]

In liberal democracy, formal equality can therefore be paired with the natural prejudice that leads the oppressor to disdain those who were once his inferior even long after they have been emancipated. Without the destruction of prejudice, equality can only be imaginary. Even if the law makes of the Black Man an equal, he will never be like us. Tocqueville insists that there is an "insurmountable distance" separating the Blacks of America from the Europeans. The difference is unchangeable. It has its roots in nature itself, and the prejudice that surrounds it is indestructible. For this reason, the relationship between the two races can only oscillate between the degradation of the Blacks and their enslavement by Whites, on the one hand, and the fear of the destruction of Whites by the Blacks, on the other. The antagonism is unsurpassable.[10]

The second kind of fear experienced by the White master is that he will be confused for the debased race and end up resembling his former slave. It is important, therefore, to keep his slaves at the margins, as far away from himself as possible—thus the ideology of separation. Even if the Black Man has obtained formal liberty, "he is not able to share either the rights or the pleasures or the labors or the pains or even the tomb of the one whose equal he has been declared to be; he cannot meet him anywhere, either in life or in death." As Tocqueville specifies, "the gates of heaven are not closed to him: but in equality scarcely stops at the edge of the other world. When the Negro is no more, his bones are thrown aside, and the difference in conditions is found again even in the equality of death." In fact, racial prejudice "seems to increase proportionately as Negroes cease to be slaves," and "in equality becomes imprinted in the mores as it fades in the laws." The abolition of the principle of servitude does not necessarily signify the liberation of the slaves and equal access. It only contributes to transforming them into "unfortunate remnants" doomed to destruction.[11]

Tocqueville believes that the question of the relationship between race and democracy can be resolved only in one of two ways: "Negroes and Whites must either blend entirely or separate." But he conclusively sets aside the first solution. "I do not think that the white race and the black race will come to live on an equal footing anywhere." This kind of mixing would only be possible, he argues, under a despotic regime. In a democracy the liberty of

Whites can only be viable if accompanied by the segregation of Blacks and the isolation of the Whites among themselves. Since democracy is fundamentally incapable of resolving the racial question, the question that remains is how America can free itself of Blacks. To avoid a race war, Blacks must disappear from the New World and return home, to their countries of origin. This will allow an escape from slavery "without [Whites] having anything to fear from free Negroes." Any other option would result only in the "the ruin of one of the two races."[12]

A plate from Wyck Historic House, England features the Wedgewood abolition emblem: "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" The curvy, Rococo revival form dates it aproximately in the c.1840s-50s.

Human like All Others?

In Tocqueville's period the terms of the question were therefore clear: could Blacks govern themselves? The doubt regarding the aptitude of Blacks for self-governance led to another, more fundamental doubt, one deeply embedded in the modern approach to the complex problem of alterity— and to the status of the African sign in the midst of the economy of alterity. To understand the political implications of these debates, we must remember that, despite the romantic revolution, Western metaphysics has traditionally defined the human in terms of the possession of language and reason. In effect, there is no humanity without language. Reason in particular confers on the human being a generic identity, a universal essence, from which flows a collection of rights and values. It unites all humans. It is identical in each of them. The exercise of this faculty generates liberty and autonomy, as well as the capacity to live an individual life according to moral principles and an idea of what is good. That being the case, the question at the time was whether Blacks were human beings like all others. Could one find among them the same humanity, albeit hidden under different designations and forms? Could one detect in their bodies, their language, their work, or their lives the product of human activity and the manifestation of subjectivity—in short, the presence of a conscience like ours— a presence that would authorize us to consider each of them, individually, as an alter ego?

These questions gave rise to three different kinds of answers with relatively distinct political implications. The first response was that the human experience of Blacks should be understood as fundamental difference. The humanity of Blacks had no history as such. Humanity without history understood neither work nor rules, much less law. Because they had not liberated themselves from animal needs, Blacks did not see either giving or receiving death as a form of violence. One animal can always eat another. The *African sign* therefore had something distinct, singular, even indelible that separated it from all other human signs. The best testament to this was the Black body, its forms and colors.[13] The body had no consciousness or any of the characteristics of reason or beauty. It could not therefore be considered a body composed of flesh like one's own, because it belonged solely to the realm of material extension as an object doomed to peril and destruction. The centrality of the body—and especially of its color—in the calculus of political subjection explains the importance assumed by theories of the physical, moral, and political regeneration of Blacks over the course of the nineteenth century. These theories developed conceptions of society and the world—and of the good—that claimed an absence among Blacks. They lacked the power of invention and the possibility of universalism that comes with reason. The representations, lives, works, languages, and actions of Blacks—or even their deaths—obeyed no rule or law whose meaning they themselves could, on their own authority, conceive or justify. Because of this radical difference, this being-apart, it was deemed legitimate to exclude them in practice and in law from the sphere of full and complete human citizenship: they had nothing to contribute to the work of the universal.[14]

A significant shift occurred at the moment of abolitionism and the end of the slave trade. The thesis of Blacks as "humans apart" certainly persisted. But there was a slight slippage within the old economy of alterity that permitted a second kind of response. The thesis of nonsimilarity was not repudiated, but it was no longer based on the emptiness of the sign as such. Now the sign was filled with content. If Blacks were beings apart, it was because they had things of their own, customs that should not be abolished or destroyed but rather modified. The goal was to inscribe difference within a distinct institutional system in a way that forced it to operate within a fundamentally inegalitarian and hierarchical order. The subject of this order was the native, and the mode of governance that befitted him was indirect administration—an inexpensive form of domination that, in the British colonies especially, made it possible to command natives in a regularized manner, with few soldiers, and to pit them against one another by bringing their own passions and customs into play.[15] Difference was therefore relativized, but it continued to justify a relationship of inequality and the

right to command. Understood as natural, the inequality was nevertheless justified by difference.[16] Later, the colonial state used custom, or the principle of difference and inequality, in pursuit of the goal of segregation. Specific forms of knowledge (colonial science) were produced with the goal of documenting difference, purifying it of plurality and ambivalence, and fixing it in a canon. The paradox of the process of abstraction and reification was that it presented the appearance of recognition. But it also constituted a moral judgment since, in the end, custom was singularized only to emphasize the extent to which the world of the native, in its naturalness, did not coincide in any way with our own. It was not part of our world and could not, therefore, serve as the basis for a common experience of citizenship.

The third response had to do with the policy called assimilation. In principle, the idea of assimilation was based on the possibility of an experience of the world common to all human beings, or rather on the possibility of such an experience as premised on an essential similarity among all human beings. But this world common to all human beings, this similarity, was not granted outright to natives. They had to be converted to it. Education would be the condition under which they could be perceived and recognized as fellow human beings. Through it, their humanity would cease to be indefinable and incomprehensible. Once the condition was met, the assimilated became full individuals, no longer subject to custom. They could receive and enjoy rights, not by virtue of belonging to a particular ethnic group, but because of their status as autonomous subjects capable of thinking for themselves and exercising that particular human faculty that is reason. The assimilated signaled the possibility that the Black Man could, under certain conditions, become—if not equal or similar to us—at least our alter ego. Difference could be abolished, erased, or reabsorbed. Thus, the essence of the politics of assimilation consisted in desubstantializing and aestheticizing difference, at least for the subset of natives co-opted into the space of modernity by being "converted" or "cultivated," made apt for citizenship and the enjoyment of civil rights.

The Universal and the Particular

When Black criticism first took up the question of self-governance at the end of the Atlantic slave trade, and then during the struggles for decolonization, it inherited these three responses and the contradictions they had engendered. Criticism essentially accepted the basic categories then used in Western discourse to account for universal history. The notion of civilization was one of the categories.[17] It authorized the distinction between the human and the nonhuman—or the not-yet-sufficiently human that might become human if given appropriate training.[18] The three vectors of the process of

In Abderrahmane Sissako's 2006 movie Bamako, the plot follows a trial that is attempting to determine whether the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are guilty of the current financial state and debt of African countries.

domestication were thought to be conversion to Christianity, the introduction of a market economy through labor practices, and the adoption of rational, enlightened forms of government.[19] Among the first modern African thinkers, liberation from servitude meant above all the acquisition of the formal power to decide autonomously for oneself. Postwar African nationalism followed the tendencies of the moment by replacing the concept of civilization with that of progress. But this was simply a way to embrace the teleologies of the period.[20] The possibility of an alternative modernity was not excluded a priori, which explains why debates about "African socialism," for example, were so intense. But the problematic of the conquest of power dominated anticolonial nationalist thought and practices, notably in cases involving armed struggle. Two central categories were mobilized in the struggle to gain power and to justify the right to sovereignty and self-determination: on the one hand, the figure of the Black Man as a "suffering will," a victimized and hurt subject, and, on the other, the recovery and redeployment by Blacks themselves of the thematic of cultural difference, which, as we have seen, was at the heart of colonial theories of inferiority and in equality.

Defining oneself in this way depended on a reading of the world that later ideological currents would amplify, one that laid claim as much to progressivism and radicalism as to nativism. At the heart of the paradigm of victimization was a vision of history as a series of inevitabilities. History was seen as essentially governed by forces that escape us, following a linear cycle in which there are no accidents, one that is always the same, spasmodic, infinitely repeating itself in a pattern of conspiracy. The conspiracy is carried out by an external enemy that remains more or less hidden and that gains strength from private complicities. Such a conspiratorial reading of history was presented as the radical discourse of emancipation and autonomy, the foundation for a so-called politics of Africanity. But behind the neurosis of

victimization lurks in reality a negative and circular way of thinking that relies on superstition to function. It creates its own fables, which subsequently pass for reality. It makes masks that are conserved and remodeled in different epochs. So it is with the couple formed by the executioner (enemy) and his victim (the innocent). The enemy—the executioner—incarnates the absolute form of cruelty. The victim, full of virtue, is incapable of violence, terror, or corruption. In this closed universe, where "making history" becomes nothing more than flushing out one's enemies or destroying them, any form of dissent is seen as extremism. There exists a Black subject only within a violent struggle for power—above all, the power to spill blood. The Black Man is a castrated subject, a passive instrument for the enjoyment of the Other, and becomes himself only through the act of taking the power to spill blood from the colonizer and using it himself. In the end, history moves within a vast economy of sorcery.

As we have underscored, Black discourse consists in part in appropriating the ideology of cultural difference for one's own purposes, in internalizing it and using it to one's own benefit. The ideology leans on the three crutches that are race, geography, and tradition. In fact, most political theories of the nineteenth century established a tight link between the human subject and the racial subject. To a large extent, they read the human subject first through the prism of race. Race itself was understood as a set of visible physiological properties with discernible moral characteristics. It was thought that these properties and characteristics were what distinguished human species from one another.[21] Physiological properties and moral characteristics made it possible to classify races according to a hierarchy whose violent effects were both political and cultural.[22] As we have already noted, the dominant classification during the nineteenth century excluded Blacks from the circle of humanity or at least assigned them an inferior status in the hierarchy of races. It is this denial of humanity (or inferior status) that forces such discourse to inscribe itself, from the beginning, in a tautology: "We are also human beings."[23] Or better yet: "We have a glorious past that proves our humanity."[24] That is also the reason that, at its origins, the discourse on Black identity is infused with a tension from which it still has difficulty escaping: are Blacks part of a generic humanity?[25] Or, in the name of difference and singularity, do Blacks insist on the possibility of diverse cultural forms within a single humanity—cultural forms whose vocation is not simply to reproduce themselves but also to seek a final, universal destination?[26]

In this sense, the reaffirmation of a human identity denied by others is part of a discourse of refutation and rehabilitation. But if the discourse of rehabilitation seeks to confirm the cobelonging of Blacks to humanity in general, it does not—except in a few rare cases—set aside the fiction of a racial subject or of race in general.[27] In fact, it embraces the fiction. This is true as much of Negritude as of the various versions of Pan-Africanism. In fact, in these propositions—all of them imbued with an imagined culture and an imagined politics—race is the foundation not only of difference in general but also of the very idea of nation and community, since racial determinants are seen as the necessary moral basis for political solidarity. Race serves as proof of (or sometimes justification for) the existence of the nation. It defines the moral subject as well as the immanent fact of consciousness. Within much of Black discourse, the fundamental foundations of nineteenth-century anthropology—the prejudice of evolutionary thinking and the belief in progress—remain intact. And the racialization of the nation and the nationalization of race go hand in hand.

The latent tension that has always broadly shaped reflection on Black identity disappears in the gap of race. The tension opposes a universalizing approach, one that proclaims a cobelonging to the human condition, with a particularizing approach that insists on difference and the dissimilar by emphasizing not originality as such but the principle of repetition (custom) and the values of autonomy. In the history of Black thought during the last two centuries, race has been the point of reconciliation between the two politico-cultural approaches. The defense of the humanity of Blacks almost always exists in tandem with claims about the specific character of their race, traditions, customs, and history. All language is deployed along this fault line, from which flow representations of what is "Black." We rebel not against the idea that Blacks constitute a distinct race but against the prejudice of inferiority attached to the race. The specificity of so-called African culture is not placed in doubt: what is proclaimed is the relativity of cultures in general. In this context the "work for the universal" consists in expanding the Western ratio of the contributions brought by Black "values of civilization," the "specific genius" of the Black race, for which "emotion" in particular is considered the cornerstone. It is what Senghor calls the "encounter of giving and receiving," one of whose results should be the mixing of cultures.[28]

The discourse of cultural difference was developed on the basis of these common beliefs. In the nineteenth century, there emerged attempts to settle on a general denomination and locate a place in which to anchor the prose of Black difference and the idea of African autonomy. Its geographic locus was tropical Africa, a place of fictions if ever there was one. The goal was to abolish the fantastic anatomy of the place that Europeans had invented and that Hegel and others echoed.[29] Somehow, the scattered limbs of Africa were gathered up and reattached, its fragmented body reconstructed in the imaginary zenith of race and in the radiance of myth.[30] The project was to locate Africanness in a collection of specific cultural traits that ethnographic research would furnish. Finally, nationalist historiography sought out what was lacking in ancient African empires—even in pharaonic Egypt.[31] This approach, taken up by ideological currents linked to progressivism and radicalism, consisted first in

establishing a quasiequivalence between race and geography, and then in creating a cultural identity that flowed from the relationship between the two terms. Geography became the ideal terrain in which the power of race and institutions could take form.[32] Pan-Africanism effectively defined the native and the citizen by identifying them as Black. Blacks became citizens because they were human beings endowed, like all others, with reason. But added to this was the double fact of their color and the privilege of indigeneity. Racial authenticity and territoriality were combined, and in such conditions Africa became the land of the Blacks. As a result, every thing that was not Black had no place and consequently could not claim any sort of Africanity. The spatial body, racial body, and civic body all became one. The spatial body served as a witness to the common indigeneity by virtue of which all of those born there or sharing the same color and the same ancestors were brothers and sisters. The racial referent became the basis for civic kinship. In the process of determining who was Black and who was not, there was no way to imagine identity without racial consciousness. The Black Man would henceforth no longer be someone who simply participated in the human condition but the person who, born in Africa, lives in Africa and is of the Black race. The idea of an Africanity that is not Black simply became unthinkable. In this logic of identity assignation, non-Blacks were not from Africa (they were not natives) since they came from elsewhere (they were settlers). As a result, it was impossible to conceive of Africans of European origin.

But, because of the slave trade, it so happened that Blacks inhabited faraway lands. How was their inscription in a racially defined nation to be conceived when geography had separated them from their place of birth, which was far from the place where they lived and worked? Some proposed that the best way for them to consecrate their Africanity was purely and simply to return to Africa. Since the African geographic space constituted the natural homeland for Blacks, those who through slavery were taken far from the bosom of Africa lived in a condition of exile.[33] To a large extent, the horizon of the ultimate return (the back-to-Africa movement) infused the Pan-Africanist movement. More fundamentally, Pan-Africanism developed within a racist paradigm that triumphed in Europe during the nineteenth century.[34] It was a discourse of inversion, drawing its fundamental categories from the myths that it claimed to oppose and reproducing their dichotomies: the racial difference between Black and White, the cultural confrontation between the civilized and the savage, the religious opposition between Christians and pagans, the conviction that race founded nation and vice versa. It inscribed itself within an intellectual genealogy founded on the territorialization of identity on the one hand and the racialization of geography on the other, or the myth of a racial polis. And it forgot a key fact: that if exile was certainly the result of the rapacity of capitalism, its origins also lay in a family murder.[35]

X

This text is an excerpt from Critique of Black Reason *by Achille Mbembe, translated by Laurent Dubois and published by Duke University Press in March 2017.*

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1
Whether through the vocabulary of alienation or that of deracination, Francophone criticism has probably conceptualized this process of the "exit from oneself " best. See in particular Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967); Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (London: Heinemann, 1972); Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1977); and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

2
This applies in particular to Anglophone work in Marxist political economy. See, for example, Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* , rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982); or the works of authors such as Samir Amin, *Le développement inégal: Essai sur les formations sociales du capitalisme périphérique* (Paris: Minuit, 1973).

3
On falsification and the necessity to "re-establish historical truth," see, for example, the work of nationalist historians: Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire, d'hier à demain* (Paris: Hatier, 1972); and Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* , trans. Mercer Cook (New York: L. Hill, 1974).

4
On the problematic of slavery as social death, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

5
Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79* , trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 64, 66.

6
Ibid., 67.

7
Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of "De la démocratie en Amérique,"* ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 516–17.

8
Ibid., 517–18.

9
Ibid. *,* 549, 551.

10
Ibid., 552.

11
Ibid. *,* 555, 566.

12
Ibid. *,* 572, 578.

13
On the centrality of the body as the ideal unity of the subject and the locus of recognition of its unity, its identity, and its value, see Umberto Galimberti, *Les raisons du corps* (Paris: Grasset, 1998).

14
On this point and those that precede it, see, among others, Pierre Pluchon, *Nègres et Juifs au XVIIIe siècle: Le racisme au siècle des lumières* (Paris: Tallandier, 1984); Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois,* vol. 1 (Paris: G arnier/Flammarion, 1979); Voltaire, "Essais sur les moeurs et l'esprit" des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIV," in *OEuvres complètes* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire et Typographique, 1784), vol. 16; and Immanuel Kant *, Observations sur le sentiment du beau et du sublime* , trans. Roger Kempf (Paris: Vrin, 1988).

15
Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

16
The most developed institutional form of this economy of alterity was the apartheid regime, in which hierarchies were of a biological order. It was an expanded version of indirect rule. See Lucy P. Mair, *Native Policies in Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936); and Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1980).

17
See the texts gathered in Henry S. Wilson, *Origins of West African Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1969).

18
See, for example, Nicolas de Condorcet, "Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Nègres (1778)," in *OEuvres* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1847), vol. 7.

19
Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994); and Edward W. Blyden, *Liberia's Offering* (New York: John A. Gray, 1862).

20
See, for example, the texts gathered in *The African Liberation Reader* , 3 vols., eds. Aquino de Bragança and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Zed, 1982).

21
See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Chicago: Southern Illinois Press, 1978).

22
On this point, see *L'idée de la race dans la pensée politique française contemporaine* eds. Pierre Guiral and Emile Temime (Paris: Editions du cnrs, 1977).

23
You can see the centrality of this theme in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks;* Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* ; and, in a general sense, the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor.

24
W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1946).

25
To this effect, see the final pages of Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* .

26
This is the thesis of Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism in the Twentieth Century," in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* , eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 27–35.

27
In this regard, see the critique of the texts of Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chaps. 1 and 2. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racism and Moral Pollution," *Philosophical Forum*, vol. 18, nos. 2–3 (1986–1987): 185–202.

28
Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); and Senghor, *Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

29
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History* , trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953).

30
In the Francophone world, see in particular the works of Diop and, in the Anglophone world, the theses on Afrocentricity offered by Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988).

31
See, among others, *Théophile Obenga, L'Afrique dans l'Antiquité: Égypte pharaonique* , *Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973)

32
Paradoxically, we find the same impulse and the same desire to conflate race and geography in the racist writings of White colonists in South Africa. For details on this, see John M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). See especially the chapters on Sarah Gertrude Millin, Pauline Smith, and Christiaan Maurits van den Heever.

33
They must "return to the land of (their) fathers and be at peace," as writes Blyden in *Christianity*, 124.

34
Africa as a subject of racial mythology can be found as much in the works of Du Bois as those of Diop or else Wole Soyinka; for the latter, see Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

35
Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

Barbara Cassin

More Than One Language

Why Learn and Speak a Different Language from One's Own?

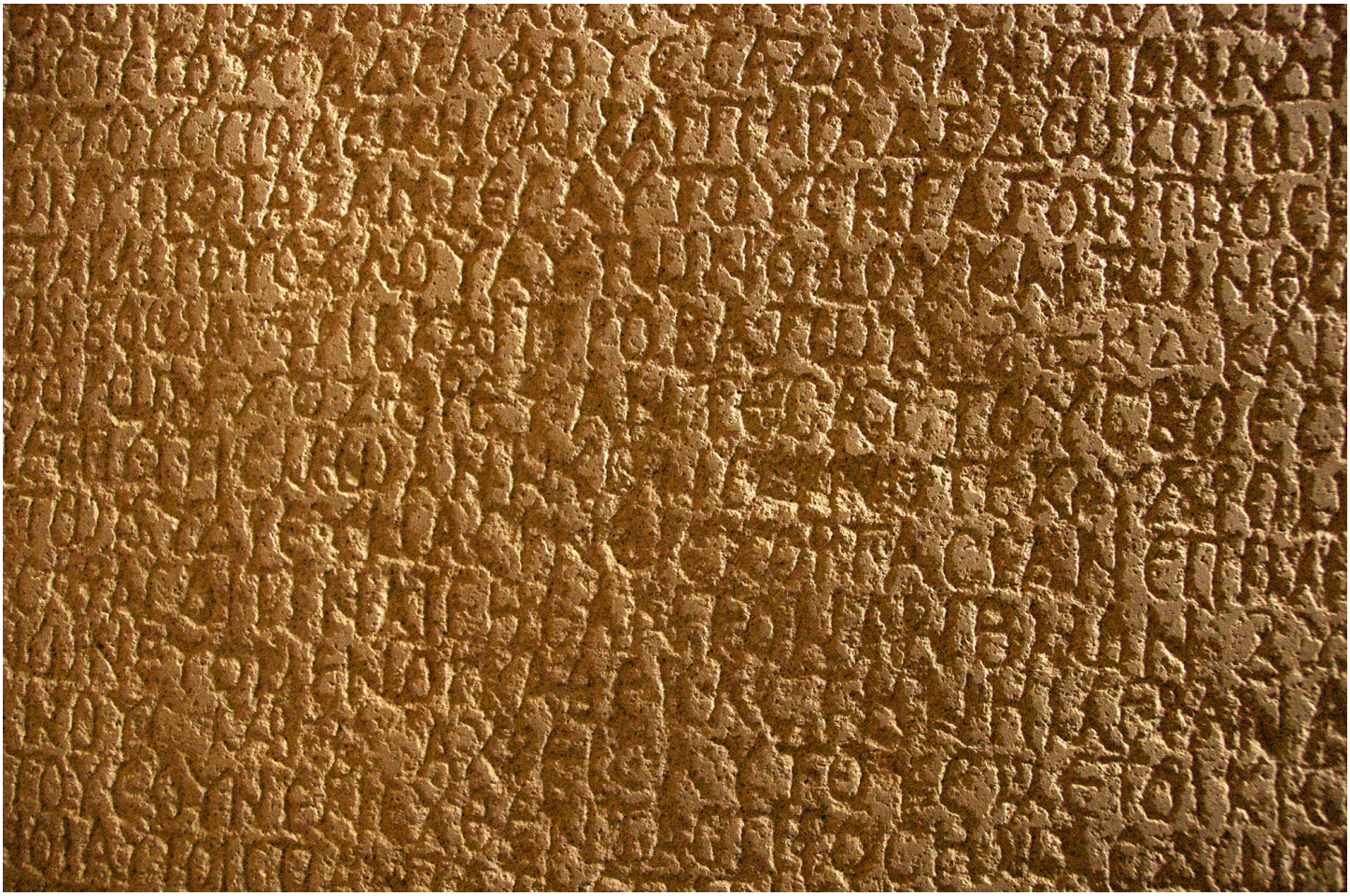
I don't know what "one's own" means and I'd like to begin with a different question: What is a maternal language? I will then try to understand what happens when you speak more than one language, when you speak several different languages, and how these different languages ultimately draw out different worlds; not incompatible worlds, not radically different worlds, but worlds in resonance with one another and without ever being able to match up completely. This is why we will have to ask how we go from one language to another and think about what we call translation.

I will wonder about this on the basis of what I know, on the basis of the heart of my trade. I am a philosopher. The term "philosopher" comes directly from Ancient Greek and means someone who loves wisdom. This is what a few Greeks called themselves a long time ago, in the fifth century BC, twenty-six centuries ago. These Greeks declared that they were called philosophers, and in that they were being much less pretentious than you might think because they said they loved wisdom and not that they were wise. They were not "sophers" but "philosophers." The love of wisdom can bring about the birth of certain questions: Why speak another language? What is a language? And what is a maternal language?

What Is a Maternal Language? Barbarity and Blah Blah Blah

Let's start with the first question. The maternal language is Mom's language, it can also be Dad's, and they are not necessarily the same one. It's the language we speak, in which our birth is bathed, the language that surrounds us at home, with our family. Already in our mother's belly, we hear sounds that start a long process of habituation made from the sequence of the songs we are sung to make us fall asleep when we are infants and the stories we are told later on. This is the singularity of the maternal language. A certain number among you perhaps have two maternal languages, not because you have two mothers but because the language of your mother or of your father is not the same one. Or else because the language your family speaks and in which you bathe is immediately linked to or in competition with (I'm not sure how to put it) the language of the country they find themselves in, the one spoken to you and that you perhaps already speak at home, with your brothers and sisters, and if not, after a short while, outside the house, at the nursery, at school.

Speaking two languages is never easy, but it is an opportunity. It allows you to avoid falling prey to an illusion that, in my opinion, is very dangerous, one the Greeks

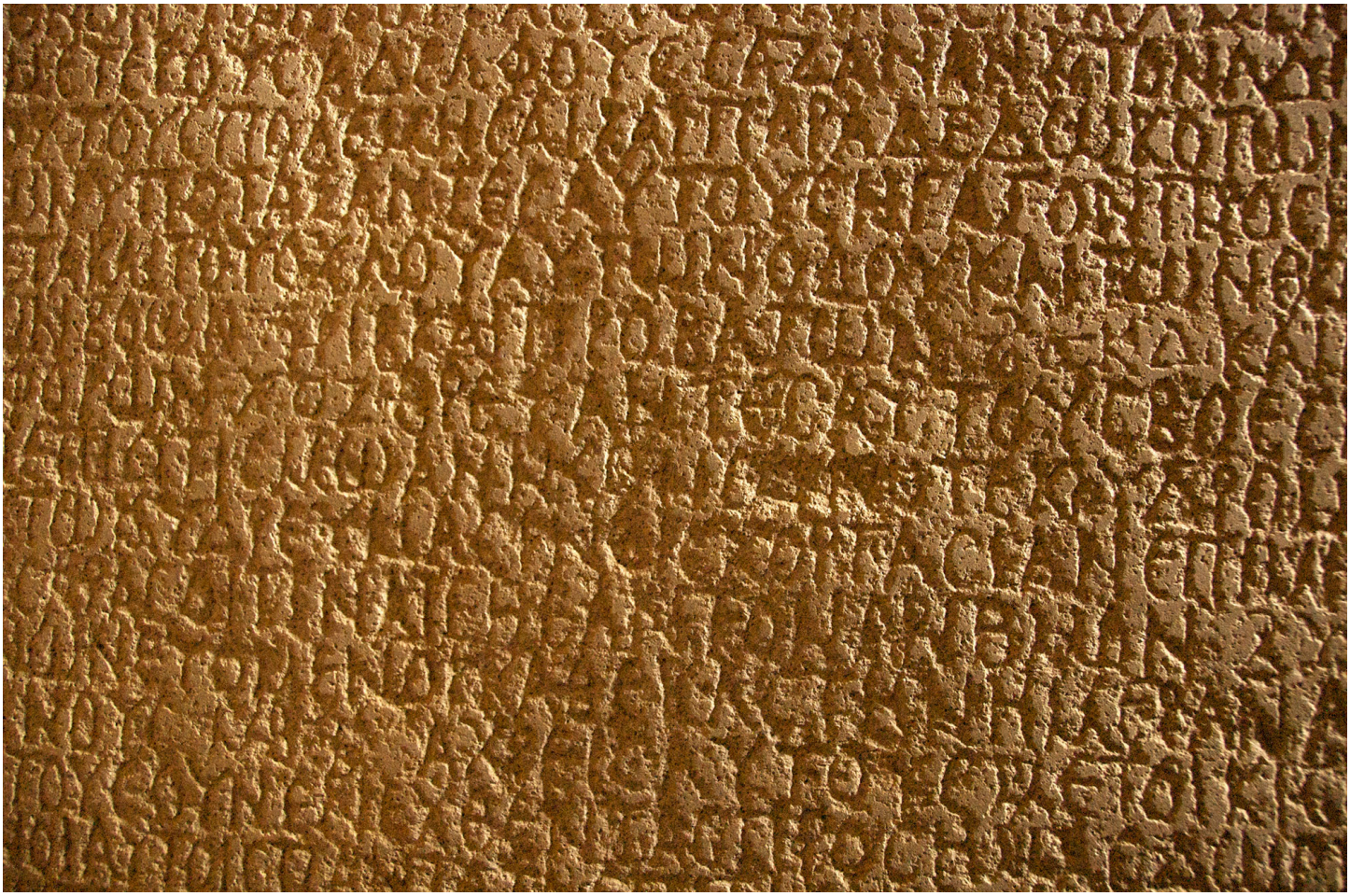


A close-up of the Ezana Stone shows its chiseled words in bas relief. The Ezana Stone is an artifact from the ancient Kingdom of Aksum (corresponding to modern-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) and documents, in three different languages, the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity. Photo: A. Davey.

cultivated. They imagined that only one language, their own, truly existed. They named it with a word: *logos*. Everybody else, anyone that didn't speak like them, were "barbarians," people who say "blah blah blah," something the Greeks could not understand. You know what onomatopoeias are, "crack," "splash," "boom." "Barbarian" is the noise of people designated by their noise-making—an incomprehensible noise for the Greeks, who did not understand it and did not seek to understand it. *Logos*, in contrast, signifies "language" in Greek, but also "reason." Aristotle, one of the first Greek philosophers, defines man as an animal endowed with *logos*, an animal that speaks-and-thinks. The Greeks therefore suppose that the language they speak is the same thing as reason, that Greek is the language of reason, of intelligence, the only possible language, and that anything else does not actually exist. The rest isn't even a language. The Greeks spoke the *logos*, in other words the language that makes up humanity, culture, rationality, so much so that the Greeks were not sure the barbarians were human. In any case, as barbarians, as blabbering, there was room for doubt. Imagining that only one language exists, the one you speak, sets a terrible divide into place. This means that the others perhaps do not really speak, may not be human, or at any rate are not human like you. This is why I say that being bilingual is an opportunity, because it provides a chance for understanding and feeling that there are several languages. The first thing to bear in mind when you want to think the maternal language is that it is one language, one language among other possible languages, one language among others, even if each one is magnificently singular.

"A Language is Not Something that Belongs"

The maternal language is therefore the one, or the several, into which we are born, and it is not the only possible one. It's the one that will accompany us our whole life (or the ones that will accompany us if there are several), the one in which we dream. Have you ever wondered which language you dream in? This is a beautiful and important question. What language does one dream in? The maternal language is the one in which we are steeped, we bathe in its sonorities and we can play with it, make puns,



A close-up of the Ezana Stone shows its chiseled words in bas relief. The Ezana Stone is an artifact from the ancient Kingdom of Aksum (corresponding to modern-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) and documents, in three different languages, the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity. Photo: A. Davey.

hear significant echoes, invent: we are master of this language and yet it is the one that has a hold on us. It's an extraordinary relationship. We are master because we can say what we want in it, but it has a hold on us because it determines our manner of thinking, our manner of living, our manner of being.

This very singular relationship constitutes us and, at the same time, one must know that the language that is ours, or the languages that are ours, our maternal languages, do not belong to us. Jacques Derrida, a philosopher, said a phrase I find very beautiful: "A language is not something that belongs."

One can understand this in two different senses.

First, the most obvious one: a language is not something that belongs to a nation or a country. Others learn or share the French language, for example, with us. "Francophonie" is not only made up of French people, luckily for the French and for the French language because it spreads, diversifies, and is enriched not only in Africa or Canada, but in lots of other places.

"Not something that belongs" also means that, when you speak a language, you are the one that belongs to it as much as it belongs to you. Within it, you can always invent but ultimately, through you, thanks to you, it is the one that is constantly inventing itself. You are not the one who possesses it because it is the one that obligates and makes you. It doesn't belong to you: you belong to it and it belongs to people other than you. That is what a maternal language is.

In our maternal language, we find easier access to sounds like "blah blah blah," *barbaros*, "barbarian"—sounds that refer to what is called the signifier, in other words the manner in which noises constitute words, the relation between a word, the noise it makes, and the sense it has. This is why the maternal language or languages are also the languages in which we dream, and in which we can read, and perhaps write poems. And when we dream in a foreign language (something that has happened to me), we honor it, we belong to it a bit, or we belong to someone who speaks it. Poetry, too, is constantly bringing sounds in and setting them to play. In the manuals for studying languages, there are hardly ever poems. We are taught to

say, "Hello, how are you? I want to go to the movies. Can you give me a coffee?" But we rarely learn to listen to the language in its texts and poems. In a certain way, you will therefore never really have it in your ear, or in the body, and you are not truly going to have pleasure with it. You will not know how it draws out the world. In the maternal language, you know it and hear it immediately. It is very important to hear and read texts aloud. La Fontaine's fables are extraordinary in that we are obligated to read them with a tone. And tone is something that comes from sounds. For example, *The Cat, the Weasel and the Little Rabbit*:

> La dame au nez pointu répondit que la terre était au premier occupant. C'était un beau sujet de guerre qu'un logis où lui-même il n'entrait qu'en rampant.
>
> The madame with nose so sharp replied: "The earth is his by whom first occupied. A pretty cause for war is feign'd; A house himself by creeping only gained!"

Ta ta ta ta, hammered, articulated, and up high: preemptory and pointed, that's the weasel. And here's the cat:

> C'était un chat vivant comme un dévot ermite. Un chat faisant la chattemite, un saint homme de chat, bien fourré, gros et gras, arbitre expert sur tous les cas.
>
> He lived a pious hermit of a cat—A cat with meek inviting face. Swelled in his reverend ermine sleek and fat, A judge expert in every case.

In French, you can hear it, *gros* and *gras*, lots of o's and a's that the translator has also found in "pious" and "cat." You can navigate inside this as if it were a whole, and to know a language, it is indeed true that you have to feel it as a whole.

There are very great poems in every language. They fabricate the language and are fabricated by it. Homer's poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* founded the Greek language. If I tell you two phrases from these poems, you are not going to understand them but perhaps you will hear them. The scene represents a goddess, Thetis, and her son Achilles. He is mourning the death of his friend Patroclus, she knows that her son is going to die and is mourning as well and each one of them mourns with a particular noise. He is a great warrior whose speech heavily sighs, with long syllables, from the depths of his chest: *tôi de baru stenakhonti*. When she mourns, everything is tight with sadness and almost chirps, listen: *oxu de kôkusasa* (it's in the 18th song, lines 70–71). What one has for oneself in the maternal language, and what is perhaps the most difficult thing to master in another language, is the body of that language.

There are thus one or several languages that are more maternal than others, the ones we are immediately able to hear and with which we are one. But luckily, if a language is not something that belongs, this is also because it is something that is learned.

Several Languages Several Worlds

What does it really mean to know several languages? Perhaps having more than one string to one's bow. Several languages are several worlds, several ways to open oneself to the world.

It is not things first and then words, and it is complicated to figure out how this relationship forms. This is the source of a longstanding quarrel among philosophers. Did we first have a thing and then a word, or first a word and then a thing, or did both come at the same time? Probably both: philosophers are extremely prudent and today they often decide for both. But, in classical philosophy, we traditionally imagine that the thing exists first and that then we will start naming it. As a result, we don't often think about the way we name it in different languages: the identity of the thing to which the words refer is enough to ensure correct communication.

Yet I think that the word works the thing and in a certain way makes it be. Let's take *khaire*, the Greek word used as a salute. It does not at all signify *good morning* or *welcome*, nor *bonjour.* It literally means "enjoy, take pleasure." When we salute one another in this language, one does not say "have a good day" or "hope your day is fine," one says "enjoy," and that is not at all the same thing! There is a whole world that is sketched out here. When a Latin speaker meets or leaves another Latin speaker, he tells him: *vale*, "be well," "be in good health." That is yet another world. When you say "hello" in Hebrew or in Arabic, you say *shalom, salam*, "may peace be with you." The world opens up in an entirely different way according to the language used and whether you are told to "have a nice day," to "enjoy" or "be well," or for "peace to be with you." This is what I find so interesting in the difference between languages: how each one always sketches out something like a world or a vision of the world, and how these worlds enter into contact with one another.

I would like to take another example, a very concrete one. The word "table" comes from the Latin *tabula*, the banker's tablet. The banker would set up a little *tabula* where affairs of money could be settled, particularly loans or currency exchange. The Greeks for their part would say *trapeza*, "with four feet"; it was a Greek table that had four

Woodcut illustration from the anonymous medical handbook Zhengzhi tuzhu houke (Diagnosis and Treatment of Throat Conditions, Illustrated), edition engraved in 1797. Photo: Wellcome Foundation.

feet and was not a little tablet. When you say "table" in Spanish, you say *mesa*. In geography too, a *mesa* designates a plateau: the Castile plateau or the one in the Andes. You do not say exactly the same thing when you think of a changer tablet, a piece of furniture with four feet, or a plateau in Castile. All these haloes of sense around the words constitute languages and their differences. Speaking different languages thus comes down to having within one's reach several worlds that can be compared to one another. In the nineteenth century, the German Romantics proposed a very beautiful comparison by inventing or by reinventing linguistics, in other words the art of dealing with languages. They said that a language is like a net you throw into the world, and according to the mesh of the net, where and how it is thrown and pulled back in, different fish turn up. A language is what brings back certain kinds of fish, a certain kind of world.

Untranslatables

I have spent a lot of time understanding what we might do with this perception. As a philosopher, I worked with a hundred and fifty other philosophers from all the countries of Europe—simply because I was not able to make my way out of Europe in order to undertake a truly external comparison—on what we call "untranslatables," words that one cannot render in another language, that are characteristics of a language and signal it in its difference: in sum, symptoms of the difference of languages.

We wrote a *Dictionary of Untranslatables* in philosophy … and it took us fifteen years! What was most improbable about this adventure was that it was such a success in bookstores! Fairly quickly we sold more than ten thousand copies, proof of the public's interest. We were not interested in "table," but in more abstract, more philosophical words such as *liberté*, for example, a harshly philosophical word. There are at least two ways to say *liberté* in Europe and they imply very different things. In English, for example, the French word *liberté* can be translated in two ways: "liberty" or "freedom." These two words include two concepts of *liberté* that are not at all alike. "Liberty," like *liberté*, comes from the Latin word *liberi*, "the children": "liberty" belongs to children who are born in free people's homes, non-slaves; in other words (and I am only repeating the analyses of a great linguist, Emile Benveniste), it is a matter of a liberty transmitted from parents to children, a vertical liberty. "Freedom," for its part, is from the same family as "friend" and this kind of *liberté* is horizontal, the freedom of a class of age, of companions who are going to study or wage war together. "Freedom" exists in an immediately political way while "liberty" is "naturally" transmitted through the family. Of course, things immediately get more complicated because the question of nature and culture is difficult: a father is not "naturally" free because nature is only ever the name of a certain state of society, it's just that this type of *liberté* is transmitted from generation to generation. In any case, you can see how "freedom" and "liberty" are different perceptions of *liberté* that are sketched out within the same language.

The mere fact that there are two words in English ("freedom" and "liberty") for what has only one word in French (*liberté*) and also has only one word in German (*Freiheit*, which has the same etymology as "freedom"), is very interesting. Like the Latin word, the French word implies *jus sanguinis*, a born writ that passes from father to son. As for the German term, it immediately designates the freedom of equal battle companions acting out of solidarity. This produces philosophical and political reflections that are not at all the same. It produces them or is produced by them, I am not sure how to state the direction of the causality, but let's say we can feel the difference in languages vibrating here.

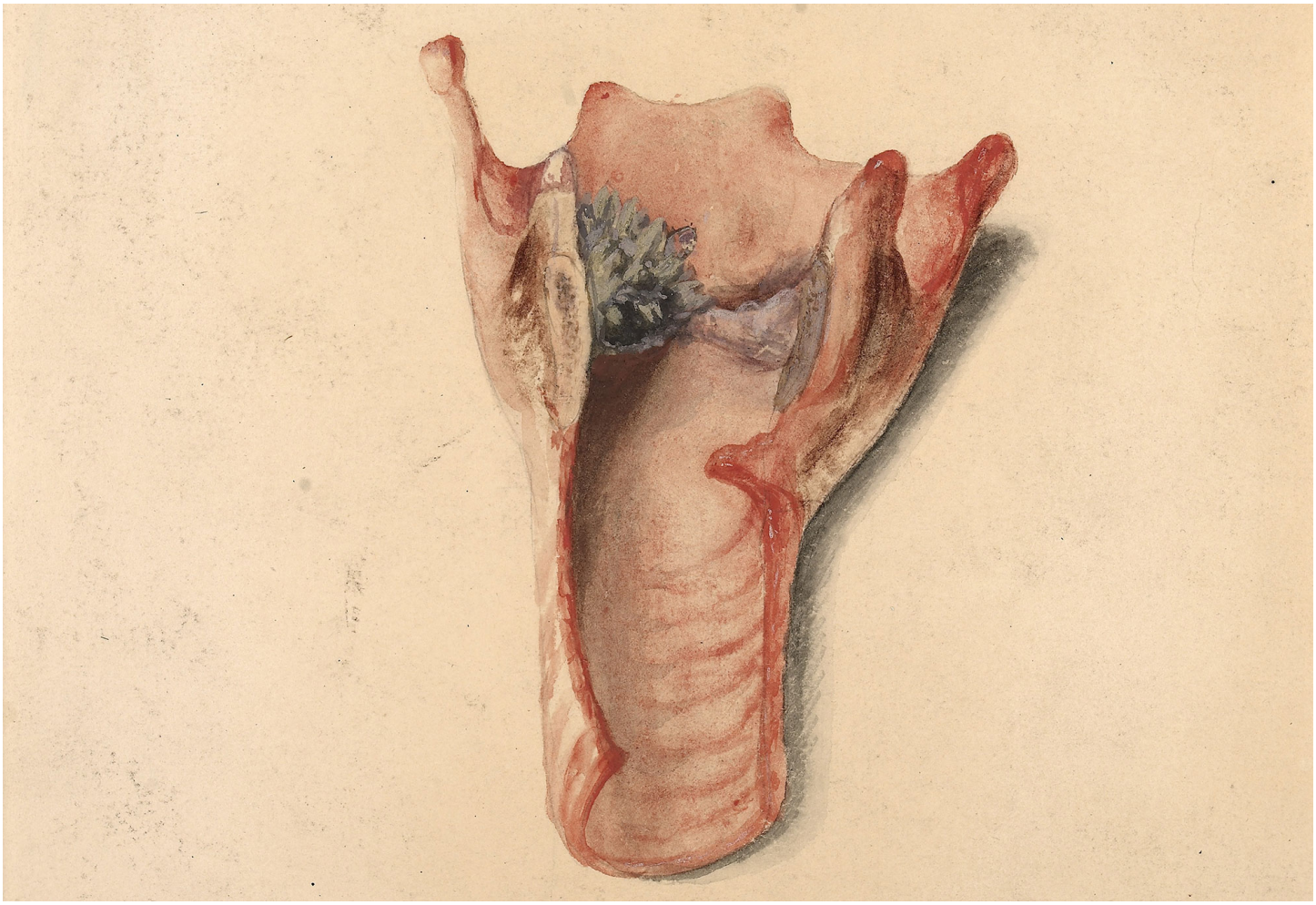
Homonyms

It is fascinating to improve our understanding of what makes for the singularity of each language. If I forget for a moment many important things, things related to syntax and grammar (the order of words, the gender of nouns, verb tense, etc.), what constitutes the singularity of each language is, in particular, words with several meanings. There are the terrible words we call "homonyms": the same word means several things.

Different homonyms exist in every language. It is in fact on the basis of another language that we can identify the homonyms in the language we speak, in our maternal language.

Let's take the example of "truth" in English, something that conforms to reality. When I say that this table is yellow, it's true: you see it and it is indeed yellow. But in Russian there are two words for saying "truth." One of these words, *pravda*, was the name of the Communist Party's newspaper that was always supposed to tell the truth. But this same word also means "justice"; we know this because it was used to translate the Greek word *dikaiosunê*, which signifies "justice" in the Bible without any possible ambiguity, into Russian (or into Slavonic, an ancestor of Russian). The other Russian word, *istina*, also means "truth" but in the sense of exactness: this table is brown, yellow, this statement is exact and therefore the word *istina* is used. So you can see that for Russians, when we say "truth," we confuse two things: justice and exactness. From our point of view, on the other hand, when they say *pravda*, Russian speakers confuse two things: justice and truth.

Every language has its share of confusion, but these forms of confusion can be observed on the basis of another language. They even only exist as a function of this other point of view. It is always from the outside that you can see how things work at home. It is only outside your own



Thomas Godart, Watercolor Drawing Showing a Papilloma Springing from the Neighbourhood of the Left Vocal Cord [detail], 1862–75. Photo: Wellcome Foundation.

territory that you notice it. It is very important to speak two languages, at least two, because it allows you to understand that yours is not the only possible one, as well as the kinds of conflagrations or fusions of meaning your language produces. When I say *sens* in French, it means the "sense" or "meaning" of a word in English, the "sensation" one feels, and also the "direction." This is incredible and I don't think it exists in any other modern language! What defines a language is the sum of its ambiguities, especially when they are not a product of chance but are grounded, as is the case here, in the long history of that language, for example through the translations that are carried out from one language to another. Thus the "sense" of a word and "sensation" were already related in the Latin *sensus* from which the French language inherits; and the Latin itself translated the Greek *nous*, which means something like "intuition," something you apprehend all of a sudden, whether instantaneously (like a sniffing dog) or immediately (like a thinking god).

Translating

And so to conclude, we have yet to understand how we can go from one language to another: by translating, "trans-lation," "bringing across," how eloquent.

One must first underline just how difficult translation is. To go from one language to another, we have to go from one world to another and we have to somehow make our way across a ditch. Luckily there is a world common to all these worlds: we all live, I was going to say "globally," in the same world; we do indeed have something like "the world" that we share, but, considering all the many languages and the cultures they implicate, it is passionately composite, heteroclite, jointed, and disjointed.

Here are two translations of the same text, describing the scene of Babel. It makes the plurality of language out to be a form of divine punishment and not a human richness, so much so that I am not at all sure I agree. This passage from the Bible tells how men wanted to erect a tower so

high that it defied God. God punished them by preventing them from entirely gathering together, in other words by giving them the diversity of languages. Men started speaking several languages even though up until then they had only spoken one. They therefore dispersed, because the difference of languages was successful in preventing them from uniting. The first translation is from the *Bishop's Bible*:

> And all the whole earth was of one language and lyke speech And when they went forth from the east, they found a playne in the land of Sinner, and there they abode And one saıd to another: Come let vs prepare brycke, and burn them in the fire. And they had brycke for stones, and schlime had they in steade of morter And they saıd: Go to, let vs build vs a citie and a toure, whose toppe may reach into heaven and vs make vs a name, least per aventure we be scattered abroad into the upper face of the whole earth But the Lord came donne to see the citie and toure which the children of men building And the Lord saıd: Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do: neither is there any let to them from all those things which they have imagined to do Come on, let vs go donne, and there confound their language, that eur eye one perceive not his neighbours speech And so the Lord scattered them from that place into the upper face of all the earth, and they left of to build that citie And ter four is the name of it called Babel because the Lord did confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Here you are being told the story of Babel. All of a sudden nobody understands anyone else any more, people only hear "blah blah blah." But you have no problem understanding. It's a text that functions as if it were written in a strangely familiar English though it dates from the sixteenth century.

If I read the second translation, what you will hear is a very different English language, it's another language in our own that comes from further back in time: the *King James Bible*.

> And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
>
> And they said to one another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them roughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
>
> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
>
> And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
>
> Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

Here then are the two translations of the Bible most often read in English today. One translation leaves the reader as undisturbed as possible because she finds herself as if she was in her contemporary language, even if she does not understand all the words of the text. The other translation, however, disturbs the reader because it comes from further back in time: she doesn't use several of the expressions ("came to pass," "go to," or the inversions of subject and verb such as "had they"), but thanks to this she understands that the translation comes from the past and that something from that past is being heard and working its way through her language.

It's very interesting that there are different manners of translating, and several ways to have a language heard in another one. This implies that a language is not simply a means of communication: it is also a culture, a world of phrases and rhythms that differ.

Today, when one writes a phrase in Google and asks Google Translate to translate it, one often obtains very strange results. For example, this phrase from the Bible: "And God created man in his image." I asked Google to translate it from French, for clarity's sake, into German, and then I asked it to retranslate the German phrase into French, and at the end of the operation, once the result has stabilized: "And man created God in his image!" For the moment, translation is labor that is not done automatically, and for many good reasons. When Google, for example, takes it up, it works its way through English, which serves as a pivot language, in other words as a common denominator like the one you use for fractions. Google therefore translates the French into English, then the English into German, the German into English, and finally the English into the French. Of course all these passages produce some very strange things, like this utterly contradictory reversal ...

Starting from the moment one considers that one language is not only a means of communication but that it draws out a world, you become very careful and attentive. A maternal language is not like any other thing, even if it

does not belong, and even if more than one, thank goodness, exists. Thanks to the fact that more than one language exists, the world is more interesting, more varied, more complicated. This complication forbids us from believing that we are the only ones who possess the truth.

X

Translated from the French by William T. Bishop, with the generous support of LABEX Empirical Foundations of Language (ANR-10-LABX-0083). Originally published in Barbara Cassin, Plus d'une langue *(Montrouge: Bayard Culture, 2012). Excerpt courtesy of the publisher and the author. The second part of this text will be published on e-flux conversations in March 2017.*

Barbara Cassin is director of research at the CNRS, the **director** of the Léon Robin Center for Research on Ancient Thought, and President of the Collège International de Philosophie. Trained as a philosopher and philologist specializing in Ancient Greece, her research focuses on the relationship between philosophy and what is posited as not being philosophy: sophism, rhetoric, literature. Her engagement with the question of what words can do is manifest in a host of publications, many of which have been translated. The most recent volumes to appear are *Jacques le Sophiste: Lacan, logos et psychanalyse* (2012), *Plus d'une langue: Petites conférences* (Bayard, 2012) and *La Nostalgie: Quand donc est-on chez soi? Ulysse, Enée, Arendt* (2013). Her editorial work includes the seminal *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2004, Engl. transl. Princeton UP, 2014). A translator herself (notably of Hannah Arendt and Peter Szondi), she is also the editor of several book series, notably *L'Ordre philosophique*. In 2012, the Académie Française honored her work with the *Grand prix de philosophie*.

Carol Yinghua Lu

The Missing Front Line

In the past five years, Chinese art has become triply deficient: lacking a questioning approach, lacking a sense of history, and lacking a view of values. The majority of artworks, art projects, and exhibitions are in a *vacuous* state. When they are not infinitely magnifying certain everyday experiences, individual trivialities, and emotions, they are nihilistically discussing abstract concepts, life, and Zen, casually elevating these concepts to the level of "resistance." There is aversion to discussing the commercialization and commodification of art, and the artistic creator as entrepreneur. Many artists divide their work evenly between time in the studio and time spent interacting with the society of collectors, financiers, and social elites. The value of art is directly equated with its commercial value and its social reception.

Concealing the triple deficiency of artistic practice are the words "contemporary art." Though "contemporary art" is a term of temporal relativity, it has given many artistic practitioners a form of "atemporal" legitimacy. This "atemporality" is unmoored, feeling no need to explain its origins, care for the past, or to touch on larger problems. As long as something takes place in the time and space of "contemporary art," it is as though it can be self-evidently affixed with the label "contemporary art." I am not here to roll up my sleeves and get to the bottom of who qualifies as "contemporary," nor do I have any intention of treating "contemporary art" as a faction. What is important is to ask: How did we get to this understanding of the contemporary? Where did we come from to arrive here? The presence and development of the contemporary art system encourages us to avoid answering or asking these questions.

The "New Normality"

The more craftily written art writing and criticism is, the more vapid and powerless the dressed-up art appears to be. Most artistic practitioners lack curiosity about their surroundings, and have no interest in engaging audiences in dialogue. Artists are merely concerned that their artworks be placed within this system, consumed and circulated for their own benefit. The critical ecosystem surrounding exhibitions and artworks has become a production line. A glance at the constantly updating exhibition reviews on popular art websites shows a consistent formula: short reviews, between four hundred and a thousand words in length, either praising the artist or casting out a line of criticism to show the writer's independence by simply listing the works in the exhibition. Reading a dozen exhibition reviews is like reading the same one over and over, no matter how much the exhibition content differs. Not that it often does: many exhibitions are much the same, minus a few changes in artists' names, a few changes in the way Zen thought is expressed, a change of abstract form, or a change of internet "totems." Is it art that leaves me so disappointed? Are my expectations of artistic practice too high? Is it too

A street scene in Chaozhou, a small coastal city in south China, Feburary 2017. Photo: Liu Ding.

much to ask that art possesses ideas, speak, and even do something?

Young artists, novel and appealing, are quickly drawn into the art system. Frequently they enjoy an extended honeymoon period of being viewed, supported, consumed, discussed, and described. Meanwhile, artists who have been working since the 1970s and '80s are highlighted as part of a particular art movement, even being lauded as the movement's leading or representative figures, gaining the affirmation of the art system. These older artists have been brought into international exhibitions that focus on presenting Chinese art, and have been the center of attention for collectors and the art market. However, after so many years, *their work remains undescribed* in terms of its art-historical relevance. They circulate without being critically examined, considered, or analyzed. A widespread anxiety remains among these artists, born in the 1950s and '60s, about whether the attention placed on them will shift, with the passage of time, to their body of work. As it is, their practice is reduced to a few representative achievements before the discussion moves on to focus on their market value. Very little transcends the topics of supply and demand. We could say that in over thirty years of the progression of Chinese contemporary art, much work and thinking has yet to be described or contextualized art historically.

A shared concern among Chinese artists and practitioners is that they do not know from what position to discuss, expound on, and view their own work. A few discursive methods control the discussion of art, limiting it to such frameworks as historical determinism, evolutionary development, and generational replacement. Some critics and historians are skilled at using one specific language to automatically exclude other value orientations arising from different approaches outside of the dominant narrative. This presents us with the immediate, pressing challenge of keeping those people and things who have been excluded at the forefront of our imaginations.

Beginnings: 1949–1978

Today, the Chinese government is the largest employer in contemporary art, exercising near-total control over the allocation of resources, exhibition opportunities, and

A street scene in Chaozhou, a small coastal city in south China, Feburary 2017. Photo: Liu Ding.

platforms. The government manages and oversees the creation and output of contemporary art. By playing the role of agent, sponsor, and patron of Chinese contemporary art in the international field, it aims to gain greater authority domestically. Alongside the increasing acceptance and accommodation to the existing state system in the field of Chinese contemporary art, there has been a marked increase in nationalist sentiment among practitioners of the art field. This is a new historical situation, one that represents a drastic change in artistic practice and discourse, even if the groundwork for it was laid decades ago.

The existing narratives of contemporary art in China rarely consider anything prior to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Contemporary art is treated as a new phenomenon, easily distinguished from what came before it. The prevalent disregard of the three decades immediately following the founding of the People's Republic gives a false impression that contemporary art can be free of any inherited ideological framework. Since 2013, the artist Liu Ding and I have been researching the historical narratives and ideological frameworks of Chinese contemporary art in a sixty-seven-year timeframe.

To study the formation of "Chinese contemporary art" in the New China is to recognize the extremely complex artistic system that has gradually taken shape since 1949, and its multiple inner contradictions. The current historical narrative of the origin of Chinese contemporary art stresses its rupture from the fine art tradition, and describes contemporary art as in a "transitional" state in terms of its relationship to art before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Such a perception fails to sufficiently account for many actions and directions witnessed in contemporary art of the past three decades. Although such dualistic narrative structures as art vs. politics, heterodoxy vs. orthodoxy, oppression vs. submission, independence vs. dependence might have a certain historical legitimacy in specific contexts, they are far from being adequate when it comes to describing the versatility, complexity, and fluidity of both current and historical realities. Such a narrative structure based on dualist oppositions forms into a basic description and consciousness. It is an inert extension of the "revolutionary" narrative plot, subjectively suspending the varied conflicting elements in the space and time of history. The narrative construct of contemporary art that bases its legitimacy on its "avant-garde" position has long

Installation view of Salon, Salon: Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile—A Beijing Perspective. The exhibition, which opened on January 7, 2017, is part of a joint research project on the legacy of Socialist Realism in the historical discourse of Chinese contemporary art by Liu Ding and the author. Images appear courtesy of Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum.

revealed its limitations and narrow-mindedness in failing to provide stimulus to both artistic practitioners and to diversifying historical accounts of art. Re-analyzing and rediscovering the directions of Chinese art in the three decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 is essential if the characteristics and judgments of contemporary Chinese art today are to be understood.

Socialist Realism with Chinese Characteristics

The Chinese socialist movement was a resistance movement as well as a movement of modernization carried out through nation-building and industrialization. Its historical experience and lessons are intricately linked to the modernization process itself. In the research that Liu Ding and I are undertaking, we have proposed treating Socialist Realism as a visible thread of modernity in China. The evolution of Socialist Realism in China has always been intertwined with aspirations towards modernization. The issues of modernization in contemporary China were not simply raised by Marxism; China's Marxism is itself an ideology of modernization. China's socialist movement not only had the realization of modernization as a fundamental goal; it is also a primary trait of Chinese modernity. There is a difference between the concept of modernization in the Chinese context and the concept of modernization in theories of modernization. The Chinese concept of modernization encompasses a value system composed of socialist ideology. Mao Zedong's socialism was, on the one hand, an ideology of modernization and, on the other, a critique of European and American capitalist modernization. Clearly, the politics of names is also the politics of memory. The conceptual tradition of our Socialist Realism is the formation of a named reality that extends to this day. By placing it within an internal field of vision for examination, we hope to begin discussions and efforts to recreate the circumstances of its complex diversity.

The origins of Chinese Socialist Realism lie in the political and social crisis of the early twentieth century. The May Fourth Movement began in 1919 after the Treaty of Versailles transferred the Shandong peninsula on China's east coast from defeated Germany to the Empire of Japan. Driven by a deep-rooted patriotism, Chinese scholars and thinkers pursued a rhetorical and conceptual revolution in literature. The Movement took a utilitarian view on art and culture, which grew out of its concern that Chinese art and literature, like other cultural institutions, had fallen behind in the international competition for modernity and that drastic measures had to be taken to remedy this situation.

Driven by the calls for enlightenment of the mind and revolution, Chinese scholars and thinkers were anxious to resolve the fate of the nation; art and literature became a channel through which a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from the national character to the nation's future, would be addressed. The most fundamental shift in the history of

this commitment was when the Communist Party established Yan'an as the center for literature and art in 1942, attracting many leftist artists and writers to join. Prior to this event, it had been intellectuals and thinkers who mobilized and guided the reform and revolution of literature and art. Since the "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," politicians have been the decisive force of literature and art in China—Mao above all. The concern of reforming art was no longer that of seeking a remedy to save the country from crisis, but one of legitimizing the absolute position and power of the Communist Party.

At the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao endeavored to stem and deflect three trends in artistic practice: realism, sentimentalism, and satire. These were all denounced as wrong to the extent that these served "petty-bourgeois" interests or communities. Henceforth, literature and art were to serve the masses, and by extension, the Party under Mao, who ruled in the name of the workers, peasants, and soldiers.

> No revolutionary writer or artist can do any meaningful work unless he is closely linked with the masses, gives expression to their thoughts and feelings and serves them as a loyal spokesman. Only by speaking for the masses can he educate them and only by being their pupil can he be their teacher. If he regards himself as their master—as an aristocrat who lords it over the "lower orders"—then no matter how talented he may be he will not be needed by the masses and his work will have no future.
>
> Is this attitude of ours utilitarian? Materialists do not oppose utilitarianism in general but the utilitarianism of the feudal, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes; they oppose the hypocrites who attack utilitarianism in words but in deeds embrace the most selfish and short-sighted utilitarianism. There is no "ism" in the world that transcends utilitarian considerations; in class society there can be only the utilitarianism of this or that class.[1]

The literary and artistic framework in the seventeen years between 1949 and 1966—after the founding of the PRC and before the Cultural Revolution—was mainly derived from the interpretation, and subsequent specification, standardization, and institutionalization of Mao Zedong's literary theory and thought, led by the Party's leftist cultural leaders headed by Zhou Yang. As Mao's leading theoretician, Zhou Yang elaborated on Mao's conception in writing, and realized the formation and institutionalization of early leftist culture in China.

Even after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou maintained Mao's influence over art and literature. At the Fourth National Conference on Literature and Art on November 1, 1979, Zhou delivered a speech entitled "Carry forward the Cause to the Future, Literature and Art in the New Era of Prosperous Socialism," giving an overview of the history of socialist literature and art in China, while conveying the Party's policy on literature and art to the country's cultural practitioners. This iconic text set the blueprint for the basic historical structure as well as the contemporary image of Chinese literature and art. Zhou pointed out in his talk that

> Looking back on our country's literary and artistic development in the last thirty years, with the exception of the ten years of turmoil caused by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, our literary and artistic work for the most part, followed the literary and artistic direction set by the Party and Comrade Mao Zedong, with Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as our guiding principles at large. Mao Zedong's thinking on literature and art is an important component of Mao Zedong Thought, which has educated generations of literature and art workers in our country.[2]

In his report, Zhou Yang told the workers that

> the main task is to correctly handle three relations: one is the relationship between literature, art, and politics, including how the Party leads literary and artistic work; and the relationship between literature, art, and people's life, which is the issue of realism in artistic creations in practice; the last being the relationship between tradition and innovation in literary and artistic work, that is how to implement the policies of bringing forth the new through the old, adapting ancient forms for the present, and making foreign things serve China. Whether or not these three relationships are handled correctly directly results in the success or failure of socialist literature and art.[3]

These three problems directly pulled literary and artistic work in the new era back to the narrative framework and evaluation system of the seventeen-year-period after independence and before the Cultural Revolution, as a continuation of Zhou Yang's "old view" on the relationship between literature, art, and politics. Not only did Zhou Yang summarize and reflect on literature and art from the last thirty years, he was also a pioneer in the artistic practice of the new era. In fact, his thinking can be seen as the "theoretical version" of the general outline of literature and art for nearly thirty years.

After 1978 China, in its "reform and opening," placed reform before opening early on.

The rethinking of Chinese socialism in the 1980s was carried out within the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, and thus its critique of socialism could not extend into a rethinking of the reform process and the Western modernity upon which it was modeled. To the contrary, the critique of socialism became an act of self-affirmation in the post-Cold War era.

The practice of contemporary art in China has never strayed far from the official framework. In 1978, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided to rehabilitate all rightists. The Ministry of Culture, China Artists Association, Beijing Literature and Art Association, and other relevant bodies held commemorative exhibitions and posthumous exhibitions for the late artists who were condemned as rightists and persecuted by the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution.

In January 1979, the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition (*Xinchun huazhan*) opened in the waterside pavilions of Zhongshan Park, featuring landscape and still-life paintings. The exhibition was organized by a handful of artists including Pang Jun, Yan Zhenduo, and Zhang Jiaxi. The more than one hundred exhibited oil paintings were created by over forty painters, mostly from Beijing. The participating painters included elderly, middle-aged, and young ones, some professionals and some amateurs. All exhibited works were decided by the artists on their own, without any censorship. All participants were treated equally and the atmosphere was a relaxed one.

The organizing artists of this exhibition approached Jiang Feng, a former cultural official just free from imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution and about to be reappointed as the head of the China Artists Association, the highest-level governmental body for the administration of art. In Jiang Feng's foreword to the exhibition, which was reprinted four times in all the subsequent exhibition booklets of the Beijing Society of Oil Painting, an artist collective founded as a result of the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition, he proposed to "freely set up painters' associations," to organize exhibitions without restriction or censorship, as well as to trade art freely. His proposition was warmly received by the middle-aged and young painters all over the country.

Many art associations and societies emerged in Beijing and across the country in response to Jiang Feng's advocacy of the democracy of art at the end of the 1970s. Statistics from the 1980 meeting of the China Artists Association showed that there were 166 active painters associations across China between 1979 and 1980. These associations organized exhibitions, forums, and exchange activities.

The art events taking place in the late 1970s and early '80s in public spaces in Beijing exemplified changes in China's governance of art and a positive trend toward public space. By this point, art practitioners had a chance to contribute to the development of a healthy public culture, owing to a brewing of new thoughts in the art community between 1977 and 1978. The significance of that period was the review and criticism of the Cultural Revolution, the art during the Cultural Revolution, as well as issues that emerged in literature and art development during the seventeen years before the Cultural Revolution. Another significant development was the theoretical reflection on far-left politics and practices by high-ranking government officials who were artists and writers, further breaking with the constraint to interpret everything in terms of "class conflict" and far-left politics.

In December 1978, Zhou Yang had made a crucial speech entitled "Literature and Art in the New Era of Socialism" at the Guangdong Literature Work Forum. Zhou began by stating that the mission of literature and art in the new era of socialism was to depict the reality of socialism and new social practices, with a diversity of themes. He said that literature and art works could agree or disagree with, and praise or expose, these new practices. "No comment" was also an acceptable tone in the works. In terms of forms and styles of art, Zhou Yang mentioned Mao Zedong's "policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend," and derived from it two "freedoms"—freedom in the development of different forms and styles in art, and freedom of discussion on different schools of thought. Zhou Yang concluded by talking about the governance of art and literature, proposing to relax censorship and to remove political constraints on literature and art. The speech was a sign of a relaxation of the governance of art and literature from mid- and high-level governmental authorities. Cultural officials in Beijing like Jiang Feng and Liu Xun implemented the idea of the message, i.e., freedom of art and liberation of thought, in their practices. So the artists working both inside and outside of government bodies echoed the message from the grassroots level, which turned out to be a productive interaction with authority, helping to explore and define a new practice of literature and art in a whole new domain and era.

In the political arena, two years after the Gang of Four's downfall, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978 put a decisive end to slow-moving Party work. In the meantime, a new political space appeared after the Session, facilitating the "change-seeking" process across society. This process of change-seeking brought people with all kinds of backgrounds and various desires to a convergence in 1979. In this fleeting convergence, most political and social elites used in a selective manner the previous practices of the seventeen-year-old PRC to legitimize change-seeking. They also fully acknowledged the PRC's achievements in these seventeen years, based on which the May Fourth Movement spirit was reiterated. The relevant explorations culminated in the middle and late stages of the Cultural Revolution, and also the first ten years of reform and development, symbolizing the end of

A portrait of Jiang Feng, an image of the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition, and Jiang's foreword to the exhibition.

an era and leaving a rich legacy to the upcoming 1980s, when China's reform witnessed constant redirection and deepening.

The practice of contemporary art in China has always worked within a framework of official permission and refusal, official control and relaxation. In popular perception, however, this official framework is simply dismissed as an external condition that contemporary art practice situates itself in opposition to, basing its legitimacy on its divergence from and disregard of the state's ideological structure. On the contrary, in reality contemporary art practice in China is always directly subject to such a fundamental framework of ideas. One manifestation of this subordinate relationship between contemporary art and the state's ideological structure is the imagination of the West and the Western art system in the self-projection of Chinese contemporary art. Once, when I was interviewing artist Shi Chong, he said,

> In the 1980s, we were still in the process of learning. We were learning Western classical art, on the one hand, and Western modern art, on the other. It was right in the middle of the process of switching from one to the other. In fact, after the 1990s, whether it was rooted in Western classical art forms or in Western modernist art forms, we were all searching for the greatest possibilities.

Even in the 1980s (a period which many witnesses describe as a "process of learning from the West"), the view of the individual practitioner—their mindset towards understanding, probing, judging, referencing, and learning Western modern and postmodern art—was still based on a Materialist critical standpoint, and gleaned from short-term utilitarianism. In an essay in the first volume of *International Aesthetics,* Shao Dazhen wrote in 1986,

> Postmodernism raises many new topics that are certainly worth treating with importance. Some of their views are worth our further research and consideration. But as an overall view, as an art system, postmodernism is preposterous. It fundamentally rejects the principle that art is a reflection of life, that it in turn influences life, and thus rejects the social function of art.[4]

On this point, the art scene's acceptance of the "West" and the "international" was not decoupled from the field of vision of the nation and its new government.

"De-Westernization" has, to a certain extent, been a part of every step of China's modernization process. Constantly expounding on and shaping dominant culture has served as the process of establishing the Party's leadership in the Chinese intellectual and cultural fields.

In the late 1980s, China began following a development strategy of "two ends outside," meaning focusing on importing raw materials and exporting products to foreign markets, which resulted in unprecedented levels of openness. The gradually deepening relationship between internal reform and external openness was not only manifested in mutual economic supplementation, technology transfers, and the study of systems. The relationship between the internal and the external was also an ideological construct. The phrase "lining up with international practices" became commonplace, but at the same time a strong nationalistic awareness was also externalized in the slogans popular among the cultural and commercial scenes: "only through localization can we have internationalization" and "the more ethnic, the more global."

In 1987, the first "Exhibition of Chinese Oil Paintings" took place at Shanghai Art Museum. In this exhibition, there emerged two new trends of painting: one of a classical style, as in Western classicism; the other abstraction. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese painters had made various attempts to free themselves from the constraints and legacy of Socialist Realism. To do so, most painters took a curious path, going in a backward direction within an oversimplified understanding of the Western tradition of painting, referencing its models of practice in search of the truth of painting. In essence, this was driven by their desire to break away from the revolutionary aesthetics and discourse of art from Mao's period.

The "classical" trend and the "abstract" one were two such attempts. They arose at this time specifically in response to what was called the '85 New Wave, which mainly referred to the phenomenon of a dozen young painters' collectives emerging in different Chinese cities between 1984 and 1986. Most of these collectives distinguished themselves from other coexisting practices and trends of thought by subjecting themselves to the influences and discourses of Western modern art in preference to the convention of Socialist Realism or Chinese ink wash traditions. Along with the introduction of Western modern art practices, there were many philosophical books and humanistic concepts being translated from the West through the first half of the 1980s. The young painters involved in the '85 New Wave had tapped into these intellectual resources for inspiration and concepts for their practice. Meanwhile, many artists and art critics came forward after 1986 to publish articles criticizing the roughness of the stylistic and aesthetic language of artworks in the '85 New Wave movement, blaming philosophical concepts for hijacking artists' attention to the artistic language of their works.

In 1988, art critics such as Li Xianting were quick to spot a significant wave of changes in the art world, which took the form of a nation-wide debate on the subject of the "purification of language" (*chunhua yuyan*) in Chinese. As an editor of *Fine Arts* magazine, Li invited Meng Luding, an artist teaching in the Central Academy of Fine Art, to write an essay entitled "The Process of Purification," questioning the insufficient attention artists had paid to the language of art—meaning the technical and stylistic quality of art—while giving too much weight to conceptual consideration. This debate was intensified by an "orchestrated" confrontation of two positions, one advocated by Meng Luding, who switched to abstract painting at this time in his own practice, and the other by Li Xianting himself. While Meng emphasized the importance of keeping art to itself, Li called for the "big soul" as a response, insisting on art's responsibility to give consideration and visibility to social and humanistic concerns.

In October 1988, *Fine Art* magazine organized a discussion around the theme of "Art and Culture, Spirit and Language," reevaluating the relationship between artistic language and cultural concerns. In the discussion there was a sense of urgency to purify (meaning to improve and to upgrade) the "rough" language, specifically the formal aspects of artworks.

As the discussion unfolded on all fronts, it became clear that advocates of the "purification of language" were proposing a way of practicing art that divorced the aesthetic and stylistic concerns of art from concepts, content, and meaning. It arbitrarily equated any consideration beyond the stylistic aspects of artworks to that of "politics," and set up a dualism between art and politics, between the artistic language and any concerns of a philosophical nature, between form and meaning.

Such intellectual movements both in art and literature in the late 1980s were driven by a compelling desire to break away from Mao's revolutionary tradition and from that of the stiffened art and literature system. This system came into being through Mao's era and had become stagnant and restrictive by the 1980s. Within this escape from a former discourse, there was also the aspiration to be modern, to establish a modern art history in China based on an understanding of the Western one. Yet, even as artists and writers tried to correct the politicization of art from Mao's revolutionary discourse, they set up a simplistic dualistic structure of value between art and politics, between art and thought, between form and content, between modernism and backwardness.

In the following decades, this discussion turned out to be a process of constructing a new ideological structure for literature and art. The "purification of language" went on to replace the subject that it criticized: on the surface, the over-conceptualization of art at the cost of neglecting artistic language; and deep down, Mao's revolutionary

tradition of art. Under the influence of the "purification of language," ideology-free and depoliticized artworks became a new embodiment of the political ideal itself.

In this period, many artists answered the call to "purify language"—to make works that showed a strong depoliticizing tendency and that voluntarily abandoning ideological concerns. Many turned to representing their everyday reality with pop-art aesthetics and approaches, or through a cynical and indifferent attitude. Others invoked the period of Mao, but merely through representations of its visual culture. This gave rise to a generation of painters whose works were grouped into "political pop," "cynical realism," and "the new generation painters." Interestingly, the market that emerged for these artworks consisted mostly of sympathetic Westerners and Western museums. After a few international exhibitions, there arose an overbearing discourse around this work rooted in the post-Cold War ideological perception of "political art" in China. While the works were depoliticized, the narrative and consumption of them were derived from political frameworks.

The depoliticizing tendency in both the Chinese art world and Chinese society was further accelerated after the 1989 Tian'anmen Democracy Movement. In 1988, economic reform was in full swing. For many people, to engage in enterprise—either to work as a member of a company or to set up a business—was not just an economic choice but an opportunity to participate in the currents of the time. The enthusiasm was reinforced by the government's endorsement of risk-taking in economic ventures. But the Party leadership deliberately contained such enthusiasm, circumventing political discussions and replacing them with pragmatic and technological aspirations.

After 1989, the nation sped up the process of carefully crafting a market. The essence and significance of this creation is far more than a social event. Its most fundamental goal was the hope of using market principles to regulate all of social life, and to more covertly and deeply implant the national will as a means of social organization. The workers, peasants, and soldiers were gradually supplanted as social role models by successful business and political figures. This figure of the business and political role model, produced by powerful political and media mechanisms, became the representative of the contemporary Chinese social elite and the leader of social values.

The 1990s alienated artists and intellectuals from the political agenda of the government; even though they were mobilized and implicated by such an agenda, they could no longer play a critical and active role in defining it. The perpetuation of pragmatism and the industrialization of intellectual and artistic practice aggravated such a divorce. In his observations on China's intellectual landscape in the 1990s, Wang Hui raises an important difference from the 1980s, namely that the intellectual scene, which saw itself as the cultural elite and oracle in the 1980s, had by the 1990s quickly realized that they were no longer the cultural elites and shapers of values in contemporary China, and that they needed a means of adapting and confronting the ubiquitous commercial culture. This sense of being unfit also permeated the field of art. One striking change was the increasing development of the market and its increasingly visible role as a force in the art system, which was complemented by the emergence of some curators, critics, and artists who became actively engaged in the progression of the market orientation of contemporary art. They all shared the goal of wresting more social space for contemporary art practice, with the belief that by demonstrating contemporary art's commercial potential they could win more possibilities for expression and practice. They also drew inspiration from their limited understanding of the Western art system, believing the West to be a highly commercial society in which foundations, galleries, museums, and other institutions worked together to promote the commercialization of art. This understanding and thinking led them to actively engage in the project of commodifying and commercializing art.

Curators and art agents began to work together to devise exhibitions, name canons of artistic creation, and categorize and brand artists. Some artists consciously changed their packaging and look, voluntarily donning Western-style suits, writing their own bios, providing proposals upon requests from exhibition organizers, publishing bilingual catalogues, getting involved in the widespread discussion of the price of critical essays, and affirming that critics should be highly paid laborers. These shifts were all markers of this phenomenon. Flipping through the pages of the China Artists Association journal *Artists Communication* from 1994 to 1995, we can see that the mechanism of the art market, art fairs, and auctions was already quite normalized. The magazine reported on these events in very positive tones, with only scattered voices of skepticism and criticism. In a series of essays on the '94 China Art Fair published in 1995, one writer by the name of Xiao Meng wrote in an essay titled "Return to Your Role—Thoughts Evoked by the '94 China Art Fair" about how the art market had become the focus of attention in art circles in recent years: "Overnight, everyone from painters to theoreticians have become experts on the issues of the market."[5] Nearly every issue of *Artists Communication* from this time contained reports on the market and auctions, including the publication of full seasonal auction results in the journal's pages, such as the entire list of artworks and prices for the Sotheby's and Christie's 1995 Spring Auctions of Chinese contemporary oil paintings.[6] From this data, we find that the 1994 Guardian Fall Auction was held in Beijing, and fifty contemporary oil paintings were on sale, with an 89.8 percent closing rate; that *Upland Wind* (188 × 255 cm) by Chen Yifei, which was auctioned in mainland China for the first time, sold for RMB 2.6 million yuan, setting a price

record for that artist in mainland China. These pieces of information outline the landscape of an art market quickly rising to prosperity. In these pages, we read about: how the state had defined and implemented "Measures for the Administration of Artworks" and had repeated, as a beginning, the rich, market-oriented insights of the "Taiwan experience"; reports on the developing Moscow art market; artist Wu Guanzhong's lawsuit against an auction house for selling a counterfeit work; how art history graduate Wu Jin created and played the role of the independent agent; how artists of the Yuanmingyuan artist village hung Chinese and English signs on their doors and sold their own artworks; and that some wealthier artists were building houses for themselves at Songzhuang.

In these texts, we can gain a sense of how the state's intention of making society more market-oriented was, to a certain extent, internalized and transformed into practice by the art industry, and quite effectively. Though some critics and curators who advocated participation in the construction of the art market repeatedly emphasized the commodification of art as a cultural strategy, in the process of putting it into practice participants often became too engaged in these roles, and benefited from them. Gradually, they unconsciously came to share in the state's project of using the market to realign and divide social classes, and reshaped themselves from consciousness to behavior. In the process of participating in and benefiting from the commodification and commercialization of art, the general sense of acceptance and constantly rising prices came to conceal the urgent need to develop a critical vision in artistic practice.

Certain professionals went from viewing the struggle for commercial impact and public influence as a survival strategy to affirming and internalizing the rules and logic of commerce, and from actively shaking the existing order to joining it. These individuals lost sight of their original motives. In this period, the state expended great energy on developing the market and promoting urbanization, thus accelerating the process of the social division of labor. It organized the intellectuals as a whole into such industries as state administration, educational institutions, research institutions, commercial activities, the technology sector, and the media, thus turning them into beneficiaries of the reform period while also cutting off their historical ties to workers, peasants, and soldiers. Likewise, increasing market orientation and specialization led to the atomization of the art industry. On the one hand, the art system was reconstituted and reshaped by the values of commercial society. On the other, the contraction of space for social expression led to widespread anxiety about the legitimacy of art after the end of the 1980s.

In facing society, the legitimacy of art depends on the demonstration of quantifiable, visible, and functional value (such as entertainment). In the process of presenting their worth to the outside world, art professionals reshaped themselves by magnifying their ideological content and highlighting art's role as a describer of those repressed by the government and those in the opposition. This reshaping of the self frequently found resonance in the art market and the international scene, eventually turning it into part of the self-image of art professionals.

Since the 1990s, as the art market has thrived, the elite representatives and value orientation of the art market have grown increasingly in accord with the main values driven by the state in the social sphere. Artists have been increasingly assessed by their auction prices and market coverage, and have gained social recognition and status through their commercial success. If, during the Cultural Revolution and right after its end, elite artists and intellectuals were the subjects of attacks, they maintained tense, uncompromising relationships with the social and political order while continuing in a spirit of criticism and reflection of history. Since the 1990s, the order the art system has gradually carried out is a restructuring from within, one that internalizes the universally accepted values, logic, and operational methods of the social sphere, equates price with value, quantifies and materializes practice according to immediate success and visible results, places little to no emphasis on ideas, and actively and harmoniously fuses with the social reality around it. Meanwhile, the self-declaration of elite status and identity has, through economic conditions, decoupled these people from the salaried and lower classes of society, and pulled them increasingly further from the struggles for developmental rights among these social classes. We could venture to say that the critical potential of art has withered. The commodification of art has been accepted by both art professionals and the government. In the process, art professionals' optimistic projections and blind entry into the "market" reached unprecedented levels of accord with the content of state ideology and trends of society.

After 1989, some of China's intellectuals placed their full faith in the growing market to solve the issue of democracy in China, and contemporary art's growing market was part of this trend. But in reality, the economy and market have never been separate from the notion and field of the state, a fact that has been diluted and ignored in accounts and analyses of contemporary art. One important reason is that participants once believed that this market strategy could bring the possibility of a form of autonomy from state ideology, which they used to defend their commercial behavior. In market conditions, the operations of cultural capital are an important facet of overall social activity. The control of cultural capital and the media define the cultural trends and ideological orientation of society. The controllers of capital are also the controllers of political power. Meanwhile, when the commodification of art reached a certain point and led some artists to become wealthy before others—enabling them to join the "new aristocracy" with their fancy cars and cigars—the unequal distribution of rewards led to stratification within art. On the one hand, these newly

wealthy artists continued to enjoy the social attention and entitlement that stemmed from their enhanced economic status. On the other, they had to endure the sense of disappointment at their perceived "selling out"—having gone from being considered "vagrants" in the 1990s due to the lingering effects of China's population control policies, from having a "marginal status" and being "dissidents" against state ideology, to becoming "celebrities" and enjoying salaried positions at the National Academy of Painting and other official art institutions. The new works they produced could never again be interpreted from the angle of ideological critique, even if they still sought new possibilities for creation within that interpretive framework.

There was one striking blind spot in the synchronized market shift of Chinese society and the field of art: the former wariness regarding state ideology's permeation of every level of society was set aside, and marketization was seen as a route to political democracy. The unequal market was even viewed as a natural part of the progression towards democracy. In fact, in this process, the groups that benefited from China's economic reforms formed a new alliance that achieved widespread influence. If the discussions of the 1990s universally placed "society" outside the realm of the state, and imagined the self-operations of the market as a natural progression towards democracy, thus hampering political thinking regarding universal democracy, then discussions of contemporary art also encountered the same misunderstanding and limitations of awareness. People placed "contemporary art" outside of the realm of the state, and likewise imagined democratic prospects through the market. The art industry's faith in the market and economic forces grew even stronger after the year 2000. After nearly a decade of local evolution in China, Chinese art capital also followed the globalizing national outlook to extend olive branches to art institutions in the slowing economies of the US and Europe, in hopes of using the power of capital to open up the so-called "gates to academia" of the world, and gain access to the influence of the art systems of developed nations to shape value.

University of Oxford anthropology professor Xiang Biao describes the localization efforts of certain Chinese artists and film directors in the 1990s as follows:

> In Zhang Yimou's hands, when Chinese people weren't fussing and fighting everywhere and following extreme customs, they were only acting out the most basic (and sometimes extreme) emotions and desires. They lacked their own sense of history, sense of society, and ability to think … Zhang Yimou's "nationality" no doubt successfully went out into the world, but his success, rather than assisting in China's communication with the world, served as an impediment to true mutual understanding.[7]

The Chinese contemporary art practice constantly featured in Europe and the US, and the specific discussion that formed around them, presented a commonality: they often diagrammed particular social atmospheres and the political markers and social memories of the Mao era, and were thus deemed to possess a critical spirit and crowned as the representatives of Chinese contemporary art culture. Reading essays about artists and their artistic practice since the 1990s, it is easy to see that most accounts attempt to establish a link between reality and artistic creation. This interpretation of art found efficacy in the real world, and such interpretations that did so in a diagrammatic way particularly resonated with the projections of many European and American commentators regarding Chinese contemporary art. Practitioners in the Chinese art industry, including artists and critics, also made their own projections onto the Western art practices being disseminated into China. Their understanding and practice of pop, for instance, universally interpreted as a critique of consumerism, led to the magnification of this critical element in their creations, and turned them to a practice of expressing critical meanings and attitudes. This description and interpretation seems to have given their art practice a basis in art history (Western art history) while also establishing their so-called connectedness to the reality of Chinese society.

The feedback from reality, particularly from European and American art institutions in the 1990s—such as the Venice Biennale—as well as the selection and affirmation of certain types of art in the newly forming domestic market made self-doubt and reflection within art seem less current and pressing. It temporarily suspended these fragmented, hesitant, clumsy, sincere, and biting thoughts, making it seem as though they had been shrouded by a dense fog. On the contrary, the question of how to establish a systematic and immediately recognizable approach in criticism and discussion became a key, universal pursuit.

In the 1990s, the anxiety in the Chinese field of art came from multiple fronts. On the one hand, after the experience of 1989, the art world needed to seek out new conceptual and practical methods with modernist awareness. Within this trend, there were many work modes and visual schema with a "rational face," such as the New Measurement Group and the work of such artists as Qian Weikang, Geng Jianyi, and Wang Jianwei. On the other hand, the choices, passions, and discourses from the West became the object of both aspiration and anxiety for artists. Zhou Tiehai's 1999 work *Airport* featured speakers repeatedly playing announcements for international flights departing from Shanghai, as well as seven fake international magazine covers the artist had created between 1995–98, which featured his own image. These were the most direct expressions of the consciousness, aspiration, and urgency of international

participation. Much of the internationalization in the field of Chinese art in the 1990s was a passive process of being selected, invited, and consumed. At the same time, artists also faced an increasingly market-oriented art industry pushed by the logic of capital.

Art production was, on the one hand, restricted by the operations of state machinery, and on the other, increasingly restricted by the activities of capital and the market. The effects of the latter have grown increasingly apparent since the 1990s. It cannot be ignored that the economy and the market have never been outside of the realm of the state, but we still lack a clear recognition of this more complex and concealed historical relationship and condition, and have yet to describe and explore it.

In this period, most artists continued to follow their bodily and artistic instincts in their work, and certain art criticisms continued to seek a basis for creations on the psychological, sociological, and philosophical levels. But commentary on art itself remained overlooked. One could say that artistic practice fell to the fate of excess projection on the levels of narrative content and social awareness, while the artistic nature in creation—namely the recognition of art itself—lacked adequate awareness, platforms, and atmosphere for discussion and consideration. This presented artists with many difficulties, even anxieties. For them, the entire academic field of art lacked an internal recognition of art or the discourse of art. Artists seemed to always need to present a certain realistic legitimacy for their creations, a pseudo context. But that was not necessarily what they were interested in, and some artists had no choice but to resist. The widely disseminated "political pop" and "cynical realism" of the 1990s were results of this conspiracy between art criticism and artistic creation. They truly did fit with the demand for rapid dissemination and consumption by the social mentality and the art market. But on the other hand, this summarization and delineation served to mislead about art practice itself, and particularly about the artists' own understanding of their practices. Political directedness and social topics often became the medium and language of artists' works, and also became the only path for art criticism to approach creations. Art was iconified and simplified. Certain expansive decorations, disseminations, and misreadings of artistic creations for material gain were magnified into a perfect knowledge, and the artworks, once pressed into historicized narratives, lost much of their original color, while the organic and serendipitous nature of artistic practice itself was both consciously and unconsciously overlooked. A certain clumsy, original state of art, certain unclassifiable, primal, spontaneous, private, serendipitous, individual elements of artistic creation and thinking, had been diluted, forgotten, and overlooked in the process of the industrialization, universalization, and refinement of art. If these superficial values and practices in creation, criticism, and art mechanisms of the 1990s hampered true mutual understanding between China and the rest of the world, they also shaped a profound estrangement within art and between universal society and artistic creation.

Today's creators could be said to have moved to another extreme. Since the year 2000, though they have gradually adapted to and begun to follow the economic rules of capital in their art production, and attempted to draw from European and American models in the regulation and construction of China's contemporary art system, their creation and thinking has still been stuck on superficial criticisms of the market and the artist-comprised art system, and has never been able to touch on the deep issues of strict government control and political interference. More worryingly, the critical function of art has, today, gradually declined to the level of superficial performance, constantly vacated by capital consumption on various levels and in various forms. "Depoliticization" and "dehistoricization" have become the most important traits of the Chinese contemporary art field. Under these circumstances, the avoidance of politics and the maintaining of silence have not only become correct, they have become sincere. They have also become the best path for entry into the logic of capital.

Installation view of Salon, Salon: Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile—A Beijing Perspective. The exhibition, which opened on January 7, 2017, is part of a joint research project on the legacy of Socialist Realism in the historical discourse of Chinese contemporary art by Liu Ding and the author. Images appear courtesy of Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum.

Interestingly, at present, the art industry in China has formed a superficial self-sufficiency. With the gradual flourishing of the art market after the year 2000, the self-consumption of contemporary art, unlike in the 1990s, became a possibility, at least for those galleries and artists whose work unconsciously followed relationships of supply and demand. As it was for the nation, the economic order suddenly controlled the choice to create, to present artworks, to collect art, and even the standards and authorities over artistic creations. To this day, economic power is still the strongest force in the field of art. The

expansion and permeation of economic power went hand in hand with the state's full entry into the economy.

After the year 2000, when contemporary art had already undergone over twenty years of progression, critics and art historians began attempting to record and describe the work of the past. But these accounts were overwhelmingly monolithic in their descriptions of artists' works. The art consumption of a growing market came to reinforce this monolithic narrative. The singularity of social ideology and values also strengthened this monolithic description to become the sole standard guiding the consumption of art, and even came to shape and influence the future direction of some artists' practice. Even if most artists in their hearts still aspired towards art, still hoped their works could maintain vitality, and still expended varying degrees of effort to these ends, they were still swayed by the desire for market affirmation and scholarly affection. For most artists born in the 1970s and '80s and who matured and rose to fame in the '90s, their speechlessness and the widespread view that they belonged to a past era drove them into disorientation, confusion, and struggle. On the one hand, through raw accumulation from the early '90s to the financial crisis of 2008, they had assembled large amounts of capital and were able to enter into the new aristocracy and elite class of the supposedly classless contemporary Chinese society. Interestingly, as they acted within this class, they were able to shape themselves into a certain form of social celebrity through such mechanisms as charitable art auctions. In this way, they were able to maintain a dialogue with society, thus gaining a certain affirmation of value. Meanwhile, they were left at a loss by their inability to enter into the sights of the active discussion of art by curators and critics. It seemed they had lost a connection to artistic discourse and the development of art.

These actions continued along the lines of the Chinese Communist Party's 2003 announcement of a shift in its nature from a revolutionary party to an administrative party. This announcement included a series of important shifts that would have a profound effect, such as an affirmation of private ownership, the declaration of an end to the reallocation of farmland, and the encouraging of private business people to join the Party. Peking University professor Dai Jinhua accurately pointed out the significance these changes would have for the political culture of China:

> The series of policy shifts in 2003 mark a total turn from the predicament of Chinese political culture that had grown increasingly drastic since the 1980s owing to the Tiananmen Square Incident. The predicament was the rupture in the continuity, ideology, and ideas of political economics in the party. Thus, for a long time, China's government and officialdom had been in a difficult, speechless state, a state where they could not say what they could do, and they could not do what they could say. Mainstream discourse had become a destructive, even impeding force against mainstream forces. Any official statement could be used as a powerful policy against officialdom. This predicament gave rise to many cultural issues. Primarily, it revealed the emptiness of mainstream ideology.[8]

Some artists such as Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, and many others gained attention and a central position in the artistic spectacle in the 1990s, only to gradually lose this sense of centrality after 2008. They chose to mold themselves through the spiritual and physical trials they faced, and hoped that through this bodily action they would gain new creative momentum that would push them past the creative rut they were in. Some artists grabbed backpacks, hopped on the simplest forms of transportation, and set out for remote regions to take photographs, collect materials, and exile themselves. Some artists returned to traditional Chinese landscape painting in hopes that this approach could establish a channel for understanding the work of past artists while also gaining new creative visions.

Compared to romantic aspirations toward dreams and art, most artists today follow a method of work and participation in the art system that is strongly realist in tone, while socialist significance is derived from everyone's aspirations towards progress and development for art as a whole. For example, artists exploit market mechanisms to raise the price of their own art and gain social influence, which they then use to organize documentary exhibitions on themselves, thus solidify their success through mythmaking. One such artists is Fang Lijun, who was extremely popular among international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s and became a representative figure for Chinese contemporary art, both in terms of the exposure he received and the market value of his works. Since around 2012, he worked with galleries and dealers to place exhibitions of his work in museums and universities. In addition to showing his artworks, he put together an exhibition of archival materials of his life and practice, to monumentalize his own status. The exhibition managed to travel to many provincial museums and galleries in universities across the country.

After this, the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing successfully crafted a completely new narrative of China's image within globalization: a peacefully rising, harmonious-minded China. In this narrative, an image of China as connecting imagined community and a high level of individuality began to emerge.[9]

The question is, which reality is more real: what we see and hear in front of us, or what is taking place on levels we

cannot see? If we look at what we can see, then by statistics and scale, the industry of Chinese contemporary art can only be described as flourishing. A complete art system, for which so many practitioners strove and yearned in the 1990s, has begun to take shape. This is evidenced by the many galleries, art museums, art institutions, art fairs, collectors, academies, curators, and museum directors across the country as well as artists who have taken on bureaucratic roles and begun to shape the world around them. This increasingly strong local art system has provided each of us with a clear sense of direction. As long as they are willing, every individual can strive for a place within it, play a role, blend themselves in smoothly, and enjoy the conveniences of the system. Though the line between official and private individuals has never been truly clear, today the two have found unprecedented accord in the interest of mutual benefits and needs, and no longer exclude each other. In 2009, when contemporary artists Luo Zhongli, Xu Bing, Cai Guo-Qiang, Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Fang Lijun, and Yue Minjun, among others, joined the China Contemporary Art Academy—a division of the government-backed Chinese National Academy of Arts—the event made waves. Many voices criticized the apparent co-opting of contemporary art by the official system. Soon, however, the platform and resources provided by the official art system turned such participation into a widely accepted new normal.

In recent years, the capital support system for contemporary art production has shown unprecedented energy. When we began the research and curatorial work for "Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art"[10] in 2010, we predicted and sensed at the time the trend of capital taking a more dominant role in artistic discourse. Through this project, we had hoped to discuss and partially release the pressure practitioners felt within such a production relationship. Quite obviously, however, it is unstoppable. The development of the industry seems to have resolved the question of "legitimacy." The latter was a leading component of the questioning mentality of the 1990s.

In the summer of 2013, after many Chinese artists, curators, institutions, and investors spontaneously invested massive amounts of money to hold satellite exhibitions during the Venice Biennale，and failed to achieve the desired international effect, the Chinese art scene entered a short period of low activity before quickly turning to self-restoration. The satellite exhibitions during the Venice Biennale had intended to prove to the world that Chinese art could be presented equally on one of the best international platforms. Yet the shows were neither warmly received, nor did they generate further opportunities for Chinese artists to be included in international exhibitions or museum collections. It wasn't long, however, before the center of focus shifted to the establishment of a local value system. The system's current composition can be described as being quite rich, with many facilitators, ample funding involving many individuals and corporations (both Chinese and foreign) as well as art academies across the country, along with, of course, the active participation of many local governments. The mutual assistance between these forces has formed a massive native system for the consumption, support, presentation, and collection of contemporary art.

With the opening ceremony of the Central Academy of Fine Arts School of Experimental Art on September 4, 2014 at the CAFA Museum, the model of teaching contemporary art creation in the academies as a degree focus, for which artist Lu Shengzhong had striven for over a decade, became a model that art academies across the country.

On May 15, 2015, the exhibition "CHINA 8—Contemporary Art from China on the Rhine and Ruhr" opened simultaneously at nine museums scattered across eight cities in the Rhine-Ruhr region of Germany, with works from 120 Chinese artists. It was, to date, the largest, officially approved contemporary art exhibition ever held in Germany. The Chinese counterpart in China, which was responsible for the organizational work for this exhibition with the Foundation for Art and Culture Bonn, was the China Arts and Entertainment Group. In addition to the German curators, the Chinese curator was Fan Di'an, director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. When German chancellor Angela Merkel traveled to China between June 12 and 14 to discuss a trade deal on twenty-four items of collaboration, including the automotive, aviation, and rail industries, the document included cooperation on official exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, such as "CHINA 8." Equal numbers of exhibitions of German art will be held at multiple museums in China. "CHINA 8" was the largest "collective presentation" of Chinese contemporary art to follow the dozens of Chinese exhibitions at the 2013 Venice Biennale . A great nationalistic undertaking thus underwent the transformation from a privately funded, self-organizing act to one supported by state capital and a state platform.

In the summer of 2015, Shanghai hosted three simultaneous art fairs, with support and funding from the municipal government. Meanwhile, many private museums, funded by both individuals and corporations, were granted varying levels of support in terms of land use and cultural policies. There is also, of course, the Sixth Beijing International Art Biennale held by the People's Government of Beijing, the China Artists Association, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. These production mechanisms in the contemporary art field suffer from no lack of support from the government, which, as patron, lays down a wide range of visible and invisible boundaries on the practical direction, scope, and interpretation of contemporary art. This local mechanism not only controls most art and discourse rights; it also constantly uses mechanisms of exchange, patronage, and

donation to extend its influence into Europe and the US. Recently, there has been a series of gifts and donations by private individuals to European and American museums with the demand of being able to choose and hire curators. Then there was the "feast" of "CHINA 8." These events are a part of the movement to export values through Chinese capital (both state and individual). This process is not so much participation as it is an "invasion" of powerfully subjective demands. In a sense, this process is also a process of "de-Westernization" and "de-internationalization." It shows new capital and new national authority using different operational models to demonstrate its strength in international society.

We also cannot overlook the ubiquitous presence of the "post-internet" trend in exhibitions and galleries, which releases long pent-up anxiety among Chinese practitioners about their failure to move in sync with the world. Now it seems that the world is as flat as the image, accessible at a single click. The fragmented is the rational and form is idea.

As the "totem art" of a new era, the creative approach of post-internet art, which goes from one image to the next, seems to allow for the temporary suspension of the exploration of concrete issues, making the local irrelevant in the global field of vision on an unprecedented level. As a new language that can circulate across the art world, post-internet art allows for an obsession with the aesthetics of language itself, with no need to get entangled in the contents and ideas expressed by language. We can sense that the new clothing of technology seems to have provided the best route for the redemption of the conservatism of the art academies. The once fervent, persistent debate on "art for life" and "art for art's sake" that began in the 1980s has now been simplified into "art for the art system" or "production for the system." This system intertwines the interests and wills of officialdom and business. In these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand the increasingly conservative leanings presented by a young generation of artists raised in the era of globalization. We are increasingly left with young artists who openly declare their impatience or indifference towards political and societal matters. Some simply consider politics and social issues irrelevant. They are more responsive towards and feel more responsible for the art system than the wider society they are part of.

The practices, discourse, and ideas in the field of contemporary art are, to a great extent, identical in composition to the realistic logic of Chinese society. To trace this compositional similarity and agreement, we must use a historical framework to open a path to understanding the widespread trends of depoliticization, dehistoricization, and de-internationalization in the field of Chinese contemporary art. The various phenomena, creative methods, and artistic discourses today require an understanding that transcends the surface, and a sufficient amount of time and continuity to gain a field of vision for examining these movements. Only by constantly returning to the past can we gain a deep view on the present. We must avoid commemoration and memorializing.

Artists and art practitioners today must, to a great extent, face a powerful sense of a loss of position. Though they are all involved in certain projects or creative processes, they always feel that they are not being described, that they are absent from the lively, dominant discourse—a sense of dissatisfaction of unknown origin. This can be seen on social media and in online art journalism. Everyone seems to have a pressing urge to take action and get involved, as if through action they can gain a path to involvement in reality, to affirm each other's presence, and to pressure each other; but the deeper motives beneath these actions and their connections have yet to be penetrated. The urgency to act is still driven by some bodily instinct and desire. Most instant responses to the various spectacles that rise and fall in the art system are passive, instantaneous reactions rather than active reflections on the mechanisms of art, and are certainly not the continuous direction of the artist's work and thinking.

More specifically, we face a wide range of specific issues, conundrums, and challenges, and we draw from our respective understandings, instincts, abilities, and resources to respond within creations, within the art industry, and within the social system in an attempt to overcome these pressures we place on each other. Each member of this industry uses a particular form to get involved. The various themed projects and temporary spaces run by artist-curators in recent years are the release of this pressure. These projects are often anxious to prove their presence, and this urgency surpasses any artistic topic. Through these paths, artists are able to huddle together for warmth and release their own pressure while simultaneously exerting more on their peers. A reciprocal sense of anxiety is heightened rather than alleviated through each other's actions. In fact, within an as-of-yet unclear narrative of the contemporary condition, we, of course, cannot avoid feeling overlooked and excluded, nor can we find the entrance into this secret conference.

Today, in order to participate in the Chinese contemporary art system, one must accede to the general assumption that the art industry and art are interchangeable, that they can be spoken of as a single whole. The price of visibility is to accept that the development of the art industry can be the topic of the whole conversation, to the point that there is no longer any need for a detailed discussion of art practice, much less to assess it with any other set of criteria—scholarly, romantic, or otherwise. The discussion of the industry has monopolized the discussion of art. The construction of the industry has replaced scholarship of the social-historical field. The rise and fall of the industry can seemingly be equated with the rise and fall of art.

Contemporary art in today's China—we shall temporarily suppose the existence of such a distinction and such a group of practitioners—has long lost its front line, and has become deeply embroiled in the whirlpool of the hegemony of capital and the official system. More importantly, as we witness the drastic changes unfolding before our eyes, we should realize that much of the groundwork for it was laid decades ago.

X

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Jonas Staal

Assemblism

New Authoritarian World Order

To build an effective resistance mobilized by a new collectivity, we must understand and change the lines of division imposed upon us by an authoritarian world order. Today, we are living under a growing, global network of extremist authoritarian regimes: from Trump in the United States to Temer in Brazil, from ultranationalists and fascists rising throughout Europe to Erdoğan in Turkey, and from Putin in Russia to Modi in India. This ultranationalist and patriarchal new world order aims to impose lines of division intended to defeat emancipatory politics indefinitely.[1]

I speak here specifically about the Us/Them dichotomy re-entrenched over the past fifteen years of the War on Terror.[2] "Us" can be the self-proclaimed, enlightened liberal-democratic order (there's not much liberal nor democratic about it) versus "Them": the so-called terrorist, barbarian other. "Us" can be the white, American upper and middle classes re-enforcing their privilege against "Them": people of color, immigrant communities, Muslims. "Us" can be the Brexit voters claiming their country back from "Them": the Eurocratic elites and the so-called tsunami of refugees.[3]

The real, unnamed line of division is that between the precarious classes and the corporate-political elite: that is the true Us versus Them—the only division worth holding to.[4] So how do we *assemble* a new definition of Us? And how do we locate the constituents that would define such a collectivity? These questions are explored in Judith Butler's *Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly* (2015). Not just a reflection on how performative assembly generates the embodiment of a new collectivity, this book allows us to articulate a *practice* of performative assembly—a practice that links the domains of art, theater, performance, activism, and politics, which I propose to name *assemblism*.

Towards a Practice of Performative Assembly

The aim of Butler's *Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly* is to theorize models of public assembly that emerged within worldwide social movements in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century: from the manifold movements stretching from Tunis to Egypt and Syria known as the "Arab Spring," to the emergence of the M15/Los Indignados movement in Spain, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, to the worldwide Occupy movement, the *Indignant* Citizens Movement in Greece, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Black Lives Matter, Nuit Debout in France, and Standing Rock—as well as assemblies in the form of collective hunger strikes in military prisons such as Guantánamo Bay, demonstrations by undocumented

The Rojava ambassador Sınam Mohammed debates with fellow panelists Moussa Ag Assarid, Shela Sheikh, and Laura Raicovich at a roundtable chaired by Maria Hlavajova. The debate took place inside the New World Embassy: Rojava, a temporary embassy constructed in Oslo in 2016 and coproduced by Oslo Architecture Triennial: After Belonging & URO/KORO, Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, and Studio Jonas Staal. Photo: Ernie Buts.

migrants and refugees, university occupations by students, and even online mobilizations to massively petition or hack into certain regimes.[5]

In other words, Butler observes a geographically, politically, and culturally diverse set of peoples and groups that all, one way or another, *assemble*. Their bodies gather at a specific place, or coordinate a series of similar, and most importantly *simultaneous,* gestures in different places. In both cases, they enact a political choreography that suggests the articulation of some form of collectivity.

The first question is *why* certain bodies assemble in ways that become meaningful as a potential collectivity capable of opposing the Us/Them dichotomy. Butler opts for the rubric of *precarity*, arguing that this term describes the results of the massive neoliberal privatization of common infrastructures; precarity, she writes, "brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities."[6] Clearly, the conditions of precarity in these examples differ radically: a student demanding a reduction of their debt by joining the collective occupation of a university building represents a different condition of precarity than a prisoner in Guantánamo Bay who decides to join a collective hunger strike. But although conditions of precarity differ, in all cases the term denotes the falling away of a necessary collective infrastructure of life support. Thus, Butler argues that precarity can operate "as a site of alliance among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism."[7] In other words, the *precariat*—the precarious classes, the *proletariat* of the twenty-first century—could be a potential class-in-the-making through which a variety of peoples could become aligned.[8]

The first step in understanding the process in which the precariat articulates a new collectivity is to see the *body* as the foundation of the social architecture that we call "assembly." Butler here emphasizes the importance of

The Rojava ambassador Sınam Mohammed debates with fellow panelists Moussa Ag Assarid, Shela Sheikh, and Laura Raicovich at a roundtable chaired by Maria Hlavajova. The debate took place inside the New World Embassy: Rojava, a temporary embassy constructed in Oslo in 2016 and coproduced by Oslo Architecture Triennial: After Belonging & URO/KORO, Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, and Studio Jonas Staal. Photo: Ernie Buts.

understanding the body not as an isolated entity: "We cannot talk about a body without knowing what supports that body, and what its relation to that support—or lack of support—might be," because "the body is less an entity than a living set of relations; the body cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and acting."[9] This means that the collective gathering of bodies in the form of an assembly is an inherent act of resistance against the lack of care that a given regime provides to these bodies. When masses of people lose their houses due to a criminal mortgage system and assemble with their tents in a park, then this assembly is a response to a dysfunctional or absent collective infrastructure. The assembly is simultaneously a direct expression of the condition of precarity and a protest against it.

But when the precariat gathers its bodies in the form of an assembly, it also gains the potential to propose alternatives to the regimes that have forced it into this assembly in the first place. This is what Butler describes as the *performative* dimension that defines the social form of the public assembly[10] (and which I propose as the practice of assemblism):

> A social movement is itself a social form, and when a social movement calls for a new way of life, a form of liveable life, then it must, at that moment, enact the very principles it seeks to realize. This means that when it works, there is a performative enactment of radical democracy in such movement that alone can articulate what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a liveable life.[11]

Although social movements and their public assemblies are often critiqued for their lack of clear demands, there is—if we follow Butler—a propositional or even

At Vladimir Putin's annual news conference in Moscow in December 2016, a journalist holds up a poster with the portraits of Putin (left), France's far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen (center), and US president-elect Donald Trump. Photo: AP.

prefigurative dimension to the performative process in which the precariat gathers and generates its social forms.[12] To make this very concrete: in Occupy Amsterdam, where I resided with about thirty fellow artists, the coalition of students, civil organizations, activists, homeless people, etc., organized a common kitchen and food distribution center, a free library, a tent for medical treatment, and a space for the daily general assembly through which the camp governed itself.[13] In the case of the New University student occupation in Amsterdam, a similar set of alternative institutions were devised in the process of assembling its constituents: students programmed their own curricula, inviting philosophers and theorists to give free lectures to students and nonstudents alike; they set up a general assembly for the daily self-governance of the university; they organized a parallel University of Colour[14]; and they built coalitions with We Are Here, a collective of undocumented migrants and refugees, as well as with the cleaners union of the Netherlands.[15]

While neither of these two assemblies proposed anything like a ten-point political program, they most certainly did *perform an agenda* by articulating and devising a new set of institutions: a new social form that provided "life support," making a different Us—a new collectivity—possible. As Butler writes, "In the most ideal instances, an alliance begins to enact the social order it seeks to bring about by establishing its own modes of sociability."[16] The social order that emerges from the practice of assemblism remains fragile, precarious—occupations of streets and squares tend to come and go, as do their general assemblies, temporary libraries, and food distribution centers—but it nonetheless embodies and enacts what Butler calls new "infrastructure and architecture" that "take part in the making of the space of politics."[17]

The process in which the precariat assembles and performs its new social forms is at constant risk of being romanticized. The assembly in the square is often presented as the moment in which the capital-P "People" appear unmediated in some kind of evental rupture, a "genuine" democracy embodied in the famous slogan of the alterglobalization movement: "This is what democracy looks like!" There is a risk in focusing on the assembly as a solution, rather than as a *forced* moment of public

The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, on its thirty-first day of protest and occupation, 2014. Photo: Pasu Au Yeung.

exposure in which the precariat assembles due to a material threat to its system of life support. Romanticization can negate that which we might learn and win through the assembly, if we could build its social forms into a new type of institutionality altogether.[18] Once the squares are empty again, this new institutionality needs to be formalized, organized, and enacted under administrative structures of checks and balances that guarantee durable physical and economic security and fidelity to the collectivity that brought it into being in the first place.[19]

It is also important to remember that there is always an unchosen element in the practice of assembly. There has never been some kind of democratic magic at play when the precariat has revolted against one tyrant or another. There is nothing necessarily desirable about building common ground within the radically diverse and internally conflicting precariat. To put it simply: we never unambiguously *choose* to assemble. We assemble because our capacity for self-determination is in some way violated, or even because we have *no other choice left*. Nor do we choose *with whom we assemble.* Assemblism is the practice of the unchosen:

> Whoever "we" are, we are also those who were never chosen, who emerge on this earth without everyone's consent, and who belong, from the start, to a wider population and a sustainable earth. And this condition, paradoxically, yields the radical potential for new modes of sociality and politics beyond the avid and wretched bonds formed through settler colonialism and expulsion. We are all, in this sense, the unchosen, but we are nevertheless unchosen together.[20]

Jacques Rancière lectures in the public program of the New University occupation of Amsterdam, 2015. Photo: Nicola Zolin.

The Art of Assemblism

While the practice of performative assembly cannot and should not be understood in purely artistic terms, Butler references terminology that emphasizes the role that art plays *within* the political practice of assemblism. For example, she discusses the assembly as "assemblage," and also speaks of the "theatrical" dimension of the assembly and the "morphology" of its social forms.[21] "Morphology" here is a term from biology that refers to knowledge gained through the *visual* observation of form, the intersection of forms, and the mutation of form.

In the process of trying to understand the artistic dimension of assemblism, let us begin with a simple observation: there is always a relation between *power* and *form*. There is a performative aspect to power, a process through which power enacts itself and which results in specific morphological constructs. This is what Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky famously defined as the workings of propaganda. The creation of monopolies of power through intersecting domains of politics, economy, and media results in a construction—a performance—of a normative reality.[22] This process creates what Joseph Masco describes as a "feedback loop": monopolies of power perform a normative reality that benefits these same monopolies of power.[23] But just as constructions of power differ, so do forms of propaganda—resulting in different, often conflicting *propagandas*.[24] Whereas political and corporate elites keep populations in check by projecting upon them the imminent threat of terrorism or biological warfare, *emerging powers* such as the social movements that Butler discusses have the capacity to project a completely different claim to collective power, one based on notions like democratization, transparency, wealth redistribution, and so on.[25] Radically different than the powers of the expanded state that emerged through the War on Terror, the performance of the emerging powers of the precariat points toward a form of *emancipatory propaganda*.[26]

In sum, whereas political and economic elites construct realities that normalize and strengthen the power of ruling minorities, social movements like those discussed by Butler propagate a collective power of precarious majorities that form a direct threat to the status quo. This collective power generates a morphology (the social form emerging through the practice of assemblism—one could call it a "propaganda") structured—composed, scripted, choreographed—by egalitarian ideals. An example is prisoners engaged in a collective hunger strike. Even though each prisoner is in their own cell, their simultaneous choreography reaffirms that no matter how much the prison divides them physically, they continue to enact a script—a series of planned gestures—in collectivity. A different morphology of collectivity is performed in the case of bodies that have the relative privilege of gathering in public, for example in a general assembly, the daily circle of self-governance present in social movements such as Los Indignados, Occupy, and Nuit Debout. The form of the circle is literally shaped by the bodies of the participants in the assembly, resulting in an architecture of collective power that cannot exist if the collective is not literally present at that very moment. If the bodies disperse, the Parliament of Bodies ceases to exist.[27]

Most important in the way these two examples of assemblism perform collectivity is the imaginary that they evoke—the surplus of presence they bring into being. Encountering one prisoner in a hunger strike while knowing others are performing similar gestures reinforces the idea of an unlimited number of people standing with a single individual. The synchronicity of the gestures in this form of assemblism generates the sense of a larger collectivity. Something similar happens in the circular assembly in the square: when the people who are present refer to themselves as the "99 percent" or something similar, they perform *as if they were a majority*, even though they are factually a minority. In this way, assemblism lays the foundation for a collectivity yet to emerge. A new Us is performed *as if* it is already a majority, before it manifests materially.

Although the morphology of these assemblies tends to be described as "spontaneous," they are not accidental. The very form of the square, for example, tends to structure the conditions for assemblism through containment: severely limiting the amount of bodies that can be present. Similarly, the dispersed assembly of the hunger strike is structured through the specific conditions of prison architecture. This, we could say, also names the paradox of the morphology of assemblism, as the claim to a new power is articulated through the infrastructure of the regime it struggles against. I have witnessed this myself on several occasions, ranging from Occupy Amsterdam, which had to shape itself within the rather tiny square of Beursplein, to the revolutionary Rojava government in northern Syria, which has had to organize its alternative model of stateless assembly-based democracy within the

Turkish choreographer Erdem Gündüz stands in Taksim Square on June 18 2013, after state security forces attacked protesters in Gezi Park. The action became known as "Standing Man," generating many followers across the country. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP/Getty Images.

rigid, modernist, hierarchical architectural structures left by the Assad regime.[28]

I have worked alongside many colleagues and friends in a variety of political movements, organizations, and platforms. As artists in assemblism—as *assemblists*—we have learned how the emerging power of collectivity generates new morphologies. In other words, we have observed and attempted to practice the artistic within the performance of the political. As such, we have learned about the mathematics of egalitarianism: a gathering of two hundred and fifty people can make some of those people feel alienated and excluded within the staging of a collectivity. We have learned that the form of the circle can be inclusive, but it can also be exclusive; sometimes, differential privileges develop between the "inner circle" of people who have been there from the beginning, and the "outer circle" of people who joined at a later stage.[29] We have learned that using chairs maintains the liberal order that emphasizes the sovereign individual above the collective, whereas benches maintain the principle of negotiating and sharing collective space. We have learned that using digital projections can turn a gathering of people into a gathering of observers rather than a gathering of potential actors.[30] These are questions that relate to the morphology of assemblism and the visual literacy needed to translate its prefigurative propositions of alternative institutionality into truly new and durable morphologies of transdemocracy.[31]

As artists, we are not *in power*, but through morphology we *give power*: we give *form to power*. The practice of assemblism that we can derive from Butler's work opens up the possibility of a new collectivity arising from the precariat—a new Us with the potential to shatter the Us/Them divide that has brought the new authoritarian world order into being. Embedding our artistic practice within social movements, we can help formulate the new campaigns, the new symbols, and the popular poetry needed to bolster the emergence of a radical collective imaginary. In that process, we can also begin to devise the new infrastructures—the parallel parliaments,[32] the stateless embassies, the transdemocratic unions—needed to establish the institutions that will make a new emancipatory governance a reality.

Our time as assemblists is now. As the tsunami of authoritarian decrees from Trump to Erdoğan suggests, our time might never come again.

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I tried all I could to express myself. Sometimes I talked, sometimes I refused. I hunger struck for days, but [redacted]3 made me eat under the threat of torture. I figured that good food was better than kicking the tail. I wanted to compell the Jordanians to send me back home, but ~~the~~ I failed. Maybe, I wasn't hard core enough!!! Later on, I hunger-struck secretly. I just wasted ~~the~~ my food without the knowledge of the guards, and they thought I ate. The goal of this type of hunger strike was to make myself so weak that I ~~don't~~ feel neither physical nor psychological pain. I don't know about other people, but if get too hungry, my feelings, and care drop considerably. Nobody taught me anything like that, I just found it while in jail. I practiced the same method later in U.S custody. Torture in Oodles: Around Feb' 2003 The director of the Department for Fighting Against terrorism was subject of an assassination plot. He almost gave his soul back. Somebody planted a timed bomb in the ~~Chassis~~ car's chassis of the biggest fund of the Islamic movement in Jordan. The bomb was supposed to explode on the way between his home and his office, and it did. But what happened looked like a miracle. On his way to work the Director felt like buying a cigarette, the driver of his stopped in front of a store, and left to grabbed a pack of cigarette. The director felt liking going with his chauffeur. As soon as both left the car, the bomb exploded. Nobody was harmed but the truck was history. The investigation led to a suspect, but after watching his family's house for some time, they

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Redacted page from Guantánamo Diary (2015) by Mohamedou Ould Slahi, who was imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay from 2002 to 2016. In this part of the text he describes his involvement in individual and collected hunger strikes with other inmates at the prison. Written in 2005, the manuscript would not be declassified for publication until 2012.

Exterior view of the New World Embassy: Rojava (2016), coproduced by Oslo Architecture Triennial: After Belonging & URO/KORO, Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, and Studio Jonas Staal. Photo: István Virág.

X

This text resulted from a lecture presented at the conference Solution Communism, organized by Iliana Fokianaki, Ingo Niermann, and Joshua Simon on January 21, 2017 at State of Concept, Athens. The text will be further elaborated for the conference Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler on April 5–7 at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. I would like to thank Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei, Iliana Fokianaki, and Brian Kuan Wood for their support in writing this essay.

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1
As Maria Hlavajova notes in her introduction to the appropriately titled book *Former West*: "The country that routinely calls itself the leader of the free world has just blatantly shown that bigotry, xenophobia, misogyny, racism, climate change denial, etc., are at the core of how it wants to be governed. All this to loud jubilation of right-wing ideologues in the west and across the globe, saluting the birth of a new world order, once again." *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* , eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 15.

2
In the work of Brian Michael Goss, for example, the Us/Them dichotomy is discussed as the dominant ideological doctrine of the War on Terror. Reviving the trope of orientalism, Goss argues, allowed Saddam Hussein and his regime to become constructed as "exotic, traditional, sensuous, mysterious" while simultaneously being framed as "brutal, untouched by the rigors of reason, subjected to the primitive social organization of the leader and the led." Against this, George W. Bush could be contrasted as the enlightened crusader of Western democracy. Goss goes on to comment that "the paired exaltation and denigration of Our and Their leaders perhaps mutually summon each other into being." Brian Michael Goss, *Rebooting the Herman & Chomsky Propaganda Model in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 98, 104.

3
This political use of the term "tsunami"—equating migration and fleeing refugees with the devastation caused by natural disaster (or rather, climate change)—was first coined by Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, when he described the "tsunami of Islamization" as the greatest threat to the Netherlands and the West at large. See Sanne ten Hoove and Raoul du Pré, "Wilders bang van 'tsunami van islamisering,'" *Volkskrant*, October 6, 2006 http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/wilders-bang-voor-tsunami-van-islamisering~a786026/ .

4
Sven Lütticken rightfully points out that this division entails far more than income inequality, as was demonstrated by the Brexit vote, in which well-off citizens who owned houses tended to vote "leave," while people in more precarious conditions and those with mortgages tended to vote "remain." The Us/Them divide is as much political and cultural as it is economic. See Sven Lütticken, "Who Makes the Nazis?," *e-flux journal* 76 (October 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69408/who-makes-the-nazis/ .

5
Not all these examples are examined in Butler's book, partly because Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock had not yet emerged when she was writing it. But a different category of assemly that seems missing from the book is heavily politicized online assemblies that aim at collective action, for example in the form of transnationally organized "DDoS" attacks (Distributed Denial of Service)—essentially a tactic to overwhelm websites by accelerating their data usage. Although DDoS attacks are also used by governments in cyber offensives and are certainly not exclusive to progressive groups, historic cases such as Operation Payback (2010), which took down the websites of Visa and Mastercard in retaliation for their refusal to accept donations to WikiLeaks, are examples of forms of transnational assembly with a potential to construct diverse collectivities. See Esther Addley and Josh Halliday, "WikiLeaks supporters disrupt Visa and Mastercard Sites in 'Operation Payback,'" *The Guardian*, December 9, 2010 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/08/wikileaks-visa-mastercard-operation-payback .

6
Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 58.

7
Ibid., 27.

8
See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

9
Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* , 65.

10
In a collaborative book project with Athena Athanasiou, Butler writes in a crucial passage that "the performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious—unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself—to demand the end of precarity." Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the* Political (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 121.

11
Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* , 218.

12
Butler's own speech at the Occupy Wall Street protests in Zuccotti Park, New York on October 23, 2011 can be considered a marking point for her theory on performativity and the enactment of new social forms. She said: "As bodies we suffer, we require shelter and food, and as bodies we require one another and desire one another. So this is a politics of the public body, the requirements of the body, its movement and voice. We would not be here if elected officials were representing the popular will. We stand apart from the electoral process and its complicities with exploitation. We sit and stand and move and speak, as we can, as the popular will, the one that electoral democracy has forgotten and abandoned. But we are here, and remain here, enacting the phrase, 'we the people.'" See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=50&v=JVpoOdz1AKQ .

13
For accounts from different members of Artists in Occupy Amsterdam, see *Actors, Agents and Attendants: Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice* , eds. Fulya Erdemci and Andrea Phillips (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

14
The University of Colour emerged as a critique of and alternative to what its initiators considered the underlying colonial and white bias of the demands and knowledges propagated by the New University. The University of Colour, in contrast, sought to "decolonize the university." See http://universityofcolour.com/ .

15
On the role of art in instituting the New University, see Jonas Staal, "New Art for the New University," June 15, 2015 https://www.onlineopen.org/download.php?id=472 .

16
Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* , 84.

17
Ibid., 127.

18
Not An Alternative argues for a form of "institutional liberation," meaning that through social movements, occupations, boycotts, etc., existing institutions can become repurposed within the imaginary of an alternative institutionality brought forward by the precariat: "Institutional liberation isn't about making institutions better, more inclusive, more participatory. It's about establishing politicized base camps from which ever more coordinated, elaborate, and effective campaigns against the capitalist state in all its racist, exploitative, extractivist, and colonizing dimensions can be carried out. This takeover will not happen overnight. But it is happening now at an international scale, accumulating force and momentum with every repetition of a common name and image, every iteration of associated acts: red lines, red squares, arrayed tents, money drops, blockades, occupations." Not An Alternative, "Institutional Liberation," *e-flux journal* 77 (November 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76215/institutional-liberation/ .

19
Jodi Dean's work on the concept of the "crowd" overlaps in some respects with the assemblies of the precariat discussed by Butler. However, Dean takes a more militant approach in arguing that the egalitarian potential of the crowd must be translated through a new international Communist Party. Through the Community Party, she writes, the crowd can emerge as the People. See Dean's lecture "If You're Not Against Us, You're With Us," Former West Public Editorial Meeting, Hungary, May 13, 2015 http://www.formerwest.org/PublicEditorialMeetings/ThereIsACrackInTheMuseumOfHistoryIsThatHowTheFutureGetsIn/Video/IfYouAreNotAgainstUsJodiDean . See also Dean, *Crowds and Party* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016).

20
Butler, *Notes Towards a*

Performative Theory of Assembly , 116.

21
Ibid., 68, 85, 87. Regarding art and morphology, see also Jonas Staal, "Ideology = Form," *e-flux journal* 69 (January 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60626/ideology-form/ . The notion of "assemblage" here resonates with Yates McKee's history of art within the Occupy Movement and its aftermath: "Like the camp itself that would be set up in the following month, the founding assembly might be understood as a kind of embodied collage, transposing an alien political form into both the ossified landscape of the New York Left and the symbolic heart of global capital itself." Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 93. Hito Steyerl, in the context of the alterglobalization movement, speaks similarly of its "montage." Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 78.

22
Herman and Chomsky, who articulated their famous "propaganda model" in the late Eighties, identified five "filters" through which monopolies of power come to perform normative reality: ownership, advertising, information dependency, flak (distortion), and anticommunism. They also proposed a form of counter-propaganda (what I will call "emancipatory propaganda") realized through the "organization and self-education of groups in the community and workplace, and their networking and activism." Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 307.

23
Masco speaks of the expanded concept of biosecurity in the War on Terror, which "promises a world without terror via the constant production of terror," and as such ends up creating "a potentially endless recursive loop of threat production and response." Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 156.

24
The idea that propaganda should be understood in the plural is taken from the philosopher Jacques Ellul, whose "Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes" (1962) is a rather curious translation of the original plural French title: "Propagandas."

25
The notion of emerging power resonates with what Gerald Raunig, following Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès and Antonio Negri, describes as "constituent power": a "collective subjectivation, institution, and formation beyond constituted power." Raunig writes that constituent power is the driving force of "micropolitical" practices through which an alternative, non-statist history of art can be articulated. Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 54, 60. In the case of assemblism, we will speak of "emerging power," since the cases examined by Butler are so radically differentiated.

26
In her essay "Some Propaganda for Propaganda" (1984), Lucy Lippard spoke of emancipatory propaganda as an "inherently feminist … more intimate" form of propaganda. See Lucy Lippard, *To the Third Power: Feminism, Art, and Class Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 117.

27
"Parliament of Bodies" is the title of the Athens edition of documenta 14. It attempts to broaden Bruno Latour's concepts of the "Parliament of Things." See Iliana Fokianaki, "Missing Bodies," *Frieze*, October 24, 2016 https://frieze.com/article/missing-bodies .

28
This has been discussed by the founders of Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, who note that "throughout the histories of decolonization, the possibility of reusing existing structures in the very same ways they were used under colonial regimes has proven too tempting to resist." However, they simultaneously emphasize that "colonial remnants and ruins are not only the dead matter of past power, but could be thought of as material for re-appropriations and strategic activation within the politics of the present." The latter certainly applies to the autonomous Rojava region. See Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 20, 21.

29
Jo Freeman's "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1970) makes a similar point. In the context of the Women's Movement, she observed that "the members of a friendship group will relate more to each other than to other people. They listen more attentively, and interrupt less; they repeat each other's points and give in amiably; they tend to ignore or grapple with the 'outs,' whose approval is not necessary for making a decision. But it is necessary for the 'outs' to stay on good terms with the 'ins.'" See http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm .

30
Although I agree with Claire Bishop that the "binary of active/passive" tends to be reductive, the practice of assemblism certainly does aim to shift agency amongst participants, although this is admittedly more complex than switching from a politics of representation to one of "presence." From a Butlerian perspective we could very well argue that our bodily presence is also a form of mediation and representation. In the context of assemblism, the term "actor" is closer to what Augusto Boal termed "spect-actor." See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso, 2012), 38.

31
See Jonas Staal, "Transdemocracy," *e-flux journal* 76 (October 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69843/transdemocracy/ .

32
Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency points to Palestine's history of a parliament-in-exile—born out of devastating colonial violence—as a model of extraterritorial "Common Assembly," which survives state violence through time "precisely because their gatherings have no fixed seats." Petti, Hilal, and Weizman, *Architecture After Revolution* , 169.