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Editorial

In this issue of *e-flux journal*, Carolina Caycedo explains that so many climate activists in South America are murdered by the state that their friends and families have coined a new term for this loss: the dead aren't killed so much as they are "sown," like seeds. Their legacies are a source of abundant energy and knowledge to be used in continuing struggles against the collusion of extractive corporations and necropolitical states. But Caycedo points out that such a conversion of the meaning of death into a continuing source of strength is also a delicate matter, since it demands a certain political and poetic sophistication, as well as a richness of spirit willing to understand and practice a unity between human life and the earth underneath our feet.

Harvesting the radiant energy of the sun for human needs might initially seem like a less delicate matter. But Elizabeth A. Povinelli considers how the sun's incomprehensible power can still be converted ideologically by rendering all its unharnessed energy as wasted productivity—"the singular manifestation of settler-capital disavowal." In the toxic homecoming of liberal capitalism, according to Povinelli, what scorches us will be what cools us.

Also in this issue, the Organ of the Autonomous Sciences reports on attempts in Scandinavia to fuse neofascism and twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetic strategies. Citing an obnoxious faction of "artists suffering from extreme self-adulation" who were expelled from the Situationist International, today's version exploits the avant-garde's radical contrarianism to pander to spectacle and deliberately target immigrant communities with the "post-shame" nihilist irony of the global alt-right movement.

In an essay that, like Caycedo's and Povinelli's, was originally commissioned for our summer issue on food and agriculture, Genaro Amaro Altamirano speaks of land, water, and soil as being on par with human beings. In "Where Will Our Food Come From?" he gives an account of a community and a museum's effort to renew the transmission of agricultural knowledge and practice for

surviving what is to come.

Lithuanian Holocaust scholar Saulius Sužiedėlis draws up a detailed portrait of Jonas Mekas's activities as a young artist living under German and Soviet regimes before leaving Lithuania, putting to rest the allegations against Mekas that surfaced just prior to his death.

In an essay written just before his participation in this year's documenta fifteen, the artist Richard Bell warns against the immanence and political strength of Indigenous art dissolving into a market, land, and world brokered by imperialist whiteness. Bell's piece is a continuation of his famous 2002 essay "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing!," which reads Western art and aesthetic appetites for Aboriginal art as an index for larger colonial machinations.

In the first of a two-part essay, scholar Su Wei uses emotion as a key to understanding the complex and often contradictory demands that Chinese artists contended with in the decades following the country's 1949 revolution. Placing personal feelings in the service of nation-building in a tumultuous and radically forward-looking period meant also drawing from the same feelings to create socialist-realist works. Such works expressed strength and vision at a time when—not unlike today—their artists felt great uncertainty.

X

Saulius Sužiedėlis

Portrait of a Poet as a Young Man: Jonas Mekas in War and Exile

Many in the art world are observing the centennial of the Lithuanian-born poet and filmmaker Jonas Mekas (1922–2019), a founder and icon of avant-garde cinema. Cultural programs, exhibits, and conferences are marking the occasion. But not everyone is celebrating. In two recent reviews, historian Michael Casper has made allegations that appear to tarnish Mekas's legacy. The first, published in the *New York Review of Books* (*NYRB*), took aim at the poet-filmmaker's diary/memoir *I Had Nowhere To Go*.[1] The second attack appeared in *Jewish Currents* as a review of "The Camera Was Always Running," an exhibition of Mekas's work in New York that concluded in June 2022.[2]

The two articles focus on Mekas's wartime activities and his refugee experience. Casper claims that Mekas was evasive and dishonest about his wartime activities, and then proceeds to paint him, an eighteen-year-old when the Wehrmacht invaded Lithuania in 1941, as a Nazi sympathizer, if not outright collaborator. One would assume that such a dark indictment of an American cultural icon would require clear and convincing evidence, if not proof beyond a reasonable doubt, but the case presented disappoints. The review format of the articles allowed Casper to present judgements without the burden of buttressing his allegations with relevant sources and requisite detail. The resulting narrative turns Jonas Mekas's life as a young man into something that it was not. Casper also employed the filmmaker's ostensibly dark past as a vehicle to pronounce on broader issues of collaboration, nationalism, and revisionism. He tells us to "move beyond the superficial," echoing Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter's recent lament on the "national hunger for simplifying history."[3] But Casper's account of Mekas's life fails in this regard. The reader gains no real understanding of a young poet's life under conditions of war, foreign occupation, and exile. We learn little of the harsh realities of Lithuanians caught between the grindstones of two criminal regimes and find no useful description of the conditions they endured, or the reasons they fled their country.

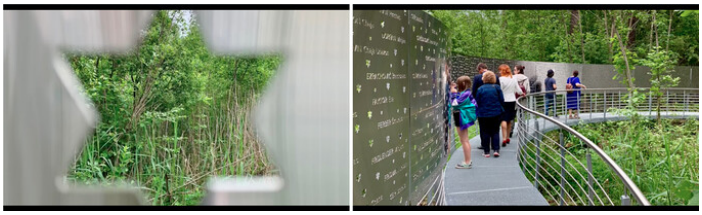
More often than not, all that we find are suggestive images and associations that seek to denigrate Mekas's person. As an example, in the *Jewish Currents* article Casper contrasts two evocative events of the same day (June 16, 2019): the unveiling of a memorial in Biržai, Lithuania to the town's murdered Jews, a commemoration witnessed by thousands, including Casper; and Mekas's burial, described as a "secret ceremony" in nearby Semeniškiai, his birthplace. Casper pits these unrelated gatherings against one another: a proud march for historical truth vs. a shameful clandestine gathering—a dramatic juxtaposition to be sure. But why is Mekas's burial "secret" rather than "private," a common-enough practice? Professional film crews recorded the Reformed Protestant burial service attended by dozens of the poet's relatives and friends, some of whom spoke with reporters. Videos of the funeral appeared on Lithuanian national and local

Portrait of Jonas Mekas with Bolex. Photo: Boris Lehman.

media outlets and are easily found on YouTube. So how "secret" was this ceremony? Words matter, as do images. The photo beneath the headline of the *Jewish Currents* article shows Mekas's "temporary foreign passport" issued by the Reich authorities, complete with swastika. Casper intends for this to look compromising, but the picture only proves that Mekas received the same ID as many thousands of other non-German refugees, allowing them passage through checkpoints and access to food rations. I still have my parents' certificates among the family papers.

Two disclaimers on my part as I go on to consider the shallow allegations made against the late artist. I have no expertise in American avant-garde culture which, in any case, has no relevance to Mekas's wartime past or the two articles mentioned above. The second caveat is personal. In the 2018 *NYRB* review, Casper cited me as a "Lithuanian-American historian." True, I am of the cohort who arrived in America from the displaced persons (DP) camps as small children and, as adults, chose to restore, sometimes as dual citizens, close ties to the land our parents had fled. Whether this background enhances or undermines what I write here is for the reader to decide.

Finally, a clarifying stipulation. My research has centered on the decade that followed the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940, the deadliest period in the country's history. Casper brings up revisionism, a burdened idea often associated with Holocaust denial. This issue requires serious consideration, but we should be clear about what is *not* in dispute. The genocide of the Jews was the greatest instance of mass murder in Lithuanian history, incomparable in scope, and one in which a part of the ethnic Lithuanian populace participated. The ultimate horror has a timetable. Before the murder of the Jews of the Biržai region (Mekas's birthplace) in the first week of August 1941, an estimated 90 percent of Lithuania's Jews were still alive. Less than three months later, almost three-fourths were dead. Following this unprecedented bloodbath, about forty thousand Jews labored in the starving urban ghettos (Vilnius, Kaunas, and Siauliai), a pause which amounted to but a temporary reprieve—essentially existence on death row. Less than ten percent of Lithuanian Jews ultimately survived: some by fleeing the country eastward ahead of the Nazis; others by hiding among rescuers; some simply by sheer chance. According to official Lithuanian estimates, between 190,000 and 206,000 Lithuanian Jews died in the



Unveiling of a memorial in Biržai to the town's murdered Jews, June 16, 2019.

Holocaust.

This history is well known to mainstream scholars everywhere and is accepted as fact by reasonable people in Lithuania.

Soviets, Germans, and Mekas: A Teenager in War

The most damning of Casper's assertions is that the aspiring poet had been "deeply involved in political activism that led him to support the Nazi occupation of Lithuania during the critical period when the Jews were killed."[4] To understand whether this charge has merit requires a grasp of what transpired in Lithuania before and during the Nazi invasion and subsequent occupation (1941–44), and a closer look at Mekas's activities during this fateful period. The aspiring poet's boyhood and adolescence passed under the rule of Antanas Smetona (1926–40), whose authoritarian regime permitted a degree of artistic freedom, financed the education of national minorities (including Jewish public schools), and contributed to the salaries of priests and rabbis. This all ended with the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in the summer of 1940. The occupiers found followers among those disaffected by Smetona's political repression, while even the majority of the country's Jews opposed to Communism could see the Soviet army as a protector against the Nazi threat next door. But most Lithuanians, ashamed of the government's collapse in the face of the Kremlin's threats, placed their hopes in a breakdown of the Soviet-Nazi partnership established in August 1939.[5] The Soviet occupation produced a toxic brew of resentments, one of which was the perception of Jews as traitors. Fantasies of Judeo-Bolshevism gained currency. Not surprisingly, the geopolitical orientations of the country's national/ethnic communities (and not only those between ethnic Lithuanian and Jews) diverged sharply and tragically. Jewish memoirs have described the volatile atmosphere as rife with social tensions, on the verge of explosion.

Where was the young Mekas in all of this? Casper claims that the poet was a member of an underground movement that "supported the 1941 Nazi invasion of Soviet Lithuania." On closer inspection we see that Mekas joined a gaggle of teenage students in posting anti-Soviet leaflets ("Down with Stalin") in late November 1940, which police tore down within hours. These bumbling adventures were described in the August to September 1941 issues of the Biržai weekly *Naujosios Biržų žinios* (The New Biržai News, henceforth *NBž*), published as excerpts from the diaries of "the Six," the name the youngsters chose for themselves. My mother taught literature at a secondary school in Kaunas and recalled that some of her students "raised a ruckus" when asked to read Pushkin as part of the new, Russified curriculum. To call such outbursts an underground movement seems strange. (The anti-Semitic Lithuanian Activist Front [LAF], founded in November 1940 in Berlin, *did* create a network of followers within the country, but it did not appear until months later. Most of these underground cells were broken up by Soviet security before the Nazi invasion.)

The predicted and feared anti-Soviet explosion erupted when the Wehrmacht invaded the USSR on June 22, 1941. Much of the Lithuanian populace welcomed the Germans, the euphoria recounted in numerous memoirs. For many Lithuanians, the long-awaited war came as a relief, an end to Soviet repression, which had culminated in mass deportations (June 14–17, 1941) only days before the German attack. At the invasion's onset, thousands of mostly young rebels rose up against the retreating Soviets. This June Uprising, as it is usually described in Lithuania, was brief (less than a week) and largely spontaneous. The majority of the roughly twelve thousand soldiers of the Red Army's Lithuanian-speaking corps mutinied or deserted en masse: under the circumstances, there was no point in dying for Stalin. Rogue fighters attacked civilians, mainly Jews and accused Communists. Anti-Jewish violence intensified with the arrival of the Germans. A sense of impunity encouraged criminal assaults, which the rebels themselves documented at the time. For their part, the NKVD, the Red Army, and Soviet activists massacred nearly a thousand civilians as they retreated.

The LAF leaders who had evaded the Soviet police emerged from the underground and proclaimed a short-lived (June 23–August 5, 1941) provisional government as an independent state in alliance with Germany. The media broadcasted effusive accolades to Hitler and the German forces in gratitude for the nation's "liberation" and announced a willingness to join the "New Europe" in the struggle to crush Bolshevism. The LAF's political ideology and alliances were to prove morally and politically ruinous, widely judged as shameful, except by its still active apologists. After the war, even former LAF leaders rather weakly admitted that the Front's program contained "totalitarian tendencies with a leader, and with allusions to racism which were fashionable at the time."[6]

The Young Mekas: Literature under the Nazis

What did Mekas do as the German armies swept through Biržai? In a postwar Soviet interrogation, his classmate

The ceremony of Jonas Mekas's funeral in his native village of Semeniškiai was broadcast by Lietuvos Rytas and uploaded on its Youtube channel.

Leonardas Matuzevičius (one of "the Six") took credit for establishing an LAF command center in the town. There is no evidence that Mekas took part. But, according to Casper, soon thereafter, Mekas's cultural life blossomed as he "ascended through the ranks of the collaborationist Lithuanian literary world," and took part "in running two ultranationalist and Nazi propaganda newspapers."[7]

This remarkable achievement for someone who had not yet reached his twenty-second birthday when he fled Lithuania in 1944 requires closer examination. What were Mekas's editorial activities and literary output, and what did it mean to work under foreign occupation? In his email exchanges with Casper, Mekas admitted that "calling myself editor-in-chief was obviously a bragging … [something] a young person put in his or her job application."[8] During **a six-hour interview he conducted for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** (USHMM) in 2018, Mekas explained in some detail his work as a proofreader and writer for the cultural features in two newspapers. In the aftermath of the Nazi invasion, Mekas had found work at the aforementioned Biržai weekly newspaper. He does not appear in the editorial credits of the *NBž,* nor in the weekly *Panevėžio apygardos balsas* (The Voice of the Panevėžys District, henceforth *Pab*), a much larger paper, which he joined in 1943. Mekas is listed as one of the self-styled "Biržai literati" who congratulated the *Pab* on the paper's hundredth issue.

Tellingly, while Casper admits that Mekas never wrote a single anti-Semitic sentence in the two newspapers in question, he never details what Mekas actually published. Given the charge of support for Nazism, it seems only fair to examine Mekas's wartime writings in the two papers (which are both available online). The first poem he published in the *NBž* appeared on September 6, 1941, a satire which likened Soviet activists to Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Aside from mostly lyrical poetry, Mekas produced biographical sketches of cultural figures. In *Pab*, he published an effusive tribute to the leftist avant-garde poet Kazys Binkis, born near Mekas's home village and later recognized as a Righteous Gentile (in 1988). He praised the atheist freethinker Jonas Sliūpas for his "humanism and tolerance" and commemorated Martynas Yčas, a Protestant liberal politician in the Russian Duma. There are several of what Casper characterized as "sharp essays," mostly apolitical polemics among literati insiders. Mekas also penned a plea to halt the plague of alcoholism and save the nation, a common theme during the Nazi occupation (*Pab*, August 15, 1943). Not quite the texts one expects from an ultranationalist Nazi sympathizer. Mekas's writings then and later strongly suggest that he disapproved of the fascist drivel penned by associates like Matuzevičius. This is as logical a conclusion as any in trying to understand why Mekas avoided parroting anything resembling Nazi-like ideology or anti-Semitic tropes. Describing the posting of anti-Soviet wall posters and youthful literary creations as "deep political activism" in support of Nazism is grossly misleading.

The collaborationist label that Casper pins on Mekas derives almost entirely from his work at the two Nazi occupation–era newspapers, so we should understand the historical context in which the poet first put pen to paper, that is, the situation of the Lithuanian-language press under foreign rule. The Smetona regime's supervision of the press had been relatively lax. The Soviet occupiers of 1940 imposed, for the first time, totalitarian censorship policies. Portraits of Stalin and visions of a new, classless society became ubiquitous. During this time, some Lithuanian writers sought to evade censorship by producing tracts on noncontroversial topics, such as nineteenth-century poets. As the Soviets took over after the German retreat in 1944, the mustachioed Leader of Progressive Mankind reappeared as a front-page icon. In his interview with the USHMM, Mekas insisted that Soviet censorship in cultural matters had been far more intrusive than the restrictions under Nazi rule. Any reader of the period's Soviet Lithuanian newspapers can easily see that Mekas was right. The differences stemmed from contrasting approaches to control of the press. The Soviets assigned the arts a specific, transformative task: according to Stalin, the intelligentsia should strive to be "engineers of the human soul." For their part, the Nazis were mainly concerned with securing the economic potential of conquered territories and cared less whether supposedly inferior peoples accepted Nazi-think. Their tendency to give the arts considerable latitude allowed Mekas and others to include uncensored material on Lithuanian cultural life.

Nonetheless, while Mekas and other apolitical authors avoided explicit support for the occupiers, there remains the question of how readers responded to the front-page and editorial content of their newspapers. After 1940, toxic belief systems came to dominate Lithuania's public space for the first time. A certain level of ideological contamination was unavoidable, but there is no way to

The Journey of a Jew with Stalin, caricature. Example of underground anti-Semitic propaganda from 1940s Lithuania. Source: Lithuanian Special Archive, Vilnius →.

assess its extent. There were no Gallup polls, but conversations with contemporaries and anecdotal accounts hint at the impact. Some people bought what the Soviets and Nazis were selling, others responded with avoidance strategies: reading between the lines for nuggets of real information about the war and the political situation; skipping the nonsense on the first page and turning to useful sections that affected their daily lives (prices, regulations, obituaries).[9] A free press reappeared in Lithuania only in 1990.

During the final months of the German occupation, Jonas and Adolfas Mekas helped type up and distribute some anti-Nazi bulletins derived from BBC broadcasts, activity not unlike his teenage postings of anti-Kremlin wall signs. Soon after, however, Jonas's typewriter was stolen, and he feared that the Nazi police might trace it back to his place. At this point, he had reason to fear the German authorities. Once again, some context is in order. The popular enthusiasm that greeted the Wehrmacht in June 1941 began to wane within months. For most Lithuanians, long-term Nazi rule was hardly the desired outcome of the war. Lithuanian leaders insisted that nothing should be done that would assist the Soviet military advance, but, when necessary, Nazi designs inimical to Lithuanian interests were to be frustrated: cooperation and/or resistance would have to be conditional. As a result, the German-Lithuanian relationship became increasingly ambivalent, even contentious. In the spring of 1943, Lithuanians massively sabotaged Nazi plans to mobilize an indigenous Waffen-SS legion. A year later, when Germans (falsely) promised to create what was perceived as a separate Lithuanian army, thousands volunteered. Cooperation with the major anti-Nazi armed groups

operating in Lithuania was considered but proved impossible because their pursuits were inimical to Lithuanian goals: the Polish Home Army wanted Vilnius, while the Soviet partisans supported the Kremlin. Such calculations became moot as the Wehrmacht retreated in the summer of 1944. To sum up, if in June 1941 most ethnic Lithuanians experienced the first days of the Nazi occupation as a liberation, the final year of 1944 presaged a second foreign occupation. Mekas's wartime predicaments can be understood, but not if one is content with a "simplified" history.

Photos from the displaced persons (DP) camps, 1945–49.

Mekas as Refugee: The Escape

As the Red Army advanced in July 1944, the Mekas brothers faced a decision. Jonas feared German arrest, but the approaching Soviets also evoked memories of the Kremlin's repressions in 1940–41. My parents faced the same conundrum: there was some argument over whether to stay or go. The Soviets had deported my father's cousin in June 1941 just before the Nazi invasion: Juozas Sužiedėlis and his two-year-old daughter survived Siberian exile, but his wife did not. In the end, many chose flight as the wiser option. Jonas and Adolfas obtained fabricated papers marking them as students on their way to the University of Vienna. From Austria, they hoped to reach Switzerland and find help from old friends of their uncle Povilas Jašinskas, a Reformed pastor, who had studied in Basel during the 1920s. However, the men were seized en route by the Germans and sent to do forced labor, which may have saved them from an even worse fate had they stayed home. In all, as many as a hundred thousand Lithuanians fled their homeland, most picking their way through East Prussia and continuing westward towards the Western Allies, careful not to travel too deeply into the Reich, where the men could be dragooned for labor, nor stay too close to the front and risk being overrun

by the Soviets. In May 1945 my family reached friendly American troops and found safety.

To understand the motivations behind this dangerous trek into the Reich requires a factual if discomforting explanation of comparative threats. Needless to say, in the eyes of Lithuania's surviving Jews, whose community had been effectively annihilated in the Nazi-led genocide, the return of the Red Army meant salvation. Dov Levin, one of the foremost historians of Lithuanian Jewry, aptly presented his work on Eastern European Jews in 1939–41 as a study in living under the rule of the "lesser of two evils."[10] Obviously, for them, the Kremlin was by far the lesser calamity. Even the Soviet deportations offered a far better chance of survival than Nazi rule. For Jews, thus, the question of relative dangers answered itself. But Levin's formulation inevitably raises the question: a lesser evil for whom? The experience of non-Jews pointed to answers that were not as clear-cut. Despite selective repressions, non-Jews in German-occupied Lithuania did not suffer genocide. Nearly five thousand ethnic Lithuanians perished during the Nazi occupation, and tens of thousands more wound up as laborers in the Reich. The country's Polish and Russian minorities endured worse in relative terms. But compared to the horror that had befallen the Jews, self-interested ethnic Lithuanians could conclude that, at least in the short term, the Germans did not yet pose an existential threat. It would be contrary to human nature if those who encountered first one, and then the other, of the most murderous regimes in European history did not engage in at least some cost-benefit postmortem.

Another factor encouraging flight was the illusion of a quick return. The Lithuanian generation that came of age during the interwar period hoped for a repeat of the Great War: Russian collapse, followed by a British and American victory over Germany, leading to favorable geopolitical conditions for the restoration of state independence. Refugee memoirs recount the desperate hope of another conflict: a nuclear-armed America forcing the Stalinists out of Eastern Europe. However fantastic in retrospect, at the time this hope was the only one that provided relief from visions of a bleak future.[11] Strange as it may seem today, millions of people actually believed in a future in which they "may live out their lives in freedom," one of the lofty goals articulated by Roosevelt and Churchill in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941.

Finally, many Lithuanians simply assumed that a second experience with Stalinism might be worse than the first version. On this point, they were not wrong. By the late 1950s most refugees learned more of what had happened back in their homeland. The vast majority of ethnic Lithuanians who died violently in the twentieth century perished during the five years following Germany's surrender. After their return in 1944–45, the Soviets deported more than 130,000 people, mostly to Siberia and the Far North. Tens of thousands more were arrested, often tortured, some executed. At the same time, an estimated forty to fifty thousand people, including many civilians, died in the war between Lithuanian partisans and the various Soviet security forces. After Stalin's death, Lavrenti Beria, the notorious Soviet police chief, reported to the Party bosses that more than a quarter million people had suffered one of these violent outcomes in postwar Lithuania.[12] The Kremlin claimed to be fighting fascist bandits, of course, but the fierce Soviet pacification of the country targeted thousands of innocents. People who lived this post-1945 reality do not remember it as a liberation. In popular idiom, these years are known as the *pokaris,* the "afterwar," an expression understood as carnage rather than peace. Some Lithuanians tend to adopt the *pokaris* as their own Holocaust, which it was not, but this massive and lethal Soviet terror was clearly a crime against humanity.

I surreptitiously visited my father's village in 1969, the first physical contact with relatives left behind since the war. Uncle Vladas told me we were the lucky ones: the Soviets had turned up at the family homestead looking for my father. He led me to the family cemetery where one can still read the dates on the gravestones: 8 May 1945, VE-Day (the German surrender much celebrated in New York). But on this day, my uncle's in-laws, including children, were massacred in clashes during the first phase of what would become a full-scale guerilla war. When Mekas visited Lithuania in 1971, family members reported that Soviet soldiers searched their premises repeatedly and on one occasion killed their livestock as retribution for not delivering the escaped brothers.

Jonas and Adolfas survived the final months of the war as laborers in factories and farms. Jonas's Lithuanian-language diary/memoir, far richer in detail and more expansive than the English version,[13] cites hunger and aerial bombardment as their daily travails until the war's end, before their subsequent transfer to refugee camps in Hesse. My parents, like most refugees, hoped for a quick return, a dream they abandoned after a few years in the DP camps. They left for America in December 1948 on one of the numerous retrofitted troop ships. After Stalin's death, they accepted the painful reality of a lost homeland and applied for US citizenship, mainly to assure prospects for their sons. Jonas and Adolfas Mekas left Europe in October 1949 as the DP camps emptied. This was to be a new stage in the arc of an extraordinary life. A disadvantaged village child, who, as a life-long bookworm, had acquired a remarkable grasp of philosophy, literature, and the arts, would now find fame within a new culture.[14]

Mekas in New York: Despair and Hope in the New World

Casper's claim that Mekas was a "typical" Lithuanian DP is far off the mark. It is true that during his first years in Brooklyn, Mekas was no stranger to the Lithuanian diaspora. My brother's fiancée remembers the cinematic

Mekas brothers and their literary friends as "a lively bunch." But as Mekas settled into New York's art scene, he began to spend most of his time with his newfound American friends and celebrities. Catholic Lithuanian leaders were wont to tag Mekas's iconoclastic avant-garde companions as "Communists" who disrespected "national traditions." Conservative anti-Communist DPs were enraged by the brothers' visit to Soviet Lithuania, counting it as a betrayal. Others described Mekas as a bohemian.

Like most immigrants, he was torn, longing for a lost homeland which he recalled in his published reveries of his childhood, but also increasingly at home in his new country. As most people who have undergone the refugee experience know well, there is often a permanent, lingering sense of loss.

But in Casper's *Jewish Currents* article, the American Jonas Mekas appears as a one-dimensional, reactionary prevaricator about his past. Mekas, he tells us, was a "Trump supporter," although the filmmaker is known to have likened the former president to Vladimir Putin and ISIS and was put off by Trump's attitudes towards immigrants and women. His Lithuanian memoir contains anti-war texts, sharp attacks on hypocritical ultra-patriots of his own community, and an abhorrence of "-isms" right and left. Casper's other allegations against Mekas fault him for things he didn't do or say: sins of omission. Mekas dodged confrontation. He never condemned the wartime activities and allegiances of people he knew. Compared to others, he did not suffer as much at the hands of the Germans. He avoided talking much about the specific suffering of the Jews, as evident in his interview with the USHMM. (Mekas did evoke the death of the Jews of Biržai in his memoir, relating "how we listened helplessly to the chanting dirge of the Jews driven to their execution, unable to help in any way," a sentence in a passage bemoaning Nazi and Soviet barbarism in Europe.)[15]

Aside from what he presents as oversights, Casper employs the dubious tactic of guilt by association. Mekas was friends with some bad actors, such as his schoolmates who praised the Führer and promoted anti-Semitic tropes. Jonas's brother Adolfas, a filmmaker in his own right known for satiric comedies, visited Germany with his wife in 1971 and had a friendly encounter with an old foreman from his wartime labor days. The artist had unnamed "lifelong connections to Lithuanian political and cultural figures" who shared his refugee experience. A seemingly innocuous association, but useful if one wants to align Mekas with pro-Nazi elements who found their way to the West after the war. Did Mekas encounter war criminals in his numerous interactions with fellow DPs? Was he literally in the same boat with them as he crossed the Atlantic in his stormy passage to New York? There is no way to be sure, of course, but there is little evidence that he was close to such people, or to "political leaders" among Lithuanian immigrants. Without knowing the actual degrees of separation, such connections, especially when casual, tell us little, but they can be useful in staining a reputation.

History Revisited: Collaboration, Nationalism, and Revisionism

Was Mekas a collaborator? An answer requires both a definition of collaboration (not so easy) and an understanding of the environment in which a particular society faced foreign rule (also difficult).[16] As a pejorative, collaboration implies the betrayal of one's own group. Accused collaborators of all stripes have invoked the "better us than them" defense, claiming that they prevented much worse by cleverly subverting the foreigners' policies while pretending cooperation: "patriotic traitors," according to one author.[17] This is often a self-serving evasion, but one can also imagine a wide range of behaviors in real-life conditions: from slavish devotion to the occupiers, to providing apolitical educational or other public services within ever-narrowing constraints. My historian father taught university courses under Smetona, served as an official in the Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian SSR after the Soviet annexation, and continued in the position for some time after the German invasion. Throughout he remained what he had always been: a Catholic sympathetic to Christian Democratic social teachings. People who knew him did not see him as a collaborator. A recent academic study on postwar DPs implies that work in a post office or a hospital during an occupation might be evidence of "collaboration."[18] This is not the only example of an unfortunate tendency to paint, with a broad brush, a world where schoolteachers and poets share the same culpability as jailers and killers.

As with collaboration, discussions of nationalism must deal with a range of meanings. Given his iconoclastic views, contrarian political positions, and impatience with kitsch-like patriotic cant, it is strange to learn that Mekas, in Casper's words, "maintained a strong Lithuanian nationalist streak his entire life" (whatever that means).[19] So, was Mekas a "nationalist"? Probably, if we include those who recognize the importance of attachments to place, of possessing a culture they can call their own, and find it difficult to accept foreign domination. These attitudes pretty much describe most Europeans since at least the end of the nineteenth century, but the spectrum of possible nationalisms is wide.[20] Before the war there was Smetona, the anti-Nazi nationalist who once praised the French Revolution's liberal ideas, a contrast to his enemies in the secretive fascistic Iron Wolf organization who espoused "blood and soil" ideology. Anti-Nazi resistance movements in occupied Europe were fervently nationalist, such as the French and Dutch, and the largest, Poland's Home Army (which, notably, was not free of anti-Semitic excesses). During the war, some Lithuanian

nationalists turned into murderers, some served in various posts under both the Soviet and German occupations, others observed the atrocities of the occupiers, and still others fought the foreigners. There are nationalists listed among Yad Vashem's Righteous Gentiles: Ona Landsbergienė, the wife of a minister in the LAF provisional government (and the mother of Vytautas Landsbergis, Lithuania's leader in 1990–92); Jadvyga Jablonskienė, whose brother headed the Vilnius city government during the first weeks of the Nazi occupation; Kazys Grinius, the country's leftist president in 1926; Stefanija Ladigienė, an active Catholic leader and the widow of a general executed by the Soviets. Jablonskienė and Ladigienė were among the Lithuanian rescuers who were arrested by the Soviets during the *pokaris*.[21] The point here is that while there exists a rich literature on nationalism, the nationalist label is, at best, inadequate when divorced from its historic context and attached to vastly dissimilar people. If Casper wants to paint Mekas as some sort of extreme "ultranationalist," then he should say so and provide the evidence.

Casper, among others, is concerned about "revisionism" regarding the treatment of World War II in Lithuania. He attacks a certain "state-sponsored commission" for investigating both the "Soviet and Nazi occupation regimes," thus "flattening the distinction" between Nazism and Communism.[22] I assume Casper is speaking of the historical commission of which I am a member, so some facts should be clarified. In 1998, Lithuania's president Valdas Adamkus convened an international body of researchers (with admittedly a most unwieldy title)[23] charged with examining the history of foreign rule in Lithuania (1940–91). Under international law, there was a basis for treating the period as a whole.[24] Since there were two occupying powers, separate working groups (subcommissions) were convened; they eschewed superficial comparisons between the Nazi and Soviet regimes, and after the commission was reconstituted in 2012, explicitly acknowledged the "distinct, unprecedented nature and scale of the Holocaust." The subcommission on Nazi crimes includes scholars from Germany, Israel, and the US. I am chair of the Nazi crimes subcommission.[25]

An increasing number of ethnic Lithuanian scholars, some of whom have mastered Yiddish and Hebrew, now publish widely on the country's Jewish past—according to Casper, a veritable "renaissance of Jewish studies."[26] Today they are authoring monographs, articles, collections of documents, and other scholarly materials on the Holocaust in Lithuania. For many of them, confronting the past has been a difficult journey. These mostly younger scholars have worked to move Lithuanian society forward towards a more inclusive history that entails a recognition of Jewish culture as an integral part of Lithuania's past; an understanding of the Shoah as a central event in history; and an examination of the behavior of the Lithuanian people during the Holocaust. These goals are obviously aspirational and more needs to be done.

What Casper and some other American commentators fail to acknowledge is that this process is largely financed by the Lithuanian government through state-supported universities, academic institutes, research centers, museums, the ministries of culture and education, and similar institutions. Hundreds of teachers have traveled to Yad Vashem on this same government's dime, and there are numerous educational programs on the Holocaust, Jewish history, and the promotion of tolerance. Foreign NGOs, the EU, and international institutions, such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, have contributed significantly. As would be expected, there is strong pushback on all of this from right-wing forces in Lithuania, which has inflamed culture wars that rival in intensity similar conflicts in the United States and elsewhere. The LAF and the June Uprising in particular have spawned bitter polemics.

Post-Soviet (and now uncensored) historical research in Lithuania reflects Baltic perspectives and often differs from narratives found in many Western studies. It gives voice to non-Jewish peoples, of whom Mekas was one. In some sense, it is "revisionist"—that is, new scholarship based on previously inaccessible evidence. This does not mean denial of what is already known, nor does it negate the enormity of the Holocaust, but rather adds to the understanding of how a people were destroyed in a genocide, without minimizing the suffering of those who escaped annihilation. All this might discomfort people with preconceived stereotypes about the Baltic peoples and their past.

There is another problem to consider, one more difficult to confront, since it reaches into a world of deeply emotional memories and contrasting experiences. A serious obstacle to an acceptance of an inclusive history in Lithuania stems from the fact that there are few shared wartime experiences that produce good feelings (for example, rescue), and many more that are divisive. The nexus of Nazi and Soviet crimes complicates discussions. Conflicting stories of heroes and victims do not allow for soothing narratives. Most of the "anti-fascists" encountered by Lithuanians during the *pokaris* were Stalinists, some with nasty reputations. Small wonder that references to the Grand Alliance and "anti-fascism" do not, in their case, automatically evoke warm feelings.[27] Among the postwar freedom fighters were a number of perpetrators who had served in German-organized police battalions, so that many Jews find it difficult to embrace the heroic memory of the anti-Soviet guerrillas, affectionally known as the "forest brothers." The harsh reality is that Jews and Lithuanians inhabited different worlds of wartime and postwar experience and, as a result, acquired sharply contrasting collective memories. What might encourage further misunderstandings is the fact that the Western narratives of the war, particularly those of Americans steeped in Spielberg films and stories

Mekas revisiting the building where he and his brother lived while in the Mattenberg DP camp, in the suburbs of Kassel, 2017.

of the "Greatest Generation," remain largely irrelevant to the experience of many peoples who suffered the war on the Eastern Front. These issues are emotive and create a difficult relationship with both the Other and the past itself. But it needn't be so forever. Perhaps, more than seventy-five years after the end of World War II, we might come closer to an understanding of how different peoples were affected and how we are all still shaped by those events.[28]

There are historians and commentators, primarily in the US, Western Europe, and Russia, who vehemently oppose any suggestion of comparison between Nazism and Stalinism. (I prefer the latter term rather than "Communism," because this was the form of Soviet power that Mekas encountered.) Nevertheless, a body of respectable scholarship has studied comparative totalitarian systems, albeit from varying perspectives. Hannah Arendt tackled the problem in her classic *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), as did, in later years, Carl Friedrich, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, and Ian Kershaw. More recently, Robert Gellately, Timothy Snyder, Alan Bullock, Vladimir Tismăneanu, and others have written insightful comparative analyses of Nazi and Stalinist systems. It seems impossible not to see striking similarities: the mass murder of targeted groups as a legitimate path to achieve utopian goals; the worship of charismatic leaders; the ubiquitous one-party police state; control of cultural expression. To acknowledge the obvious is hardly sinister "revisionism."

During the Second World War, states and resistance movements often chose one evil to confront another, facing, at times, morally compromising choices. There are many possible responses regarding the ideology and goals of a problematic ally, from reluctant accommodation to total identification. Befriending one devil to fight another is one thing; embracing the devil's worldview,

quite another. There were too many notable intellectuals, artists, and literati who either justified or embraced murderous extremist movements. To name a few: American architect Philip Johnson lauded Hitler, Ezra Pound trumpeted fascist ideology, and Jean-Paul Sartre praised Mao. Martin Heidegger joined the Nazi Party and Pablo Neruda remained for years a card-carrying Stalinist. A motley crew deserving at least a mention on the wall of shame.

Jonas Mekas was not one of them.

X

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1
Michael Casper, "I Was There," *NYRB* , June 7, 2018 https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/06/07/jonas-mekas-i-was-there/ .

2
Michael Casper, "World War II Revisionism at the Jewish Museum," *Jewish Currents*, April 21, 2022 https://jewishcurrents.org/world-war-ii-revisionism-at-the-jewish-museum .

3
Letter to *The New Yorker*, May 23, 2022.

4
Barry Schwabsky and Michael Casper, "On Jonas Mekas: An Exchange," *NYRB*, July 19, 2018 https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/07/19/on-jonas-mekas-an-exchange/ .

5
Specifically, the Soviet-German nonaggression treaty of August 23, 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), the Treaty of Friendship of September 28, 1939, and the commercial agreements of January 10, 1941.

6
As stated by former LAF leaders Juozas Brazaitis (Ambrazevičius) and Pilypas Narutis, "Lietuvių aktyvistu frontas," in *Lietuvių enciklopedija* , no. 16 (Boston: LE leidykla, 1958), 27.

7
Casper, "World War II Revisionism."

8
Citation provided by Mekas's family and friends who had access to Casper's email correspondence with the artist. The information citing him as "editor" found in a short encyclopedic entry in 1997 and other sources almost certainly comes from information supplied by Mekas himself, which first appeared in a 1959 émigré multivolume encyclopedia ("Mekas, Jonas," in *Lietuvių enciklopedija* , no. 18 (Boston: LE leidykla, 1959), 148.)

9
Some responded with humor, as in the anecdote about the two major Soviet newspapers, the Party organ *Pravda* (The Truth), and the government paper *Izvestiya* (The News): "There is no news in *The Truth* and no truth in *The News.* "

10
Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: East European Jewry under Soviet Rule, 1939–1941* (Jewish Publication Society, 1995).

11
As in the memoir of the refugee and later president of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus: *Likimo vardas—Lietuva* (Fate's Name—Lithuania) (Kaunas, 1998).

12
"Beria's Report to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR," May 8, 1953, listing Lithuanians who had "suffered repression."

13
Jonas Mekas, *Žmogus be vietos: nervuoti dienoraščiai* (Man without a Place: Nervous Diaries) (baltos lankos, 2000).

14
In challenging Mekas's account of his own education, Casper claims that Mekas's high school graduation and studies at the University of Mainz are proof that the artist lied about being "largely self- taught." Mekas, like many village children with literate but minimally educated parents, enrolled in elementary school late at age nine (which in Lithuania comprised four grades). He was a voracious reader who eventually tested into the appropriate grade for his age. Mekas struggled as an older student but finally entered high school when he was seventeen. He took some college courses in Germany as a displaced person but never earned a degree. To challenge a nonagenarian about this seems ungenerous at best.

15
Mekas, *Žmogus be vietos*, 389.

16
In one reasonable definition, the collaborator must be willing "to grant the occupier authority" in a context of an "uneven distribution of power," rather than merely providing "expertise and information." Jan Tomasz Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement 1939–1944* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 117, 119.

17
As in the title of the journalistic survey by David Littlejohn, *The Patriotic Traitors: A History of Collaboration in German-Occupied Europe, 1940–1945* (Heinemann, 1982).

18
David Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War* (Penguin Books, 2020).

19
Casper, "World War II Revisionism."

20
See Alan Ryan's thoughtful review essay "Whose Nationalism?" *NYRB,* March 26, 2022 https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/26/whose-nationalism/ .

21
As an interesting aside, one should note that rescuers in all Nazi-occupied countries were a diverse lot. Some brave souls were known anti-Semites (a point well elaborated by historian Nechama Tec), which seems counterintuitive—but only if one forgets that most American abolitionists were racists by today's standards. To complicate matters further for those seeking a simple history, Timothy Snyder has cited the case of Andrey Sheptytsky (Andrzej Szeptycki), the Ukrainian metropolitan of the Greek Catholic Church who "welcomed the Nazis and saved Jews" (Timothy Snyder, "He Welcomed the Nazis and Saved Jews," *NYRB*, December 21, 2009 https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2009/12/21/he-welcomed-the-nazis-and-saved-jews/). A thorough analysis of this cleric's thinking can be found in John-Paul Himka, "Metropolitan Sheptytsky and the Holocaust," *Polin*, no. 26 (2013).

22
Casper, "World War II Revisionism."

23
The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, known in short form as the International Historical Commission.

24
The Lithuanian parliament's declaration of independence of March 11, 1990 was a restoration of a status that had existed de jure since 1918. The major Western powers never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR and had continued to accredit their diplomatic missions throughout the postwar period.

25
An overview of the Commission's work is in my article "The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania: Successes, Challenges, Perspectives," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 49, no. 1 (2018).

26
Casper, "World War II Revisionism."

27
Putin is now playing the anti-fascist card in Ukraine with brazen hypocrisy, but this has roots in the Soviet past, as explained in Timothy Snyder, "We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist," *New York Times* , May 19, 2022 https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html .

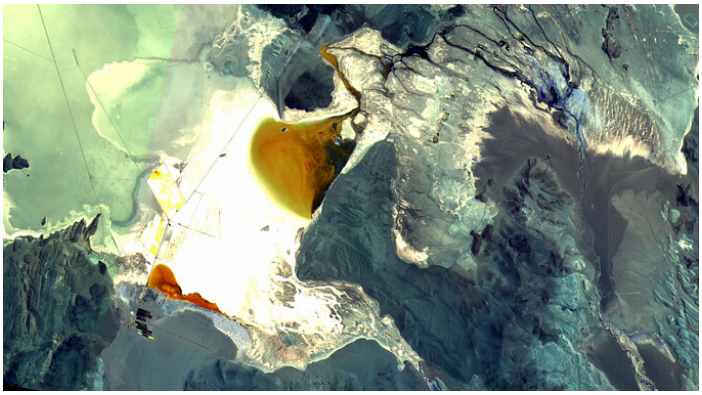
28
A good example of an honest confrontation with the past is Jeffrey Gettlemen, "On Poland-Ukraine Border, the Past Is Always Present. It's Not Always Predictive," *New York Times,* April 14, 2022 https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/world/europe/poland-ukraine-holocaust-dispatch.html .

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

The Wasted Earth: Excess, Superabundance, and Sludge

Two conversations on opposite sides of the earth—one in an elevator in my New York City apartment building, one on the shores of Mabaluk, Australia, Emmiyengal country. Both conversations focused on earth elements characterized as "being wasted" as they were targeted for capitalist incorporation. In both conversations the referential meaning of "being wasted" oscillated, much as does Schumpeter's characterization of capitalism's creative destruction. At one moment the capitalist concepts of waste and creative destruction conjure the fantasy of superabundant resources; at another moment, they point to the history by which capitalism, the spawn of colonial geontopower, has laid waste to human and more-than-human worlds.

Neither conversation was long, neither academically substantial. The elevator conversation was guided by the sort of neighborly banter that characterizes apartment sociality in New York City. A neighbor and I were riding up to our floor. He was excited, having just gotten back from a business seminar on green energy. He said something like, "Think of all the energy of the sun just being wasted when it could be turned into something productive. And it will have no effect on the environment." Picturing the new and expanding lithium mine just south of Belyuen, Northern Territory where my Karrabing family live, I said something like, "Well, only if we don't think about the massive mines ripping up the earth for lithium and other stuff." He said, "Yes, but think of all the energy around us going to waste." I said, "Well, sunshine is being used by the things that it's being used by." He: "What things?" Me: "I wouldn't have a clue; and we won't know until after we've destroyed their conditions." *Ding* went the elevator bell. We smiled, said good day, and that was that.



At this lithium mine in the high-altitude wetland of Salar del Hombre Muerto, Argentina, seven times more water evaporates than enters the system. Since it started operating in 1997, it has steadily dried up the Trapiche River floodplain. Photo: Coordenação-Geral de Observação da Terra/INPE. License: CC BY-SA 2.0.

The conversation at Mabaluk was also brief. About ten Karrabing had driven the seven-hour drive from Belyuen

GIF of the famous elevator scene in Stanley Kubrick's The Shining (1980).

for a long weekend of work mapping an extensive network of precolonial rock fish traps lining the coastal point. It was morning. We were using the embers from the night fire to make morning tea, and talking about plans for a late-afternoon hunt in the surrounding vast wetlands. I said something like, "You heard about *berragut* (settlers) wanting to harvest water for cotton and mango plantations?" Natasha Bigfoot Lewis observed something she's observed before: " *Berragut* think anything they are not controlling is being wasted. They don't think about goose, turtle, and bullock—and that grass they eat and water that feeds grass. They were here first. It's their country too. If we don't think for them, then they won't be there when we go hunt them." Cecilia Lewis, Natasha's mother, overhearing us, added, "It's because they wrecked that country down south. Then they wrecked Darwin. Starting to really wreck Belyuen area. So now they're targeting this water."

These two fleeting conversations are the everyday murmurs that pass in and through more focused debates about ancestral energy and agricultural futures, or what I have recently described as the social tenses, or chronotopes, of the ancestral catastrophe and the coming catastrophe.[1] These two chronotopes are not merely temporal inversions—the one looking to the future, the other to the past. They are, instead, fundamentally different approaches to social time, political eventfulness, and ethical substance.[2] From the perspective of the ancestral catastrophe, time is transformed into differential sedimentations that leak, drift, or disperse depending on the nature of their substance and holding conditions. The catastrophe of the ancestral catastrophe is not something that will happen, not something whose state change has a universal reach. It sinks into, mingles, and bubbles up from the ground. The coming catastrophe expresses the anxieties and disavowals of this ancestral legacy. Its core figuration is the ever-receding horizon where settler liberal capital once blithely claimed its truth lay, but is now a foreboding sightline of climate collapse. In the current climate crisis, the brilliant sun promises to purify the contaminated horizon of pure possibility. Its sheer radiant incomprehensible power aligns with the dream of pure profit based on the bounty of wasted matter—the singular manifestation of settler-capital disavowal. What scorches us will be what cools us.

We have accustomed ourselves to critiquing the quantificational logics of neoliberalism, logics that reduce existence to a set of commensurate units that can enter the logics of private property and capital exchange. One of the great attractions of George Bataille's *Accursed Share*, for instance, is its emphasis on a superabundance of energy that cannot be contained by the rationality of social

Film stills from Karrabing Film Collective's The Family (2021). Courtesy of the artists.

systems—that erupts in an erotic and pure sacred surplus. Bataille's wager was that this superabundant energy, exceeding the closed economy of capitalism and manifested in a waste and wastefulness of low material (shit, orgasm, sadism, war, human sacrifice), can never be fully recuperated into any social system.[3] But, in a less read essay, Gayatri Spivak suggests that we might want to be cautious before separating capital and pure surplus. If, on the one hand, liberal capital claims the power to eat every last smear of its own excrement, on the other hand, it insists that the productive individual always has more power than she actual is. This bizarre, grammatically awkward phasing—that subjects are more than they are—lies at the heart of the "predication of the subject as labor-power (irreducible structural super-adequation—the subject defined by its capacity to produce more than itself)."[4] This subject, in other words, is predicated as her own little sun.

The discursive toggle of excess energy which, on the one hand, threatens because it cannot be totalized and yet, on the other, beckons because it provides the dream of pure surplus, is explicitly mobilized during liberal and capital crises, but is also a constant pressure exerted across its wasted earth. Super-adequate subjects of capital powered by the superabundant energy that comes from pure waste continually roam the earth even as the ancestral catastrophe of the Black Atlantic and settler colonialism restrict agricultural acreage and potable water. The energy needed for the disavowal of this ancestral history grows ever greater until it finds that only the scorching sun will suffice. As geontological frameworks quake in the wake of a toxic homecoming of liberal capitalism, Western techno-energy bros and agricultural visions have shifted from the human subject to nature as subject, even as they double down on the predication of nature as a super-adequate being.

Natasha Bigfoot Lewis's observations that the concept of waste arises only by severing the perspectives of those forms of existence that exist within and as all places before the characterization of them as waste shifts the problem from the need for *food production* to the fantasy of *pure eating*. We move from the quantitative logics of units of food produced and consumed to the jouissance of Rabelaisian bulimia, from the relational world of eating to a system of severed eating whose lateral consequences have yet to intrude on the worlds able to shit downwind. This shit comes in many forms. It is never, however, manure. It does not fertilize the land. It spreads toxins, cracking landscapes and exposing existence to forces that mutate its current relationality.[5] Pure eating is a form of devouring that disavows its spreading corrosive effects, the reach of its clawing hands, producing the toxic tailings which cannot be assimilated, which do not extinguish existence so much as produce new forms of existence. Pure eating meets creative destruction when toxic wastes are plowed back into lands as if they were fertilizers of the future. In this way, plastic-eating bacteria are not far afield from David Cronenberg's world of a plastic-eating morphumanity. The ancestral present of these morphumans can be glimpsed at the intersection of the taut sealed-off bodies of fitness and the paunchy overflow of consumptive addictions.

Film still from David Cronenberg's Crimes of the Future (2022). Here a boy bites into a plastic garbage basket, evoking a central theme of the film: consumption.

While sunlight provides the figure of pure eating, other elements fall into the fantasy of excessive waste as they were targeted for climate-destroying capitalist incorporation.

Take, for example, "Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia," which figures monsoonal water as unruly, unrulable, and able to be culled without consequence.[6] The dynamics of rainwater and soil have frustrated colonial agricultural projects in the Northern Territory since settlers began surveying for blind property sales in 1869.[7] Historically, monsoonal rains began in January and gave way to dry skies in March. During these ferocious rains, farmlands flooded out and then parched. Pastoral cattle bogged and starved. As Cecilia Lewis

Clip-on solar-powered fan by Unbranded that "will make you comfortable, and cool and let you enjoy the coolness. Solar power, no battery needed, only works in the direct sun. The brighter the sunlight, the faster the fan turns."

notes, the ongoing wreckage of settler expansion—in its distributed climate impacts and forms and in its specific localized practices—has transformed the cycle of rain in the Northern Territory even as historical rain is constantly conjured in reports focused on capitalizing on it as an agricultural resource. Water is described in terms that mean to evoke and exceed ordinary phenomenological experience in order to produce an imaginary quantificational superabundance. The monsoons are put in a bucket, something everyone has held in their hand. But the bucket is said to be the size of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, "the height of more than 80,000 km, or more than 20 per cent of the way to the moon."[8]

No mention is made of the current inconsistency of rains, the relationship between current and historical aquifer levels. Older members of Karrabing and other Indigenous peoples with long memories and experience of lands remember places where *puminin* (water holes from flooding aquifers) bubbled up from the ground, now dried from settlements. Massive floods drowning Australian cities are sometimes correlated to the dense, pounded earth of capital infrastructures. But the ideologically harnessible experience of increasingly regular flooding is one of too much, more than enough, wasting, wasteful. Effect is figured as cause. Colonized soil creates the conditions for an uncontrollable earth, intensifying settler disavowal, whose material manifestations are modes of damning others as they try to dam themselves off from their own sludge.[9]

Picture: Freepik.com.

Rather than food, we need a history of distributed sludge, created by the disavowal of pure eating. As Filipa César has shown, the politics of soil has a long anti-colonial signature, and the soil-based liberation project of Amílcar Cabral provides one track: "Cabral understood agronomy not merely as a discipline combining geology, soil science, agriculture, biology and economics but as a means to gain materialist and situated knowledge about peoples' lived conditions under colonialism."[10] Cabral and others sought not merely to highlight and reverse the agricultural deterioration of colonial lands but to interrupt the disavowal of the chains of destruction that provide the basis of bounty—by, for example, mapping the topological relationship between the hollowing-out of the Pacific Islands and Morocco for phosphates and the building-up of nutrient-rich soils in North America and Australia.[11] Or, literalizing the climate metaphor of global development: for all boats to rise, rather than the boats sailing the highest seas to recede, the North will keep gaining ground while those who never needed to live on boats slowly lose the ground beneath their feet.

X

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1
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2021).

2
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment* (Duke University Press, 2011).

3
George Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay of General Economy* , vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1991). See also Allan Stoekl's unpacking of Bataille's philosophy of energy and consumption relative to concepts of sustainability: *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

4
Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2006), 216.

5
Michelle Murphy, *Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Exposure in Modern Environments* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6
See https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/nawp-whitepapersummary.pdf .

7
Tess Lea, *Darwin* (NewSouth, 2014).

8
"Our North, Our Future," 4.

9
Liam Grealy and Kirsty Howie, "Securing Supply: Governing Drinking Water in the Northern Territory," *Australian Geographer* 51, no. 3 (2020).

10
Filipa César, "Meteorisations: Reading Amílcar Cabral's Agronomy of Liberation," *Third Text* 32, no. 2–3 (2018).

11
Katerina Martina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba* (Indiana University Press, 2014); Renee Cho, "Phosphorus: Essential to Life—Are We Running Out?" *State of the Planet*, Columbia Climate School, April 1, 2013 https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2013/04/01/phosphorus-essential-to-life-are-we-running-out/ .

Richard Bell

Bell's Theorem (Reductio ad Infinitum): Contemporary Art—It's a White Thing!

This essay, written in April 2022 shortly before the opening of documenta fifteen (in which Bell was a participating artist), was commissioned on the occasion of Richard Bell's exhibition "RELINKING" (June 25–December 4, 2022) at Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. The exhibition features statement paintings accompanied by two essays by Bell on the position of Aboriginal art and artists in the art world. This is the second of those two essays. The first is "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing!," a landmark text originally published in 2002 and reprinted *by* e-flux journal *in April 2018.*

—Editors

My painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, or *Aboriginal Art: It's a White Thing*, won the 20th Telstra National Aboriginal Arts Award in August 2003—it was an important moment in many ways. The accompanying essay, "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing!," was written to come to terms with my position in Contemporary Art, given the aesthetic prejudices against urban Aboriginal artists and practices and the persistent white hold on, and ignorance of, our power. There wasn't a position, so I made one. I'd moved away from activism in 1992, the year of the Mabo court case, which marked the beginning of the defeat of the political possibilities of a national, pan-Aboriginal land rights movement. Mabo reexamined the absent legal foundations of the British invasion of what is now Australia.[1] One of its main outcomes was an extremely weak "cultural" category of Indigenous land title called "Native Title," made up entirely out of thin air, to placate the case for land rights. My essay aimed to just map out, for a settler-dominated art institutional landscape, the direct links between the ongoing white control and exploitation of Aboriginal identity by the "Aboriginal" art market, and the pernicious "divide and rule" impact of post-Mabo Native Title legislation, which had already taken its hold of our people, and, I still argue, strongly constrains white imagination. In the intervening years, "Bell's Theorem" has pretty much held up as a manifesto for my art practice. It came from discussions over decades with Aboriginal people not just about art, but culture, life, politics, everything—the actual situation we are in.

Around the time of "Bell's Theorem," the politics of fine art was beginning to recede from public debates and was replaced by a flat-out race war, which dominated the scene in Australia as elsewhere from 2001, continuing up to and beyond the 2008 global financial crisis. A conservative prime minister, John Howard, had clung to power by accusing Muslim refugees of throwing their children into the sea whilst seeking asylum. The Australian government had already built refugee detention centers in the desert that resembled concentration camps. After the "children overboard" affair, it embarked on the Pacific Solution, which was to dump these people unlawfully and indefinitely onto remote Pacific islands in detention

Richard Bell, Bell's Theorem: Cui Bono?, 2022, acrylic on canvas, diptych: 240 x 360 cm. Photo by Carl Warner. Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

prisons. Many of these people are still there, living the hell of offshore terra nullius, twenty years later. The Yorta Yorta case was the major Native Title decision around that time and it was a whitewash, the judges imagining the "tide of history" had "washed away" people's laws and customs. I reckon you could track that history of manufactured race wars against actual land grabs through the rise and fall in Aboriginal Art sales, but not many people think about it in this way.

An Aboriginal Critique

To the Australian art world, and its broader public, what was shocking about "Bell's Theorem" was that it showed how badly positioned our work was, given that the total number of sales of Aboriginal Art was ten times the number of non-Indigenous Australian art sales internationally. Also for value of sales, Aboriginal Art just monstered the sales figures of non-Aboriginal artists. It was bigger, better, and far more significant than the non-Indigenous Australian art scene, which had never happened before in any of the Anglo colonies. As late as the 1980s, when national Aboriginal land rights were still a political possibility and had unprecedented support from the Australian people, 80–90 percent of Aboriginal Art was still going overseas and was hardly being collected by Australian art institutions. The prices of individual works by painters like Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas were going through the roof. So it was shocking to people that there was so little Aboriginal control, and so little benefit, or return of value. It was an entirely unspoken and unspeakable reality up to that point. And it went against all the white fantasies of pomo reconciliation that the Australian art world and the legal establishment, the museums and Mabo, were aiming at to mystify their dominance.

Art was always a part of what we were reclaiming as our rightful, stolen inheritance. It was and is inseparable from the maintenance of our culture and economies. Without getting our land back, our culture—which was illegal to practice—is everything, is all we have. Right up until the 1960s and '70s, many Aboriginal people who were wards of the state had to ask the permission of welfare and missionaries to buy or sell anything worth more than ten

pounds! That kind of thing is why the everyday extractivism and selfishness of the art world we put up with is just so painful, pointless, and banal. It is a banal missionary culture we experience a lot of the time when white curators and institutions think they are inevitably helping us, when merely offering us professional opportunities for our projects. When Redfern activists Billie Craigie and Cecil Patton stole the paintings of Yirawala from a commercial "Aboriginal" gallery run by a white man in Sydney on a mischievous night in 1979—important paintings by an important Arnhem land artist almost wholly under the control of a white woman—their defense was that since they were Aboriginal, and the paintings were Aboriginal-community owned, they believed they could take them legally to protect them, and they won the case.[2] That is the kind of political solidarity and nonaligned imagination that was totally eviscerated by Native Title.

Aboriginal Art was not 1995 or 2020, but 1975, when the first state-sponsored Aboriginal Arts Board had a majority of fifteen Aboriginal members. They favored outreach collaborations and mobile production units, educational training and touring, black film and black theater, *not replacing traditional forms* but engaging grassroots people in the topical issues of the day and in the media forms directly affecting them. We knew we needed art and we had sophisticated media tactics. That's how I became an artist—I learned how to use the media when numbers are not on our side, which they are never. We are 3 percent of the population, and the majority of us live in the cities far away from our rightful territories, so decolonization in the way it was defined and strategized by the Algerians was just not an option.

After three years of running the place, the Aboriginal Art Board was disbanded. Sotheby's set up its "primitive" art department in London in 1978, and later an auction house

See the essay by Aboriginal Black Power historian Gary Foley, Native Title is NOT Land Rights (1997) →.

Australia was the first officially white-supremacist nation in the world.[3] The genocide was unceasing, and legal until the twenty-first century.[4] When the country "internationalized" its economy via US state power through Southeast Asia from the 1950s and '60s, it still paid poor colonial attention to Aboriginal Art practices, "traditional" or otherwise. The inaction and backwardness of the major Contemporary Art organizations in the areas of collecting and displaying work, in taking a genuine interest in Aboriginal people, was a disgrace. It took land rights and the activism of urban Aboriginal artists for the inattention of settler art institutions to be too obvious to ignore. Arguably, the peak of the Aboriginal control of in Australia, but the national impact of those years was significant, impacting multiple generations. As I wrote in "Bell's Theorem," "the Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future … The Dreamings pass deep into urban territories and cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed 'real' Aboriginals of the North and the supposed 'unreal' or 'inauthentic' Aboriginals of the South." The main brake on these crossings of solidarity, which are material (it was shared ecosystems and people's lives that we were defending!), was always the colonial project. "Bell's Theorem" named its cultural arm: the ethnographic approach to Aboriginal Art, the authority

of anthropologists, the tendency of Westerners to classify the shit out of everything for them to make their world picture, the hidden exploitation of "remote" art centers, and the clear capitalist tribal order that ranks white specialists as more knowledgeable on Aboriginal Art and identity than Aboriginal people themselves.

Anthropology Regained?

Today, many Aboriginal people are confused as to why white anthropologists continue to be asked to adjudicate the value of our practices in art spaces internationally. After 250 years of extraction, sixty-plus years of Aboriginal Art being treated seriously by art historians (despite their limited authority for judgment), and just a few decades of Aboriginal-curated exhibitions, the time for white experts to be forging "practical" careers upon our land rights struggles in this transition to neoliberalism is nearly coming to a close (because the claims themselves have been intentionally limited to a fraction of the total land base). When I wrote "Bell's Theorem," anthropologists were entirely up our arses. Europeans today seem to think anthropologists must have all decolonized because the reckoning itself was so necessary. Given that their employment and colonial power of interpretation over our people, lands, and families only shifted from art into law in the contemporary era, with great consequences of land loss as part of the land rights legislation, how could this have been possible? Aboriginal people can't turn up to a land court and have our rightful claims heard without the verification of some white scholar from Sydney, New York, or Melbourne. That is the reason anthropologists are still on our land. The onus should always have been on white title holders to argue for their occupation of our land under claim.

What we now know was that Mabo and Howard's Ten Point Plan is what neoliberalism looked like in the South. To Europeans and settlers, neoliberalism was about wage freezes and privatized infrastructure, the sell-off of public assets, utilities, and housing. In the South and on Indigenous-governed lands, calls for decolonization were not just calls for self-determined politics but also an attempt at countering the violent and increasing reach of multinational capitalists, miners, and agriculture. The restructuring of the global economy, which Mabo was both a part of and a distraction from, made it more possible for more kinds of non-Indigenous capitalists to make more diverse kinds of profits from more differentiated kinds of leasing agreements on our lands. The scale of that diversification of capital is far more significant in keeping power unbalanced than the diversity initiatives of art institutions to "correct" such imbalances. What "good governance" in Australian art organizations usually means is what the Business Council of Australia requires for itself.[5] A next generation of land activists such as the SEED Indigenous Youth Climate Network[6] and the Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance[7] fights against major pipelines and energy companies in struggles as significant as Standing Rock, and includes many artists. There is no comparable level of attention from the local or international media to this situation. The increasingly blatant influence of corporate power, apart from producing an ever-expanding sphere of intervention into Indigenous lands, ecosystems, and peoples' agency, offers up just ever-more fragmentation. There is no community, no politics, no solidarity, and no debate in this dominant business culture at all. The Australian Dream of one nation under private property and debt, with a few tax breaks for art appreciation, is a nightmare for my people and it is what continues to do us all in. Tell them *they're* dreaming.

Against Art Industrial Assimilations

The Western hold on Art and cultural critique is not just a problem for art, it is a problem for the way we can think about culture as a space of survival, imaginative thinking, and responsibility. Museums are loot rooms to colonial patriarchy and white welfare nationalism, and yet when we take a serious look at their cultural power they are also very naked. We may engage with them or walk away from them, but they are some of the last semi-public spaces where cultural practices and debates are not entirely under corporate control, or entirely subjected to entertainment principles (though this is debatable in Australia). We can use words like "decolonization," "demodernization," "rematerialization," "feminism," and so on to describe a position or practice. But only a genuinely nonaligned art movement defecting from the status quo can deal with these things systematically, genuinely, and cooperatively as very unevenly shared problems.

In response to "Bell's Theorem," there was no real capacity of Australian or international institutions to begin to deal with the critique. If you listen to the establishment's version of history covering the successful "inroads" of Aboriginal artists into the Australian art world over the last decades, you will hear that we have all come to a place of being taken seriously by institutions and critics, that Aboriginal artists and curators are everywhere, and so on. Some will even say our work is the most contemporary! The end. Of course, we have been collected. There are now two generations of Aboriginal curators, working since the 1980s and 2000s. Institutions are dependent now upon their Aboriginal Art collections for their value propositions. Indeed, they have to put the Aboriginal Art right at the back of the institution to force visitors to walk through the white art first, because if the Aboriginal Art was up front they would walk in, see that, and piss off. But the institutions still exhibit an extremely limited capacity for both internal and external critique, even just at the level of any singular project. They are entirely nontransparent in the actions they take that directly affect Aboriginal community politics and Indigenous art histories.

Right now, the space of criticism in Australia has never been more conflict bound, racially charged, intellectually limited, and therefore borderline irrelevant. There is an increasing illiteracy of gallery directors, writers, and curators in geopolitics and in sophisticated non-Western art debates. Because of the full impact of Native Title and corporate governance in wreaking conflict and havoc on Aboriginal community and self-determination possibilities, we do so much work just trying to keep things together, while the art organizations cherry pick for winners and lone rangers. In the absence of institutions and curators—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—taking stronger intellectual positions in the field, even more pressure gets put on my people to be the only angry ones. We are left with the task of educating the audiences of institutions that show no long-term commitment to our histories, because they truly don't understand or recognize how much they would benefit from our liberation, beyond myopic claims on our practices that constitute little more than window dressing.

To be an Indigenous artist who moves through Europe amid an almost nonexistent contemporary discourse for our work there is very hard. We need to have Indigenous curators working abroad. At the same time, the ones that are most committed to our communities have no reason to be "based in Berlin." However, it is unfortunate that few Indigenous curators can take critical opportunities to leave the domestic scene to absorb other geopolitical realities, away from the cultural and political vacuum of assimilation agendas, which are unceasing. BANFF used to be a place for this kind of discussion—that's where I worked with Brenda Croft, Megan Tamati-Quenell, Margaret Archuleta, Leanne Martin—which created so many amazing opportunities for many Aboriginal artists. In the absence of meaningful, educated, informed infrastructures for our work, white curating self-reproduces its own expertise through our supposedly civilizational "difference." They will never engage enough with our strongest and most geopolitically minded artists, activists, and curators. This situation will certainly continue.

Our people are always looking for messages coming out of the arts. Even if they don't understand Contemporary Art as a whole, they know that we have to be there. There is a class dimension to how the work gets shown, not just due to the dynamics of settler capitalism, but because there is a specific class dimension within Aboriginal society that is allocated and exacerbated by Native Title legislation. Tragically, this is seldom understood. What's also tragic is when people think you make millions from political platforming practices—when really it is a matter of speculative expenditure. How much cash do you choose to blow on something in order to get a meaningful result and impact that you can live with? These are the realities that face an artist making political art which comprises just 4 percent of total sales in the art market. Urban Aboriginal Art would be the tiniest portion of that.

Extinguishment's Place-Making

The Australian museum system and art gallery system has paid lip service to urban Aboriginal Art since the 1990s, but it is only through our outspokenness and our support of each other, including through all-Aboriginal collectives, that we have gained the space to show our work and some degree of notoriety. Institutions are afraid to invite us in as self-determined collectives. And there is almost no understanding still of why we needed and still need to organize like that, in the non-Aboriginal urban art world, because there is such limited understanding of the relationship of Indigenous art histories to the control of people across space, in an international perspective.[8]

When art professionals do not understand the regional, global, and family histories of our movements, they easily repeat the divisive favoring of "A team" Aboriginal assimilationist players over the long history of B team commitments and operations. What was the A team? The A team aimed at Western legal solutions to only-cultural recognition. They gave up on our demand for land rights as a political and economic problem that still haunts us, and that increasingly haunts white people also trying to defend our lands and waters from predation. They turned us into a cultural development art of the state and limited our future legal possibilities to the benefit of a small number of already legally empowered communities. They eliminated real reparations and anything close to black radical or abolitionist politics from our demands, for an obsession with constitutionalism that is entirely favored by transnational corporations. The Howard-style con job of the Statement from the Heart already happened years ago in Eva Valley.[9] (Most blackfellas know fuck all about the Statement from the Heart, for reasons that should be obvious. But they will be as disappointed by the outcome as they were then, maybe more so.) This is not "personal" critique—what continues to divide our people is part of a global regime of control and assimilation—it is no different to what is happening to Indigenous and racialized peoples' movements in wanted territories all over the world. Domestically, we write and acquit decolonial art project grants according to evaluation criteria for beauty and community set by the cultural policy of the RAND Corporation.[10] No one bats an eyelid about this. This is wholly connected to the problem with reading our finest art practices through political minimalism—the ease of alignment with any neoconservative agenda available. But this is seemingly no concern for settler cultural industry workers, or they would speak up about it. They don't seem to even notice.

It was only through the global financial crisis that the neoliberal consensus was broken in Contemporary Art, though that never happened in Australia.[11] In the US, artists and activists connected the crisis of subprime mortgages to histories of redlining, as an exorbitant amount of wealth was extracted from black families. In Western Europe, liberal institutions belatedly dealt with

the populist right by giving space to Marxist and feminist critiques of capitalism for the first time in decades. The communist horizon was revisited, while artists from the Former East also addressed entanglements with imperialism and colonialism. There was a more general recognition that the postwar good life, white and assimilationist, was unravelling. In Australia during this period, a large-scale Intervention into remote Aboriginal homelands rolled back years of flailing self-determined policy agendas and Indigenous-led land reform, while citizens were told the mining boom saved them from the global financial crisis (which was impossible, because the profits aren't kept in the country—only 15 percent of mining interests are Australian owned). A persistently conscientious corporatism has left no space for a shared, let alone intersectional, understanding of art's actual conditions of production beyond a neoliberal multicultural agenda that is traumatizing for almost everyone because it is so devastatingly meaningless.

Art institutions today seem to prefer to focus on the problem of extinction over the problem of capitalism. Precisely by not connecting these, they limit their relevance. There is no fear of the damage of such conservatism in daily institutional decision-making. Directors and curators update themes, and try to invite more diverse artists to the performances and parties, but the *mode of production* is exactly the same. Some artists are doing double the work through practices that do not perpetuate colonial modernity, but without major turns at the level of direction and organization, our best interventions become sensational and singular, almost in spite of what they actually are. A just-in-time mode of production and a lack of understanding and respect reduces our work to just another commodity, sold up to whiteness. Meanwhile, capital's hold on the real and the possible, in and outside of art, continues apace. When Occupy Wall Street was accused of itself occupying the lands of the Lenape (the original Indigenous people of Greater New York), it was a teachable thing that happened for the urban left in New York City. We need that kind of literacy at the center of Empire and at the frontiers, shared between all kinds of people. Instead, we have manufactured identity wars watched over by very poorly educated urban settler cultural industry professionals, who have no idea how to reproduce anything that matters.

The Limits of Ethical Consumption (More Ooga Booga)

Europeans love nothing better than to indigenize their racist humanism when they themselves are in crisis—it is one of their most dearly loved moves (all of the Enlightenment guys did it, not to mention the modernists). While the Western world has now fully penetrated the globe with their model of universal competition, the political economy they've violently assigned our communities cannot address the situation that any of us now face together. There is no more planet or time left. An Indigenous and nonaligned conversation about genuinely independent and collective politics is what was always needed. We also need to remember that the very concept of comparative civilizational recognition is a white thing.

Consider, for example, the gargantuan problem that some of the most ornate, land-based forms of Australian Indigenous paintings today—paintings which testify to the intergenerational resistance and survival of peoples, their intimate ancient knowledge and maintenance of lands, waters, and songlines—are so freely offered up as nonpolitical consumption to the most colonial and neo-imperial Art Institutions globally. People still misread the urban Aboriginal artists' critique of what we call Ooga Booga. Ooga Booga is not a critique of land-based or "traditional" practices. Ooga Booga is not even the work itself. It is what is cultivated and harvested by the white traders. It is the market niche that attaches spirituality as supplement to the work, although what is sacred has already been shielded away by the artist and community. The real magic of the important knowledge is not given over to the buyer, but this point is academic. It is the white-managed fantasy of access to our very being that they want. In France, Germany, the Netherlands, New York, they will always want painting, weaving, dance, and sand drawings, but the appetite for our spirit in the absence of a critical curatorial and noncoercive economy participates in a broader depoliticization and aestheticization of all of our practices. Europeans want the finest work, of course, to be viewed in a vacuum, shielded from the rest of humanity, and even from their capitalism!

The fact that art remains relevant in this voracious stage of unlimited total production is indeed a testament to art's power. But what we get, what the public gets, are the most easily commodified forms, viewed through Western minimalism still. Such curation says nothing about our struggles to maintain life against our disempowerment. The unprecedented "Aratjara" exhibition was cocurated to tour Western Europe by land rights activists in 1993.[12] "Aratjara" was one of the most important, collectively deliberated, large-scale, Indigenous-curated exhibitions seen anywhere. Each work across all media stayed attached to a rightful argument about our different land relationships within the group, but that show is almost always missing from the international exhibition histories preferred by white art historians. The few places that collect urban Aboriginal practices in Europe update their representations to be "inclusive," but they rarely upset the broader ethnographic system that essentializes us ahistorically into place.

When we insist on our inter-nationalism, our solidarity and communal traction, shared professional commitments to the field of "Culture" might involve more accountability. What Aileen Moreton-Robinson called "white possession" will always be in the room.[13] So the question is—whether you are in an artistic, curatorial, academic, or managerial position—how are you going to respond to the real

generativity, the serious generosity of the call for accountability that is coming from the nonwhite position and from artist groups? "You scratch my back, I piggy-back on yours" is not a very edifying professional experience for any of us. Can the traffic in Aboriginality that non-Indigenous spaces profit and benefit from—indeed can't do without in the Anglo colonies, despite no returns of value or profit to our communities—can it ever be deployed otherwise? Based on the last forty years, perhaps not. Or at best, rarely so. Much more often, revisionist takes on our history and practices do deep colonizing damage, wittingly and often unwittingly, offering little to nothing on the side of a broader collective sense of well-being.

Reductio ad Infinitum

Documenta is a marker for Europeans of their turn away from race, but not their racial entanglement with the Global South and East. What actually occurred in the so-called "postwar" era was a switch towards gross national product as the measure of all things. You can't celebrate doing away with fascism while maintaining global capitalism. The postwar biennial space is a good thing, but looking inwardly, all the Europeans can see is themselves. Outside that whiteness, the rest of the world isn't. The fact is, 90 percent of the world's population is not white. But this is not reflected in the art market. There may never be a reckoning, because of the simple fact that the art market is driven more by the need to avoid regulatory control and taxation (of "whatever") by sovereign states, than by any historical focus or literacy. New terra nullius zones like freeports, designed specifically for lawless art operations, are built in direct response to the climate crisis, while carbon smokes from the NFTs.[14] The market attention has moved through Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, through blackness, but this is a calculus, and Indigenous Art is next to have its moment. It's presented now as contemporary, but it will still be "a white thing."

Documenta fifteen is not going to look like any other previous iteration and the usual audiences may well find it difficult to navigate. They may feel under attack, or affronted to not be able to recognize themselves or their cultures. How will they react to the multitude of issues and ideas unleashed by such unfamiliar practices? The previous documentas and the Berlin Biennales of the past were just a precursor to this, and shows like "Diversity United" may be used as a bit of a distraction from it. There will be many unrecognizable names that have never been in a prestigious biennial before, and certainly never shown in a major institution. It is the fault of the institutions, and the curators, that they haven't been able to find these people. Questions need to be asked. Why have the museums and curators not been able to find them? Why have these artists been ignored? The reason is clear, Contemporary Art is a white thing.

As I write this, a major and important exhibition of Aboriginal songlines from the middle of the desert of Australia will soon be showing in Plymouth, the port of Cook, before heading to the Musée du Quai Branly (so blatantly anthropological and primitivist), and landing inside the gargantuan Prussian Palace of the Humboldt Forum, one of the most neo-imperial museum projects of the twenty-first century in Western Europe.[15] When ordinary Germans see this kind of important show in that kind of place, that is the kind of show that is presented to them as Aboriginal, and only that kind of art is the kind of art that they will be looking for in the future. How do we deal with this kind of aestheticization and depoliticization of really significant practices? This is a project driven by progressives, and conservative institutions have grabbed it and will turn it into a neo-ethnographic experience. They are pretending to care for our culture and knowledge but will take no interest in the Apartheid situation. It speaks to the lack of literate venues for complex contemporary work, and to the central fact that even when Aboriginal Art is assumed to be contemporary, it is ghettoized and essentialized as a white thing. I don't believe this institution has the capacity to enact a duty of care for this exhibition. Rest assured, the Humboldt will not be the only major institution to stage shows like this. To be very, very clear, this is not a criticism of the exhibition, but of the venue, and of the kinds of institutional entanglements we have to deal with. It is a judgment on the unworthiness of the Humboldt to hold it.

I believe that in the next decade or so, as the hunger for Indigeneity, for ecology, for a new black market of unfamiliar "Indigenous Art" practices becomes more widespread, that the most popular work on the market will be the least political, the least offensive, and the least critical. The market will choose the winners. It will try to wholesale ignore the most outspoken and dispossessed people in my country, rendering the most critically engaged Contemporary Art the least valued. Gagosian Gallery has already tipped its hand with two Emily Kngwarreye shows and we have Steve Martin as an overnight "influencer." The direction they are taking is a familiar one. It always starts out and finishes in the same way. The market will continue to exoticize to destroy Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples and lands globally, and the art market will be a frontline.

No land, no compensation, just an easily ignored voice.

Hope less. Do more.

X

Edited by Rachel O'Reilly

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1
Gary Foley, "Native Title Is Not Land Rights," *Kooriweb*, September 1997 http://kooriweb.org/foley/essays/pdf_essays/native%20title%20is%20not%20land%20rights.pdf .

2
David Weisbrot, "Claim of Right Defence to Theft of Sacred Bark Paintings," *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 1, no. 8–9 (1981) http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AboriginalLawB/1981/11.html?fbclid=IwAR1cEBZo2_MblqT7Ud-7rYg5WX-rs3jLMCKf5xosQcbHoV7Dwfe19UdNrsg .

3
The first act of the new Australian parliament was the Immigration Act, otherwise known as the White Australia policy. There was no mention of Aboriginal people in the constitution. See Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Routledge, 2014).

4
Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples*. See also Irene Watson, "There is No Possibility of Rights without Law: So Until Then, Don't Thumb Print or Sign Anything!" *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 5, no. (2000) http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/IndigLawB/2000/44.html ; and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Virtuous Racial States: The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," *Griffith Law Review* 20, no. 3 (2011) https://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Moreton-Robinson-2011-VirtuousRacialStates.pdf .

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See Lindy Nolan, *Driving Disunity: The Business Council Against Aboriginal Community* (Spirit of Eureka, 2017) https://au.spiritofeureka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Driving-Disunity-PDF-Ebook.pdf .

6
SEED is Australia's first Aboriginal youth climate network https://www.seedmob.org.au/ .

7
Brisbane Blacks, "Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance: Manifesto," November 24, 2014 https://issuu.com/brisbaneblacks/docs/war_manifesto_d91595ceee8754 .

8
Slavery is almost never associated with black Indigenous politics in Australia. We had slavery until the 1970s in some areas, and our movements were in conversation with black internationalism from early days. See John Maynard, "'In the Interests of Our People': The Influence of Garveyism on the Rise of Australian Aboriginal Political Activism," *Aboriginal History* , no. 29 (2005).

9
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11
See Rachel O'Reilly and Danny Butt, "Infrastructures of Autonomy on the Professional Frontier: 'Art and the Boycott of/as Art,'" *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* , no. 10 (Fall 2017) https://joaap.org/issue10/oriellybutt.htm .

12
"Aratjara" translates as "messenger" from the Arrernte language. See the catalogue *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists* (DuMont, 1993).

13
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15
Noëlle BuAbbud, "Nightmare at the Museum: An Interview with Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum," *Berlin Art Link* , February 5, 2021 https://www.berlinartlink.com/2021/02/05/interview-coalition-cultural-workers-against-humboldt-forum/ .

Organ of the Autonomous Sciences

The Resurrection of Nashism: Report on the Emergent Forms of Spectacular Fascism in Scandinavia

The current Nashist detail is only an epiphenomenon. No doubt its successors will be stronger.
—Guy Debord, "The Counter-Situationist Operation in Diverse Countries," 1963

Today, there are more and more individuals who are declared insane, and more and more actions that are considered crazy. But the only place on earth that has so far been regarded by the cosmo-polis or in public mythology as the land of lunacy is Scandinavia.
—Asger Jorn, *Things & Polis*, 1964

Our inheritance was left to us by no testament.
—René Char *, Feuillets d'Hypnos*, 1946

A few years ago, we, the Organ of the Autonomous Sciences, started a collective project that documented, mapped, and reflected upon a hostile takeover of the Situationist International's methodologies by a group from the Danish ultraright scene. Our research was prompted by the spectacular 2019 parliamentary campaign run by the political party Hard Line (Stram Kurs) and their lawyer figurehead, Rasmus Paludan. Their use of daily "happenings" (usurping a central postwar avant-garde strategy), featuring various "props" such as toy guns as well as public urination and Koran burnings, managed to seize the public's attention and cause a bombastic media spectacle.[1]

We are acutely aware that this text will leave the impression of having transgressed a taboo. The prevalent stance among Nordic intellectuals and commentators is that these "fascistoid" provocateurs should be silenced (deplatformed) to death. But increasingly, this strategy only seems plausible if one also ignores the very form and forum of today's so-called "politics": the pseudo–public sphere of social media.

Notwithstanding warnings of engaging with these neofascist provocateurs, we have increasingly begun to see the boundaries of this taboo as an integral part of spectacular fascism's very ability to thrive. Public critiques of far-right phenomena often have appalling consequences. We have carefully considered whether the publication of our research could attract the uncomfortable attention of Paludan, who has a history of harassing and stalking his critics. While we share the commentators' desire to undermine the far right's violent operations and directly confront the ugliest swing of the "death spiral" of racist politics in the Nordic welfare states, we also need to problematize how proscription has become a guiding structure underpinning the plethora of bullshit that constitutes a global mainstreaming of far-right movements. This paradoxically both erodes and prolongs the fantasy of a liberal public sphere. In short, although we have sincerely wished that our research would eternally collect dust in the archive, we can no longer justify hiding it from public view. Lately, too many bad things have occurred.

Jørgen Nash and Jens Jørgen Thorsen dressed up as convicts before going to court, 1975. Copyright: Aller Media/MEGA. Photograph: Morten Langkilde/Ritzau Scanpix.

What is Happening?

In April and May 2022, a series of strange and highly disturbing events were common front-page news in Scandinavia. For one, a video live-streamed on the Facebook page of the far-right group Patriots Go Live (Patrioterne går live) showed the anti-trans artist Ibi-Pippi vandalizing Asger Jorn's iconic artwork *Den foruroligende ælling* (*The Disquieting Duckling*, 1959) .[2] This famous piece, displayed at Museum Jorn in the provincial Danish town of Silkeborg, is an example of Jorn's "modification" technique, in which he would buy paintings at flea markets and paint over parts of them.

In this "happening"—which the artist called a "double modification"—Ibi-Pippi glued a self-portrait onto Jorn's painting, then signed the painting in marker. Allegedly, Ibi-Pippi's ambition was to question the notion of authorship. Reports say that the artwork was irreparably damaged by the action.

The disturbing thing about this "happening" is the eerie convergence between goofy right-wing artists and documenters and their avant-garde icon, Jorn.[3] This impression was only bolstered by the identification of one of the other persons in the video as the notorious "penis artist" Uwe Max Jensen, who has earned a name for himself by urinating in an Olafur Eliason installation.[4] In 2019 Jensen entered the political scene as the first candidate for Hard Line. Jensen, Ibi-Pippi, and others are often grouped under the nebulous "provo art" banner, which, unlike the anarchist Provo movement of the 1960s whose actions mainly provoked responses from Dutch authorities and the petite bourgeoisie, encompasses right-wing provocations that target immigrant, minority civilians in Scandinavia.[5]

Contemporaneously, Paludan made a spectacle when traveling through Sweden and burning copies of the Koran. Paludan, who founded Hard Line in 2017, acted as a defense lawyer for Uwe Max Jensen and others, while making a name for himself through YouTube videos on the channel "Frihedens Stemmer" (The Voices/Votes of Freedom).[6] Then as now, his actions are designed to provoke violent clashes between frustrated minorities and the police to create a scapegoat. Staging demonstrations in over-policed and poor immigrant communities, Paludan provokes the public with actions like spitting on or burning the Koran. While Paludan is protected by the police, he capitalizes on the ensuing demonstrations against him in order to come off as the defender of freedom of expression while framing the ethnic minorities he harasses as unlawful and unbelonging "others."

This specific fusion of neofascism and twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetic strategies is far from a unique case; it falls squarely into the "post-shame" nihilist irony of the global alt-right movement and their "culture wars." There is, however, a local reference that ties this disturbing web together in this context: an almost forgotten movement in Scandinavian art, the "Nashists." Our intention here is to show a continuity, however perverted, between that group and the objectionable media-warriors introduced above.

The Emergence of Nashism

"Nashism" was the label for a group of Nordic artists who operated together from 1962 to 1976 and were excommunicated from the Situationist International. Its most prominent figures were Jørgen Nash, Jens Jørgen Thorsen, Hardy Strid, Ansgar Elda, Dieter Kunzelmann, and, to some ambiguous degree, Asger Jorn and Ambrosius Fjord. According to the First Situationists, the Nashists turned the "revolution of everyday life" into a source of popular entertainment. The Nashists propagated a "situationism" that legitimized expressionist gestures and staged "happenings" centered on artistic subjectivity—something a "critique" of the spectacle was supposed to have surpassed. If this is the more or less "correct" theoretical explanation for the excommunication, a more sectarian one is that the Nashists disrupted Debord's desire for theoretical and organizational coherency, which led the unofficial leader to dispose of the Nordic rebels. Thus, as writer Howard Slater has put it, the exclusion of the Nashists could also be understood as a "defence against a threat to the idealized self-image."[7]

The word "Nashism" first appeared in a 1962 issue of *Internationale Situationniste.* J. V. Martin defined it as a "term derived from the name of Nash, an artist who seems to have lived in Denmark in the twentieth century."[8] As Martin elegiacally framed it, Nash (Asger Jorn's brother) was "a man primarily known for his attempt to betray the revolutionary movement and theory of that time." Thus, Nash's name was détourned by that movement and made into a generic term applicable to "all traitors in the revolutionary struggle against the dominant cultural and social conditions." For our purposes, it is pertinent that Martin somewhat tautologically defines a Nashist in the broadest sense as "someone who in conduct or expression *resurrects* the intentions or essence of Nashism."[9]

Acknowledging this historical context, our return to using the term "Nashism" could easily be misconstrued as a defense of the First Situationist International. To us, however, the structuring logic of Nashism seems not only easily detachable from Situationist sectarianism, but also stands on its own in a far stronger way today. While the twentieth-century Nashists could still frame themselves as a group of avant-gardist (pseudo-)revolutionaries pursuing a life outside capitalist exploitation by artistic means, the advent of neofascism has arguably raised the stakes. With this also comes the need for mobilizing the delegitimizing and condemnatory function inherent to the concept of Nashism, past and present.

The contemporary context that has once again given rise to Nashism has everything to do with the specificity of

The first legal transgression of the Nashists was their co-painting of a public wall, 1962. Left to right: Jørgen Nash, Hardy Strid, Jens Jørgen Thorsen, and Dieter Kunzelmann.

Danish culture and the mainstreaming of racist politics in twenty-first-century Scandinavia. The inhabitants of these cozy welfare states have decided that the Nashists' transgressions are legal, even if morally repulsive. They have thus failed to take responsibility for this cultural and historical heritage. As Nashism via Paludan is becoming a new cultural export—to the entire world, but especially to our Swedish comrades who are now struggling against the newest recurrence of Nashism—we hope this essay can help, if not as an antidote, then at least as a clarification.

From these convergences, we propose a central thesis: Nashism is not only an undescribed movement in art history, but a continuous and neglected political reference. This is so because the current resurrection of Nashism has manifested and operated through a series of aesthetico-political strategies that are facilitated and empowered by the increasingly "compact spectacle" inherent to a stupefying attention economy.[10] Rather than putting forth a conscientious and well-composed art-historical hypothesis, we want to tunnel through this antagonistic force by deploying a wider conceptual generator of multiple Nashisms. These are Nashism, neo-Nashism, and anti-Nashism.

As a vulgar appropriation and an "objective tendency" of the Situationist movement, the Nashists are finally returning from the gates of Hell in pure, concentrated form. The neo-Nashists not only follow the geographical path of the Nashists (who likewise moved from Denmark to Sweden in their break with the First Situationist International to found the municipality Drakabygget). They also explicitly develop and radicalize practices and codes that were already in circulation among the Nashists: from discriminatory and harassing transgressions to anti-trans rhetoric and libertarian conformism.[11]

The historical Nashists were of course never fascists, but rather saw themselves as anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. However, as a cultural symptom that moves within the homogenous and contradictory storm of the society of the spectacle, Nashism has now revealed its true reactionary face—and like Minerva's owl before dusk, some of this was already visible in the goofy and bellicose lineaments of its "founding fathers." We understand the emerging forms of neofascist spectacle as an attempt at "racist re-enchantment," in the words of Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, which functions as the "thin varnish that just about covers the fractures of classless class society."[12] It thus becomes obvious that the rise of neo-Nashism serves as a peculiar, stinky example of a much broader, even global form of flesh-indulging fascism that circles around the historical avant-garde's rotting corpse.

Nashism as a Tendency of the Situationist International

History has long been familiar with various forms of Situationist recuperation. In general, the Situationists' afterlife has included some unsuitable heirs: first, late-capitalist spectacle's recuperation of artistic critique and aesthetic emancipation, as outlined by Boltanski and Chiapello,[13] and more recently, the spectacle of right-wing situationism that has revitalized the position of Nashism. In this context, Nashism could be seen as a conflation of the fifty years of " *la droitisation du monde*" and the "fifty years of recuperation of the Situationist International."[14]

According to Martin's original definition, the Nashists were essentially artists suffering from extreme self-adulation. Due to their desire to "be accepted in a society," they did nothing but "expose the Situationist movement to mockery and laughter."[15] Feeding the society of the spectacle with obnoxious provocations, the Nashists were always keen on being swallowed by the spectacle itself. The "Nashist gangsters," as they were later called in the eighth issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, were "much more sociable [than the Situationists], certainly, but much less intelligent."[16] Thus, steadily assured by the authenticity of the "original" Situationists, Debord points out how the Nashists engaged in a "systematic spreading of false information,"[17] with help from "more-than-enthusiastic journalists employed by the Scandinavian press,"[18] referencing Nash's promiscuous "art dealing." The personalized tone of Debord's and Martin's callouts underlines the logic of *abjection* that later became a definitive characteristic of the neo-Nashist movement.

In February 1962, a series of controversies culminated in the Situationist excommunication of the German Gruppe Spur, as well as the expulsion of Nash and the rest of the Scandinavians (besides J. V. Martin), who all ultimately supported Spur, which was facing legal proceedings in West Germany for distributing blasphemous and pornographic material in their new journal. This process laid the groundwork for the Nashists' subsequent fetishization of legal transgression and freedom of speech, which is the most obvious connection to neo-Nashism.

Thus, from 1962 the Situationist International was divided into two easily identifiable yet opposing factions within a shared strategic field: a "French" First Situationist International, and a "Nordic" or "Scandinavian" Second Situationist International. However, the two groups explained the split very differently. Contrary to Martin, the Nashists believed that each faction of the movement had developed into a nationalism in Situationist disguise, which rendered the international impossible.[19] They chose to affirm these identities in a manifesto, "The Struggle of the Situcratic Society," published in Swedish and English in two new Situationist journals, *Drakabygget* and *Situationist Times*, with a visual design, terminology, and tone clearly based on Asger Jorn's ethnicist-organicist analyses of the time[20]—he signed the manifesto with the pseudonym "Patrick O'Brien."

As such, the Nashists reinterpreted the sectarian disagreements along cultural-organicist lines. They claimed that whereas the "Franco-Belgians" were "socio-centric" and regarded action as something preceding emotion, the "Nordic rebels" were "anthropocentric."[21] For the latter, the pre-reflective realm of emotion preceded both action and an analytical attitude towards social life. From the Nashists' perspective, these cultural-ethnic traits determined two legitimate forms of Situationism. Specifically, the anarchist Nordic rebels would only allow the revolution of everyday life to arise "out of the situation itself" (their happenings, for example, which they theorized with the term "CO-RITUS"). They opposed the way that the *bande dessinée* of Marxist "Franco-Belgians" outlined a theoretical trajectory that was to be realized practically (through the methods of détournement, the dérive, etc.).[22]

As far as Nash was concerned, the Spur trial and his own artistic transgressions, by virtue of their specific Nordic attributes, were the most forceful means of combatting bourgeois society.[23] In their manifesto, the Nashists nonetheless abstracted from the personalized-practical conflict between the two groups' very masculinized attitudes to life, arguing that they could still be thought of as "complementary," paraphrasing Jorn's analysis of Niels Bohr's quantum mechanics. This view proposes that the tribalism could be resolved eventually, but that each "situationism" was confined to "blossoming" within the milieu of its own ethnic *Kulturkreis*.[24]

In contrast, the First Situationist International analyzed the split through a political lens. They explained that any operation within the society of the spectacle is always

potentially compromised, as it becomes an object of recuperation by the late-capitalist logic of attention and publicity. For Debord and the rest of the "French" originals, the Nashists were "cliché-mongers" and were merely a *symptom*. "It seems to us," he wrote, "that Nashism is an expression of an objective tendency resulting from the Situationist International's ambiguous and risky policy of consenting to act within culture while being against the entire present organization of this culture and even against all culture as a separate sphere."[25] In this light, today's neo-Nashist "culture warriors" aptly put into practice the problem of art and artists in the spectacle society that the First Situationists had so far only theorized.

Notwithstanding the First Situationists' sectarian motivations and censorious "idealized consciousness, based upon sovereignty of individualism,"[26] which, as Howard Slater has stressed, abandoned any fruitful contradictions,[27] their critique of Nashism was essentially on point, because soon enough, the original Nashists indeed became "star activists" or "experienced media workers."[28] They always managed to receive massive media exposure whether they acted in the streets of Copenhagen, the Danish Parliament, the Royal Danish Theater, the Venice Biennale, award shows, or in the context of the world press. They carried out the notorious "murder" of the bronze statue of *The Little Mermaid*, which according to Nash was to be read as a "media novel," and added fuel to a global blasphemy debate with Thorsen's film on Jesus's sex life. In all these instances, the Nashists managed to posit themselves as "pioneers of the present," as a "fun" way of reminding everybody that the North was still indebted to Christian guilt and shame. They called Scandinavia the "land of horniness," and they steadily became household names as the provocateurs of the Nordic welfare model.[29]

Nashists, then and now, have always failed to construct genuinely free situations, as they depend on some authority within it—in concrete terms, the presence of journalists or police officers. Nashists, old and new, exploit a cunning method in which the police essentially sanction their provocations by standing guard against potentially violent reactions from their targets of harassment, whether minorities, journalists, or other artists. Consequently, Nashist happenings allow for neither chance nor free play, but rather affirm a need to be recognized and valued, as all Nashists seek to be honored members of society—in short, parrots (patriots).

Today, the Nashists should be lamented for fueling the public's fascination with provocateurs. Their operative logic is already found in the etymological connotations of the Latin *provocationem*, which signifies a calling forth, a summoning, or a challenge. The actions of the Nashists should in other words be understood as *challenges summoned by the society of the spectacle*, and as such the Nashists are—in the Satanic sense—its minions. In this light, they can be understood as a "false friend" (or what Nash and later the Hard Line party counterrevolutionarily call the "Fifth Column") in a general struggle against society and the prevailing conditions of culture.

In 2012, Uwe Max Jensen visited the Tin Foil Hut in Floalt, Sweden, which was inhabited by Jens Jørgen Thorsen until his death in 2000. Image: Snaphanen.

Neo-Nashism as Right-Situationism

Today, a right-situationist wave has reawakened the dragon of stupidity, calling, in one egregious example, for the mass deportation of all Muslims. If we follow the First Situationist International's critique of Nashism, we should likewise be able to conceive of neo-Nashism as a phenomenon that is *called forth by the society of the spectacle*, and that even in its most excessive acts cannot but respond to these terms.

Defining neo-Nashism as a fascist détournement of a gang of expelled Situationists from the 1960s can indeed attest to a far broader emergence of avant-garde strategies and trolling in neofascist subcultures. But what strikes us in the case of Paludan and his "Sancho Panza,"[30] Uwe Max Jensen, is the crude and inverted radicalization with which they continue the program of the Nashists. In this way, they not only reveal the reactionary elements that were already at play, but also realize some of the actual *effects* that the Nashists could only dream of. As Debord rightfully stressed: "Brutally phrased: *capital* will never be lacking for Nashist enterprises."[31]

The reasoning here is not simply that "provo" artists like Ibi-Pippi and Uwe Max Jensen, and by extension the Hard Line party, become Nashist simply by identifying with Nash, Thorsen, or Jorn, but that their actions have managed to bring about a neo-Nashism by operating through a series of obviously Nashist logics. It is impossible to decipher any boundary between the

neo-Nashist aestheticization of the political, and the public and institutional embrace of the neo-Nashists. In fact, both sides of this productive reciprocity constitute one and the same racist spectacle.

This is all made possible by a culturally expanded sphere where art itself is a quintessential, "interdisciplinary" phenomena within the society of the spectacle: a fully compromised automata which seems to have colonized everyday life at a level far beyond Debord's worst excesses of imagination. All the while, today's transnational "art industry" ensures its continuing "absolute" commodification and semblance of autonomy.[32] The contradictory disintegration of art within a far wider aestheticization of everyday life has rendered any project aspiring to sublate the realms of art and life completely obsolete.

If the First Situationist International really is the "last avant-garde,"[33] as some critics have argued, then the Nashists might be seen as the "first" post-avant-garde. They manifest the exhaustion of any critical practice seeking to foster an *Aufhebung* or *dépassement* by refusing the officialized *Abspaltung* between art and life. These two realms have mutated uncannily by force of the society of the spectacle itself.

Today, this disintegration of art into the aestheticization of life, primarily facilitated by the emergence of social media, has opened up a very wide field of possibilities for the far right and other "fascists derivatives."[34] Rather than operating through traditional right-wing hotbeds such as veterans associations and military clubs, today's far right uses 8chan and online gamer forums such as Discord to facilitate the spread of politically incorrect "content" to an increasingly hybrid and multilayered audience of atomized "spectators."

The Paludan Show

Before earning his reputation as Denmark's provocateur par excellence, Rasmus Paludan described himself as an artist. Echoing André Breton, and also Donald Trump, in 2016 he brought a realistic toy gun to a free-speech conference in the Danish Parliament featuring the Swedish far-right artist Lars Vilks. This event came just one year after another event in Denmark featuring Vilks as keynote speaker (called "Art, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Expression") was subject to a so-called "Islamic terrorist" shooting with civilian casualties. Regarding the 2016 conference, Paludan insisted that he "wanted to try to illustrate with my artwork how the police act towards something that is completely harmless"—in other words: a white man with a (toy) gun.

Already in the early 2000s, Paludan proved to be quite creative at expanding the boundaries of the law as his personal fetish. He used the website kriminelle.dk to meticulously document cyclists' unlawful behavior. Since then he has amassed a lengthy record of using his legal education to carry out serious harassment of ethnic and sexual minorities. However, the effect of these transgressive vendettas clearly pales in comparison with Paludan's Koran-burning "demonstrations." A former Danish prime minister described Paludan's actions as "provocation for its own sake," thus placing it beyond the official sphere of politics. Some political commentators have even wondered whether Paludan is performing one big stunt: "Is it just a game?"[35]

Anti-Nashist uprising in Sweden, 2022. Courtesy of Kicki Nilsson / Ritzau Scanpix.

The truth value of such naive suggestions is continuously subtracted from Paludan's "happenings," which have steadily taken on a violent and dramatic character involving intense clashes between young minorities and the police.

These clashes include, on the one side, police bodies harmed by their effort to protect Paludan, which legitimizes the "vulnerable" state's exclusive monopoly on violence (and public visibility). On the other side, there are the ethnic minorities who "allow themselves"—as people said then, and do now in Sweden—to be provoked by a rabid jackass who has already escaped the scene.

Paludan's happenings deploy a strategy that we, acknowledging the right-situationist context, term *racialized situology*: their sole purpose is to construct situations with potentially violent responses from ethnic minorities.[36] This actionist mobilization of a public audience, whipping them up into a violent "collective rite," is at once a radicalization of the Nashists and their outright betrayal. Paludan's subversive actions bolster the existing racialization that legitimizes "our" state-sanctioned racism. His happenings can be understood as involuntary parodies of avant-garde strategies, such as détournement or *Verfremdung*, as

he—rather than exposing or inverting operative ideologies and social relations—is only able to affirm and intensify the usual racist imagery surrounding "the Muslim."

A frequent site for extensions of Paludan's happenings has been schools with large populations of ethnic and religious minorities—providing the ultimate (pseudo-)fulfilment of the avant-gardist reverence for "infantile disorders" and "primitivist" babbling. Teachers nationwide have reported schoolyard reenactments of Paludan's stunts, including one where pupils divide themselves into "Muslims" and "Jews" who are put in a cage.[37] This neo-Nashist appeal to children has been so strong that the Danish state TV channel DR produced a documentary titled *Rasmus Paludan*: *Right Nationalism for Children*, a program that clearly revealed who tricked whom. In the program, scenes depict children reconstruing Paludan's idiotic actions via cunning gimmicks, causing visible frustration for the neo-Nashists.

A peculiar relation to infantilism clearly informs Paludan's aesthetic and performance. In constructing his image, Paludan does not aspire to epic Landian heights, or even to the middlebrow ironic memes of the alt-right (whose meme characters, such as Pepe the Frog, are arguably reminiscent of the First Situationist International's détournement of cartoons). Paludan's lack of imagination also prevents him from pursuing the style of neo-totalitarian Monumental Art, as in Steve Bannon's media empire. Pathetically, the aesthetics of Paludan & co. instead draw upon figures from Danish children's television. In terms of voice, theatrics, and even worldview, Paludan has consistently constructed himself as the identical twin of the 2000s satirical character Dolph, a violent, racist, and fascist hippo.

Most commentators agree that Paludan's mode of expression, a kind of caricature of the Nashists' beloved *Homo ludens*, is just too much. But through media hyperbole ("Is it just a game?") and the *effects* it produces ("Why are non-Western foreigners so angry and violent?"), Paludan's morally repulsive stunts become justified. His superficially antiestablishment tactics—paradoxically epitomized by police shields surrounding him at "happenings"—echo the Islamophobic aesthetic that we have become accustomed to since at least 9/11. Jonas Staal calls this aesthetic regime "expanded state realism."[38]

The fascist gestures of Paludan and his ilk are undergirded by the "great replacement" master narrative, a conspiracy theory claiming that a secret global cabal is intent on replacing white, cis-gendered people with non-white people. This narrative is an enabling device for necropolitical racialization, stigmatization, and ultimately murder. In Paludan's antics one can also hear the echoes of Nash and Thorsen's outcry after forcing their way into the Swedish pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1968 and transforming it into a "pavilion of revolt": "This year they don't exhibit art, but policemen."[39]

Plan for the disruption of the Venice Biennale in 1968. Source: Situationisterne 1957–71: Drakabygget, Bauhaus Situationniste (Skånskå Konstmuseum, 1971).

Exit the Paludan Show

We need to underline that the emergence of Paludan and the other neo-Nashists is unthinkable without the acute mainstreaming of a far-right agenda in Denmark. It therefore might seem rather peculiar that as Paludan's exuberant media exposure has grown, most commentators and politicians have increasingly treated him as the name-not-to-be-mentioned.

But the majority's deviating behavior and ignorant views display that they *know* Paludan is their own shameless bastard, that they have fostered him, and they are thus also to blame for his "bad-mannered" behavior.[40] The existing Islamophobia and racism in Denmark's political culture allowed Paludan to shamelessly posture as the state's leading comic actor.[41]

During Paludan's rise to fame, a wide coalition of Danish parties agreed on the so-called "ghetto package": a cluster of policies based on ethnic criteria ("foreigners" or descendants of foreigners from "non-Western" countries) and racial profiling implemented through temporary visitation and double-punishment zones, as well as forced expulsion from residences. The political background for this is explicitly formulated as the destabilizing and threatening factor of "non-Western" foreigners. The state's racialized motivation likewise legitimized the establishment of new deportation centers in Sjælsmark and Kærshovedgaard, where rejected asylum seekers live under systematically restrained conditions worse than those of Danish prisons. These centers are placed in close

earshot of the trauma-evoking noise of military camps.

Continuing on this endless road of patriotic bravery, the Social Democratic government is currently acting as the world's xenophobic avant-garde with plans to install detention centers in Rwanda and prisons in Kosovo. And the current refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine has put discrimination in plain sight, as "non-Western" migrants and refugees continue to be treated very differently than white (Christian) Ukrainians.

Paludan's disobedient happenings produce a more entertaining, dramatic, and disgusting image of the state's authoritarian and xenophobic fight against "Others." When Paludan "proves" that young Muslim men are criminals whose "psychological constitution" displays their inferior "stage of civilization," as a Danish politician tweeted after a happening, it is easier to exclude "them" from fundamental democratic rights. This imaginary of the "inferior, uncivil Muslim" and the "civil, white Western Man" puts a fresh coat of paint on an old racist logic, as described by Ana Teixeira Pinto: "Racial animosity is always expressed in the language of principle."[42] Especially in the case of neo-Nashists, this logic manifests in a contradictory form.

In this sense, the neo-Nashists can be conceived as a strange reversal of the fascist "aestheticization of political life" famously discussed by Walter Benjamin. Rather than using radio or cinema to project a homogenous, ornamentalized ethno-nationalist image that gives expression to and organizes the masses, Paludan uses digital platforms to coproduce the image of an "us" (white Western) and a "them" (Muslims) that disorganizes and fragments the masses. These provocations draw upon fascist tropes of aestheticizing violence that have been known since the futurists and the "avant-garde fascism" of the interwar years, where politics was boiled down to the mythmaking of heroes and enemies.[43] Evoking a painting from 2016 by Uwe Max Jensen displaying Paludan in a heroic act of public shooting, Paludan himself once stressed in a demonstration (*ed. trigger warning)*: "Our streets and alleys will be turned into rivers of blood, and the blood of the alien enemies will end up in the sewer where the aliens belong."

Despite being appalled by Paludan's Nashist methods, liberal and even left newspapers create a more moderate—but often no less racist—version of the aesthetic effects of the neo-Nashist spectacle. Provocations—in this case with "Muslims" as the objects of provocation, and "Danes" as its subjects—can be eerily comforting. This stems from the fact that Paludan merely produces and stimulates images that are already in circulation. He affirms the "truth" through a dramatic image of what is already known.

In contrast to the "uncivil" behavior of non-Westerners, the Danes display their "civility" by publicly accepting and defending Paludan's "right" to free speech—and by logical necessity condemning ethnic minorities for their violent behavior in response to his taunting provocations. Consequently, few have questioned the racist and repressive *context* for this "violent behavior," nor the fact that the "pain of others" is turned into the "measure of our freedom."[44] The discussion is stunted at the level of principle: "Freedom of speech is not for sale," as the original Nashists exclaimed at their mass demonstration on the main street of Strøget, Copenhagen in 1965.

To a certain extent, the neo-Nashists have simply continued the Nashist struggle for freedom of speech, as if nothing had happened since the 1960s. "Artistic freedom of speech has no moral limits" was another Nashist slogan.[45] As *artistic* speech, this liberal principle is extended from discourse to action, which entails a broader palette of expressions. Thus, the neo-Nashists can exploit a principle that first came into being with their forebears: a "fundamentalist" notion of freedom of speech that authorizes the amoral expression of privileged bodies. However, whereas the Nashists largely focused on artistic freedom of speech as embedded in the struggle to subvert bourgeois, nationalist, and conformist morality, the neo-Nashists employ free-speech subversion either as a pure medium, or as a kind of reactionary transgression that sanctions and further racializes existing social relations and their anti-queer and white-supremacist morality.

While the Nashists struggled *against* the state—despite being fully dependent on its system of support—the neo-Nashists are paradoxically struggling against *and for* the state, like sad "heroes" that fortify the Danish state at day and break its laws by night. This is true of most examples of neofascist tendencies that mine the historical avant-garde. So, while the pseudo-praxis of Nashism ultimately only bolstered the pseudo-reality against which it was supposed to fight, this same structuring logic now seems to assist neo-Nashism in coproducing the state-sanctioned racism that is so intimately desired by a reality-hungry public sphere. For the Nashists, this immanent contradiction was what made their endeavor into a spectacle—that is, made them Nashist—while the neo-Nashists can more easily thrive on this contradiction.[46]

"Ban the Nash!"

Throughout this text, we have tried to *hyper- thesize* the First Situationists' more or less on-point takedown of the Nashists as a template for dealing with contemporary fascisms. Naturally, we don't believe that a short genealogy like this will be able to do this by itself. Today, critique can only hope to raise an eyebrow.

Therefore, it is obvious for us that we must synthesize the situation in relation to a general order of the spectacle. In doing this, we must avoid any embarrassing intellectual-moral explanations, or even worse, any attempt to reclaim a neo-Debordian Situationism that

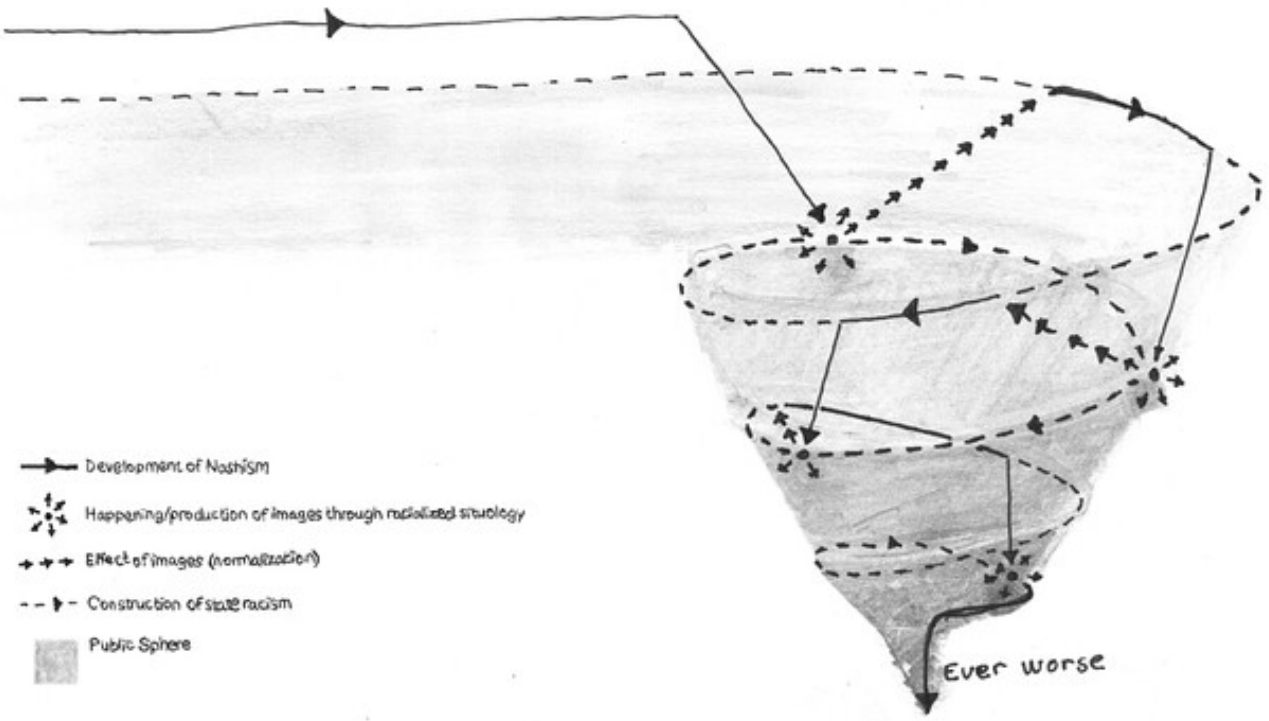


Diagram on the eternal resurrections of Nashism. Courtesy of Organ of the Autonomous Sciences.

would amount to telling an esoteric Hegelian joke at the dinner table during the honeymoon days of the Vienna circle. We prefer to have our cake and eat it too.

Fortunately, we can address the neo-Nashists as nothing more than the idiotic friends of our true enemies by allegorizing the First Situationists' lamentations one more time. In a letter to J. V. Martin dated May 8, 1963, Guy Debord outlined a new position: anti-Nashism. "We are quite in agreement on the fact that you must try to take artistic and theoretical control of the new *anti-Nashist* and *anti-nuclear* gallery (*Ban the Nash*)," he wrote.[47] In French, the last phrase is " *A bas le Nash*," an allusion to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)'s iconic 1953 slogan "Ban the Bomb."

Rather than continuing a personal polemic with the Nashists, Debord's new concept of anti-Nashism addresses the colossal scale of the problem through multiple references to a global network of revolutionaries (CND and the Spies for Peace group, amongst others). For our analysis, this essentially places the problem of the neo-Nashists on par with the way the atomic bomb and its associated security measurements should be regarded: a pretext for the passivation and militarized domination of the society of the spectacle.

So far we have pinpointed how neo-Nashism operates as a molecular nuclear weapon within the territory of Danish state racism. The anti-neo-Nashist question is more difficult to answer: How can we ensure the banning of this bomb without resorting to the liberal phantasmagorias of isolated and pseudo-public "critique" or "dialogue" that so blindly lets itself whirl into the death spiral of Nashism?

In his brief note on anti-Nashism, Debord references a gallery exhibition that took place at Tom Lindhardt's Galerie Exi in Odense, Denmark. Here, the First Situationists arranged for the exhibition "destruction of rSg-6" to take place as a response to the Nashists' spectacular betrayal. The reason for the Situationist exhibition in Galerie Exi was indeed to solve the difficult conundrum that Nashism originally evoked: namely—as Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen has also articulated—how to act within culture while being against all culture as such.[48] Of course, this mission had to fail, as the gallerist Lindhardt became publicly outraged about "hosting a shooting match" when he was "promised an art exhibition," which ultimately forced the Situationists to retreat from the scene.

As a reaction to Paludan, a collective of jazz musicians began assembling at the locations of his racist happenings, with the aim of producing noise against the fascist noise of the neo-Nashists. Encouraging everyone to bring an instrument, this quickly evolved into a remarkable popular and anti-fascist form of protest. Photograph from the Facebook page “Free Jazz Mod Paludan” (Free Jazz Against Paludan).

Here we must point out a regulative idea, which was already inscribed in the exhibitory logic in Odense, and which any emphatic anti-neo-Nashism should rely upon. If we really want to disarm this particular atom bomb—ban the Nash—then we cannot narrow our focus to the bomb itself, which in the end only functions as a *personification* of the atomic reactor and the whole toxic infrastructure that gave birth to the bomb in the first place—that is, the too-late society of spectacular fascism that saps our sense of living. We can only combat Nashism by pursuing a strategic terrain that renders its conditions inoperative.

We must continuously invent routes for egress, desertion, and destitution, and elicit a mass dropout from the unofficial fascist tutelage imposed by our own shameless bastards. To navigate in the striated field of a shrinking universe, where the spectacle can always recur in any guise and place, we must seek out the limits—less by expanding our bodies than by securing ground and forging new organisms. We must bring forward a resistance by further bolstering the undercommon worlds that are poisonous to the neo-Nashists' soil. Any victory will emerge from our efforts to stand outside the worst of it all. And in this sense—as Michèle Bernstein's efforts demonstrated in the Odense exhibition—we have already won.[49]

X

Organ of the Autonomous Sciences (Asker Bryld Staunæs, Benjamin Asger Krog Møller, and Tobias Dias) is an extra-disciplinary collective for research, art, and infrastructural organization.

1
Just weeks before the election, Hard Line managed to receive triple the media exposure compared to the two prime minister candidates. Although the party's alleged mission to enter parliament failed (by only 0.2 percent of the vote), Hard Line clearly won in the eyes of the generalized attention economy. The party garnered millions of YouTube and Snapchat views—the latter among children and teens especially—and graced the headlines of the largest Danish newspapers, in which Paludan became the third-most-mentioned politician during the campaign.

2
To promote an anti-trans agenda, Ibi-Pippi has exploited a law concerning legal gender change to conduct various purposefully triggering actions, such as attempting to access a female changing room and a swimming class for Muslim women. Previously, Ibi-Pippi also walked in a "hetero pride" parade, penetrated a Putin blow-up doll, and carried out a public performance that allegedly involved blending and drinking a fetus.

3
While most critics believed that Ibi-Pippi's vandalism was an act of spontaneous idiocy, a quick dive into Facebook reveals that this idea of making an "homage" to *The Disquieting Duckling* had a ctually been brewing for five years, as depicted in a painting including pedophilic imagery https://www.facebook.com/184894414887978/posts/1442968345747239/?d=n . Ibi-Pippi also claimed to be in spiritual contact with Jorn beforehand https://fb.watch/dnv8GaiVBg/ (watch 03:00). This does not take away from the stupidity of the action as much as it underlines the persistent veneration that a new generation of far-right artists seems to hold for Jorn. This problematizes the analyses that have framed the incident at Museum Jorn as some sort of "right-extremist" attack on a "left-wing artwork." See, for example, Lukas Slothuus, "Why Is the Danish Far Right Vandalizing Left-Wing Artwork?" *Jacobin*, April 5, 2022 https://jacobin.com/2022/05/denmark-far-right-vandalism-left-wing-artworks-situationists-jorn-asger-hard-line .

4
In 2016 Jensen attempted a similar performance in the Kunsten art museum in northern Denmark but ended up violently assaulting two employees. Jensen was sentenced for the assault. More recently, Jensen gave the opening performance for a far-right exhibition in Warsaw, where he yelled the n-word, waved the Confederate flag, and reenacted the murder of George Floyd in blackface.

5
For another example of the legacies of fascist-leaning "provo art," see Sven Lütticken, "Who Makes the Nazis?" *e-flux journal* no. 76 (October 2016) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69408/who-makes-the-nazis/ . —Eds.

6
In a Danish political context, an obvious predecessor for this "Faustian pact" between a provo artist and a far-right lawyer can be identified from 1970–73. Back then, the Situationist provo Jens Jørgen Thorsen hired the charismatic libertarian provo Mogens Glistrup as his defense lawyer. In 1973, Glistrup entered the Danish parliament with the populist-libertarian Fremskridtspartiet, a party acclaimed and affronted for its heroization of tax cheaters and anti-Muslim politics. Thorsen's connection to the far-right was further bolstered in the late 1970s and '80s when he toured around Denmark with a central member of Fremskridtspartiet, Kristen Poulsgaard, in the aftermath of the anti-intellectual movement "Rindalism."

7
For an in-depth account of the exclusion and subsequent emergence of the Scandinavian Situationists, see Howard Slater, "Divided We Stand: An Outline of Scandinavian Situationism," *Infopool* , no. 4, 2001 http://scansitu.antipool.org/2001.html . Notwithstanding the virtues of Slater's text, it suffers from a complete lack of attention to the Nashists' more diabolical side. It shares this with later discussions by Jakob Jakobsen, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, and others.

8
J. V. Martin, "Définition," *Internationale Situationniste* , no. 8 (January 1963): 26; appeared in Danish in *Situationistisk Revolution* , no. 3 (1970): 44.

9
Martin, "Définition" (emphasis ours). This conceptual trajectory seems all the more ironic given the anti-fascist origin of its very name. Born as Axel Jørgensen, "Jørgen Nash" was—according to biographer Lars Morell—originally a cover name taken up by a young, up-and-coming poet who was sent to Nazi Germany by the Danish resistance movement as a specialist worker in aviation. In 1941, "Nash" was caught by the Gestapo and detained in Berlin for two months. As such, Nashism is already a cruel détournement of an explicitly anti-Nazi pseudonym.

10
With the notion of "compact spectacle," we borrow the epistemological standpoint of Debordian diagnostics. For Debord, the society of the spectacle is conceived as a fetus whose evolutionary-cumulative stages morph from the bureaucracies of totalitarian states (concentrated spectacle) to the great commodity boom of the postwar Keynesian compromise (diffuse spectacle) and ultimately to the synthesis of a neoliberal, biopolitical totality (integrated spectacle). If, in other words, we think of Debord as a driver on the catastrophic highway of Western modernity, "our" contemporary moment seems to induce the feeling of living amid a universal traffic jam caused by a crash between a few unmanned monster trucks and a gang of street vendors.

11
In his memoir *The Mermaid Killer Crosses His Tracks* (*Havfruemorderen krydser sine spor*), Jørgen Nash publicly mocked and scorned the gender transition of his ex-spouse and former Situationist Peter Albert Lindell. Describing a meeting between the former couple in Malmö Kunsthal, Nash stresses how he first fell into a state of shock, then a fit of laughter, and lastly a furious state of mind where he desired "to murder this crazy person." Paradoxically, Nash chooses to impose clear limits on the life-form of his former partner, while at the same time celebrating the "limitlessness" of his own artistic and sexual freedom, which in the memoir is visible when Nash brags about having sex with minors and their mothers at his and Lindell's riding school.

12
Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Late Capitalist Fascism* (Polity Press, 2021), 132.

13
Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* , trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2005).

14
François Cusset, *La droitisation du monde* (Textuel, 2016); McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

15
J. V. Martin, "Antipolitical Activity," *Situationistisk Revolution*, no. 1 (1962): 26, 27. This text is translated into English (which we are using here) in *Cosmonauts of the Future* , ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Neblua and Autonomedia, 2015).

16
"L'operation contre-situationniste dans divers pays" (author anonymous), *Internationale Situationniste* , no. 8 (1963): 24. Translation borrowed from http://www.notbored.org/counter-situationist.html . Translator Kenn Knapp suggests that this text was written by Guy Debord.

17
"L'operation contre-situationniste," 26.

18
Martin, "Antipolitical Activity," 99–100.

19
Paraphrasing a later text by Thorsen, this strange Nashist nationalism or cultural organicism was of course "anti-nationalist," but with its libertarian individualism, it was mostly "anti-internationalist" in effect. See Jens Jørgen Thorsen, "Draft Manifesto of Antinational Situationism," in *Cosmonauts of the Future* .

20
For Asger Jorn's writings on the ethnic and organic characteristics of Scandinavia, see *The Natural Order* (1962) and *Things & Polis* (1964).

21
"Kampen om det situkratiske samhället: Et situationistiskt manifest," *Drakabygget – Tidsskrift för konst mot atombomber, påvar och politiker* , no. 2–3 (1962): 15.

22
"The Struggle of the Situcratic Society: A Situationist Manifesto," in *Cosmonauts of the Future*, 92.

The Swedish and English versions of the manifesto contain small differences.

23
Jørgen Nash, "Konstens Frihet," *Drakabygget* , no. 2–3 (1962).

24
This term used by Nash and Jorn might very well derive from the writings of the racist anthropologist Leo Frobenius, who also figures in Jorn's texts.

25
"L'operation contre-situationniste," 24.

26
Lars Morell, *Poesien breder sig: Jørgen Nash, Drakabygget & situationisterne* (Det kongelige bibliotek, 1981), 79.

27
Slater, "Divided We Stand."

28
Morell, *Poesien breder sig*, 85. Posing as journalists was a strategic camouflage often employed by Nashists to enter inaccessible sites, and was described by Nash as a method of the Fifth Column. This is also a general trick employed by Uwe Max Jensen and was used to get Ibi-Pippi into Museum Jorn in 2022.

29
Jens Jørgen Thorsen, *Wilhelm Freddie: Brændende blade* (Internationalt Forlag, 1982), unpaginated.

30
Madame Nielsen, "Er Kristian von Hornsleth og dermed 'provokunsten' virkelig død – eller bare ligegyldig?" *Dagbladet Information* , July 27, 2020 https://www.information.dk/kultur/anmeldelse/2020/07/kristian-von-hornsleth-dermed-provokunsten-virkelig-doed-bare-ligegyldig .

31
"L'operation contre-situationniste," 26. Emphasis in original.

32
For more on this "interdisciplinary" dimension within the context of propaganda, see Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019). On the notion of the "art industry" as complementary to the "culture industry," see Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2013), 162–68. With the word "absolute," we allude to Adorno's briefly stressed idea of art as an "absolute commodity" in order to encompass the peculiar economic exceptionality of art. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* , trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum 1997), 21; and Stewart Martin, "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity," *Radical Philosophy* , no. 146 (November–December 2007).

33
Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Den sidste avantgarde: Situationistisk Internationale hinsides kunst og cirkler* (Politisk Revy, 2004).

34
Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art* (Verso, 2017), 181.

35
See Søren Schauser, "Tænk om Rasmus Paludan var et stunt," *Berlingske Tidende,* May 6, 2019 https://www.berlingske.dk/aok/mediekommentar-taenk-om-rasmus-paludan-var-et-stunt .

36
As literary scholar Jørn Erslev Andersen has recently argued, Asger Jorn explored the notions of situology and triolectics to conceptualize an aesthetic-epistemic process that never synthesizes (as in dialectical movement), but rather manifests as an open situation, in what he termed a "transformative morphology of the unique." In contrast, the situology at play in neo-Nashist happenings is neither dialectical nor triolectical, but rather seems to follow a monolectic logic of subjugation and repulsion. This is a closed situation that is given in advance, an "isomorphology of the same." For an in-depth account of Jorn's situology, see Jørn Erslev Andersen, *At sætte i situation: Asger Jorns triolektik & situlogi* (Antipyrine, 2017).

37
For a report on Paludan's appeal to schoolchildren, see Peter Thomsen, "Stram Kurs-leder er blevet et Youtube-fænomen blandt skolebørn," *Berlingske Tidende* , September 19, 2018 https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/stram-kurs-leder-er-blevet-et-youtube-faenomen-blandt-skoleboern . Ultimately, Paludan's political project in Denmark collapsed when he got caught in an online "sex chat" with underage boys on Discord. This marked the complete transition of neo-Nashism from an intriguing "child monster" to full-on demonolatry—a point of transgression that Paludan only affirmed when, three days after the revelations, he sought to stifle what he called "homophobic rumors" by announcing his marriage to a younger woman.

38
Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century,* 77.

39
This is reported in a catalogue text from the exhibition "Situationister 1957–71 Drakabygget," held at the Skånska Konstmuseum in Lund, Sweden in 1971. The text can be read online at http://scansitu.antipool.org/7102.html .

40
In 2019, just a few months after the election, a survey showed that 28 percent of Danes agreed "strongly" or "somewhat" with this xenophobic statement continually expressed by Paludan: "Muslim immigrants should be sent out of the country." See Jens Reiermann and Torben K. Andersen, "Hver fjerde dansker: Muslimer skal ud af Danmark," *Mandag Morgen* , October 21, 2019 https://www.mm.dk/artikel/hver-fjerde-dansker-muslimer-skal-ud-af-danmark .

41
See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "On the Turn Towards Liberal State Racism in Denmark," *e-flux journal,* no. 22 (January 2011) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/22/67762/on-the-turn-towards-liberal-state-racism-in-denmark/ .

42
Ana Teixera Pinto, "Illiberal Arts," *Paletten,* November 4, 2020 https://paletten.net/artiklar/illiberal-arts .

43
See Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–39* (Duke University Press, 2007).

44
Lene Myong og Michael Nebeling, "Racismens vold er modstandens kontekst," *Eftertrykket* (originally published at peculiar.dk), April 22 2019 https://www.eftertrykket.dk/2019/04/22/7763/ ; Pinto, "Iliberal Arts."

45
Tellingly, the famous Swedish "hate speech" artist Dan Park made a symbol-laden election poster for Hard Line's Uwe Max Jensen that included the phrase "freedom of art."

46
On the relation between actionism and contemporary fascism, see Lütticken, "Who Makes the Nazis?"; and Lütticken, "The Power of the False," *Texte zur Kunst* , no. 105 (March 2017) https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/powers-false-web/ .

47
Quoted in Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "To Act in Culture While Being Against All Culture: The Situationists and The 'Destruction of the RSG-6,'" in *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing* , ed. M. B. Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Nebula and Autonomedia, 2011), 112.

48
Rasmussen, "To Act In Culture," 96.

49
At Galerie Exi , Michèle Bernstein installed a series of model tableaux with titles from revolutionary defeats renamed as victories, e.g., *Victoire de la Commune de Paris* , *Victoire des Républicains Espagnols* , and *Victoire de la Grande Jacquerie* .

Su Wei

Emotional Patterns in Art in Post-1949 China, Part I: Community of Feeling

On Labor Day 1957, at the start of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in China, the writer Shen Congwen (1902–88) looked out of the tenth-floor window of the Shanghai Mansion Hotel where he lived, toward the Waibaidu Bridge. He drew two sketches showing a bustling crowd on the bridge contrasting sharply with a lonely boat in the corner of the image. The caption reads:

> The tide is falling slowly.
> On the bridge walks a red flag brigade.
> The boat is still asleep, sleeping like a baby in the cradle, listening to the mother sing a lullaby.
> The higher the voice, the calmer the child, as the child knows their mother is by their side.

And:

> The boat is dreaming, floating amid the sea.
> It was a sea of red flags all along, a sea of singing, a sea of drums.
> (In the end, it does not wake), (as seen at six o'clock).[1]

The complex emotions demonstrated here are vividly explored in Shen's unfinished, posthumous essay "Abstract Lyricism."[2] Although Shen may have desired to join the bustling crowd in welcoming ideological transformation, he was unable to anchor his previous artistic career in the new revolutionary era. And Shen was among numerous Chinese artists who, after 1949, experienced a tumultuous transition between two eras.[3]

In any given period, and in any given place, the history of art is rooted in a dialectic between transformation and stasis. In the latter half of the twentieth century, "Revolution" (变) became mainstream, powerfully shaking the "stasis" of Chinese art and rewriting the rhythm of the times. Unlike the frustrated march toward progress during the May Fourth period of 1919, socialist visual art and literature thirty-plus years later produced an "art" dislocated from space and time. Participants in these post-1949 movements reappropriated cultural and pictorial resources from traditional art and the Republican Period; they translated modern experience from the West, from Japan, and elsewhere to the Chinese context; they adapted themselves to the political dictates of the new era and the ever-changing, ever-reincarnating requirements of utopianism.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, past, present, and future intersected in the world of Chinese art. Through this process, realism was established as the highest creative principle. It comprehensively and strictly delineated art production and discourse while also indirectly

Wu Dezu (1923–91), a sketch for the comic book Huangsong Mountain, 1948, 12.8 x 10 cm. Courtesy of Wu Xiaochuan.

contributing to the country's modernization process. With an integrated organizational structure and linguistic form, socialist modernization in China sought to unite the individual and the collective, all forms of production with the state, individual nature and universality, and the private and public realms—all through core ideologies of struggle and national progress.[4] This process transformed the discourses of progress, equality, human rights, and the value of the individual. It also placed all the local forces that were moving and sculpting this change—including art—into a dynamic dialectic of continuity and discontinuity.

Under socialism, the concepts and practice of realism continuously changed.[5] Contemporary research on visual art through the socialist period mostly focuses on the relationship between political regulation and artistic creation, defined in terms of domination and subordination. For example, while taking an artist's career as a starting point for mapping the artistic world might reflect the late-seventies concern with transitioning away from realism, doing so also precludes any interrogation into the dynamism of socialist-era art. On the one hand, the art-politics binary—or more precisely, the preference for "pure art"—has liberated people's desire to pursue artistic freedom of expression. On the other, progressive ideas on art have also relegated the period of socialist realism to the archive. In both cases, the impact of the socialist period is closely connected to our own era and to contemporary Chinese artists' and thinkers' cultural and psychological makeup.

1. Emotion as an Entry Point

In the past twenty years, art institutions across China have held many exhibitions and debates seeking to revisit and re-excavate art of the socialist period. This practice of re-historicization, most often driven by art-market forces, seeks to develop a local orientation as globalization faces increasing difficulties. Most institutions choose to revisit an artist's entire career rather than focus solely on their work between the 1950s and the 1970s, ensuring a sufficient sense of history and avoiding political risks. Doing this also allows for a relatively balanced, humane perspective on an artist. Regrettably though, many exhibitions remain colored by an underlying assumption that history is characterized by a teleology of progress, effectively reestablishing the myth of the artist. In the absence of a self-imposed requirement that the "capillaries" of history be scrutinized and excavated, the so-called "human," "lyrical," and "artistic" aspects of an artist's creative works are individually extracted and emphasized.[6] This approach also avoids embarrassment and awkwardness over the radicalism and painful, violent

Photographer unknown, 1977. Publisher: Hsinhua News Agency. Text on the back: "Peasants' fine-art creations in East China county. Tsao Hsiu-wen, a women commune member in Chinshan County near Shanghai, creating a painting in praise of rural barefoot doctors." Call number: BG B31/776 (IISH collection).

experiences of the period. Although recognition of the artist as a creative individual is important, refusing to investigate the multidimensional nature of relationships and cultural interactions between the system and the people is tantamount to failing to attend to the pulse of history. Such practices can only result in an alienated past becoming an imaginative resource decoupled from history and present alike.

Under the foundational guidelines of realism, socialist art practice was premised on highly unified organizational action. However, this premise did not eliminate heterogeneity in artistic creation and debate. In the new era highly unified collective actions tended to concentrate the struggle of multiple forces, the contention of multiple discourses, and the various experiments and strategies adopted by differing creative individuals. In excavating the diverse strata of dynamics, limitations, sensibilities, and symbolic vocabularies of art in this period, we can more deeply understand the following issues: What is the position of the autonomy of art relative to the state, public, and artistic tradition? At a discursive and institutional level, what is the process of negotiation between official limits of acceptance and the desire to make room for the creative impulse? And finally, what forms express the rare ability to transcend these limits?

We can use emotion as an entry point to discuss these questions of motivation, positionality, and appeal. In the 1920s and '30s, the artistic practice of relying on faith and ideology to resolve life's difficulties brought the perplexity, confusion, and difficulty of personal emotion into the theoretical framework of the new world. After this, Chinese artists gained motivation to move onward in life through meaningful collective action. Given the severe dilemmas China faced after 1949, how did the emotions of its people respond and compose themselves according to the urgencies of changing times? How did emotion participate in the process of molding a new political self-consciousness? Does emotion still have the potential to move towards the present, amid pulls of compulsion and illusion, ideas and truth?

The broad internal dimensions of realism in the art of the period are not only closely connected to the rationale of the post-1949 new Chinese regime, but also include a strong compulsion toward the confession of feelings. Therefore, in terms of actual conditions, the study of emotion in art should not be limited to Chinese modernism and to Chinese traditional ink painting, both of which were utterly repudiated during the 1950s–70s. Emotion and sentiment in both art forms are recognized as the natural expression of the creator's inner feelings and are not seen as the result of "making a conscious effort" (刻意为之) for the audience. In a broader sense, emotion in visual art is akin to what T. J. Clark identified as "lyric" in modern art and abstract expressionism: "the illusion in an art work of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own" and "those metaphors of agency, mastery and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject."[7] This form of emotional illusion was eliminated during the socialist period.

Conceptually speaking, the fundamental requirement for visual artists during the 1950s–70s was that they eliminate their own feelings and work to serve the public in a plain and easily comprehensible fashion. The logic of removing the individual is, on the one hand, a critique of bourgeois literature and art, forcing artists to break away from the fabrics of modernism and the Chinese artistic tradition. At the same time, however, this requirement also highlights the issue of sincerity in art. That is, it demands that artists also reform themselves in body and soul to meet the creative requirements of the new age, effectively reinscribing into the politics of art innate emotion as an underlying requirement. This internal contradiction in the emotional landscape of artwork highlights the problem of subjectivity at different historical moments: "The objectivity of realism thus somewhat paradoxically elevates the subject (as an independent platform of observation) while censoring those emotions and prejudices that we usually think of as an individual's subjectivity."[8] In actual creative and institutional practice, the elevation of the status of the subject is reflected in a high degree of tension between the individual and the system. Emotions are located between the connected individual and the projected collective and given the semblance of historicity.

Photographer unknown, 1976. Text on the back: "Colorful cultural life in China's countryside. Amateur fine-arts lovers of the Tachai Production Brigade in Shansi province painting a picture of Tachai people remaking nature." Courtesy of Hsinhua News Agency and IISH collection.

2. Starting from Uncertainty

In December 1962, the printmaker Wang Qi gave a report on the issue of form in art (艺术形式) to the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Central Academy of Drama. In autumn of 1963, he gave the same report at the invitation of the Jilin chapter of the Chinese Artists' Association in Changchun. The association printed his report as a pamphlet titled "On the Exploration of Art Forms" and distributed it to art workers, which incited a huge response across the Chinese art world. At the time, the political atmosphere was relatively relaxed, and Wang Qi used his report to discuss the unity of so-called "form" and "content," with the aim of reigniting the contention over form that had been put on hold after the brief implementation of the Hundred Flowers policy in 1956–57. In doing so, Wang Qi aimed to launch an internal debate on realist art in the socialist context.

On his way back to Beijing from Changchun, Wang Qi climbed Changbai Mountain for a visit and recorded this journey in his diary. In this reflection, Wang Qi discusses the theoretical ambitions of art, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign alike, but also briefly gives way to an intoxication with the beauty of nature:

> In the evening, as we were sweetly sleeping, suddenly someone woke up saying that there was a car passing by that could take us to the foot of Changbai Mountain. We hurriedly got dressed and climbed aboard. Under the hazy moonlight, I feasted on the vision of the forest at night, the stalwart and beautiful soaring red pines inspiring me to boundless reveries. There were many beautiful, stirring images brought forth in my mind. It was dawn by the time we arrived at the foot of Changbai Mountain, and we took rooms in a simple inn. The next day a few of us set out together and walked from the foot of the mountain to its peak. There was a meteorological observation post on top of the mountain at an altitude of 2500 meters, standing at one side of the Heavenly Lake. Looking out from the other side of the Heavenly Lake was the border with North Korea. It is said that there was a volcanic eruption in this place 150 years ago, and so the mountains around the Heavenly Lake are full of rocks of various shapes and colors, most dazzling in their appearance. Such spectacularly colorful natural scenery is included in my paintings; I leave nothing out. There are some three or five staff working at the post, and their working conditions are quite tough. Food and water must be supplied from the foot of the mountain. Nevertheless, they warmly welcomed us and treated us to lunch. We took a siesta on the mountain, and then slowly headed down. While walking on the meandering road near the foot of the mountain, we discovered the claw marks of a tiger in the soil still damp from earlier rain and it was apparent to us that the "Lord of the Mountain" had passed through this place. We tapped with wooden sticks to make noise as we quickened our pace down the mountain, till we found a military truck parked on the side of the road. Only then did we regain a feeling a safety.[9]

The "spectacularly colorful" natural scenery overwhelms the sight of North Korea—a fellow socialist country set paradoxically on the other side of a national border. The author enjoys a brief respite from politics at the top of the mountain, but seems to sober up again on the way down. The image of the tiger, and the sense of uncertainty it symbolizes, bring him back to reality.

As an artist and an art theorist, Wang Qi was an intellectual who enjoyed special treatment from the state. The emotions he reveals when surrounded by nature are naturally different from those expressed by intellectuals condemned as rightists or transferred to impoverished mountain regions for self-reform. The account he gives does not reveal sentiments of dissatisfaction with the present, yet his memory seems to break free from the confusion of political struggle and return to a corner of his own inner world.

Wang Qi's "On the Exploration of Art Forms" was criticized by He Rong, the editor of *Fine Arts* magazine, in a 1964 issue. Titled "What Class Viewpoint Is This? Questions on Wang Qi's 'On the Exploration of Art Forms,'" He Rong's article used the theory of class struggle to repudiate Wang Qi, labeling him an admirer of "Cezanne, Gaugin, and Matisse." Yet He Rong had published a series of three articles in *Fine Arts* in 1959 with the titles "Landscapes,

Propaganda photograph of Li Fenglan. Photographer unknown, 1974. The artist paints her mural Joyful Cotton Picking on a village wall. Originally published in China Reconstructs, January 1974.

Birds, and Blossoms," "Nature, So Beautiful: A Further Discussion on Landscape, Birds, and Flowers and Blossoms," and "The Peony Is Good, So Is the Lilac: Landscape, Birds, and Flowers and Blossoms, Part Three." As the lead editor of the *Fine Arts* magazine group, he used these three articles to question "subject determinism" in the field of Chinese painting, at a time when the Great Leap Forward was being widely criticized and ultraleftism was under attack from inside and outside the Party. An attempt was made to correct the creative method of the Great Leap Forward and the ultraleft style flooding the art world. However, in 1964 Mao severely criticized the Party department in charge of literature and art, and the Chinese art world began introducing corrective measures. He Rong thus had to take up his pen and join the cause of class struggle within the artistic world.

After 1949, the Chinese art scene was left in a complicated situation: it was operating under almost total political constraint, and its own production and circulation mechanisms were constructed in a comprehensively ideologized and systematized fashion. The art scene was attempting to integrate and reconstruct China's twentieth-century art history, revolving around the aesthetic discourses produced by historical moments such as 1919, 1937, 1942, and 1949, and subordinating them to the twin themes of revolution and post-1949 innovation. At the same time, socialist art, alongside the fields of literature, drama, and film, was expected to help construct a revolutionary national narrative, even as it displayed its own particular complexity in debates over the transformation of tradition and the critique of modernism. Such an art scene, composed of several generations of artists who had different training and creative backgrounds, was now expected to collectively navigate a highly organized political landscape. Artists were required to digest and translate their pre-1949 visual experience and ways of thinking in order to transform themselves into the socialist "new man" (新人).

The complexity of such a landscape meant that art history through the 1950s and '60s was characterized by great tension and uncertainty. Uncertainty triggers various emotional artistic expressions, which ultimately lead to a multidimensional, complex artistic practice. Yet the uncertain cultural position of the artist in the Chinese socialist context produced a disempowering bind in which artists could obtain neither recognition of the autonomy of art from explicit state regulations, nor a clear, solid institutional position from which to speak. Instead, they had to accept the comprehensive leadership and discipline of operating within a collective socialist practice, while at the same time remaining clearly aware that art must also be "avant-garde" and oriented toward the future, not merely a stable practice based on a given reality. In other words, uncertainty is related to the self-knowledge of the artist. This self-knowledge is formed dynamically in the present and amid history, and, because it is self-contradictory, is deeply implicated in emotions. It involves feelings about a particular reality and one's own situation within it.

The problem of uncertainty arises at a point of unevenness that cannot be fully hidden by state rationality and the collective power it mobilizes. Today, decades later, this shadow has not completely vanished. Persisting through changing times, it now perhaps inspires another form of belief in power. The emotional structure of the post-1949 period is characterized by a search for the possibility of accommodation and breathing space within the operations of the dominant cultural framework and its ideological tenets.

3. "Never Enough" and "Never Finished": The Constant Reincarnation of Emotion

As a painter who flew the flag of modernism in China, Wu Dayu (1903–88) had been active in the art scene of 1930s Shanghai, but struggled to find a place in the new order post-1949. Before Wu Dayu's reputation was restored by his student Wu Guangzhong (1919–2010) in the 1980s, his abstract works could not be accommodated within mainstream art and had completely vanished from public view. In the 1960s, Wu Dayu wrote the following reflection:

> Feeling is the air in which art lives. What I mean here is that if there is no feeling in a painting, it is like a fish taken out of water, and displayed as a specimen. The popular New Year Painting (年画) method used in those days suffocated the viewer in the format of the picture, leaving them unable to breathe. It not only

Spare-time artistic creation activities in People's Liberation Army company, photographer unknown, 1975. Publisher: Hsinhua News Agency Call number: BG A62/940 (IISH collection).

Example of the popular New Year Painting (年画) method, author unknown, 1900s.

> paralyzed the viewer's visual sense, but it would also kill the efficacy of the visual sense and the emotional response. Thus, even if the New Year Painting contained a lot of "content and material," it would never be treasured, could never be transposed to the side of the viewer … Our diplomatic rhetoric is almost all about laying out the facts of history, it is always righteous, it always makes us generous when wrong, it always makes us upright and strong, and it is unavoidable that it perhaps can only excite the audience at one place and in one time. This is because their sensory life is not full enough.[10]

Wu Dayu did not make a strict separation between sensory feeling (感觉) and emotion (情感). He presupposes here the richness of the creator's sensibilities (feelings) and holds that this "feeling for life" can be directly "transposed" onto the viewer. Emotion here means the vitality of life, and for Wu Dayu, the state is also a kind of anthropomorphic and emotional entity. He is dissatisfied with the dogma permeating political discourse and with rational statements, and hopes that the country might instead practice a kind of "flexible" emotionality, full of initiative.

Wu Dayu's passage helps us to imagine how artists, whether they were marginalized within the system at the time or not, confronted the entirely new relationships between the state and the individual in the post-1949 landscape. Putting aside some of the ridicule in his reflection, Wu Dayu associates the particular sensory transference that can be produced by art with an anthropomorphized form of the state. On one hand, this shows the state as having become the other to the individual. Wu Dayu anticipated that an emotionally "full" (圆活) state could also be the imagination that the individual projects onto the state, formed and shaped by the deep emotional recognition of each individual. Accumulated through the process of national liberation, such recognition is also a product of the utopian imagination of artists. However, if we look within art and literature circles of the period from this perspective, it is hard to explain the cognitive dissonance and personal tragedy that result from this recognition during times of political violence. There is a massive void between the ideals held by the individual and those of the political reality. Driven by large-scale political campaigns, individuals must not only reform their thinking, but also understand how to bridge such an enormous void to deal with constantly emerging political situations.

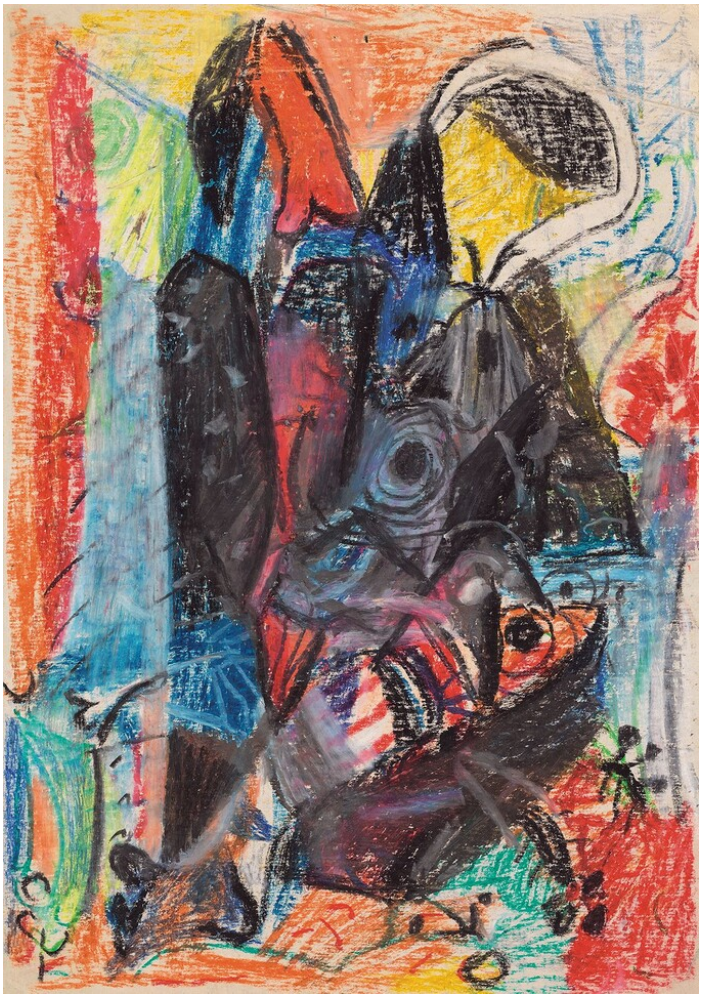
If we understand the post-1949 situation in this way, we can see how emotion operates in a more complex fashion than mere political or moral sloganeering. Specific to artistic practice, when emotion becomes a mobilizing force to connect upper and lower classes and bridge the distance between self and other, it gains a richly symbolic, self-projecting, lyrical, ironic, political, and imaginative character. These approaches were gradually revealed in the various forms of collective practice in the Chinese art world, the theoretical debates that were advanced in periods of political relaxation, and the negotiations and confrontations between the individual and the state. When realist art deals with both objective reality and expressive reality, what manner of struggle takes place?[11]

Controversy in socialist art often sketches the limits of the free space available to discuss these issues more broadly.

Wang Qi (1918–2016), Returning Late, 1955, color woodcut print, 15.5 × 23 cm. Courtesy of Wang Wei.

During the periods of political relaxation—1956–57 and 1961–62—some aspects of artistic debates were not fully realized at the level of artistic practice. In art circles, the 1956–57 period is defined by the implementation of the "Double Hundred" campaign and ends with the expansion of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. At the time, the art world was directly influenced by discussions on whether the socialist realist style exemplified by the Soviet Union could serve as a creative model for China, and debates on the diversification of art and literature in the new China. These debates turned on questions including the modernist heritage of twentieth-century China, the transformation of traditional Chinese painting, and ethnicization and methodologies in the writing of art history. They also brought to the surface a few basic issues in the artistic movements of the new China, including sketching from life, the use of models, the diversity of themes to be represented, the creation of model images, and the relationship between form and theme.

Against the backdrop of the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the great famine that had subsequently engulfed the whole country, the art world benefitted from an adjustment of state policies on literature and art from 1961–62. The proposals and later approval of the three speeches on artistic work given by then premier Zhou Enlai, alongside his "Eight Articles on Art and Literature," set the tone for the brief adjustment seen in these two years.[12] On the premise of the continuation and deepening of the Hundred Flowers spirit of 1956–57, the creative works of this period reflect the pursuit of sentiment, mood, and individual style. They express an admiration for the lyricism of realism, while also being creative products of the newly emerging fields of revolutionary historical art and the transformation of Chinese painting. Aside from this, during both periods the authorities put forward calls to unite intellectuals, including artists, and to encourage freedom and diversity in thought and art. It is also worth mentioning that many exhibitions toured China at this time, and not just from fellow socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and Mexico. Invited by the authorities as "progressive art," exhibitions from Britain, Denmark, Italy, and India briefly showed the existence of an open space for discussion and exchange.



Wu Dayu, Untitled 175, crayon on paper, 39.4 × 27.8 cm, c. 1950. Courtesy of Shixiang Space and Li Yuhan.

4. Two Periods of Political Relaxation

Within the Chinese art world, there are relatively few discussions of these two periods of political relaxation that incorporate the "politics" of available historical sources. The 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art is still used as the starting point for art-historical discussions on the evolution of art in the new China. However, the various controversies in fine art and literature circles of the 1950s, and their echoes and advances in the 1961–62 period, had unprecedented depth and breadth. Moreover, they covered a range of foundational issues, such as concept and form in art, tradition versus innovation, modernity versus contemporary reality, representation, and criticism. In other words, the depth and breadth of the discussions undertaken at the time echo the practice of art in the new era and reveal that art and art theory were no longer completely confined to the ambit of "art in the service of politics," the line established in 1942 at Yan'an.

Therefore, the 1956–57 and 1961–62 periods of political relaxation cannot be seen as merely linked responses to changes in the political situation. These two intervals established the framework, tone, and basic questions for the realist style that still reverberated through China's art world as late as the 1980s and '90s. The 1956–57 period was the first time the new China responded to the crisis of legitimacy in socialist art. The principle of socialist realism established in the early 1950s was severely challenged, while at the same time the institutionalization of art was strengthened and the radical collective demands of literature and art, strongly tinged by idealism, collided fiercely with the more critical, truthful school of realism focused on the whole of life. The 1961–62 period, in addition to reigniting the debate over the meta-problem of realist art initiated during the Hundred Flowers movement, also confronted the gradual rise of urban culture, the emergence of desire, private life, and consumption. This combined effect gave the art of this second period a strong tendency to portray the emotions of ordinary people and the details of everyday life.

In 1954, the vice chairman of the Artists Association, Cai Ruohong, published an article titled "Opening Up a Broad Path to Artistic Creation" in the inaugural issue of *Fine Arts* magazine. The article, intended as programmatic for the art world of the time, clearly asserts the core position of the image in artistic creation. Cai Ruohong uses an ontological approach to describe how artworks function through the "emotional response" triggered by the image, rather than through an effect prescribed by "reason." The context for this article was the period following the establishment of socialist realism as the highest principle for artistic and literary creation in the new China. At the time, literary and artistic circles were still experimenting with this method. The complete rejection of Hu Feng (胡风) had not yet begun, and the atmosphere of the art world was still relaxed. In the article, Cai Ruohong proposes that "passion" is the most essential feature of art and attempts to keep his discussion within the confines of art itself, to maintain a flexible distance between art and political principle. This article was once again mentioned during the implementation of the Hundred Flowers policies, reminding us of the resurgence of controversies on creative production during this period.[13]

However, the article was not only a return to the debates about the principles of artistic creation and the nature of art itself. It was also a return to the core issues of the status, role, method, and independence of art in the socialist era: Cai Ruohong's position on these issues allowed for more creative and critical practice, implicitly displaying a tendency towards re-enlightenment. Unlike the usual sense of "enlightenment," driven by reason, this re-enlightenment was driven primarily by emotions. The assertion of the "emotional" over the "rational" is not only a perspective on the essential character of art itself but is also a clear statement of the immanence and independence of artistic activity. "Emotion" is thus not so much a metaphorical return to zero. Rather, it is within the limited framework of socialism, through the effort of the

Zhang Anzhi (1911–90), Mountains in Hunan and Jiangxi Province, 1963, ink and color on paper, 28 × 53 cm. Courtesy of Zhang Chen.

bureaucrats responsible for cultural policy, artists, and art institutions, that art workers were able to achieve a limited recognition of the nature of art. This kind of emotional drive can allow artists to complete the transformation from art for "life" (人生) to art for the "people" (人民).

In the artistic tradition of Xu Beihong, the concept of "art for life" requires that individual creative activity be closely connected to public life. In the new institutional framework, however, art was put in service of the people—in the sense of political subjects—resulting in what can be called the complete functionalization of art, the comprehensive subordination of art to the purpose of serving the people. On the other hand, emotion became a space that art practitioners maintained for themselves, wherein they had a certain ability to relax and retreat as emotional production shifted between public and private spheres. Through their work, they were able to both directly draw upon the political and public nature of emotion, but also, to a certain extent—and only to a certain extent—to retain some private emotions and a measure of the heterogeneity that belongs to artists. Hence, the intuitions derived from universal life experience, which had been prioritized in art since the May Fourth Movement, were able to find a foothold in the new era.

5. Unrealized Directions for Realism

The controversy and free space that arose during the periods of political relaxation also opened up a few plausible directions for realism itself. Although these directions remained within the framework of socialist art and were not fully realized in artistic practice, they help us understand the driving force of emotion in individual life experience and creative practice, as well as in specific expressions of collective empathy. Unrealized in practice as they were, identifying these plausible directions for realism is no simple task. They are often found in the extremely complex space of art-political discourse, which itself struggled to enter the space of actual politics. Precisely akin to the great uncertainty of the first thirty years of PRC history from the 1950s to the 1970s, these potential artistic directions are diffuse, converging mainly at exceptional historical moments, when they briefly loosen the bond between state and individual or link collective emotional norms to individual emotional states that cannot be fully disciplined. We can roughly outline these directions for realism according to the following four levels:

1. Affinity and Solitude: The period after 1949 inspired the modern subject to rise to new heights once again. The cultural field, including fine arts, was fully institutionalized and the artist had to negotiate many new relationships between self and collective. How to communicate and integrate the artistic heritage of the 1912–49 Republican period—including the popular tradition of propaganda art

that had developed under Kuomintang rule during the War of Resistance against Japan—with the principles of socialist realism derived from the Soviet Union? Once the fog of war and revolution had temporarily cleared, how would the new era define the relationship between the sword and the pen? What were the boundaries between system and individuals? These questions tested artists and cultural workers.

From the perspective of the overall cultural ecology, a series of special events highlighted the twin threads of affinity and solitude. The "thaw literature" (解冻文学) that appeared in the mid-1950s, when the Soviet Union was moving away from the extreme left and "no-conflict theory" (无冲突论), provided a powerful set of references for literary and artistic movements during the Hundred Flowers period. The emergence of "manuscript" literature (手抄本文学), including underground novels such as *The Second Handshake* (第二次握手) during the late stages of the Cultural Revolution, displayed a search for freedom amidst solitude and a culture of taboo. Likewise, the rise of "scar art" (伤痕文学) in the late seventies demonstrated a tension between emotions of sorrow and hope, foreshadowing later reassessments of socialist-period artistic concepts. In the early eighties, Mang Ke (芒克), a poet of the Obscure Poetry School (朦胧诗派), and Ma Desheng, a painter of the Stars Group (星星画会), set themselves against the heaviness prevalent in the art world. Their poetry and painting collection *The Sunflower Turns to the Sun* (阳光中的向日葵) moved away from an overly emotional symbolic language, reflecting the opening of a dialogue between artistic creators of the 1980s and Western modernism.

2. Everyday Affective Experiences: Beyond labor and production, all of daily life—from trivial issues, leisure time, clothing, and decoration to advertising, children's literature, and physical exercise—was incorporated into a unified administrative and discursive narrative. However, daily life is not easy to define, nor to completely regulate. Perhaps even the revolution itself, when directed towards shaping the human spirit and the deepest levels of life, cannot be completely regulated by politics. In this sense, daily life and its emotions are not necessarily rebellious nor noncompliant, but inherent to the revolution and its narrative. When such emotions enter a pictorial scene through the objects in a still life or a landscape, they are not intended to convey a concrete reality, but rather an imagined one. They are not intended to deconstruct socialist art and its political connotations, but to identify and appeal to a higher level of reality. The fact that reality cannot be named constitutes a threat to a certainty of meaning, making necessary the creation of another certainty of meaning.

The experience of daily life is the basic criterion and spiritual basis for entering modernist art. In the castrated modernism of China's socialist era, the anxieties of modernism were explored mainly as a limited historical concept that had not been deeply experienced firsthand. Thus, the idea of daily life was confined to the collective meaning of revolution, and rarely set out to include the true feelings and perceptions of individuals. However, after the 1960s, many artists began to realize that the revolution is not only in the sweat of field and factory, that a Mayakovsky could also emerge from daily life. On the other hand, because the socialist experiment attempted to fill all corners of individual and collective experience, it would inevitably also stimulate a fear of the loss of meaning. This common cultural psychology is often suppressed, and in the brief periods of relaxation, radical utopian value production would arise once again to relieve this anxiety, alongside the rapid strengthening of the patriarchal cultural system and ubiquitous demands for totalitarian power.

3. The Centripetal Urge: The theme of the frontier occupies a unique position in China's socialist art and literary creation, providing an important footnote to the understanding of "self" and "other," "center" and "periphery." In artworks on the theme of the frontier, the dominance of revolution as a subject in socialist art is replaced by the image of the ethnic group and depictions of "ethnic feeling" (民族情感) in a setting characterized by political consciousness. Within a framework of unified political subjectivity, the emotional recognition between different ethnic groups (民族) of China drives the "people" to transcend ethnic differences. Political consciousness is linked to emotion, and emotion thus becomes the bond that maintains all ethnic groups within the same political community.

Xu Beihong and the artists around him paid much attention to the expression of national emotion through art even during the National Central University (国立中央大学) period . The artists sent to the northwestern and southwestern borders of China in the 1930s and '40s are often mentioned in today's art history. Artists such as Dong Xiwen (1914–73), Wu Zuoren (1908–77), Ye Qianyu (1907–95), Fu Baoshi (1904–65), and Sun Zongwei (1912–79) were also important creators of frontier art in the post-1949 period. The difference was that, by this time, the frontier had already evolved into a field that spanned both politics and art, a field within which it was very difficult to depart from the will of the state and convey a true image of ethnic diversity. Tibetan-themed paintings were limited to the topics of serf liberation and the Qinghai-Tibet railway. In frontier art such as Hang Zhou's depictions of festive and lively ethnic scenes, Ye Qianyu's sparse yet vivid portraits of ethnic figures, or the foreign voices that echo through prints of the "Great Northern Wilderness" (北大荒), there is a clash between the exoticization of others and the portrayal of a national ethnic community. National art has always gained meaning from being constantly refashioned, and the suppressed modernist aesthetic impulse of socialist art seems to find a foothold here; the portrayal of daily ethnic life is completely legitimated, while the voice of revolution

continued through drastic reforms to ethnic governance.

4. "The composition of distance": For Western modernism, emotion is understood more in terms of an unlimited experience of life. When this unlimited experience seeks the depths of the self, however, it inevitably encounters doubt concerning the truth of the self. Here, irony appears as an essential dimension of art. In any quest for the so-called truth of the individual self in post-1949 China, political mechanisms were inescapable. The suppression of any unlimited examination of the relationship between self and world meant that "I" (我) was merely a gear in the radical political order. Irony then becomes a tool to measure the relationship between the system and "I" (我), or to identify the limits to the self within that system.

As a theme, the position of "irony" (讽刺) within art of the socialist period is obvious. Commentators at the time used the "ruthlessness" (无情) of irony to set off the "sentiment" (有情) entrusted to literary and art workers, and—not straightforwardly—to fight for a space for freedom of expression. Only a few strange works from that era remain, which include the images of educated youth in Zhao Wenliang's work, the rare combinations of sensibility and attitude found in the mid- to late-1970s photography of Shi Zhimin, or the unclassifiable works that flowed from Wu Dayu's brush. Displaying a kind of misplaced ironic posture, works of this period not only reflect a degradation in realism's critical modality (or its rare appearances in periods of political relaxation), but also allude to a broader decline in artistic creation during this period.

The unfinished nature of these aspects listed above and their lack of realization in practice does not mean that they are markers of an alternative narrative; rather, they act as proof of the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity in the structures of socialist art. They are internal to the structure of socialist art, but nevertheless, they show a limited ability to transcend. Combing through these threads is not so much about a search for the historical significance of post-1949 art, but rather a search for understanding the unified connotations of socialist art and literature through the combined efforts of narration and imagination.

Continued at "Emotional Patterns in Art in Post-1949 China, Part II: Internality and Transcendence" in issue 131.

X

This article was written in Chinese, translated by Hannah Theaker, and is published here with abridgements. The original article is based on the exhibition Community of Feeling: Emotional Patterns in Art in Post-1949 China (Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum, 2019), curated by the author, and will be included in the forthcoming eponymous catalogue to be published by Zhejiang Photographic Press in Hangzhou, China.

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1
“江潮在下落，慢慢的。桥上走着红旗队伍。艚艚船还在睡着，和小婴孩睡在摇篮中，听着母亲唱摇篮曲一样，声音越高越安静，因为知道妈妈在身边。” And:“艚艚船在作梦，在大海中飘动。原来是红旗的海，歌声的海，锣鼓的海。（总而言之不醒），（六点钟所见）。”

2
The first draft of “Abstract Lyricism” was found among the materials returned to Shen’s family several years after they were censored during the Cultural Revolution, and was probably written between July and August 1961.

3
See David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

4
See Hong Zicheng, *Contemporary Literary History of China* (Beijing University Press, 1999).

5
The question of the transformation of the concept of “realism” from the 1950s to the 1970s is complicated. There has never been a unified definition of realism among historians or those with personal experience of the period. Caught between the frameworks of “socialist realism,” “the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” “authenticity,” “eulogy versus exposure,” and “critical realism,” realism was forever locked in a binary debate on the relationship between politics and art, content and form, with the debate itself mediated by each cycle of political relaxation and retrenchment. In the early 1950s, “socialist realism” as introduced by the Soviet Union became the dominant creative principle in art circles in China. During the Hundred Flowers movement, some critics suggested that the concept be replaced by other terms, such as “realism in the socialist period.” At the second general meeting of the China Artist’s Association in 1960, it was decided that the following phrase should be deleted from the association’s original charter: “should adopt socialist realism and the critical method.” At the time, the “two combination” (两结合) method was recognized as the best creative method. In the late 1970s, there was significant discussion on the redefinition, remodeling, or even the rejection of “realism.” Collective consciousness and the new trend of the times were the natural carriers of these debates. Instead of “realism,” this essay uses the phrase “socialist art,” but neither of these terms can capture the full connotations and ramifications of the concept.

6
See Wang Fansen, *The “Capillary” Functions of Power: Scholarship, Thought and Mentality in the Qing Dynasty* (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2015).

7
T. J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” *October*, no. 69 (1994): 48.

8
Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (University of California Press, 1990), 12.

9
Wang Qi, *Complete Works of Wang Qi* , vol. 6 (Hunan Art Press, 2019), 254–55.

10
Shixiang Space, Beijing, 2020.

11
For a discussion of objective reality and expressive reality as proposed by scholar Huang Zongzhi, see Wang Hui, *Depoliticized Politics: The End of the Short 20th Century and the 1990s* (Shenghuo/du shu/xin zhi, Sanlian shudian, 2008).

12
The three speeches were, respectively: Zhou’s 1959 lecture to the Zhongnanhai Hall of the Purple Light Symposium, titled “Literature and Art Should Learn to Walk on Two Legs”; a 1960 speech to the All-China Art and Literature Work Forum and the All-China Feature Film Creation Conference held at the Beijing Xinqiao Hotel; and a lecture titled “On Intellectuals” delivered to the 1962 Theatre Symposium held in Guangzhou.

13
See Ma Xianghui, “Emotion, Reason and the Other in Art,” *Fine Arts* , no. 11 (1956).

Genaro Amaro Altamirano

Where Will Our Food Come From?

At the end of the nineteenth century, business owner and rancher Iñigo Noriega Laso ordered Lake Chalco, a ten-thousand-hectare lake in the Valley of Mexico, to be drained. In the Chalco Valley, the lake was part of the Basin of Mexico lake system, an area home to many Mesoamerican settlements dependent on the waterways. The process of draining the lake that Laso began took until the mid-twentieth century to be completed, at which point the land was converted for agricultural use.

The Chalco Valley area became known for its dairy farming and the exceptional quality of its corn, but this changed in the 1970s when the increasing salinity of the soil made agricultural activity unprofitable. At this point the land began to be subdivided and sold to builders for housing purposes. The people who moved to the area in the 1980s came primarily from Mexico City and Nezahualcóyotl City, and they settled near the lower slopes of the Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl volcanoes, just southeast of Mexico City. I was part of this influx of people who had been expelled from the big cities and forced to live in the outskirts. Inhabitants from the neighboring states of Oaxaca, Puebla, Morelos, and Tlaxcala were also arriving. Yet it was not until 1994 that the Valle de Chalco settlement finally acquired the status of a municipality.

Those of us who came from Mexico City or Nezahualcóyotl were completely unaware of ways to obtain food from the land. So it was a pleasant surprise to be connected with agricultural practices through the *ejidatarios* (people who hold shares in common lands), who had for a long time dedicated themselves to working the fields in the region. The *ejidatarios* we met came from the *ejido*—common land—of San Miguel Xico in the Chalco Valley.

By the 1980s a group of neighbors had begun promoting the creation of a Xico community museum. These citizens were looking to participate in the cultural dynamics of the town and its agricultural practices. The town welcomed a proposal brought by Don Onésimo Ventura Martínez, an *ejidatario* from Xico, seeking to communally farm the land he owned in a way that preserved traditional agricultural techniques. He wanted to develop a communal sense of identity tied to the land, to create a sense of recognition with the soil that provides us with food, to learn to value the food we eat, and to prepare us to defend our land, water, and life.

This is how the sustainable agricultural project of the Valle de Xico Community Museum began to emerge, a project that I have participated in and that has continued until today. According to Onésimo, difficult times were coming not only on a national level, but on the international stage as well. Human activity was changing the environment. The human species' capacity for survival was being put at risk, and it was important to preserve the agricultural knowledge produced over time by the generations that preceded us. It was also important to preserve the

New Lake Chalco, Mexico, 2010. The southwest face of the Guadalupe (or Borrego) Volcano and a part of the La Caldera Volcano, both belonging to the Sierra de Santa Catarina, are visible. The photo was taken aboard a Collective Taxi that travels from Chalco to Tlahuac, on a visit to that region between the State of Mexico and the Federal District. License: CC BY-SA 1.0.

worldview that places human beings on par with nature in order to successfully face threats to all of humanity, including famine and lack of water. Onésimo believed that, when a future social crisis came to pass, people would have to make use of traditional knowledge in order to produce food in any available space: vacant lots, terraces, patios, fields. But when that time came, it was entirely possible that people would have already forgotten how to work and relate to the land.

We took on the task of sowing Onésimo's land. We included the children in this family activity so that they might gain an education from an early age based on a respect for nature. Under Onésimo's direction, we plowed the land, planted corn, beans, and squash, and left a separate tract of land for planting radishes. We eagerly awaited the arrival of the rain, and in the meantime we weeded the furrows. Our children welcomed the rain and the sprouting plants with much happiness and rejoicing. We took special care to explain to them the processes that were taking place. They could barely stand it when a natural phenomenon like a hailstorm arrived. They wanted to climb up the slopes and cover the crops to protect them. The most significant lesson we learned was how interested the children were in the various stages of the agricultural cycle.

When harvest time came, the task at hand quickly became a full-on party: with their little hands, the children were the first into the fields to pick the radishes from the ground, to pluck the squash blossoms, carrying them in large bouquets, to snip the tender green and black beans. But best of all was when it came time to harvest the tender ears of corn, to gather a dozen or so to cook and enjoy in the warmth of family. That was the most delicious corn I had ever tasted; there was a sweetness to it that didn't

This is Nezahualcoyotl, one of the most densely populated parts of Mexico city, and also where the author comes from.

require a single other ingredient for it to be savored, and yet the addition of chiles, lemon, and mayonnaise made it exquisite. As a group, we gathered all the ears of corn together and hiked up the hillside with the necessary cooking implements in a large saucepan, and we ate up every last ear we prepared. For this activity, guests were permitted, allowing us to put even more people in touch with nature so that they could reflect on how food is produced and how deep a commitment we have to care for the earth.

A unique occurrence came about on the slopes of the Cerro del Xico hill just a few seasons ago, when there was a plague of *chapulines*. *Chapulines* are like locusts, only smaller. I don't know whether their arrival was due to the drastic changes taking place in the area, resulting in the loss of agricultural land as it was gradually taken over by residential developments, or whether it was because ecological changes are affecting the flight patterns of migratory birds like the cattle heron. The heron are the main predators of these insects, and they are now appearing in ever dwindling numbers, perhaps allowing the *chapulines* to proliferate.

It seemed as though this plague of insects could prove fatal to corn production. But the situation took an unexpectedly favorable turn. The diet of some communities in the state of Oaxaca includes *chapulines*, which they prepare with salt, lemon, and chiles and use as a side to various dishes. In Xico, the trend of climbing up the slopes of the hill to hunt *chapulines* for food didn't take long to spread. A new protein was added to many peoples' diet, and what first appeared as a calamity ultimately resulted in a new source of food. To this day, foods incorporating insects remain common.

Land-Grabbing Attempts by Mining and Real Estate Companies

In 2004, the real estate company Casas ARA, supported by the government of the State of Mexico, came in to lay the first stone of a development on Del Marqués Hill. Thus began the construction of a 3,529-unit residential project, the Casas ARA Housing Unit. The hill is part of a volcano, and the area held arable land as well as an archaeological site. The president of the *ejido* commission at the time decided to sell the common land to the developers. My colleagues and I at the Valle de Xico Community Museum tried to prevent this construction, but we lacked certain technical information on the importance of the remains buried there that would allow us to stop it.

We received an invitation from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) to participate in an archeological rescue project in order to determine the important sites and how best to preserve them. We agreed, in the hopes of acquiring the technical knowledge we were lacking in order to put together a defense of the hill. But at the end of these efforts, which were carried out

Vendors selling chapulines in the Oaxaca Market, Mexico, 2004. License: CC BY-SA 2.5.

between 2004 and 2006, INAH somehow determined that there were no historically relevant locations, and the land was handed over to the construction company. We lost this area as both a site of heritage and a zone of agricultural production. Furthermore, the volcanic hill was not suitable for housing, and soon, land beneath the houses began to erode and sinkholes emerged.

The region came under threat again ten years later. On July 26, 2014, San Miguel Xico's *ejido* commissioner convened the second General Assembly of Ejidatarios. The purpose was to consider a proposal that would allow for the exploitation of common use lands by Minerales de México, a mining company that aimed to extract various materials. If adopted, this proposal risked destroying the Xico Volcano and erasing its historical and natural importance, disowning the cultural heritage of Valle de Chalco, which today is one of the last remaining spaces for agricultural activities in the area.

Fortunately, at that time the members of the community museum were in constant contact with the surrounding towns, with the municipality's social and educational organizations, and with the Casas ARA. We also held an ongoing dialogue with the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UNAM) in Mexico City regarding an exhibition of photography and sculptures titled "The Return of a Lake" by the Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves (first commissioned by Documenta in 2012). The museum planned to include a collection of archaeological objects on loan from the Xico Community Museum, a conversation with the artist, and five roundtables where the ecological and environmental challenges facing the Chalco-Amecameca region would be discussed. We visited surrounding towns, seeking out members of local civic groups and social organizations from Valle de Chalco and inviting them to participate as speakers at these roundtable discussions. At the same time, meetings were being held with residents of the Casas ARA about the problem of subsidence—sinkholes opening up underneath the streets and foundations of their housing units. They were ready and willing to participate in these conversations.

We appointed a Committee to Promote the Defense of the Xico Volcano, which would then represent the citizens in their struggle. Among the first agreements that the committee reached was to prepare statements denouncing the situation and send them to the corresponding government institutions so they might meet our demands. We sent official letters to the Municipal Presidency of Valle de Chalco, to the Coordinating Unit for Social Participation and Transparency of the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), to the Secretary of the Environment and Material Resources of the State of Mexico, to the National Water Commission (CONAGUA), to delegates of the State of Mexico, to the Federal Attorney for the Protection of the Environment (PROFEPA), and to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), among many others.

Similarly, the *ejidatarios* of San Miguel Xico were carrying out an information campaign explaining to government institutions and officials the importance of conserving the volcanic slopes. They explained their vital importance as

Genaro Amaro and Yoali Yescas planting corn in 2012. Courtesy of Archive of Museo Xico.

an area of agricultural production, as well as the more wide-ranging need to care for the planet in order to be able to feed the world. In the end we managed to get Minerales de México's exploitative proposal rejected by the Plenary Assembly of the Ejidatarios. The government agencies told us that no requests had been received for the exploitation of said land, and therefore there were no permits being issued that would affect the area around the Xico Volcano. By late October of 2014, it was evident that efforts to exploit the Xico Volcano had been shut down. We had managed to preserve the historical, cultural, and natural heritage of our Valle de Chalco. This is how a community, accompanied by its museum, puts up a fight in defense of water, life, and land.

Translated from the Spanish by Ezra E. Fitz

Genaro Amaro Altamirano was born on September 19, 1956 in Mexico City. In November 1990 he moved to San Miguel Xico in the then-municipality of Chalco. With a group of neighbors, he created the Valle de Xico Community Museum, which opened on June 24, 1996. He has been the municipal chronicler of Chalco Valley Solidarity and the Coordinator of the Valle de Xico Community Museum. He has also held conferences in the area and neighboring regions, as well as in countries including France, Germany, the UK, and Spain. He is currently Coordinator of the Community Museum.

X

Carolina Caycedo

La Siembra – The Sowing

La siembra, or "the sowing," is an expression used by communities in Latin America when one of their members, leaders, or elders is killed for their activism in defense of territory, water, or life. They refer to the violent act of killing as the sowing, in order to turn around their loss and understand it through the abundance of the legacy it leaves. The murder of an activist sows a legacy, because the person who is buried—planted, in a manner of speaking—becomes a seed for the ongoing political and organizational processes of the community. The person who is sown is part of a resistance that takes place on all levels of life, including on the level of language. The appropriation of language in ways such as this is a vital part of the perpetuation of life, a means of cultural survival, especially within Indigenous contexts where local languages are endangered. This conversion of meaning through language requires political and poetic sophistication, as well as richness of spirit. Use of this word overcomes the terror imposed upon the community and directs the death of a beloved leader toward a process of collective strengthening and healing.

One could say that the sowing creates coherence, a union between thinking and doing. Different Colombian Indigenous groups, such as the Nasa, call this *caminar la palabra*, or "walking the word," where each step of the resistance represents an action that defines an idea. Walking the word is a concept-practice with a long history, and is one of the fundamental ways of framing community organization among the Colombian *mingas*, or activist mobilizations.[1] The Public Program of UNAM's Third Biennial of Arts and Design (2022) defines walking the word as "a doing-thinking that involves knowledge of and connections with nature, as well as constant negotiations between all those involved when it comes to the needs of the community, from its daily life to social and political problems."[2]

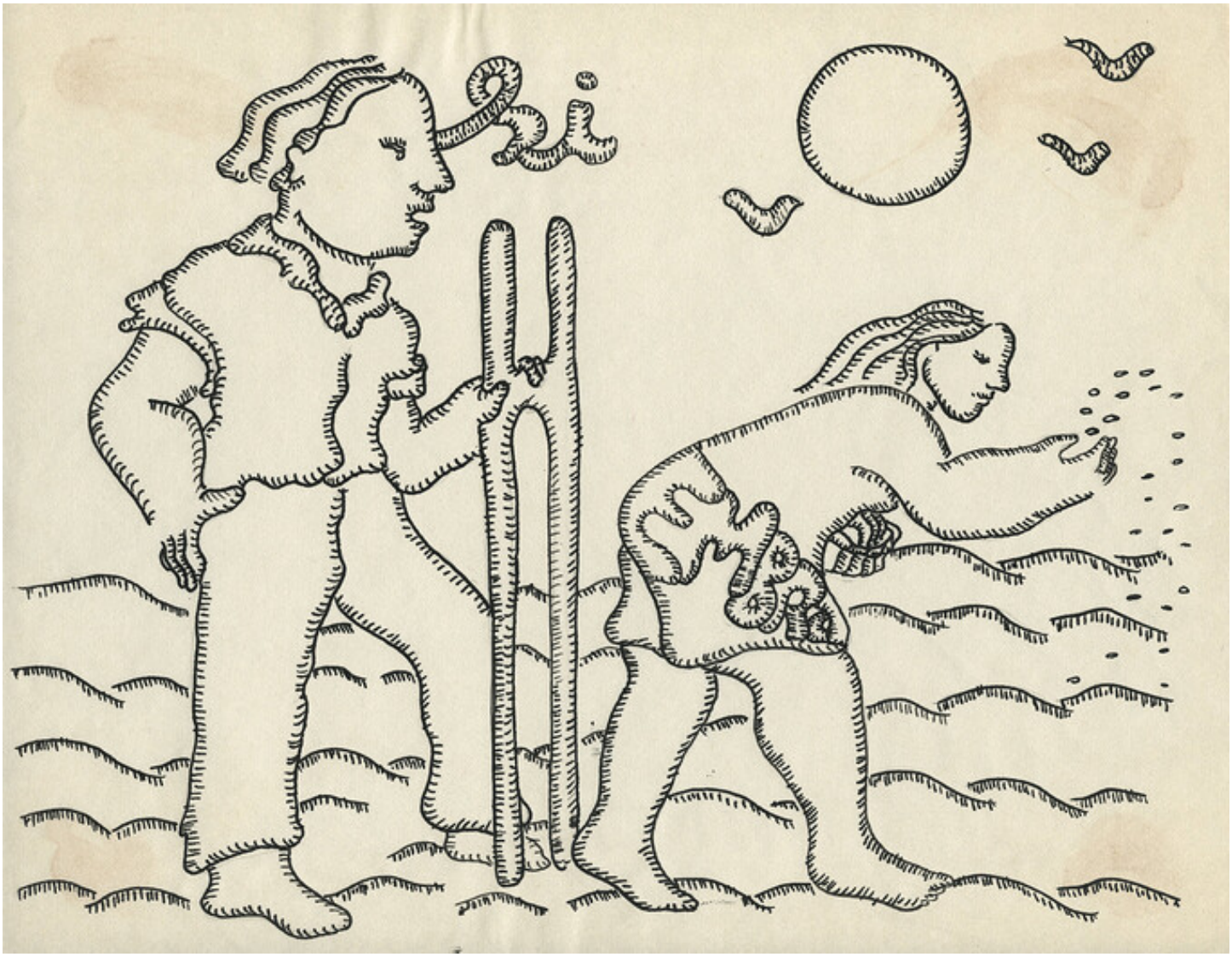
The Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña includes the concept of the sowing in her series of "PALABRARmas," a term that combines the Spanish words for "word" (*palabra*), "till" (*labrar*), "weapon" (*arma*), and "more" (*más*).[3] Vicuña's PALABRARmas pieces are monochromatic drawings on paper that include anagrams, as well as colorful appliqué banners and wearable paper collages. She has also made a series of performances and a film involving dancing that reflects the wordplay of "PALABRARmas." Vicuña coined this portmanteau to conjure the power of words through their poetic and subversive potential. In this series, words operate as concrete poems, images in and of themselves, political slogans, or calls to action. According to the PALABRARmas (1984) entry in the Chilean Memory section of the National Library of Chile, "Vicuña explains that working with words is like working the land, a 'working' plus a 'thinking.' The work arms the speaker with the vision of the words and the words become weapons, perhaps the only acceptable ones."

Eudicot navy bean, Phaseolus vulgaris, germination from seed to seedling, showing roots, cotyledons, and first true leaves. Photo: B. Domangue. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

Framing sowing as resistance reflects the importance of the knowledge and the work of tilling and harvesting the land to produce one's own food. It also suggests that the caring practices required for providing healthy nutrition are correlated with those of seed ownership, the conservation of common goods, and collective work. Common goods not only take the form of rivers, forests, animals, minerals, and crops, but also the knowledge and agriculture tools that have been inherited and accumulated across generations and which serve as underpinnings for political autonomy, food sovereignty, and environmental balance. The cycles of growing and knowledge transmission are known as agroecology.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), agroecology is a scientific discipline that studies how the different components of an agricultural ecosystem interact. Furthermore, agroecology includes a set of practices aiming to create viable agricultural systems that can optimize and stabilize production without harming the environment. It is also a social movement that proposes multifunctional roles for agriculture, promotes social justice, nurtures identity and culture, and strengthens the economic viability of rural areas.[4] When it comes to the sowing, the act of appropriating the death (violent or otherwise) of a community member in this way could be called part of an agroecological practice on both a political and literal level, because the final resting place of this person is under the earth. This drives home the concept of death as a space for cultivation which provides the grounds for regeneration. It is also an exercise in historical memory where renaming death becomes a first step towards breaking the cycle of violence.

Unfortunately, and despite the resilience and political imagination of the communities that care for the common good, the number of murders of those defending nature increases every year, and Latin America is the most dangerous place in the world for environmentalists. It is no coincidence that Latin America holds 20 percent of global oil and gas reserves, as well as much of the world's mining



Cecilia Vicuña, Siembra: decirle sí a la hembra (Sowing Is Yes To Female), from the series "AMAzone Palabrarmas," 1978. Courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.

wealth, including minerals used in energy transmission like lithium and cobalt. It also has large bodies of water in the form of mighty rivers, swamps, wetlands, and aquifers. According to Global Witness, more than half of the 227 murders committed against environmental leaders in 2020 took place in just three countries: Colombia, Mexico, and the Philippines. A third of the total global crimes were committed against Indigenous people and those of African descent, and nearly half were against people dedicated to working the land. As if that were not enough, Global Witness affirms that "these lethal attacks are taking place in the context of a wider range of threats against defenders including intimidation, surveillance, sexual violence, and criminalization. Our figures are almost certainly an underestimate, with many attacks against defenders going unreported."[5]

Through my art practice, I have been fortunate to connect with and learn from rural and Indigenous communities in different regions of the Americas, primarily those resisting the damming, privatization, and poisoning of their waters. I have witnessed harassment and dispossession as well as resistance, and I have come to realize how the extractive economy operates violently against both nature and the bodies of community members. Damming, channeling, diverting, or otherwise transferring a river not only interrupts the flow of water and the reproductive cycles that depend on it, but also mutilates the connection that the river has with other bodies of water as well as the relationship the community has with that river and the other communities it connects with through those same currents. This is essentially a privatization of a common good that threatens the sovereign and dignified life of peoples as well as the right to clean water, which is indispensable for health—for life itself.

This is why it is so important to understand that violence against nature goes hand in hand with violence against

View of Acueducto Independencia in Sonora, Mexico. Image:→.

environmentalist communities. In its report titled "The Last Line of Defense" (2021), Global Witness provides the statistics on murders of environmentalists as one more climate metric to go along with more commonly recognized data like the extinction of species, the melting of polar ice caps, forest fires, and rising ocean temperatures, because the truths about violence against environmental activists mirror what we know about the climate crisis: the impact it has is unequal, big business is responsible, and governments do nothing to prevent it.[6] Governments and corporations need to change their colonial and extractive practices, as the Indigenous activist Vanda Witoto invites us to do in a post on her Instagram feed:

> The world looks at the Amazon via satellite, it looks at the Amazon from above, and it only sees the greenery, the beauty of the rivers. It doesn't see the people who live here. To protect trees and rivers, you need to take care of the people who protect trees and rivers. Nobody is taking care of them. We need to reverse our focus, because the lives of these people are more important; they are the ones who keep the forest standing and they are the ones who protect the rivers, beginning with this way of life, with this respect for nature … We understand that we are a part, we are her.[7]

I have been fortunate enough to cultivate and spread the word together with defenders and caretakers of water in many special places in the Americas, from the peat bogs in the Selk'nam lands of Karukinka in Tierra del Fuego, to the Somi Sek village in Texas, to the mouth of the Elwha River in Klallam tribal territory on the Olympic Peninsula of the Pacific Northwest. During this process, I have learned one particular lesson— *namakasia*—which stirs in me an immense amount of courage, in both senses of the word:

" *cour*," from the Latin word for heart, as well as the second part of the word, "rage." " *Namakasia*" means both "ever strong" as well as "ever forward" in the Yaqui language. It is a tribal cry of encouragement, a collective call to never give up. *Namakasia* is both firm and tender, a call to transform pain into the dignified rage that mobilizes us.

Carolina Caycedo, La Siembra (The Sowing), view of tree planting, Union Settlement, New York, 2022. Photo: Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics.

The person who transmitted this knowledge to me, Tomás Rojo Valencia, was sown in Sonora, Mexico, in June of 2021. His sowing caused a brutal pain in the community. I met Tomás in 2014 when I invited him to lead a workshop in Mexico City that would make connections between the struggles over water in Mexico and Colombia. As a spokesman and leader of the Yaqui tribe, Tomás was opposed to the Independencia Aqueduct, a public infrastructure project endorsed by the regional government of Sonora and by the Mexican state and which—without the prior consent of the affected communities—transfers water from the Yaqui River to the city of Hermosillo to meet the demands of private industries including bottlers, brewers, and aluminum foundries, among many others.[8] The aqueduct reduces the flow of water to such a degree that, in passing through the eight traditional Yaqui towns, the river runs dry at the mouth, resulting in a shortage of water for both domestic consumption and irrigating crops. Tomás worked hand in hand with the Citizen Movement for the Defense of Water, made up of Yaqui farmers from the town of Vícam, to demand that the government respect the rights stipulated in a 1940 resolution allowing the Yaqui "to have, each agricultural year, up to half of the flow retained by the La Angostura dam, for the purposes of irrigating their own lands."[9]

Tomás understood that the transfer of water violated the rights of the Yaqui tribe, while also endangering the biocultural diversity of the river basin. He fought for the sovereignty of his people, for his river, for his ancestral plants and animals, for his sacred mountains, for the Sonoran Desert. His pacifist tactics, such as placing blockades and tolls on Mexican Federal Highway 15, which cuts through native Yaqui territory, resulted in an

endless litany of threats. Tomás conveyed *namakasia* through his gaze and his steadfast, embodied determination to work alongside the tribal people. He contributed to the entire tribe's sense of resilience by calling for collective action in the face of adversity, assembling it into a legitimate, legal, and nonviolent defense of their common interests and fundamental rights. Like the sowing, *namakasia* is an expression of linguistic and cultural resistance, of a self-affirmative, alternative, and peaceful nature, one in which conflict resolution is carried out according to a communal, tribal practice and worldview.[10]

If people control their own food, they can control their future. And in order to control food, communities need guaranteed access to clean and living waters. So my invitation is this: to accompany this verbal resistance, to walk and cultivate the word, to work as a collective, interweaving words and roots to imagine and build a world where many worlds are possible, a pluriverse, together with the people who have been sown and those currently in the fight. Ever strong and ever forward, *namakasia*!

X

Translated from the Spanish by Ezra E. Fitz.

Carolina Caycedo is a visual artist who contributes to the construction of environmental historical memory as a fundamental element in the non-repetition of violence. She is currently a nominee for the Artes Mundi 10 prize.

1
" *Minga*" comes from the Quechua word " *minka*," which alludes, in this language native to the Peruvian Andes, to an old tradition of collective work for the benefit of society as a whole and the quality of life within it. In the Colombian context, marches, protests, and mobilizations seeking the vindication of rights are known as " *mingas*."

2
See https://bienal.unam.mx/caminar_la_palabra/#:~:text=Caminar%20la%20palabra%20es%20entre,o%20de%20lo%20no%20dicho .

3
Vicuña spells the Spanish word " *siembra* " as "*Si(h)embra*." The reason, as she herself explains, is that "' *siembra*' means 'please plant.' But if you open it up, it means ' *sí, hembra*.' It is saying, 'yes, woman.' So to plant is to say yes to the feminine, to the life force of this earth."

4
See https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/en/ .

5
See https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/ .

6
See https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/ .

7
See https://www.instagram.com/reel/CcoFJj0J12V/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link .

8
These alliances between public and private powers that openly flout law, science, and ethics in order to make water into a commodity are known as "hycrocracies."

9
"22 October. Resolution definitively and specifically titling the location of the land restored to the Yaqui tribe in the state of Sonora, Mexico," *Official Journal of the Federation* (Mexico), 1940.

10
Enrique Francisco Pasillas Pineda, "Námakasia o firmeza: Hacer las paces desde la experiencia de la tribu Yaqui" (Namakasia or firmness: Making peace from the experience of the Yaqui tribe) (PhD diss., University of Granada, 2018) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329727213_Namakasia_o_firmeza_Hacer_las_paces_desde_la_experiencia_de_la_tribu_Yaqui .