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Editorial

The conspicuous presence of human growth hormone and ill-fitting suits worn by tech-billionaire CEOs in the front row of Donald J. Trump's presidential inauguration last month speaks volumes about the deep ties between the disruptive ideology of the tech sector and far-right movements in recent decades—a partnership now formally entering the White House. The way disgraced New York City mayor Eric Adams was relegated to a back room after receiving a last-minute invite to the inauguration only adds to the displacement of traditional agents of governance to make room for the new "globalists." Neoreactionary thought has been particularly influential, appealing to young provocateurs in art and tech turned on by its brand of futurist extremism and targeted anti-humanism spotted with various illiberal tendencies masquerading as pronatalism, market nationalism, and so on. In this issue, Yuk Hui notes that vice president J. D. Vance's close association with Dark Enlightenment figures such as Peter Thiel and Curtis Yarvin has taken their abject provocations to a new extreme. Hui revisits his 2017 *e-flux journal* essay "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries" to analyze how this fitful thrashing of US empire clings to the spoils of globalization while also buckling under its consequences, deepening its unsustainable contradictions.

Sven Lütticken dives into the philosophical and reactionary foundations of what he calls "propaganda for potentiality." Against the backdrop of "longtermism," "effective altruism," and their incumbent logics tied to property and rationalism, Lütticken asks how necessary deviations and divergences can be propagated to counter Silicon Valley's techno-dystopian future—especially as today's titans of "industry" dig their hands deeper into lawfare, in addition to their already central roles in warfare, surveillance, and governance. Also in this issue, Charles Tonderai Mudede observes how two supernovas that occurred during the Dutch Golden Age cemented scientific rationality's role as practical knowledge for trade, establishing merchant rule through capital and superseding the influence of church and monarchy. Such celestial events were known before the age of capital, just as enchantment and dreaming surpass the luxury goods promising to re-enchant a world deprived of basic necessities.

As part of **After Okwui**—a series commissioned by contributing editor Serubiri Moses—curators Émilie Renard and Claire Staebler join Mathilde Walker-Billaud to reflect on their work on the 2012 Paris Triennale, which had the theme "Intense Proximity." An ambitious and unwieldy project that Okwui Enwezor led as artistic director, the exhibition reexamined the ethnographic model of otherness in a city Enwezor described in terms of its "excess of cultural capital." This issue also features an excerpt from Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcana of Reproduction: Housewives, Prostitutes, Workers and Capital* (newly translated by Arlen Austin and Sara

Colantuono), a landmark work that emerged out of the extra-parliamentary, autonomous, and internationalist feminist movements of the 1970s. Taken from the chapter "Housewives, Prostitutes, and Workers," the excerpt illustrates the centrality of reproductive work for capitalist valorization in spite of the way that capital misrepresents—as personal service, domesticity, or prostitution—the labor power of this work.

Centralized AI services like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini have become ubiquitous, enclosing our collective intelligence and selling it back to us through convenient interfaces. In "Taking AI into the Tunnels," Mikael Brunila proposes that AI can be fragmented and decentralized through tools like open models, federated learning, and new forms of cryptography. A movement of "tunnel politics" that foregrounds collective opacity can undermine the panoptic aspirations of tech oligopolists. Kristin Ross and Andreas Petrossiants discuss another modality of contesting the accumulative world: the "commune form," as seen in land-based struggles like the ZAD (*zone à défendre*) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France and the movement to Stop Cop City and Defend the Atlanta Forest in the US. As Ross says, perhaps it is the joy and pleasure of cultivating new forms of collective life and non-accumulative social values that scares capitalist states the most.

X

Yuk Hui

On the Recurrence of Neoreactionaries

In 2017, almost eight years ago, I wrote an article for *e-flux journal* titled "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries," in which I attempted to analyze the rise of neoreactionaries in relation to the process of globalization.[1] 2017 may feel to some like the good old days, but it is not too long ago. Now, the world-historical US presidential election in November 2024 has officially recognized the neoreactionaries and their ideology, granting them entry to the White House through vice president J. D. Vance, who is closely tied to two of neoreaction's central figures, Curtis Yarvin and Peter Thiel.

Back in 2017, neoreactionary ideology was still largely underground, though gaining in popularity on 4Chan, Reddit, and in small groups of intellectuals interested in the work of Nick Land, who was crucial for providing a philosophical depth that the others couldn't. The discourse was very similar to internet subcultures not only because of the way it circulated, but also because it integrated technology and transhumanism into a political vision of a post-singularity future. According to this vision, we are quickly approaching the moment when machines will acquire consciousness and their intelligence will consequently surpass that of humans. This moment will call for the traditionally human concept of politics to be subordinated to planning by a greater superintelligence.

The US election also begins the cruel process of reconfiguring the post-globalization epoch, a new global order that reverses a number of trends that had advanced since the Cold War. The infrastructures that sustained the neoliberal order will be reconstructed, for better or worse. At the same time, the US election marks a true liberation of political thought from the stagnation of ideological claims such as Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis and the grand discourses of empire's thermodynamic ideology of globalization—as well as their other pole (or twin), the elite left lost in political correctness. (Neoreactionary Curtis Yarvin termed this elite left the "cathedral.")

What I call "thermodynamic ideology" is the belief that societies must be open to economic activities, that economic rights determine political rights such as freedom of speech and human rights. It is also a political epistemology in the sense that it is transposed from science to the political domain. "Free markets" and "open systems" are the buzzwords of this ideology, whose triumph was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Jean-François Lyotard witnessed:

> Marxism, the last shoot stemming from both the Enlightenment and Christianity, seems to have lost all of its critical power. When the Berlin Wall fell, it failed definitively. By invading the shops in West Berlin, the East German crowds gave evidence that the ideal of

Marcantonio Raimondi, The Witches' Procession, engraved in the 1520s. License: Public domain.

> freedom, at least of the free market, had already invaded Eastern European minds.[2]

This ideology culminated in the entry of China into the WTO in the early 2000s. China's opening to global capitalism and the nonantagonistic attitude of the Chinese Communist Party vaguely admitted to the triumph of the liberal ideology of globalization, even giving the illusion that China would eventually follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union. Though this apparent unification between East and West through global capitalism marked the end of the Cold War, it was not the end of antagonism or conflict. As I suggested in "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries," the optimism of globalization has ended. The thermodynamic ideology behind neoliberalism simply doesn't work when the process of globalization advances to such an extent that American imperial power ceases to be the sole monopoly power. China and Russia's quest for a multipolar world clearly signals this obsolescence.

Donald Trump, or rather his team, sensed this. Trump's unusual and often grotesque behavior during his first term shocked American voters, but also the global public. His attempts to reverse immigration—a cornerstone of globalization, as well as of the free market—outraged liberals, but also overwhelmed those who grew up with thermodynamic ideology. Joe Biden, while he did not abandon Trump's foreign policy, struggled to prolong the post–Cold War ideology, even when the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine seemed like a return to the Cold War itself.

While thermodynamic ideology resonated with liberals throughout the world, from Japan to Germany, it is now doomed, leaving no role for Biden and the Democrats in the current stage of planetarization—a term I use to distinguish the present era from the first phase of globalization.[3] The end of this first phase is indicated by the US desire to economically decouple from China, and by China's consequent defense of free-market globalization—a rhetoric unimaginable in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the US was the main promoter of globalization. The good old days of cheap labor abroad led to the loss of working-class jobs in the US. The "invisible hand" may be theoretically correct but it doesn't seem to account for the "jealousy of trade" that marks the worsening situation described by J. D. Vance:

> Trump's candidacy is music to [the white working class's] ears. He criticizes the factories shipping jobs overseas. His apocalyptic tone matches their lived experiences on the ground. He seems to love to annoy the elites, which is something a lot of people wish they could do but can't because they lack a platform.[4]

This is the paradox of globalization, which consolidated American imperial power by expanding the world market. In the end, one returns to the state hoping for it to stop or at least alter this process—hence a return to nationalism, to statism, to national religion. This contradiction leads to

what Hegel called "unhappy consciousness," an awareness of a contradiction without knowing how to overcome it. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we are told that the spirit progresses according to its degree of maturity and independence (i.e., self-consciousness). Compared to the confinement to thinking itself that is characteristic of stoicism and skepticism's renouncement of externality, unhappy consciousness arrives at a moment where it affirms the other without recognizing it as the other of the self, or without recognizing the self as the unity of both. This is also the passage to what Hegel called Jewish consciousness, in which a duality of extremes places essence so far beyond existence, God (the immutable) so far outside humanity, that humanity is left stranded in the inessential. In Christianity, a unity between the immutable and the particular is incarnated in the figure of Christ as also the immutable God; however, such a unity is yet another unhappy consciousness, because both the immutable and the particular still remain "other."

John Trumbull, Declaration of Independence, 1819. United States Capitol Collection. License: Public domain.

For the neoreactionary Peter Thiel, this contradiction emerged when the West no longer profited from the globalization it started. Instead, the West became vulnerable in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Thiel identified the root of this problem in the Enlightenment, whose values such as liberty and democracy were once the cornerstone of republican state-building, but which had lost their efficacy to cope with international politics. This clearly resonates with Carl Schmitt's fierce attack against liberal democracy for prioritizing endless discussion but no decision, rendering the state vulnerable, especially in a time of crisis. Analogically, all of the elements central to the neoreactionaries' discourse can be found in Schmitt's state theory: criticism of liberal democracy, the legacy of political theology, and the exigency of political vitalism. The key task for Thiel is not exactly to negate the Enlightenment but rather to ask how the West can "preserve" itself:

> The modern West has lost faith in itself. In the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period, this loss of faith liberated enormous commercial and creative forces. At the same time, this loss has rendered the West vulnerable. Is there a way to fortify

> the modern West without destroying it altogether, a way of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater?[5]

In other words, how can the West—now largely the US—maintain its imperial power without suffering the drawbacks of globalization? The crisis of self-preservation is also the moment of the state of exception. Trump's candidacy was not a choice between fascism and non-fascism, as Kamala Harris's campaign might have wished, for one has to understand that by trying to avoid danger one ends up in catastrophe. The defeat of Harris, who had no exceptional political proposals beyond sustaining existing norms, was only a moment of self-consciousness for the American spirit, if we follow Hegel's vocabulary here.

I am increasingly convinced that we need to go back to Hegel's concept of world history and world spirit to explain the historical psychology of the modern epoch. Only by understanding Hegel and the economy of the spirit might we avoid becoming mere elements of the dialectical algorithm and instead reset the rules or invent a new game. Alexander Kojève, an important reader of Hegel who popularized him among French intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, understood Hegel as essential to grasping the world process, yet he also resisted Hegel. A few months before May 1968, Kojève admitted that he thought Hegel was wrong in saying that Napoleon marked the end of history. In fact it was Stalin, claimed Kojève:

> The end of history wasn't Napoleon, it was Stalin, and I'd be in charge of announcing it, with the difference that I wouldn't be lucky enough to see Stalin ride past my window on horseback, but anyhow … After the war, I understood. No, Hegel wasn't mistaken; he gave the exact date of the end of history, 1806. What has happened since then? Nothing at all, just *the alignment of provinces* [of empire]. The Chinese revolution is merely the introduction of the Napoleonic Code into China. The famous acceleration of history that everyone talks about—have you noticed that as it speeds up, historical movement advances less and less?[6]

1968 was the year of a worldwide student movement, a world-historical event that coincided with Kojève's death as well as the beginnings of a liberal economy in Europe. Kojève, an experienced French diplomat—and a Soviet KGB agent—clearly saw historical movement stagnating with a universal homogeneous state, or with the triumph of thermodynamic ideology. Either way, his resistance against Hegel falls back into the logic of Hegel. But the world spirit was never Napoleon or Stalin so much as a logical necessity of the historical process itself, of the exigency to overcome a contradiction that leads to unhappy consciousness. From the standpoint of this economy of the spirit, Trump's victory could only be expected, not because Trump is a great leader—on the contrary, he seems more like a con man—but because he understood the political climate in time to ride its wave. And now we can foresee the reversal of the order of globalization as part of the world process.

We can also foresee the realization of neoreactionary thought. Looking back at 2017, some of those key figures of neoreaction have grown even more influential since then. Curtis Yarvin has almost become a household name among Americans; Nick Land is still observing the world process from Shanghai, while his "Dark Enlightenment" has gained popularity among young readers in China. J. D. Vance and Elon Musk have joined forces under the guise of democracy—a political magic word in the West and East that signals the impossibility of being politically incorrect.

It is too early to tell how the Trump regime will use American economic and military power to change geopolitics. Any expectation that Trump will bring peace to the world is a leftover from an earlier era of American imperial power, with its self-flattering superhero stories. This expectation furthermore appears as an illusion when one realizes that the world process, which demands radical intellectual interrogation, is far beyond any single persona or country. The world has stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis, which suggested the failure of neoliberal globalization. The escalation of wars in recent years is the consequence of a persistent post–Cold War worldview no longer at home in the world, or of a Cold War that never in fact ended but rather continued in the guise of globalization.

Will twentieth-century imperial power continue to triumph in the twenty-first century? Today the war over technology has been pushed to the forefront, with states now grouping more or less around different affinities for technological advancement. We see this in the alliance between countries that produce nanoscale microchips, while in the Cold War it was nuclear arms. The recent launch of DeepSeek and the shock it caused in the West only further confirms this observation. We also see it in the blocs that share technological infrastructure like communication systems and railways. Russia, China, and other countries might contest imperial power, but in doing so, are they also becoming imperial powers? This is a critical question if we dare to imagine a new and different phase of globalization, or to develop thought adequate to the current phase of planetarization.

The US has already entered into conflict with developing imperial powers; in response, Europe has been attempting to assert its sovereignty, but its course is not yet certain: from Habermas and Derrida's cosigned petition for Europe

Francisco Goya, The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters, 1799. License: Public domain.

to distance itself from the US unilateralism of the Iraq War, to Macron's reiteration of it after his visit to China in 2023, it seems like nothing has happened. Already in the 1930s, Carl Schmitt identified the danger of American imperialism; he pointed to America's manipulation of the Monroe Doctrine at the turn of the century to mobilize Japan to open up China's market and access its capital. Schmitt argued that the nation-state would decline in the face of American imperialism.[7] Of course, Schmitt was a Nazi legal theorist, which might render his ideas taboo for progressives—suggesting that Yarvin's idea of a hypocritical "cathedral" is not completely wrong. Nonetheless, Cold War alliances are insufficient for responding to the current planetary condition and its interlinked crises of climate, AI, and geopolitics.

Political theorist Moritz Rudolph has satirized the world spirit as a salmon that was born in the East and then travelled to the West. It grew up in Greece, writes Rudolph, and reached adulthood in the Prussian state of Hegel's time, before returning to the stream of its birth to spawn and die.[8] This journey is the becoming of self-consciousness as well as liberation (*Befreiung*). Like a salmon, the world spirit now returns to where it began and where it will probably end. This rhetoric is redolent of proclamations in China today of a rising East and declining West (升西降), which might sound like good dialectics—perhaps too good to be true. The West is trapped in unhappy consciousness, resenting that ways that globalization benefited non-Western countries while causing the West itself to lose its competence and identity. In a similar fashion, Oswald Spengler lamented that the West exported technology to Japan at the turn of the twentieth century only for Japan to rise from the rank of student to teacher with its defeat of Russia in the 1905 war.[9]

The East is trapped in an unhappy consciousness of a different kind. It is based on the East's need to assimilate to the Western modernization project, which leads to the dissolution of its own traditions, values, and family-based social structure. A symbol for this might be the gigantic infrastructure projects in the East, ranging from highspeed trains to database centers—a sublime of technological development that replaces the sublime of confronting nature, the "wow" factor and likes on social media that replace religious respect (*Achtung*). In East Asia, fast-paced modernization extends the consumer ethos from high-end luxury shops to universities.

This overproduction and overdevelopment produces problems that the West already encountered in the twentieth century panic over spiritual misery. Overproduction and overdevelopment don't mean only an excess of products, but also an excess of prosthetic organs that the soul cannot hold—like how Henri Bergson identified the looming First World War as an organological rupture. For Bergson, the source of war was not merely economic but also technological, following the unprecedented nineteenth-century expansion of artificial prostheses; with societies unable to incorporate the new extensions, war became the means of pacifying the unrest of the soul. Paradoxically, in order to surpass the West, the East will have to accelerate faster in all domains, which will only deepen its melancholia. To cope with this unhappy consciousness, the East will have to reinvent the concept of modernization by giving it a nationality, to create an illusion of moving in the direction of history. Can we really say that the East and the West are developing two different projects or agendas? There is no clearer mind than Carl Schmitt on this point: "The East, in particular, took hold of Hegel's philosophy of history in the same way it took hold of the atomic bomb and other products of the Western intelligentsia in order to realize the unity of the world in accordance with its plans."[10]

We can continue by making a long list of these "other products." Imperial powers will continue competing over resources to maintain the uneven development of the world. Many intellectuals unfortunately share the illusion that these powers will come to the table, listen to each other, work out their differences, and collaborate. But neither culture nor understanding are at stake in this larger power struggle, and those who have not woken up to this will only repeat the "clash of civilizations" cliché by insisting on respect for cultural differences. The East and the West are in fact developing the same plan, the same technology, and the same philosophy of history for domination, and are thus no longer distinguishable in this world process. As Jean-Luc Nancy put it, the Far East (*extrême orient*) becomes the Far West (*extrême occident*).[11]

How does one move out of unhappy consciousness? René Girard, the *méta penseur* of Thiel, Vance, and the neoreactionaries, developed a theory of scapegoating that calls for the sacrifice of something to resolve a conflict within a community and restore "purity," as with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The "impurity" that needs to be sacrificed could be immigrants who threaten rural whites, or the aberration of Trump voters themselves, or China's fierce economic and technological competition with the US. The Greek word for scapegoat is *pharmākos*, closely related to *pharmakon*, which means both "poison" and "remedy." The scapegoat is the remedy to the community that also poisons the community. Girard recognized this paradox: "The victim is sacred, it is criminal to kill him—but the victim is sacred only because he is to be killed."[12] Whether remedy or poison, a decision regarding the scapegoat becomes necessary; a poison can be transformed into a remedy, and a remedy can be discredited as poison. Vance expressed skepticism about scapegoating, identifying "efforts to shift blame and our own inadequacies onto a victim" as "a moral failing, projected violently upon someone else"—but still couldn't resist sacrificing Haitian immigrants.[13] Indeed, it is hard to resist the convenience of scapegoating, such as when Trump blames DEI for the recent Washington, DC plane crash, or when so-called progressive intellectuals blame

William Blake, Behemoth and Leviathan, 1825–26. Gift of Edward Bement, 1917, Metropolitan Museum of Art. License: Public domain.

Latin American immigrants for voting for Trump. Yet the question remains: Can scapegoating relieve the unhappy consciousness, or does it only maintain a contradiction that can never be resolved?

All polarizations risk being stuck in unhappy consciousness; all efforts to resolve polarization through further polarization will only deepen the unhappiness. As mentioned earlier, the obstacle is not in any misunderstanding or unwillingness to listen. In ancient times, legitimacy came from mythology, but today the legitimacy of scapegoating comes from the economy and technology. The Ancient Greeks used another mechanism to restore social and collective order, namely tragedy. Girard tried to equate his theory of sacrifice with tragedy by aligning Aristotle's *katharsis* (purification) with tragedy's necessity for violence and fear, but we should be careful here.[14] It is in tragedy that Nietzsche saw an interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian drives, again an irreconcilable polarization that was later abandoned in the pursuit of rationality, which nonetheless remains accompanied by modern decadence.

Much more than what Aristotle called *katharsis*, Greek tragedy implies a logical form, later identified by Schelling and notably acknowledged by Péter Szondi: "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic."[15] The opposition was resolved by an affirmation that transcended the opposition between freedom and fate. To follow Hegelian vocabulary, we have to ask what a true reconciliation consists of. One can't transcend unhappy consciousness without turning toward reason, because reason is the only resolution, and world history is the history of reason. Reason is the most powerful discourse of the West, since what contradicts it is inevitably unreason, which is analogical to a just enemy. By the same token, the East cannot turn to unreason in order to combat the West; but does turning to reason to operate within the framework of the West end up in the atomic bomb, as Schmitt claimed?

It is necessary to affirm and expand reason beyond the West. Such an expansion is not only geographical and universalizing; it also, in terms of logic, allows diversity to flourish. Kant uses the term *Erweiterung* to describe an expansion of theoretical reason in light of entities it cannot demonstrate and prove, but which are necessary for practical reason. I concluded my 2017 essay with the following:

> Maybe we should grant to thinking a task opposite the one given to it by Enlightenment philosophy: to fragment the world according to difference instead of universalizing through the same; to induce the same through difference, instead of deducing difference from the same. A new world-historical thinking has to emerge in the face of the meltdown of the world.

I have elaborated on this point in all my major writings since *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2016), especially in the recent books *Post-Europe* (2024) and *Machine and Sovereignty* (2024).[16] I can't think of a better conclusion to this essay. I can only add that such a fragmentation calls for a search for a genuine pluralism—in other words, a philosophy *adequate* to the current planetary condition—especially when the term "pluralism" is routinely appropriated by both the left and the right. In his theory of the *Großraum*, Schmitt developed an idea of political pluralism against universalism—namely American imperialism—that was later taken up by Alexander Dugin when he was developing his idea of the Eurasian *Großraum*. Contemporary anthropologists studying Indigenous concepts of nature have also suggested that ontological pluralism could help overcome the strictures of Western knowledge since the rise of modernity. But how can we be sure that such a pluralism isn't just a disguised monism, that resistance doesn't only contribute to the hegemony against which it fights? In recent decades we have seen how the promise of pluralism under neoliberalism collapses into monism; and we have seen how pluralism in nature was conquered by monotechnological culture. Any future pluralism will have to confront the test of technology as anticipated by Schmitt. Without relinquishing the term "pluralism," I would appeal to a pluralism that is epistemological at the same time as it is technological—a practice grounded in a matrix consisting of biodiversity, noodiversity, and technodiversity, which I suggest as a starting point for conceiving a planetary thinking.[17]

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1
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3
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4
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5
Peter Thiel, "The Straussian Moment," in *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture: Politics and Apocalypse* , ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (Michigan State University Press, 2007), 207.

6
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7
Carl Schmitt, "Großraum gegen Universalismus" (1939), in *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923–1939* (Duncker and Humblot, 1994), 299.

8
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9
Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life* (Greenwood Press, 1967), 100–1.

10
Carl Schmitt, "Die Einheit der Welt," in *Staat, Großraum, Nomos* (Duncker und Humblot, 2021), 505: "Der Osten insbesondere hat sich der Geschichtsphilosophie Hegels nicht anders bemächtigt, wie er sich der Atombombe und anderer Erzeugnisse der westlichen Intelligenz bemächtigt hat, um die Einheit der Welt im Sinne seiner Planungen zu verwirklichen." My translation.

11
Jean-Luc Nancy, "A Different Orientation," in *Derrida, Supplements* , trans. Anne O'Byrne (Fordham University Press, 2023), 125–26.

12
René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* , trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 1. In the book Girard also discusses the relation between *pharmakon* and *pharmākos* by referring to Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy."

13
Ian Ward, "J. D. Vance's Scapegoating Theory Is Playing Out in Real Time," *Politico*, September 18, 2024 https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/09/18/jd-vance-springfield-scapegoating-00179401 .

14
Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 295. Two pages later Girard rushes to claim that "Plato's *pharmakon* is like Aristotle's *katharsis* ."

15
Péter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic* , trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford University Press, 2002), 1. See also Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (University of Minnesota Press and e-flux, 2021), §2, 9–20.

16
I carried out a systematic study over three volumes that I consider a trilogy: *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019), *Art and Cosmotechnics* (2021), and *Machine and Sovereignty* (2024).

17
My book *Machine and Sovereignty* concludes with an elaboration of this appeal.

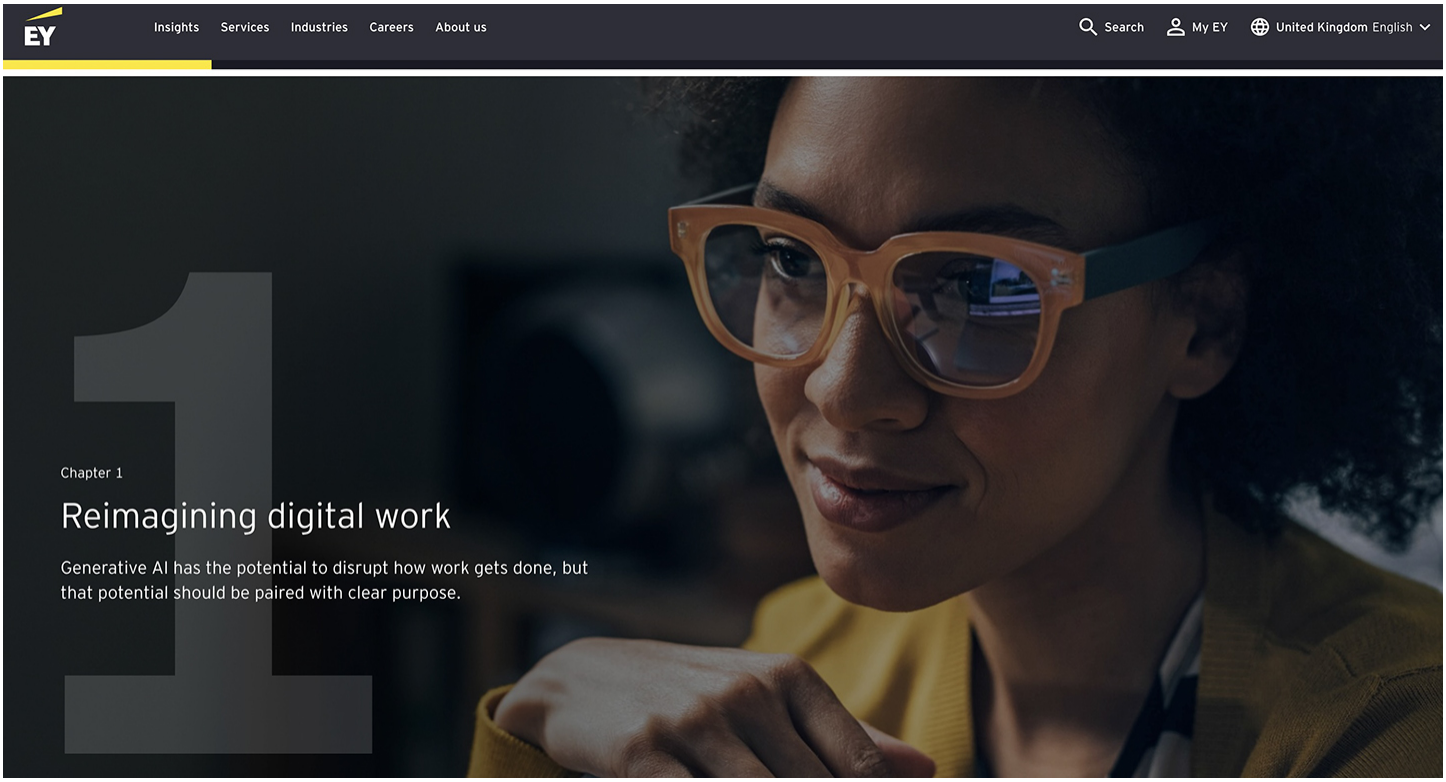
Sven Lütticken

Improbable Potentialities

On posters and digital displays, propaganda for potentiality litters airports and university campuses, fitness studios and city streets. Last spring, Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit decked its halls with posters sporting the slogans "Unlock your potential" and "Unlock our potentials" (with the plural version raising questions about grammar and agency). At nearby Schiphol Airport, travelers were instructed by adverts to "face the future with confidence" courtesy of Ernst & Young's platform ey.ai, whose holy trinity was composed by the terms "confidence/value/potential." The company wants to "empower responsible transformation," "optimize performance," "create exponential value," and "augment people potential" by creating "a future where seamless people-AI collaboration achieves extraordinary outcomes." Whereas a poster for a fitness watch simply exhorts the subject of interpellation to "become your potential," presenting the watch merely as a tool, the more sophisticated forms of "potentialist propaganda" celebrate forms of human-AI collaboration, or merger, in the shape of optimized neoliberal cyborgs.

To some extent, such campaigns are the offspring of Microsoft's decades-old slogan "Your Potential. Our Passion."[1] They are also in keeping with an ideology known as "longtermism," or "effective altruism," which originated at Oxford University and is lavishly funded by tech billionaires.[2] Longtermism involves calculations that purport to quantify the future lives that may be lost due to the wrong decisions being taken in the present; juggling astronomical amounts of "potential lives," longtermists are concerned with making sure that these lives are not lost.[3] One patron of longtermism, Elon Musk, is obsessively focused on stemming what he sees as the threat of global human population decline—with an obvious racist and classist subtext, as some individuals and cultures enjoy privileged status in the minds of Musk and the fascists he hobnobs with.[4] While the Muskian specter of the AI Singularity haunts longtermism, this school of thought is nonetheless predicated on an expansive conception of "intelligent life." Longtermists such as Nick Bostrom and William McAskill not only advocate Musk's pet project of space colonization, arguing that "the potential for approximately 1038 human lives is lost every century that colonization of our local supercluster is delayed,"[5] but are also open to the future development of "software lives."[6] Thus, they use more encompassing terms such as "Earth-originating intelligent life" or speculate on future forms of "digital sentience" that "would have at least comparable moral status to humans."[7]

For longtermism, the "potential of software minds and space colonies dwarfs every other pressing issue of the present," as one critical observer puts it.[8] One radical strand of modern historical thinking could be termed "potentialism" — a form of historicism that is open to unprecedented actualizations and long latencies, to events transcending their conditions, and to processes of becoming that are not always reducible to classical



conceptions of class. Now that it has been recaptured and refunctionalized in the service of algorithmic governance by a planetary elite of AI-pushing space invaders, what potential does the concept of potentiality still hold? How to propagate a potentialism of deviation and divergence, of the improbable-but-necessary, in opposition to the techno-dystopian future that is being made today in Silicon Valley?

Leviathan and Multitude

In his video *Not Sinking, Swarming* (2021), the artist Oliver Ressler shows footage of activists preparing a climate protest to "offer a real insight into the processes of climate movements' self-organization."[9] Ressler hides the organizers' identities, either by filling in their outlines with images of the subsequent protest or through pixelation. At one point, a pan of Abraham Bosse's frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* fills the screen. In this icon of political theory, the sovereign's body politic is constituted by, or subsumes, the mass of the people. Ressler accompanies it with a text on assemblies and swarms of disobedient bodies as constituting a counterpower to past, present, and future Leviathans, anchoring his film in ongoing debates on (state and anti-statist) power. In Sandra Leonie Field's words, Antonio Negri and many in his wake pit "Spinozist constituent power *potentia* against Hobbesian constituted power *potestas*."[10] As the perpetual potential of human creative force, constituent power is thus categorically distinct from actualized constituted power, which tends to become formalized and detached from any popular base—becoming sovereign power.

Following Field's analysis, both Spinoza and Hobbes were responding to medieval scholasticism: essentially a Christianized Aristotelianism. In Aristotle's hylomorphism, form comes to play the part of a thing's essence, its "primary substance": it is only by being in-formed that matter amounts to anything.[11] In such a framework, matter is potentiality and only attains actuality through form; nature is the process of the actualization of possibilities.[12] In a diachronic interpretation of substance as contingent upon realization, *dunamis* and *energeia* (potentiality and actuality) can thus be seen as a *temporalization* of *hyle* and *morphe* (matter and form). Building materials are a potential building, but the form must be brought out in the process of construction.[13] The scholastic conception of natural philosophy revolved around the progressive actualization of potentialities, with the "set of *potentiae* belonging to each individual" ultimately being grounded in its specific "substantial form."[14] In Aquinas's philosophy of nature, "the stone's substantial form explains why it falls to the ground, but equally the acorn's substantial form explains why it grows to be an oak tree. When natural change occurs, this is conceived as a potentiality being actualized, or a power being put in act."[15]

From Aristotle onward, human beings were a particularly knotty case study for hylomorphic theory; after all, what is the human substantial form? It should not be mistaken for some archetypal form of the human body. What eluded

Oliver Ressler, Not Sinking, Swarming, 2021.

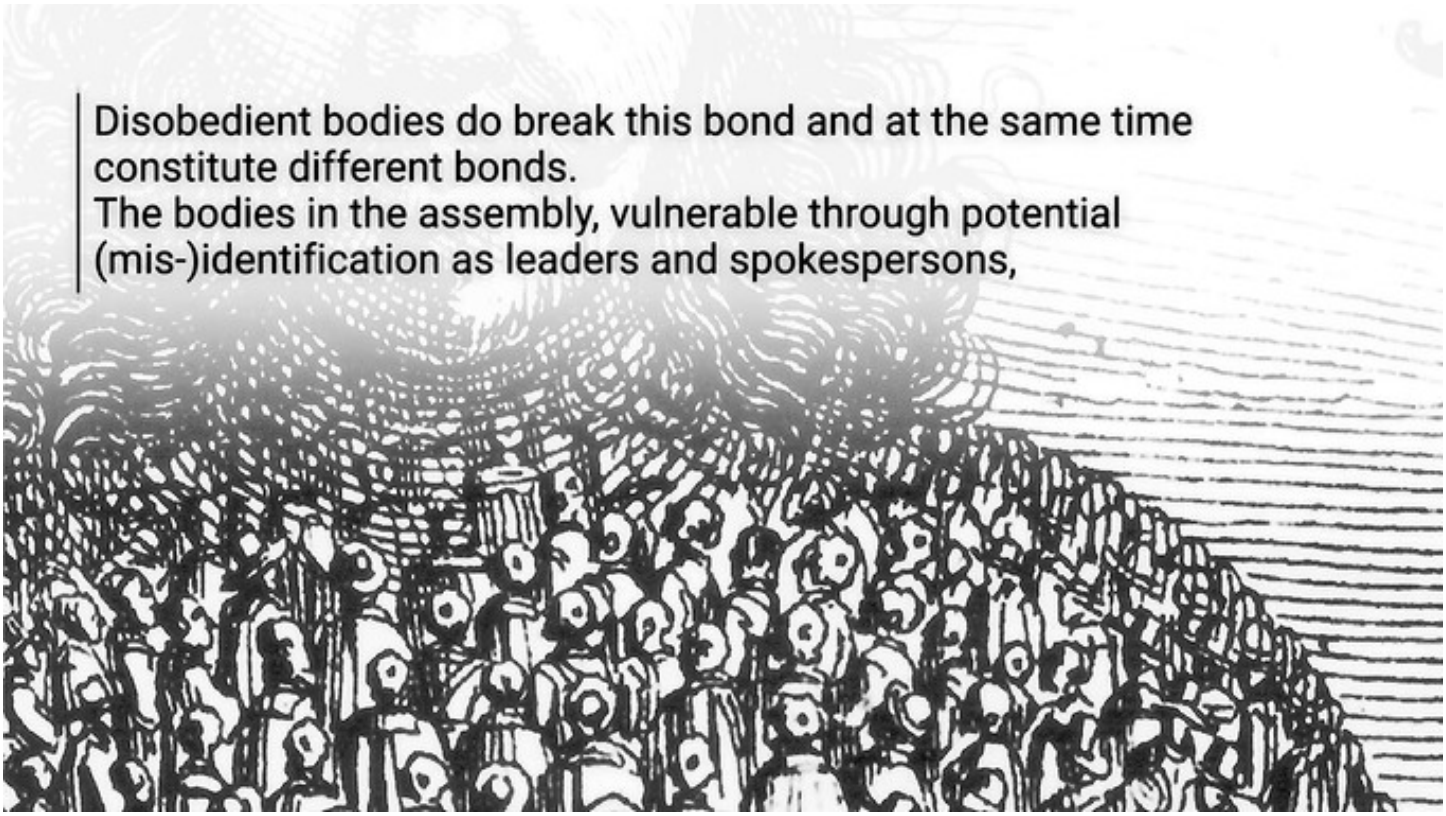
analysis was a principle that makes the human being more than a corpse, or a zombie, or a statue. For Aristotle, "the body as such only potentially has life and it is the presence of soul that fulfils this potentiality."[16] The hylomorphic tradition from Aristotle to Aquinas and beyond is marked by a series of complex debates on the soul, seen variously—or simultaneously—as a set of *potentiae* or as "the actual formal principle making embodied living substances to be the kinds of things that they are."[17] In contemporary thinking, the focus is less on houses, oak trees, or even individual humans and more on political form and political power.

Whereas much early modern philosophy tried to shed scholasticism as so much dead weight, Hobbes and Spinoza both détourned the notion of potentiality rather than jettisoning it altogether—politicizing potentiality as a form of power. Matters are more complicated than a clear-cut opposition between Spinozian multitudinous potentiality and Hobbesian sovereign potency, between amorphous social matter and institutionalized form. In his work, Hobbes himself articulated a dialectic of *potentia* and *potestas*—though he did in fact privilege the latter. In keeping with medieval thought on the problem of the King's Two Bodies—i.e., on institutions as being separate from the people that embody them—Hobbes focused on the "body politic" as a fictitious body that could be analyzed as analogous to scholasticism's theorization of natural entities in which "the proper power of an entity should generate behavior" along predictable lines, without the whims of free will.[18]

Hobbes thus based his theory of human institutions and sovereignty on scholastic *natural* philosophy, at least in early work such as *De Cive* (1642). While Hobbes's hostility to the inchoate multitude and his championing of law and order were constants in this thinking, he would abandon the juridical naturalization of constituted sovereign power that marked his early work. *Leviathan* (1651) proposes what Field terms a "relational" rather than an essential or natural conception of power.[19]

Leviathan theorizes a variety of artificial personas and forms of *personation*, in which power is delegated to some agent. Hobbes does not deem sovereignty to be fundamentally different from this, as the sovereign's power is also supposed to be the result of some—hypothetical—agreement among the people to delegate their *potentia*, transmuting it into the ruler's *potestas*.[20]

Hobbes's conceptualization of sovereignty has an incisiveness that makes it more than mere ideology. It is possible to think critically with Hobbes—or indeed to work critically with Abraham Bosse's famous frontispiece for *Leviathan*. In Ressler's film, the image of Leviathan's crowned head fades into footage of a pixelated multitude. Hobbes dissolves into Spinoza, or into Spinoza as read by



Oliver Ressler, Not Sinking, Swarming, 2021.

Negri. If Spinoza introduced the multitude as composed of pluriform *potentiae*, Negri identified the multitude with the proletariat—a notion which he in turn distinguished from the industrial working class, giving it a post-Fordist slant.[21] There is, to be sure, a tension between what Negri and Hardt term an "ontological multitude," *sub specie aeternitatis*, and a historical or not-yet multitude that needs to be organized as a political project. However, these two multitudes, "although conceptually distinct, are not really separable. If the multitude were not already latent and implicit in our social being, we could not even imagine it as a political project; and, similarly, we can only hope to realize it today because it already exists as a real potential."[22]

Actualizing this potential would indeed mean that—as Rodrigo Nunes glosses this passage—people become "conscious of its latency," which requires a political project.[23] Thus the multitude's incarnation could be coalitions of climate action groups, as in Ressler's video. To be sure, Ressler's use of "swarming" in the title raises questions: Does this not evoke the Silicon Valley discourse on swarm intelligence and hive minds?[24] The swarm is a key figure of emergent behavior as something that can be modeled and predicted—and manipulated, as in fascist mobs springing into action thanks to AI-generated content distributed by bots.[25] However, Ressler's multitude may yet have surprises in store—swerves and feints that challenge the rule of probability and predictability.

Historical Potential

Like Negri, Giorgio Agamben sides with *potentia* over *potestas*, but insists that we cannot be content with identifying *potentia* with constituent power, and celebrate the latter. Agamben conceives of sovereign power as "[dividing] itself into constituting and constituted power" and insists that the relation between these two is

> just as complicated as the relation Aristotle establishes between potentiality and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*; and, in the last analysis, the relation between constituting and constituted power (perhaps like every authentic understanding of the problem of sovereignty) depends on how one thinks the existence and autonomy of potentiality.[26]

Following Bartleby's refrain of "preferring not to," Agamben foregrounds the power to not-be (like that). Since actualization means running the risk of slipping into actualized *potestas,* Agamben advocates a new "ontology of potentiality" that replaces "the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality."[27] He therefore insists on the need to explore forms of "destituent" power that resist being captured and constituted. In this, he takes cues from Friedrich Schelling.

While the early modern politicization of *potentia* as a form of power thus resonates strongly in contemporary thinking, a second moment also needs to be addressed. In the transition from German idealism to materialism, certain philosophers and political radicals sought to side with history as becoming, and as repository of un-actualized possibility and potentiality. Schelling is key here. In his later work, he latched on to the Aristotelian temporalization of ontology in his attempts to counter Hegelian dialectics for remaining merely logical; insofar as there was any congruence between this philosophy and reality, this was accidental. Schelling obsessively attacked the problem of being, that which precedes any philosophy. In doing so, he historicized the ontological. This resonated at a moment marked by the decline of idealism and its transformation into early materialist philosophies of praxis, and it became relevant again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the poverty of orthodox Marxian dialectics—especially as codified in the Kojèvian reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic—was increasingly apparent.

"Late" Schelling differentiated between what he termed "negative" and "positive" philosophy. Negative philosophy is logical, rational—which was the case for Hegel's dialectic, in Schelling's diagnosis. Positive philosophy (which has nothing to do with positivism whatsoever) concerns actual being, that which precedes and exceeds logical thought. As Peter Dews notes, in the transitional *Weltalter* (1811), Schelling used the terms "logical" and "historical" philosophy for what he later termed "negative" and "positive" — though the entire system, as constituted by these dialectical counterparts, is itself profoundly historical in nature .[28] Historicizing Aristotle's *dunamis* and *energeia,* Schelling charts the dialectic of potentiality and actuality in the registers of both negative and positive philosophy. In the mode of negative philosophy, the dialectic starts with pure potentiality, being-able-to (*Seinkönnen*); the next steps involve that potentiality's actualization into a kind of inchoate and generic being (*Sein*); this must in turn be re-potentialized, infused with freedom and form. In the register of positive philosophy, the starting point is not pure potentiality but rather what Schelling calls " *unvordenkliches Sein*," an

Evelina Mohei, scarf for Hägerstensåsens Medborgarhus, 2023.

"unprethinkable" and undifferentiated "being."[29] This is precisely what was lacking in Hegel: Hegel started with the idea, and even its dialectic self-alienation in nature remained a mere philosophical concept. The question for positive philosophy is how this aboriginal being can become *becoming*. How to infuse being with potentiality, which is to say with freedom, historicity, futurity?[30]

When the possibility of being other, of being otherwise, reveals itself within immemorial being, it raises itself to the status of *potentia potentiae*—a potential potency that does not yet pass into actuality.[31] Once this actualization finally happens, we are dealing with the first proper potency in Schelling's triad: *das Seinkönnende*, which was the starting point in the merely logical realm of negative dialectics; here, in the positive register, it reveals itself as a differentiation from inchoate *Ursein*. The second potentiality, also called the *Seinmüssende*, that which cannot help but be, infuses direction and purpose into the potentially equally random and boundless creation that is the *Ursein*; the third potency, the *Seinsollende,* or *selbstbewusstes Können*, is a potentiality to be that never spends itself fully in being, that always maintains an essential freedom in and from being.[32] This is Spirit: a re-potentialization of being, a reopening of creation. In a Christian register, these three potencies become the personalities of the Trinity: the Father who creates the world by positing a being distinct from Himself, by self-othering (" *Gott ist das Andere"*) *;* the Son who reinjects divine Logos into a fallen world; and Spirit as free subjectivity in a transformed (transfigured) creation.[33]

Schellingian potentiality is *power over possibility*; as such it is a form of sovereignty, perhaps the highest form. As opposed to constituted and enshrined *potestas,* it is the power to become, which means: to be *other* than what already exists. This is how potentiality first manifests itself in aboriginal being. It introduces a difference.[34] Yet Schelling is not an unqualified productivist of potentiality, and this is where Agamben draws on Schelling—siding with the power to *not-be*, the refusal to actualize. As Agamben argues, his proposal to think an immemorial being "that presupposes no potentiality" is a rare attempt "to conceive of being beyond the principle of sovereignty."[35] To be sure, within Schelling's system this state must be overcome; things need to start happening. Nonetheless, he is reluctant to argue that potencies must always pass into actuality, and spends many pages discussing potentialities that refuse to budge. Thus Agamben can rightly emphasize "the potentiality to not-be," which "can never consist of a simple transition *de potentia ad actum*: It is, in other words, a potentiality that has as its object potentiality itself, a *potentia potentiae*."[36]

The ontological turn in leftist theory has been a mixed blessing. Often resulting in grand debates between the "line of immanence" (Deleuze, Hardt and Negri, Agamben) and the "line of transcendence" (Laclau, Mouffe, Badiou, Žižek), these debates are self-perpetuating and unresolvable as both sides overeagerly map ontologies that are "both fundamental *and* contestable" onto questions of political organization and action.[37] Agamben is not the least problematic in this regard. The halting and compromised historicization of ontology in Schelling is mirrored by an all-too-coherent ontologization of the historical in Agamben; a lack of mediation between the ontological and the political has led to increasingly dubious polemical interventions on his part, as when he saw Covid-prevention measures exclusively through the prism of sovereignty and the state of exception, without any allowance for the contingencies and dialectical complexities of history.

Deleuze's version of Schellingian potentialism offers a productive alternative here. At times, he uses "potentiality" and "virtuality" as synonyms, yet he is concerned with conceptions of potentiality that confuse it with mere possibility: "The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a 'realisation.' By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualisation."[38] This is not mere semantics; Deleuze insists that the point is that the actual does not *resemble* the virtual. Rather, actual forms emerge in a process of differentiation that can produce the unprecedented:

> To the extent that the possible is open to "realization," it is understood as an image of the real, while the real is supposed to resemble the possible. That is why it is difficult to understand what existence adds to the concept when all it does is double like with like. Such is the defect of the possible: a defect which serves to condemn it as produced after the fact, as retroactively fabricated in the image of what resembles it. The actualisation of the virtual, on the contrary, always takes place by difference, divergence or differenciation. Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle.[39]

There are shades here of Gilbert Simondon's critique of hylomorphism, and especially of those versions in which "form is an a priori UFO that lands on raw matter."[40] Such versions of Aristotelian hylomorphism might be said to be covertly Platonic; the *morphe* here functions like a preexisting idea. Deleuze's virtuality goes against all philosophies of preexisting forms, including modern conceptions of heredity, just as it opposes the reduction of the potential to the possible. This is not to say that Deleuze's virtual constitutes a conceptual break. Rather, it is an attempt to salvage potentiality from its degraded versions—as is apparent, for instance, from his appreciative remarks on Schelling, who "brings difference out of the night of the Identical," and in whose work "A, A2,

A3 form the play of pure depotentialisation and potentiality, testifying to the presence in Schelling's philosophy of a differential calculus adequate to the dialectic."[41]

If potentiality and actuality both partake in the real, the question is *how to practice actualization*—a practice that may also entail refusals to actualize, moments or long periods of preferring-not-to. As suggested by Hardt and Negri, a version of Jameson's historical consciousness is key, and this involves the action of *naming*: naming the multitude as a concept and a potential political reality is a speech act that may help to actualize it.[42] Performance trumps ontology, and immanence becomes immanent critical practice—a project that will generate contradictory and imperfect forms, divergent forms of identification and transindividuation, collaboration and collectivity.

Probability and Energy

I have sketched certain genealogies in ways that are no doubt both too simplified and too unsystematic, but I consider a stocktaking of these arcane philosophies of great importance even—especially—in the accelerating catastrophe.[43] The politicization of Aristotelianism in early modern thought, its historicization in nineteenth-century (post-)idealism, and the affective turn announced by Kierkegaard all intermingle in sometimes contradictory ways in current thought. One crucial question remains that of the specific forms through which power over possibility can be asserted. Is the theory and practice of *potentia* as (de-)instituent power from below not stuck all too often in an abstract opposition between the horizontal and the vertical, and hampered by an association of structure or form with constituted *potestas*?

The chronopolitical and organizational implications of contemporary potentialism are ambivalent, particularly in a context marked by forms of algorithmic management that seek to make potential history contiguous with the present through predictive probabilism—the project of the aforementioned "longtermist" think-tank theory. This is the context for Sean Cubitt's diagnosis that "potential as the presence of futurity is annihilated" in a world that no longer "distinguishes between real and probabilistic."[44] With the proliferation of "prediction products" based on data extraction, future (consumer) behaviors can become transparent. By processing vast quantities of data, algorithms can detect patterns; a classic example in the relevant literature is "vegetarians miss fewer flights." It is no longer merely a matter of extrapolation based on past data, but of real-time data mining and pattern recognition allowing for instant feedback. Thus "a handful of now measurable personal characteristics, including the 'need for love,' predict the likelihood of 'liking a brand'"—or voting for a party.[45] Algorithmic culture is thus based on a probabilistic logic. On the macro level, forms of social emergence become probabilistic trend forecasting within the *Katastrophenmanagement* that is contemporary governance. If the climate is such a complex system that weather emergencies such as extreme heatwaves are hard to predict in detail, it is well-known that "the danger of feedback loops" increases the likelihood of such "unexpected events"—so how unexpected are they, really?[46]

The real disaster is the seeming lack of options, or the reduction of *potential forms and histories* to a limited set of *abstract possibilities,* which are then transcoded into *statistical probabilities*—though certain dramatic possibilities with low probability can come to command much attention and massive resources. *What We Owe the Future* by prominent longtermist William MacAskill is a case in point. He first paints a grand vista of the "potential future of civilization," which far outruns that of "the average mammalian species," due to human reason and technological prowess: "The earth will remain habitable for hundreds of millions of years. If we survive that long, with the same population per century as now, there will be a million future people for every person alive today. And if humanity ultimately takes to the stars, the timescales become literally astronomical"—something MacAskill illustrates with rows of Otto Neurath–style figures representing future generations.[47] The potential is vast, but so are the risks of AI or bioterrorism snuffing out humankind. One particularly hallucinatory passage is worth quoting in full:

> Many extinction risk specialists consider engineered pandemics the second most likely cause of our demise this century, just behind artificial intelligence. At the time of writing, the community forecasting platform Metaculus puts the probability of an engineered pandemic killing at least 95 percent of people by 2100 at 0.6 percent. Experts I know typically put the probability of an extinction-level engineered pandemic this century at around 1 percent; in his book *The Precipice*, my colleague Toby Ord puts the probability at 3 percent. Even if you dispute the precise numbers, I think that in no way can we rule out such a possibility. And even if the probability is low, it is still high enough that preventing such a catastrophe should be a key priority of our time.[48]

The juggling of possibilities and probabilities on the basis of phenomenally sketchy sources is used to justify what seems to be a foregone conclusion.[49] Artificial Intelligence is key for MacAskill's vision of "economies [that] could double in size over months or years rather than decades," though how that would work on a finite planet, before space colonization, is anyone's guess. MacAskill is particularly slippery when it comes to climate change, doing his best to put a techno-optimistic, greenwashing spin on things: "Decarbonisation is a proof of concept for longtermism. Clean energy innovation is so

robustly good, and there is so much still to do in that area that I see it as a baseline longtermist activity against which other potential actions can be compared."[50] However, taking it as a given that decarbonization is going well, MacAskill emphasizes that "moral change, wisely governing the ascent of artificial intelligence, preventing engineered pandemics, and averting technological stagnation are all at least as important, and often radically more neglected."[51]

MacAskill briefly considers the "low-probability but worst-case climate scenario," but fails to see how "even this could lead directly to civilizational collapse." The real risk, he thinks, is the depletion of fossil fuels in this century, as in that case "we would use up a resource that might be crucial for recovery after the collapse of civilization" (due to nuclear war or bioterrorism, rather than climate change).[52] In the subtext of *What We Owe the Future*, then, we find a different conception of potentiality: the potential (fossil) energy needed to fuel the process of accelerating economic innovation. Andreas Malm's study of the adoption of the steam engine and the emergence of "fossil capital" in Britain around 1800 teems with references to the "potential energy" contained in water power and coal. This is potential energy in terms of horsepower. How much quantifiable horsepower does the heat of combustion of a certain amount of coal generate? Any comparison is ultimately complex and involves social and political factors.[53] These days, the hidden ecological costs are increasingly coming to the surface: whether wind power is more expensive than coal, oil, or gas also depends on whether the ecological consequences are factored into the equation.

As MacAskillian slogans greet us from the billboards of potentialist propaganda, it is urgent to reclaim, rethink, and reimagine potentiality itself. What the likes of MacAskill will not admit is that the catastrophe is already here. How's that for predictability? The inhabitants of this planet are already in the storm—some perhaps trying, as suggested by Aimé Césaire in a passage glossed by Malcolm Ferdinand, to get to its center, to the eye of the hurricane.[54] We are immanent to the catastrophe, and cannot dialectically magic our way out of it in one fell swoop. Obviously, some are much more affected by the accelerating slow violence then others—but the LA fires drive home the point that privilege can be surprisingly shaky, and this can be one prompt for politicization, for forming coalitions. In Fred Moten's delightful gloss on remarks by the Black Panthers' Fred Hampton:

> The problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't some-thing that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneu-ver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?[55]

In the face of the longtermists' lavishly funded ideological dross, we need to develop a potential politics, or politics of potentiality. Such a project refuses to limit human and social potential to the mathematical sublime of vast sums of future human lives. and tries to reassert power over possibility. This would indeed amount to a *potentialism against probability*, as T. J. Demos suggests: "It's against probability that we must now act, for a future of disruption, and for the emergence of the possible beyond the emergency of the present."[56] Here, a slogan from a 1908 publication which has been excavated by the team of Hägerstensåsens Medborgarhus—a social and cultural center in Stockholm—and knitted into scarves designed by Evelina Mohei is rather to the point: "Everything that is necessary is possible." Another phrase form the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) was recently quoted by Natascha Sadr Haghighian: "In time, we will demand the impossible in order to wrest it from that which is possible."[57]

Suggestive and inspiring as such slogans may be, the obvious question is how they can become truly performative speech acts rather than impotent incantations. They need to be complemented by hard questions. Are there ways of intervening actively in processes of emergence—in forming them? What of truly different forms and relationships—emancipatory and redistributive forms and relationships? Preserving potentiality and preventing it from slipping into constituted and actualized form has become such a preoccupation that the dialectic of potentiality and actuality, and of potential form and actual organization structure, has atrophied. Just how can potentialities beyond and against the merely probable be actualized? *How do we organize potential political form into relations, organizations and coalitions*—which, from the vantage point of the present, appear as so many *improbable possibilities*?

In the spring of 2024, a vision of Gaza in 2035 drawn up by Benjamin Netanyahu's office was made public: digital renderings of a Dubai-style free-trade zone with skyscrapers, high-speed train lines, highways, and a booming port—bereft of any traces of Palestinian lives. A longtermist utopia, this chilling vision of extraction and extermination will likely strike the Muskian tech broligarchy as a promising model.[58] At the same time, artists and activists have proposed and proliferated other images of Palestine and the Levant, as well as enacted divergent social relations in doing so: by circulating texts, producing zines, and organizing reading groups, by producing films and hosting screenings.[59] In the process, improbably—seemingly even impossibly—potential histories are opened up, with Peter Linebaugh's essay "Palestine & the Commons: Or, Marx & the Musha'a"

Vrije Universiteit restroom door, 2024. Photo: Nicoline van Harskamp.

being turned into a zine by the Learning Palestine collective as well as being incorporated in the "slow-growing reader" of printouts and photocopies produced in the context of Marwa Arsanios's project *Usufructuraties of earth* at BAK. Here, a theoretical and artistic engagement with a form of common land use in the Ottoman Levant becomes a way of imagining potentiality otherwise, in forms that preenact (im)possible actualizations.

X

This essay is based on parts of chapter 2 of my forthcoming book *States of Divergence* (Minor Compositions). Thanks to Sven Anders Johansson for a stimulating exchange on matters of potentiality.

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1
Issue 16 of the *Chto Delat* newspaper (March 2007) was dedicated to "Potentialities Beyond Political Sadness," and contains a drawing by Monika Marklinger that appropriates/detourns the Microsoft slogan.

2
In early 2024, the university closed the Future of Humanity Institute, Nick Bostrom's longtermist think tank. See Nick Robins-Early, "Oxford Shuts Down Institute Run by Elon Musk-Backed Philosopher," *The Guardian* , April 20, 2024 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/19/oxford-future-of-humanity-institute-closes . William MacAskill is a also a key player in Oxford's Global Priorities Institute.

3
Alexander Zaitchick, "The Heavy Price of Longtermism," *New Republic* , October 24, 2022 https://newrepublic.com/article/168047/longtermism-future-humanity-william-macaskill .

4
See remarks by Quinn Slobodian in "Crack-Up Capitalism: How Billionaire Elon Musk's Extremism Is Shaping Trump Admin & Global Politics," *Democracy Now!,* January 6, 2025 . See also Slobodian, "Elon Musk Wants Us to Have More Children," *New Stat esman* , July 29, 2024 .

5
Nick Bostrom, "Astronomical Waste: The Opportunity Cost of Delayed Technological Development" (2003), quoted in Yannick Fritz, "Philosophy Against the Present: The Foundations and Critique of Longtermism," *Umbau*, no. 2 (n.d.) https://umbau.hfg-karlsruhe.de/posts/philosophy-against-the-present-the-foundations-and-critique-of-longtermism .

6
Nick Bostrom, "Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority," *Global Policy* 4, no. 1 (February 2013).

7
Nick Bostrom, "Existential Risks FAQ," v. 1.2 (2013) https://existential-risk.com/faq.pdf ; Hilary Greaves and William MacAskill, *The Case for Strong Longtermism* , Global Priorities Institute Working Paper no. 5 (Global Priorities Institute, 2021) https://globalprioritiesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Case-for-Strong-Longtermism-GPI-Working-Paper-June-2021-2-2.pdf .

8
Fritz, "Philosophy Against the Present."

9
See https://www.ressler.at/not_sinking_swarming/ .

10
Sandra Leonie Field, *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 8.

11
Aristotle, *The Metaphysics,* trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin, 2004); for form and matter, see in particular book Zeta 6–9, pp. 185–99; for potentiality, in particular book Theta, pp. 253–82.

12
My wording here is inspired by Werner Heisenberg, *Physik und Philosophie* (S. Hirzel, 1959), 137.

13
It should be noted, however, that Aristotle's terms have proven ambiguous, with *dunamis* having been interpreted variously as logical possibility and as capacity. Both Schelling and Agamben fall into the latter camp. See Kevin Attell, "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power," *Diacritics* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 39.

14
Field, *Potentia,* 34. Field here quotes from Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 17.

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Field, *Potentia*, 34.

16
Thomas Kjeller Johansen, *The Powers of Aristotle's Soul* (Oxford university Press, 2012), 13.

17
Nicholas Kahm, "Aquinas and Aristotelians on Whether the Soul is a Group of Powers," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2017): 115.

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Field, *Potentia*, 68.

19
Field, *Potentia*, 80–91.

20
See, in particular, chapters 16–19 of *Leviathan.*

21
See Field, *Potentia,* 159–63, for an analysis based on Negri's 1981 book *The Savage Anomaly*, on which the later collaboration with

Hardt was built.

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Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2005), 212–22.

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Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (Addison-Wesley, 1994) contributed largely to popularizing the language of hives, swarms, and emergent properties.

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Ben Quinn and Dan Milmo, "How TikTok Bots and AI Have Powered a Resurgence in UK Far-Right Violence," *The Guardian,* August 2, 2024 .

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Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44. For his reading of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," see in particular "Bartleby, or On Contingency," in *Potentialities* , ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999); and "Bartleby," chap. 9 in *The Coming Community* , trans. Michael Hardt (University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 35–37.

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29
Dews, *Schelling's Late Philosophy* , 146–50; F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42* , ed. Manfred Frank (Suhrkamp, 1977), 154–64.

30
Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42,* 131.

31
Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42* , 156–64.

32
Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42,* 172–74.

33
Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42* , 165–83, 194–96.

34
Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42* , 162.

35
Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 48.

36
Agamben, "Bartleby," 35–36.

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Stephen K. White, "Affirmation and Weak Ontology in Political Theory: Some Rules and Doubts," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 2 (2000).

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39
Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* , 212.

40
The quotation is from Yve-Alain Bois, "Whose Formalism?," in *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (March 1996), 11. For Simondon's critique of hylomorphism, see *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* , trans. Taylor Adkins (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 21–54.

41
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42
Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 220.

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Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019), 277.

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The quotations are from Helena Horton and Nina Lakhani, "Longer Heatwaves Driven by 'Turbo-Charged' Climate Change, Say Scientists," *The Guardian,* July 17, 2023 .

47
William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future* (Basic Books, 2022), caption of Figure 1.2 in chap. 1. I have not been able to source a paginated version of the book online, and I have no interest in obtaining a copy of the print edition.

48
MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future,* chap. 5.

49
"In longtermism, these expected probabilities are used to feign objectivity, but in reality can be arbitrary or even informed by the person invoking them." Fritz, "Philosophy Against the Present."

50
MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future,* chap. 1.

51
MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future,* chap. 1.

52
MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future,* chap. 6.

53
Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global* Warming (Verso, 2016). As Malm emphasizes , coal was not necessarily cheaper than water power, but steam-powered factories in large urban centers gave the capitalists greater control over production and greater power over the workers. Malm's magisterial study has serious blind spots, including his neglect of slavery and the plantation system, and his Leninist and statist orientation. "Leninist practice always relies on an ecology of struggles, but demands a strategic decision which radically suppresses it. Its line—take state power—is fiercely critical of, yet relies on a popular power it cannot bring into being, and that it does not respect, even as it mythologizes it. Again, the prioritization of agency-as-unified-will—be it a green Lenin or a climate Leviathan—obscures other forms of agency which are as essential to the abolition of fossil capital." Bue Rübner Hansen, "The Kaleidoscope and the Catastrophe: On the Clarities and Blind Spots of Andreas Malm," *Viewpoint Magazine* , April 14, 2021 https://viewpointmag.com/2021/04/14/the-kaleidoscope-of-catastrophe-on-the-clarities-and-blind-spots-of-andreas-malm/ .

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56
T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (Sternberg Press, 2023), 88.

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Mikael Brunila

Taking AI into the Tunnels

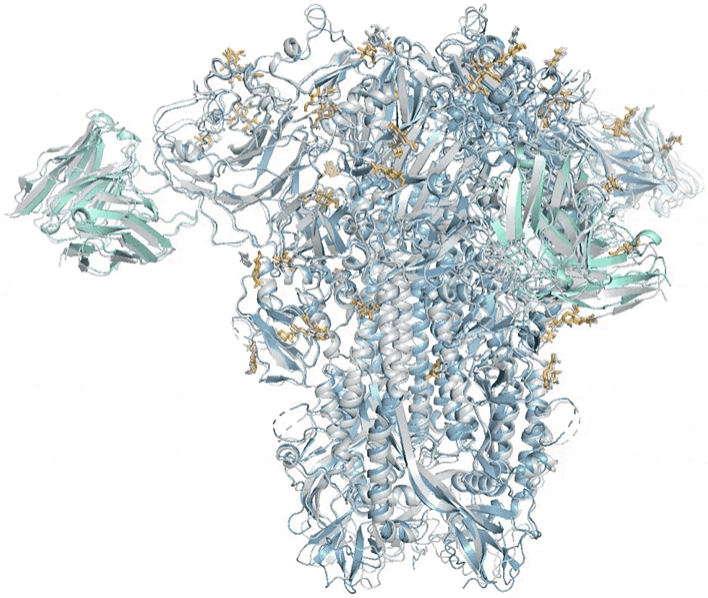
I.

In the fall of 2017, I attended a computer science class at Columbia University in New York City. The topic of the course was natural language processing (NLP), and the lecture was about representing words using computational tools. It would be a year before the first large-language models (LLMs) would be released, but already the field of linguistic AI was abuzz. Neural networks offered the promise of astonishing improvements over previous approaches in computational linguistics. Not only could they help us push the bar on old tasks like classifying and understanding pieces of text, but recent advancements in domains like text summarization hinted at an even grander promise: soon, computers would be able to produce, or "generate," language in a manner indistinguishable from human discourse.

While the rest of the world was mostly oblivious to this nascent technology, tech influencers were already pairing Promethean promises with dire warnings. AI would remake the world. In 2014, during an aerospace summit at MIT, Elon Musk cautioned that humans would be "summoning the demon" through AI, suggesting that a power was being manifested that would refuse to obey any master. Abstaining from outright demonology, Kathleen McKeown, my professor at Columbia, also resorted to the vocabulary of mysticism. During one particular class, McKeown, one of the old hands in the discipline, was introducing the concept of "word embeddings"—sequences of numbers that represent words in many dimensions and provide a fundamental building block for language models. I distinctly remember how McKeown presented a slide with the title "Word embeddings are magic."[1] "They work, but we don't quite understand why," she explained.

Today, state-of-the-art computational semantics are based not only on the famed "attention heads" of the "Transformer" LLM but also on this effective but opaque technique that McKeown was describing, the "embedding" of words. While the attention head helps an LLM know what to attend to in a given piece of text, embeddings provide the fundamental representation of all linguistic elements that the model relies on to make sense of natural languages. In this sense, embeddings are much like the bit, with the important distinction that they are explicitly *semantic*. If two words are similar, they will be represented by similar embeddings, i.e., similar sequences of floating-point numbers. By contrast, words with similar bit representations are not necessarily similar or related at all.

Back at McKeown's lecture, my head was spinning. Not because the subject was difficult for me (which it certainly was), but because the representation of lexical structures of meaning through arbitrary numeric sequences seemed so utterly foreign to me. In her slides, McKeown showed how word embeddings enabled a strange sort of lexical algebra. By adding and subtracting word embeddings, we



7PNM, Spike protein of a common cold virus (Coronavirus OC43): AlphaFold 3's structural prediction for a spike protein (blue) of a cold virus as it interacts with antibodies (turquoise) and simple sugars (yellow), accurately matches the true structure (gray). AlphaFold uses a Transformer-architecture similar to many large-language models (LLMs). Source: AlphaFold.

could inductively explore conceptual relationships that usually were mapped using natural language or laborious systems of deductive logic. By adding their respective embeddings, we could, without any pre-given "ontology" of concepts, show how various words were related to each other. A slide displayed an example that is today canonical: king − man + woman = queen.[2] I followed this perplexing performance with increasing fascination. After all, I was—somewhat naively—used to thinking of language, discourse, and meaning as almost entirely qualitative and often quite intimate fields of study, whose depths were explored more under the guidance of authors such as Foucault and Derrida than under the tutelage of your computer science professor.[3] McKeown's lecture filled me with both dread and awe. If semantic structures could be so effectively quantified, we would soon witness entirely new forms of science, poetry, literature, and even governance and power.

The production of embeddings is relatively straightforward. By letting a neural network predict words from their context, its internal structures (i.e., embeddings) end up reflecting real relationships in language. First, a model is shown a sentence like "the cat sat on the …" Then, using embeddings for each of these "context" words, it predicts the appropriate "target word," which here might be "mat." If the wrong word is predicted, a little penalty is applied to show which way the model should correct the embeddings (a technique known as "gradient descent"). By repeating this task thousands, millions, and now even billions of times, models develop the embeddings or "weights" that—along with some important other mechanisms—power the modern LLM.

Eight years after McKeown's lecture, LLMs and their embeddings have entered the daily lives of innumerable people, whether directly through the graphical interfaces of chat services such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, or indirectly through the backend of search engines, mapping apps, and the like. Embeddings are everywhere, not just in language: Spotify listens, clicks during a browser session, likes on a dating app, and any other sequence of digital events can be represented as embeddings. The models underlying these services tend to be far more complex than those presented by McKeown, but many of the principles are the same: most AI relies on embeddings and similar digital structures, "magic" that works but that remains opaque even to those who develop the technology. At the same time, the sense of awe in the face of this magic has become nearly ubiquitous.

II.

The magical vocabulary invoked by Professor McKeown and the satanic prophesies proclaimed by Musk draw on a much older arcana surrounding not just science, but information theory and the computational sciences in particular.[4]

Many cheerleaders and alarmists alike seem to think of AI in terms that are reminiscent of French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace's thought experiment about an omniscient demon.[5] "Laplace's demon" knew the exact locations and momentum of all the particles in the world and could, therefore, predict the future with perfect accuracy. Somewhat similarly, AI is often depicted as a "god trick" that establishes a gaze that sees everything while being nowhere.[6] Somewhat akin to Laplace's thought experiment, a sufficiently large LLM is thought to converge towards perfect knowledge of things themselves, expanding the frontier of scientific innovation and socioeconomic optimization. In this conception, the world is seen as a game, much like Go or chess, which can eventually be "won" (as AI agents have already done in the case of these games). If sociologists did their best in the 1990s to convince us that we live in a "risk society" in which all actors strive to minimize future "losses,"[7] AI offers the ultimate solution to this state of constant worry and malaise. AI-driven information systems can use data gathered from our smartphones and other devices to anticipate everything, finding the optimal solution to any utility function. Increasingly, fridges, cars, light bulbs, and other mundane machines are also recruited into this vast network of informers, as they are made "smart" and brought into the fold of ubiquitous digital surveillance. Laplace's demon is the fear and fantasy of total control.

While this demon encapsulates many of the hopes and fears around AI, it relies on a somewhat naive determinism that was put in question by twentieth-century quantum physics. According to the so-called "uncertainty principle," one cannot simultaneously know both the exact position and momentum of a particle. The type of perfect knowledge that powers Laplace's demon is, in fact, impossible. The universe is probabilistic, not deterministic. Consequently, the real question is how to make order amidst these probabilities. Only thus could the powers of Laplace's demon be approximated.

For LLMs, this process of mapping the probabilities of human language started with the internet. The data repository that was necessary to train modern-day AI was created through thirty years of incessant "content production." Only today can we begin to grasp the true significance of the concentration of online activity into various "platforms" that began in the late 2000s and came to dominate the internet in the 2010s. The anatomy of AI is the key to the anatomy of the present-day internet, much like Marx thought that "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape."[8]

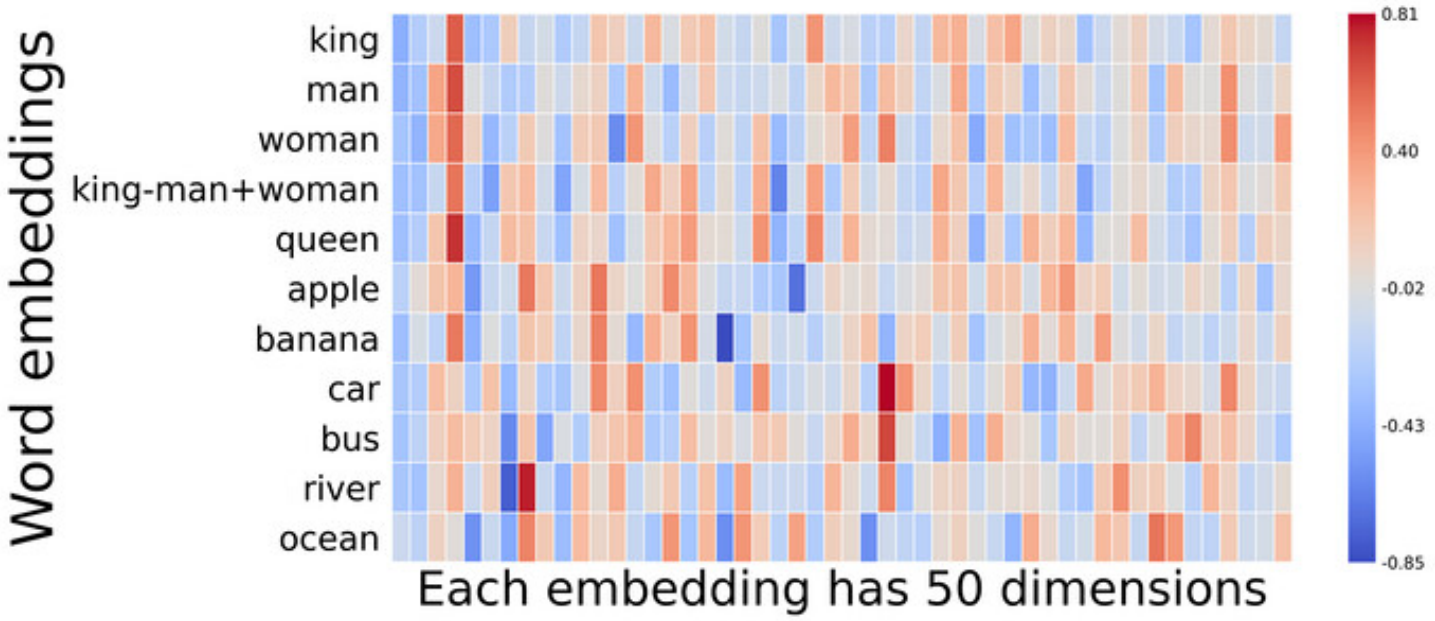
While the demon of AI relies on probabilities, it is no less terrifying than Laplace's creature. Today, AI is already generating a new set of significant power imbalances: AI-assisted drones have, for the past year and more, been dropping bombs in the Middle East and monitoring protesters around the world.[9] LLM bots are scouring the web for inappropriate and "harmful" speech, in whatever way this is defined at a given moment in time.[10] Neural networks monitor workers and measure their efficiency (is the worker taking too many breaks? are they going to the bathroom too often?)[11] "Citizens will be on their best behavior because we are constantly recording and reporting everything that's going on," said Oracle cofounder Larry Ellison during the company's 2024 financial analyst meeting. Not long after, he was announced as a backer of the $500 billion AI initiative of the second Trump administration.

While these glimpses into the future are concerning, they do not announce the arrival of an all-powerful being. We will not be ruled by Laplace's demon but by some other creature. How could its powers be undermined?

III.

The historiography of AI often distinguishes between two distinct phases: symbolic AI and the "connectionism" of current models, where the former relies on a vast accumulation of hard-coded rules and the latter on statistical learning. The prehistory of connectionism is usually found in the cybernetics of the 1940s and '50s.[12] In this interpretation, the first wave of connectionism coincided with the rise of cybernetics, while the second wave began in the late 1980s when increases in computational capacity and a slew of innovations in neural networks and efficient differential optimization created the conditions for a renaissance in connectionist AI.

From the vantage point of contemporary AI research, the key innovations in cybernetics were threefold. First, Claude Shannon's information theory showed that any single "event" can be represented as a set of "yes" or "no" choices, i.e., "bits," ones and zeros.[13] Second, and somewhat along the same lines, Walter Pitts and Warren McCulloch's simple model of an "artificial neuron"—extended by Frank Rosenblatt to the famed "perceptron"—showed that even complex mathematical functions can be reduced to a set of simple functions.[14] Third, theories of feedback and teleology proposed by Norbert Wiener and others suggested that the world should be grasped not through the essence of things themselves, but superficially through the observed inputs and outputs of various systems.[15] If a system is given a goal (teleology) that it can strive towards iteratively by learning from its mistakes (feedback), then the system will gradually develop the information structures (bits, or, in language models, embeddings) and schemas needed to achieve these goals. This is also the paradigm that connectionist AI relies on.



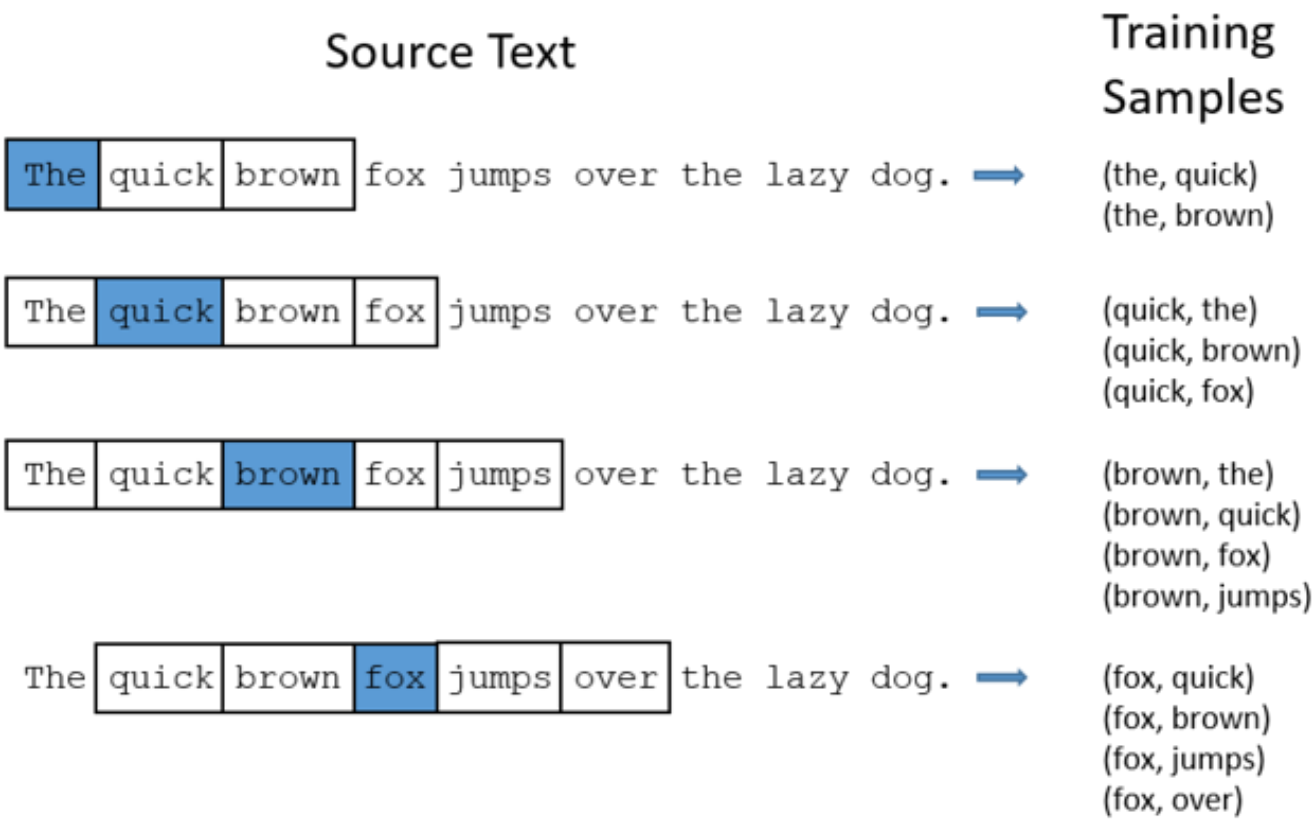
In a very simple language model, each word has one embedding. In this figure, with embeddings from a pre-LLM model known as Word2Vec, each word is represented by fifty numbers, which are shown as a range of colors. In contemporary LLMs, the embeddings are more complex, as they are usually context-dependent: i.e., the embedding for "bank" would be different if the context was "financial bank" or "river bank". Figure by the author.

After World War II, the conceptual innovations of cybernetics spread like wildfire. Its profound influence has been traced through various literary genres, the social sciences, economics, psychology, biology, and so on.[16] However, the impact of cybernetics on artificial intelligence was initially short-lived. Although Shannon's bit revolutionized computer science, the other basic principles of cybernetics were too demanding for the computers of the time. There simply was no way to actually implement ideas of feedback through learning at scale. For several decades, AI research focused not on feedback and neurons, but on symbolic systems governed by predetermined, precise instructions and logical guidelines.

It was only in the late 1980s that the second wave of connectionist AI began, coinciding with the rise of the internet and the widespread adaptation of home computers in the broader consumer market. AI researchers in the late 1980s demonstrated, finally, what cyberneticists had already hinted at: combining *simple* mathematical functions, a neural network could, in theory, estimate any *complex* mathematical function.[17] In other words: by combining simple functions into multiple "layers," neural networks could model almost any function. This is why the process of "training" a neural network is called "deep learning." A sufficiently "deep" and wide neural network would, in theory, be able to express any mathematical function, according to the basic tenets of connectionism.

Since cybernetics had—through its impact on sciences such as sociology, neuroscience, and economics—already conditioned the Western mind to think of all social phenomena as functions, neural networks could now offer the promise of a world where *everything* could be modeled. For two decades, this promise was a dream that was shared mainly by faculty in computer science and mathematics departments, but at least since the rollout of ChatGPT, it has become mainstream ideology and paradigmatic "normal science." Alarmists like Eliezer Yudkowsky warn us that the world could be annihilated by an omnipotent AI, while an endless stream of rapturous CEOs and researchers from a small set of industry leaders herald a better, more controlled world brought forth by AI.

In either case, the demon of AI will be summoned through a machine that can estimate the probabilities of "events"—from words in a sentence to the incidence of crime in an area—with increasing accuracy. But what counts as an "event" is, if not entirely, then at least largely subjective. Indeed, one of the key insights of cybernetics is the distinction between "system" and "world."[18] In the cybernetic framework, each system has its own "world," consisting of all the possible outcomes and entities that the system can perceive. A famous example is the tick, whose world the biologist Jakob von Üexkull described in works that preceded but greatly influenced cybernetics.[19] A tick sits on a branch, waiting for certain odors and patterns of light that distinguish its prey from the environment. Once it is on an animal, the tick can sense the heat of its skin and distinguish hairless patches of skin from those with hair. The "world" of the tick is composed of these signals of light, smell, and heat. Changes in these



Word embeddings are formed by training a language model through various prediction tasks. The figure shows a classic language modelling task, where the model is asked to predict the context words (white frame) from a given target word (blue frame). By repeating this type of task millions of times—along with some important post-training alignment work—a model can be trained to respond to prompts on a service like ChatGPT. Source: Chris McCormick.

variables qualify as events for the tick. These are the inputs it recognizes as significant and real.

Turning back to statistical modeling, the "world" of a classical sequential model predicting the weather might consist of the states "sunny," "cloudy," and "rainy." Transitions between these states are the possible "events" that the model can recognize. The world of GPT models, operating on sequences of characters and words, is many times larger, with complex relations drawn between myriad entities. Nevertheless, it is still limited to a set of discrete events.[20] One limit of the model consists of all the letters and words in the data seen by the model. A "multimodal" model, which combines images and words, also recognizes various combinations of the additive primary RGB colors. Sensors that collect data for remote sensing using drones, aircraft, or satellites can produce data for models that utilize hundreds of frequencies of light, many of them outside the range of human vision. This is their world, contained and restricted by the data that the model can access.

Of course, data is not magically "out there," but must always be produced. Borrowing jargon from the philosophy and sociology of science, we could say that data requires "translation."[21] Just as an English sentence can only be rewritten in Finnish by doing the actual work of translation, the production of data requires its own kind of translation work to make use of what those sensors gather, for instance. Such translation requires a certain amount of effort: it takes energy to complete. It also always demands a certain work of interpretation and is undertaken from a certain point of view.[22] To interpret new semantic structures, we have to draw on the structures that are already at hand, grounded in our previous experiences. Interpretation unfolds in the present, in a given place and at a given time, yet it does so in light of the past and under the shadow it casts. In some sense, translation is therefore always violent: certain things are highlighted, others go unnoticed or are willfully erased.[23] Often translation is actively repressive.

The diversity of perspectives implied by the sociology of translation is not entirely foreign to the science and industries of AI. In 2023, OpenAI released the "GPTs" service (with "GPT" pluralized), which allows users to create specialized GPT models based on a centralized and more general GPT model. In machine learning,

"fine-tuning" a large model for a specific purpose, such as classifying emails as spam or ham, has long been a prevailing practice. Nonetheless, these perspectives are always reducible to the perspective of one central view, the "eye of the master," to borrow Matteo Pasquinelli's phrasing.[24] Harnessing particular models to serve the learning purposes of larger, more general models is fairly straightforward for a company like OpenAI or Google. Yet despite this, the proliferation of AI models in the plural might just provide a vantage point from which to perceive a future outside the centralized, omniscient gaze of the AI demon, with its Laplacean aspirations. So where would we turn from here?

IV.

Some guidance can be found in the movements for peer-to-peer file sharing and "online piracy" which boomed in the 2000s, during the prehistory of the platform economy that we have come to take for granted today.

Before Spotify's streaming model, peer-to-peer file sharing seemed like an inevitable future. When the copyright industry successfully undid the first file-sharing service, Napster, in 2001, several new services immediately replaced it. The most important of these, the Pirate Bay, was brought to court, but without any real effect beyond the harm caused to a handful of individuals.[25] The founders were handed hefty fines and given short prison sentences, but the service remained in operation. Only Spotify managed to challenge file-sharing in earnest, with carrot rather than stick.[26] The streaming service was easier and more consumer-friendly than downloading and running torrent-tracking software, as it offered a simple interface that required little or no technical understanding. Meanwhile, stricter copyright legislation and more aggressive persecution against offenders allowed for tighter control of the dwindling pool of file-sharers. Capitalism worked as it always works: as a global embodiment of cybernetic principles, a giant machine that eventually returns all lines of flight back to its motions, with both stick *and* carrot, discipline *and* control.

Amid this crisis, the Swedish blogosphere adjacent to the pirate movement started outlining various principles and operational modalities for a new and emergent internet politics.[27] The Pirate Bay, which initially gave the finger to the copyright industry, represented the epitome of an "accelerationism" that proclaimed the unlimited and ever-faster sharing of bits, with no concern for potential repression or societal disruptions. Effectively, the Pirate Bay "channeled" and multiplied the growing desire for entertainment that characterizes late-capitalist societies, accelerating it as much as possible.[28] At this moment, amidst the relative marginalization of file-sharing after the emergence of Spotify and other streaming services, with increased repression targeting not only file-sharing but also "online" political movements, new tactics were necessary. This felt particularly urgent in Sweden, where new wiretapping legislation gave the government sweeping powers to intercept and monitor traffic directly from internet cables.

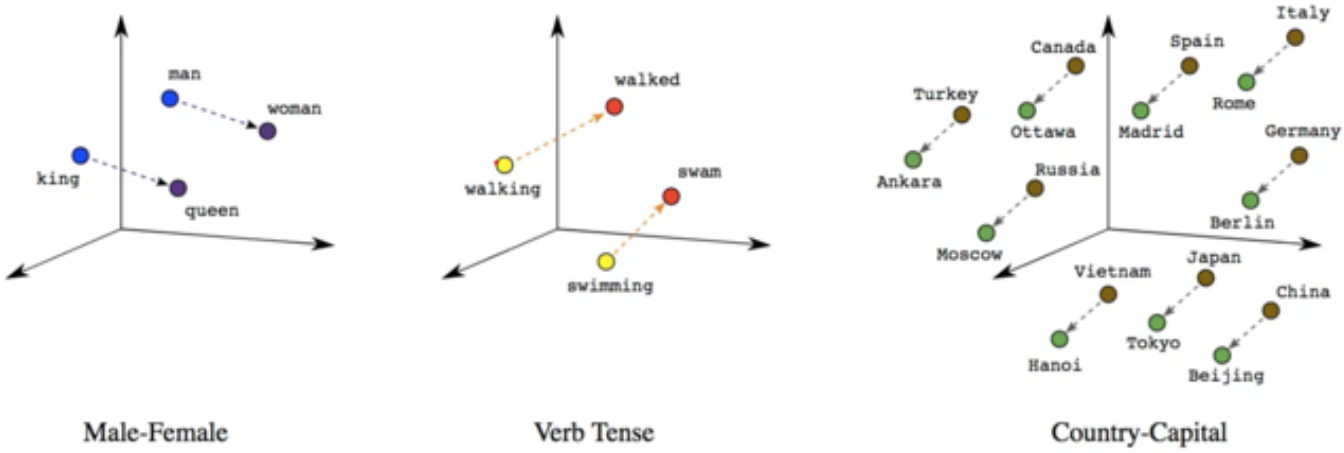
Some commentators at the time—including former members of the Pirate Bay–affiliated Piratbyrån and activists in the hacking collective Telecomix—suggested that the new politics of the internet required moving from a boastful acceleration to a more cautious pace and the "tunnel politics" of encrypted and private connections. As Christopher Kullenberg, one of these commentators, summarized:

> As matters stand now, we must think in terms of cipherspace, the net's tunnels of encrypted information. If the 00's was the decade when cyberspace imploded and we finally stopped thinking of the internet as a "virtual world," then the 2010's might be cipherspace + hackerspace.[29]

This notion of "tunneling" was borrowed from the practice of encrypting—i.e., "tunneling" online traffic using Tor, VPNs, I2P, and other methods.[30] An encrypted internet like this would be less a cyberspace than a *cipher* space. While tunnel politics enabled the continued traffic of copyrighted or otherwise "illicit" data over peer-to-peer networks, its main effect would be to emphasize a multitude of small worlds above and under the limitless bounds of the open internet. If everything is shared openly and directly, the worlds connected by tunnels will collapse. Instead, tunnels must be carefully and selectively dug between individual worlds. For example, the now-defunct What.Cd and Waffles.fm private torrent trackers were closed file-sharing sites, worlds with points of entry that were carefully guarded through referrals and memberships that required "seeding" over certain quotas. Instead of uniform acceleration, tunnels move at different speeds: sometimes they are painfully slow, other times blazingly fast.

The key difference between accelerationism and tunneling runs not only along the axes of speed and volume but also along the axis of visibility. When file sharing over peer-to-peer networks began, the vast majority of users openly declared their IP addresses, giving away their "identity" and location. By contrast, the entire point of tunneling is that everyone tries to be anonymous, sharing personal information only selectively. Beyond just online spaces, the idea of tunnel politics highlights encrypted connections between material hubs, "cipherspace + hackerspace."

In some very limited regards, tunneling is now mainstream. Since the NSA document leaks by Edward Snowden, there has been a new demand for both online privacy and device security.[31] Today, secure messaging



This classic illustration shows how embeddings can express lexical relations. The relationship between embeddings for words like "king" and "queen" is similar to the relationship between embeddings like "man" and "woman," as is demonstrated by the nearly parallel lines between the two word pairs. Similar relationships, for instance, can be drawn between word tenses or countries and capitals.

services like Signal are used not only by activists, journalists, military personnel, and government officials but also by many ordinary people. WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger both have end-to-end encryption built into them and recently even my own mother started, without my influence, using both a VPN and Signal.[32]

V.

What would it mean to accelerate or tunnel in the domain of AI? To grapple with this question, we need to also consider, in addition to acceleration and tunneling, a third term: centrality. Spotify was perfectly accelerationist, if we take acceleration to mean an increasingly fast transfer of more and more bits of data. The paradigm that shifted with Spotify and, more broadly the platform economy, was not about acceleration, but about centrality. It was centralization that destituted the previous strategy of acceleration. Instead of the peer-to-peer model where all users could host and share files, Spotify centralized all the power in the network to one node, cementing the client-server model of communication as the foundation for an internet that was all of a sudden only about various "apps."

In this sense, ChatGPT was something of a Spotify moment for AI, although this comparison must be made with many reservations: AI development was never a clandestine and horizontal activity, but always facilitated by scientific institutions with significant gatekeeping and dubious ties to both industry and military. Be that as it may, the explosion of research on neural networks in the 2010s happened in a very open and collaborative spirit. Before the latest GPT models, all the main models—from pre-LLM models like GloVe and Word2Vec to early LLMs like BERT and ELMo—were either open source or, at the very least, had open weights, meaning that their embeddings were freely available to download and fine-tune. ChatGPT took the insights from a fairly open research community and packaged them behind a convenient interface, making interface access free but enclosing the models and source code behind them. Now, we do not know what data the latest GPT models and most of their competitors are trained on, and we cannot download model embeddings and other "weights" for our own use. When we want to fine-tune models, we usually do so on OpenAI's paid platforms or by accessing their commercial API. If Spotify took our musical commons and packaged them into a paid service, ChatGPT goes much further. It packages our shared collective intelligence and sells it back to us as a convenient service.

Furthermore, by initiating the LLM race, OpenAI has created financial incentives for closing one of the last channels for reversing the gaze between user and platform: the free application programming interfaces (APIs) of platforms like Twitter and Reddit. Sites like Wikipedia, GitHub, Reddit, and Twitter are all repositories of data for LLM training. Even when the internet in the mid-2000s started to close around Facebook and gradually other major social media platforms, these sites for a long time maintained open APIs through which data from their platforms could be uploaded (this is also how the Cambridge Analytica scandal came about). However, in 2023 both Twitter and Reddit closed their APIs behind paywalls, bringing the counterrevolution against the open internet to a new culmination. Ironically, OpenAI, which was originally set up to produce open models for the

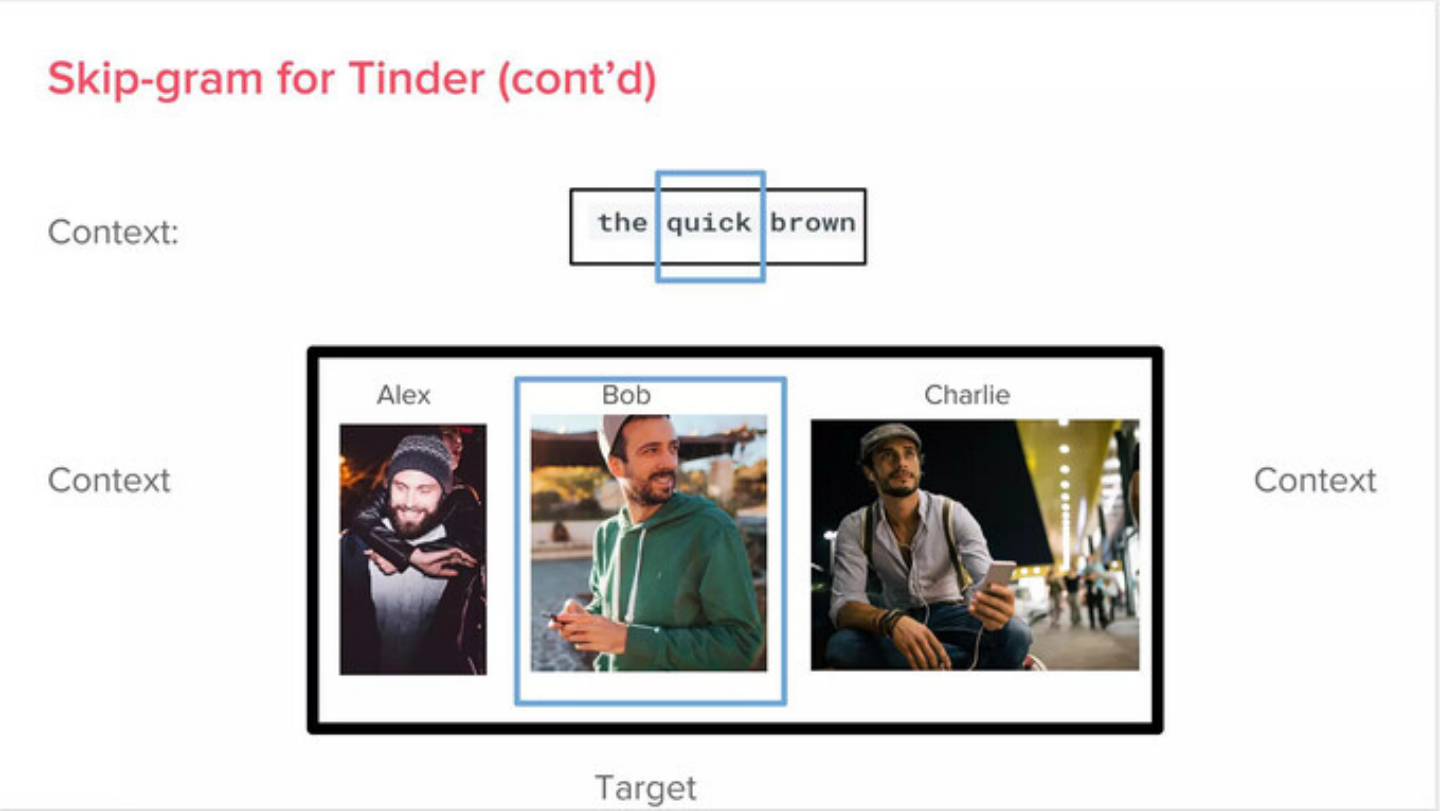
"benefits of all of humanity,"[33] has itself led this development, both by shutting down model development and by provoking other major platforms to guard more closely their own data, which suddenly has become a valuable resource for model training.

In this sense, the chatbot LLM—whether accessed through ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or DeepSeek—is just an extension of the platform economy. But something has nonetheless shifted. If the paradigm shift that Spotify brought about was about centralization (and convenience), the current paradigm shift is about *abstraction*, about the emergence of the embedding as a fundamental unit of information. When we look at the history of the internet in this way, this current watershed moment is about the development of the weights and embeddings on which neural networks depend. In them, information is condensed into opaque vector structures—a "machine semiotics"—that to most humans would be as inscrutable as ancient runes, but which can be used by the model to write prose or predict stock market movements.[34] In Marx's account of capitalism, the proliferation of the commodity form involves the abstraction of all concrete use values into the "thin air" of exchange value.[35] Embeddings make this especially literal: they are the highest level of abstraction of the semantic structures captured by an LLM, a compressed and partial truth of the discursive field of texts, images, and other media that was used to train the model.[36] The idea that "the medium is the message" has never been more true. In this regard, the embedding establishes a new "logic of sense" that is inscrutable for the human reader in its operation, legible—for laypeople and technical experts alike—mainly through probing the outputs that are generated when a model is prompted.

Once a certain threshold of abstraction has been passed, political strategy also has to adapt to that level of reality. Consequently, a comprehensive tunnel politics would have to grapple with the compression of discursive reality into the embedding. The acceleration started by Napster was also a result of a new form of abstraction, the compression of music into the MP3 file. Similarly, the tunnel politics of closed torrent trackers, VPN services, and apps like Signal has been all about bypassing and desitituting the surveillance apparatus brought forth by the centralization of online life in the platform economy. However, in theory, what was centralized after Spotify was not really the power to abstract per se. Rather, the centralization was a consequence of the so-called "network effect" in social media (a social network becomes more useful the more users it has) and what we might dub the "convenience effect" (people tend to prefer convenience over principle). What is happening now is different: it is the *very power to abstract* that needs to be contested.

In this sense, the lines of what would count as tunneling and acceleration in AI are somewhat blurry. Of course, the current LLM paradigm *is* acceleration. This type of AI only exists at scale; it does not exist and improve without more and more data. But it is far from clear that the current industry giants are truly accelerating AI. On the contrary, the enclosure of embeddings as intellectual property is—in the long run—likely to slow down the development of AI. Confining the development of models to an oligopoly of companies will, most likely, reduce the amount of effort put into the models and undermine possible innovation on other models, given that insights gained within OpenAI and Google will be unavailable to the wider scientific community as well as various hobby enthusiasts, small start-ups, etc. This type of competition is accelerationist only to the extent that it forces challengers to develop ad hoc modeling strategies—as happened with the models developed by the Chinese company DeepSeek, which in early 2025 suddenly leapfrogged ahead of closed-source models on many important AI leaderboards.[37] At the same time, various "safety" restrictions placed on models—while often well-intended—create a further layer of opacity around model design, which is unlikely to facilitate true experimentation with the centralized models.[38] In this sense, the real accelerators in AI might be found among developers of open-source and open-weight models. In addition to DeepSeek, a prime mover in this space has been the social media giant Meta, the latter a late-comer to the AI game and the former a geopolitical underdog due to American export restrictions on GPU chips. Meta's open-weight Llama model, its derivative models of various sizes, and truly open-source models like DeepSeek, Qwen, and (to a lesser extent) Mixtral already rival the flagship models of OpenAI and Google on a number of leaderboards.[39] Even more important have been start-ups that have focused less on models and more on ecosystems for sharing models. In this space, the primary actor is Hugging Face, which has developed an important platform for sharing not only models but also training data and AI apps.[40] Other noteworthy initiatives include open-source tools for running LLMs locally (e.g., Ollama), and at a more fundamental level, open-source programming frameworks for fitting AI models (e.g., PyTorch).

This accelerationism of open-weight and open-source models somewhat inevitably functions as a material practice to develop AI in and through a multiplicity of worlds. Within this paradigm, many models are being developed and deployed and anyone can refine and fine-tune them, but no single model acts as the arbiter of some final "truth." Open development also involves producing models of different sizes, more and more of which run locally on a laptop or smartphone, "on the ground" rather than out in the cloud. This is where, in the domain of AI, accelerationism converges with tunnel politics: instead of one model to rule them all, it provides a million models ruled, if not by all, at least by many. Developing different strategies for model training, models of various sizes and for different purposes, and curating



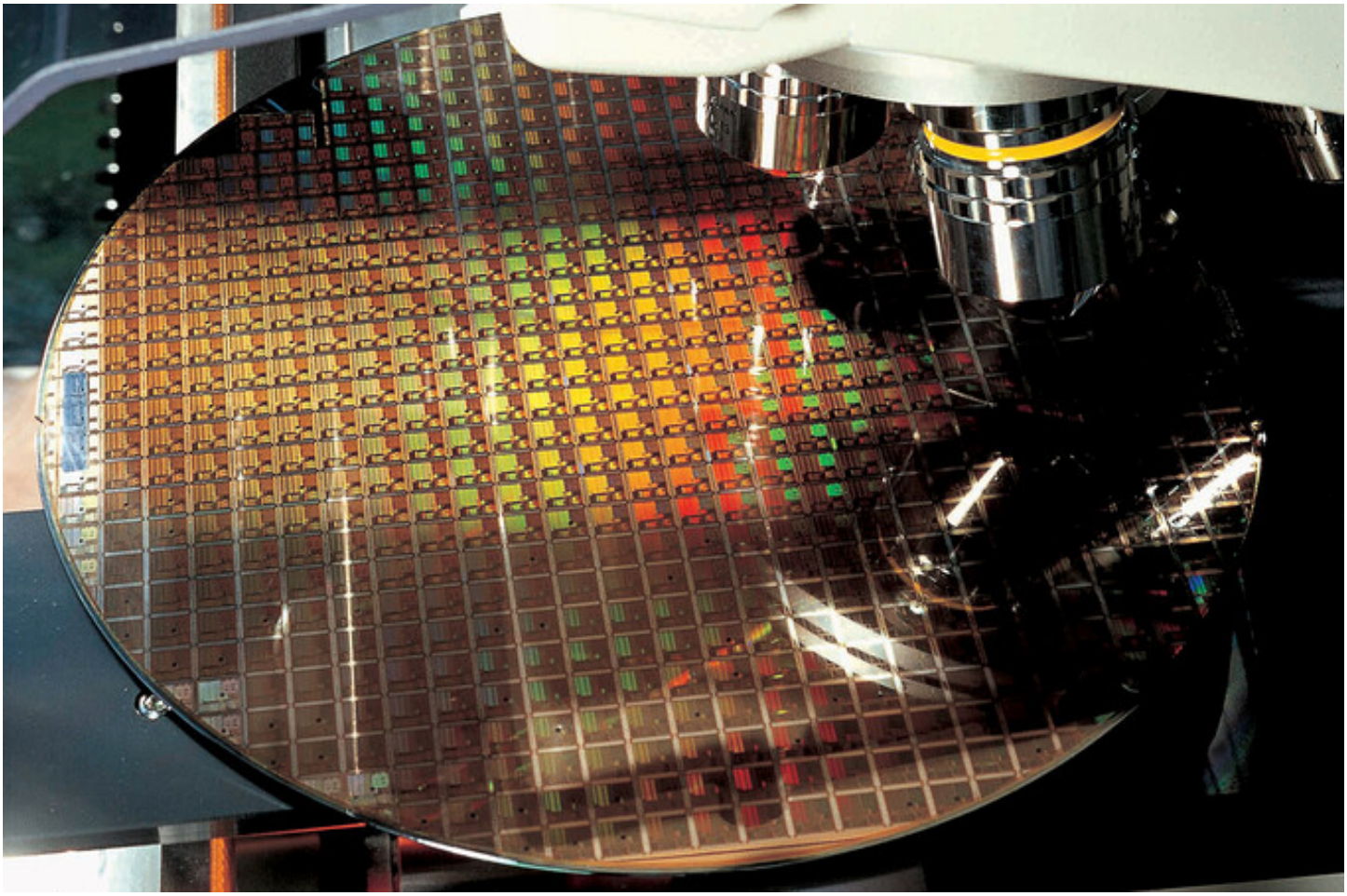
Material from Tinder at a 2017 machine learning conference in San Francisco. The figure shows how people on the app can be modelled similarly to words in a sentence, forming embeddings of users based on swipe behaviour. According to the presenters, the embeddings "represent possible characteristics of the swipee implicitly," including their interests and chosen career path.

datasets of various sizes and scopes—all of this accelerates abstraction, while also creating the conditions for tunneling AI. The most obvious example is the local deployment of smaller AI models: when models can be used on a local device without a network connection to a model running on a big server, the Laplacean aspirations of the AI demon are undercut. At the same time, the world (of data) is fragmented. Data can be collected and interpreted entirely locally. Is this brand of AI accelerationism then also a movement towards fragmentation: In this dawning world, are we on the brink of losing ourselves into completely local abstractions, each in our own burrow?[41]

VI.

Probably, and hopefully, not—at least not without reservations. For their part, Google and OpenAI are growing a system of local models (e.g., the GPTs), with the primary aim of growing the power, influence, and capacity of their centralized models. When you use a specialized GPT on the OpenAI server, you are still contributing to the accumulation of potential training data for that company. There are of course instances where this sort of continuous relationship between local users and a central node seems necessary to guarantee a particular type of service. In these cases, the central server is key for aggregating and disseminating local knowledge. For example, if Google Maps predicted traffic entirely locally, we would have no data on congestion and similar phenomena that can only be modeled and monitored through data sharing. Most urban drivers, being now used to real-time congestion updates, would never opt for such an app. If we look beyond AI as a chatbot and instead consider its myriad backend applications, open-source and open-weight models are not enough. AI is still likely to accelerate not just abstraction, but also centralization. The burrows offered by local LLM models will not save us from AI as panopticon.

So how do we resist the demonology of those who wish to bring about various Laplacean creatures, if neither fully rejecting nor fragmenting the technology is an option? In some ways, borrowing terms from Marxist political economy, we might say that an AI running on a server represents the total tyranny of the center over the periphery, while a fully individualized AI represents the total detachment of the periphery from the center.[42] The challenge, then, is not only to resist the dominance of the center but to *overcome this antinomy entirely*. Currently, the center is rapidly consolidating its dominance, despite challenges to incumbents in frontier LLM modeling. Since state-of-the-art embeddings are generated from volumes of data that are inconceivably large, and require a similarly

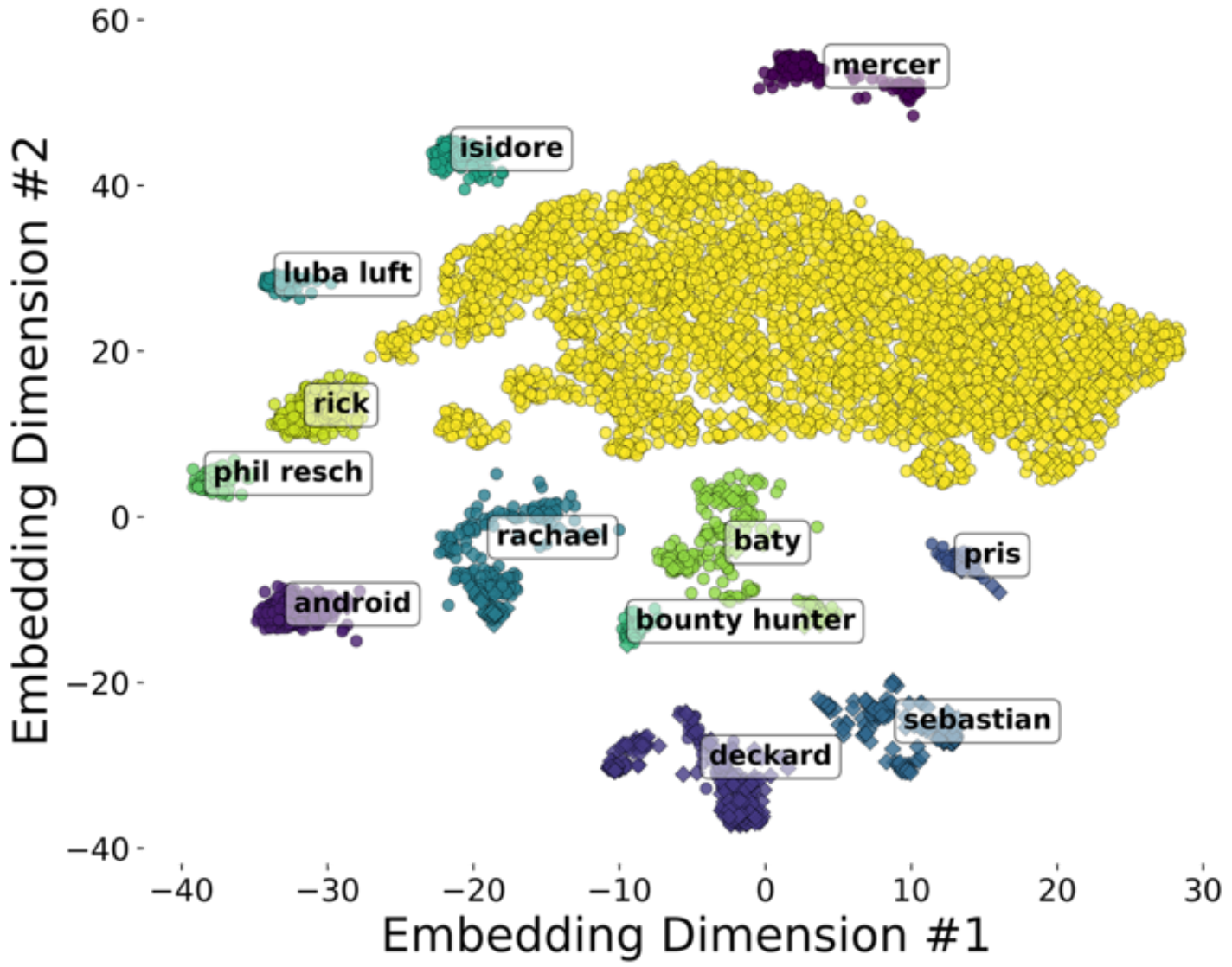


A silicon wafer being inspected at a TSMC semiconductor fabrication plant. Image: TSMC.

stupefying number of graphics processing units (GPUs) to train, our intellectual commons are being enclosed at breakneck speed.[43] Meanwhile, other developments are further speeding up this process. Elon Musk's Starlink will further centralize the infrastructure of the internet and, by extension, client-server-based AI. Starlink points towards a future where only those who can reach the stars can access the cloud.

In the early 2000s, the French collective Tiqqun suggested that cybernetic capitalism needed to be countered through "zones of offensive opacity."[44] Rather than complete detachment, such a zone would allow information to flow in, while keeping the zone itself hidden from the eyes of the master. Like extreme shades of black—e.g., Vantablack, Singularity Black, Black 3.0—this offensive opacity absorbs a lot of light but reflects very little. Guided by this idea, we might ask ourselves how we can *take* from AI without *giving* much of ourselves to it. How can we learn from LLMs without surrendering our own multiple worlds to just one or a few tech giants?

In the realm of digital technologies, the domain of encryption is where the idea of opacity has so far been most readily embraced, in stark contrast to the obsession with transparency in both AI ethics and fields like "critical algorithm studies." There are two particularly interesting paths to explore here. The first concerns decentralized training of AI models, so-called "federated learning." Through this approach, local models can share parameters with each other without sharing training data. The second concerns new encryption models to completely or partially protect user data from the server under the client-server model. These encryption frameworks would enable access to centralized services without revealing details (differential privacy) or anything at all (homomorphic encryption) about the client.[45] These tools thus allow us to request information from a server without revealing to the server what we are asking for, or even what it should return to us. Let us consider these two approaches in unison through an example: I might use a mapping app locally with a federated congestion model. My model is small and fits on my device. Instead of providing a centralized server with exact updates about unusual changes in the route and speed of my vehicle (potentially caused by congestion), I provide differentially encrypted updates on my congestion model to a limited pool of trusted users. I share the parameters of my model



The figure shows embeddings for every sentence in the script for the 1986 film Blade Runner as well as the Philip K. Dick book which it is based on, Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep. Embeddings from the book and film are shaped like circles and diamonds, respectively. The embeddings were produced using the OpenAI API. The labels and colors demarcate embeddings that are clustered, i.e. more similar to each other. Different sentences spoken by the same character in the book and the movie will be in the same cluster. For instance, in the film Rick Dekard says "I knew the lingo, every good cop did," while in the book he laments that "The Soviet police can't do any more than we can." These sentences, neither of which mention Rick Deckard by name, are both in the purple "deckard" cluster. Why? Because the LLM has an internal representation of these sentences as something Rick Deckard says. They work at this level of abstraction. Figure by author.

(which would probably include some embeddings) rather than the exact data. Moreover, using differential privacy I do not even share the exact parameters, but add some "noise" to them in order to make it harder to reverse engineer the training data, i.e., my driving routes. Alternatively, I might use a centralized server with a homomorphic encryption model. The model never receives my data as such, just an encrypted version of it. Moreover, when it serves me congestion advice, it does not know which area I am asking advice for, nor that I am asking for congestion advice at all.

While seeking political solutions through a technological "fix" is always somewhat questionable, these new technologies nonetheless seem to open certain new political horizons. They invite us to develop an "art of distances" to harness artificial intelligence and the data structures it creates, without letting any centralized gaze make complete sense of us in the process. Zones of offensive opacity are not individual bubbles but *shared* secrets and *collective* privacies. They may be based on technical encryption (i.e., cryptography) or on shared "truths" that do not translate into the language of

centralized power; this might be something innocuous like the inside joke of a friend group, or something more broad, like a local dialect and the modes of expression it affords.[46] Zones of offensive opacity use the center but make themselves only selectively accessible to it, sometimes opting to restrict their sharing to other peripheries and not relying on the center at all, as in the dummy example on federated learning around congestion. Certain subcultures, criminals, ethnic communities living in the shadow of mainstream culture, hackers, and similar groups understand opacity better than others, even if they do not always perceive it as offensive. Yet the goal cannot be opacity as a marginal phenomenon but as a *general norm*. Opacity is only truly "offensive" if it belongs to everyone. Offensive opacity moves beyond individual privacy, towards a more collective infrastructure of burrowing and tunneling.

At this point, it is important to note that opacity is already operational in AI, something I have hinted at but not spelled out. This is the opacity *from above*, largely a result of combining powers of abstraction with powers of centralization. In this sense, opacity can only be weaponized for popular endeavors if it is coupled with *de* centralization. While open-source and open-weight models are not sufficient to break the current centralization of the new powers of abstraction afforded by the embedding, they are an essential part of it. In the LLM era, there will be no true and widespread opacity *from below* without them.

So, what qualms should we have regarding AI? It is not that it quantifies the world as embeddings (which it does), or that it understands the world as a set of functions (which it also does), or even that it looks for answers in statistical structures and feedback loops (yes, it does this too). Instead, the danger of AI is that it is a movement, through these aforementioned means, towards explaining everything in terms of *one* or *very few* worlds and the tendency to capture all means of translation in *one* or *a few* models. AI is plagued by a tendency to translate all languages into a single language, which will inevitably be the language of power. A black box that rules over us without giving us anything but nominal control over our own lives, entrenching a Laplacean hubris into material infrastructures. As more and more of the content on the internet is expressed in this language, the world will *literally* become a smaller place.[47]

To challenge this development, I do not think we should balk at forming a fairly close relationship with AI, as long as it is in the spirit of mastering it without surrendering ourselves to it. This requires a tunneling practice. If centralized AI makes the world a smaller place, tunneling AI will make it larger and more fragmented. In terms of a project for an opacity from below, tunnels are the structures that afford us the condition of opacity. They increase "the surface of a body while decreasing its volume," providing space for new territories and modes of being.[48] They have limited access points but often lead to a sprawling and decentralized network. To maintain, build, expand, and protect tunnels, one can operate on many planes—from building and adapting new tools that destitute the centralized AI platforms, to nudging national and philanthropic investment programs towards directing funds into the techniques of "private" and decentralized AI outlined above.

By themselves, tunnels are neither "good" nor "bad." However, if a tunnel network is wide and dense, it is hard for any central actor to grasp and control. It is in this sense that tunnels afford us a political metaphor and some clear material tools that should be prioritized and developed at this pivotal moment. To accomplish this type of project, we need a new kind of technological literacy, along with new kinds of experiments around data, encryption, and modeling. To put it as concretely as possible: We need small models that are both independently trained and "distilled" from larger models. We need to extend state-of-the-art encryption techniques towards more private AI. We need to harness federated learning for bypassing client-server AI solutions. And, last but not least, we need all of these approaches to be combined with good product design and user-friendly interfaces.

On a more principled level, the guiding questions should be: How can opacity belong to everyone?[49] How can AI serve many worlds, instead of one central world? Tunnels offer one possible metaphor for establishing opacity as a new universal right and capacity. Through this universal right, the world could, paradoxically, again disappear into fragments that no one claims to know from a single universal perspective.

X

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Kristin Ross and Andreas Petrossiants

The Commune Form: A Conversation

The form of the commune "is as at once a political movement and a shared territory, a tactic and a community-in-the-making."[1] *It is not the fulfillment of a preordained revolutionary program, nor one that is modeled on idealist or romantic models of totality, but a dynamic process responding to present and local conditions. It reemerges during spatial struggles like the decentralized movement to Stop Cop City in Atlanta (and across the world, as Joy James reminds us, since many cities are cop cities in and of themselves) and at the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France, where farmers, anarchists, and other participants were able to halt a sixty-year-old plan to build a new airport, notwithstanding brutal state repression.*[2] *Movements in the same country mobilizing to stop the hoarding of water by agricultural capital in mega-basins present a new terrain of this struggle, waged today by collectives like Soulèvements de la Terre. The following is a conversation between Kristin Ross and Andreas Petrossiants that was held at e-flux in October 2024. It has been edited for clarity.*

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Andreas Petrossiants: You begin *The Commune Form* with Marx and Kropotkin's notions of the Paris Commune as demonstrating a "form" of action rather than a singular static event—the "art and management of daily life." Contrary to arguments made by people like Karl Korsch, this form is not incidental or irrelevant as compared with the Commune's content. Why did you turn to this framing as a way to discuss territorial urban and rural struggles since 1968?

Kristin Ross: I have been writing about the Paris Commune for many years, but I began to think of the "commune form" when I was invited in 2015 to an ongoing occupation at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, which was an attempt to block the building of an international airport in farmland. It was the longest-lasting social movement in postwar France and went through a lot of different phases. When I was invited there, they wanted me to talk about what possible continuities and discontinuities existed between what they were doing and what the urban communards were doing in Paris in the nineteenth century. So, I was forced, in a way, to think about a shared political form and the limits of the comparison. There, at the ZAD (" *zone à defendre*"), I saw something in the vicinity of the actual creation of a different world, a collective creation of a world apart. It brought to mind how Mikhail Bakhtin talks about fiction's temporalities, what he called "chronotopes": distinct space-times. The ZAD was its own distinct temporality, its own distinct space—but it wasn't fictional.

When Marx talks about the Paris commune, he says, "The form was simple, like all great things." And I've spent a lot of time trying to think about that and other pithy yet amazing kinds of statements that either he or Kropotkin

Bruno Braquehais, Barricade in the Rue de la Paix (Place Vendôme), 1871. Source: World Digital Library Collection.

and a few other fellow travelers of the insurrection made about the Commune. Kropotkin says, "It's the setting for revolution and the means of bringing it about." So, it's both the context and the substance. And Marx's reflections are not very different. Marx is at his most anarchist when he's talking about the Commune. I began to think about when it is that communes flourish. Well, they flourish whenever the state withdraws. When the state is disabled or when it takes a nap. In the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the state actually forgot, for about twenty years, that it was intent on building an airport in that area. So, it was a long nap. And during that time, the people in the occupation were able to make a lot of progress in developing the capacity of working together, which is the main thing that people now have to relearn. So, occupations like the ZAD are a political movement, but they are also the collective elaboration of a desired way of life. As such, the commune form is always linked to a particular territory. It's not an abstraction. It's not a concept. It's something that is built and anchored in a particular territory, neighborhood, region.

AP: In terms of territory, this reminds me of when you write that for many farmers in France, May '68 was experienced less as a "distinct event" than as one moment in larger struggles against enclosure. You cite Bernard Lambert's *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, which you say was the "first work to place farmers and workers in the same structural situation vis-à-vis capitalist modernity." I'm also reminded of Eric Hobsbawm's remark that for much of the world, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s. Your writing on the ZAD and other nonhierarchical movements to defend territory against statist and capitalist enclosure refers to these land-based struggles and non-urban or non-proletarian subjects that are often overlooked.

KR: Lefebvre pointed out way back in the seventies that

any struggle over land necessarily involves alliances between the most diverse kinds of people. It necessarily brings together people who have completely different political codes, who are not in the same ideological boats. It's a dramatic mix of people. This was evident at the ZAD. Occupiers there ended up coming up with a term to talk about what they were doing in trying to hold these various segments and groups together long enough to block the airport: "composition," or solidarity across extreme diversity. They had general assemblies that went on forever because this was the work necessary for bringing together groups that might include participants as diverse as old, very conservative dairy farmers (those who refused to sell their land initially when the airport was first announced), anarchists, nuns, black blocks, lesbian separatists, farmers who didn't believe in animal protein, naturalists who didn't even believe in farming, and so on. And what intrigues me the most now about composition is how effective it is. Because when you put those groups together, you also bring different knowledges and experiences into the mix: the scientific knowledge of the naturalists; the practical knowledge of the anarchists, like building and maintaining squats; the creative, spontaneous, improvisational energy of the punks; the skills of those with legal backgrounds who were able to work the courts to delay and stall construction. The state can't attack all of these different groups at once. You can think about it as a united front. But if you want to be less militaristic, you could talk about it using a musical analogy, as in a symphony where at certain points the horns are loud and the violins are recessive, and then it changes and another part of the orchestra moves to the forefront. Composition shows that it's actually very desirable to work with people who don't share your same political codes because they bring different things to the struggle. It's a kind of massive investment in working together to have an influence on our future in a way that doesn't involve some of the old sectarianisms of the left or the exclusions based on identity or ideology that the left has historically found itself caught up in.

AP: This notion of composition has helped me think through several questions I have been posing while studying operaismo's (workerism's) notion of "class composition." Theoretically speaking, they use the term to describe the dialectical relationship between technical composition (the labor process) and political composition (class struggle). But a much simpler way to think about their perspective on capitalist development is that workers only come to exist in the moment of struggle to abolish class relations. On this note, you distinguish resistance—as in liberal resistance to conservatism, for one example, which contains the implication that the battle is already over—and defense, which is instead grounded in a temporality and a set of priorities generated by the local community-in-the-making. The latter seems closer to a process of abolishing the reproductive relations key to the capitalist division of labor, as in the notion of class composition.

KR: Unlike resistance, defense starts with something that you already have, something you love, that you cherish. So, it begins with love, and the notion that there is something that you value that is worth defending. This sets up a different kind of temporality because you're not following the state's agenda or terms. What is really striking, especially in these movements that extend over a long duration, is that they have to reinvent themselves and figure out new, creative ways of inhabiting the struggle, sometimes over years. And so, what you're defending necessarily changes over time. You might begin by defending, say, some agricultural land or an unpolluted area or a Black neighborhood, but over time, the main thing that you're defending is the set of non-accumulative social relations that have developed over the course of the defense.

AP: Right! This gets at another phrasing you've put forward that I find very generative: the "transvaluation of values," which I think is a very helpful framework for thinking about the problem of "abolishing value," which of course comes to the fore in a lot of postwar Marxist currents, chiefly value-form theory and communization. As you say, throughout the course of a struggle, the goal is not just to devalorize or abolish existing accumulated wealth, but also to defend new social values that emerged from non-accumulative social relations.

KR: Well, I'm not talking about it like a value theorist, that's for sure. My thinking about it comes from the earlier work that I did on the Paris Communards and a little phrase that I found in the manifesto that the artists of the commune put together, artists who were mostly decorative artists by the way, skilled artisans.[3] The main thing that they decided was that there was really only one single artistic gesture, and it was one that both fine artists and artisans shared. And so, artists and artisans were, in effect, federating. And this might not sound like much now, but during the Second Empire, it was simply illegal for a decorative artist or an artisan to sign their work. They could not aspire to either the status or the financial rewards that sculptors or painters possessed. So, this federation was the overcoming of the most rigid social division in art under the Second Empire. Artists and artisans together wrote a manifesto where they described how all artistic intelligence is one. And in the final sentence of their manifesto, they wrote: "We work … for communal luxury." An amazing phrase—for isn't luxury only for the few? For them, it seems that everyone had the right to live and work in a pleasing environment. Luxury is not the private accumulation of stuff but the flourishing of beauty in all common spaces; in the end, of course, "communal luxury" presupposes the end of luxury based on class division. Now, if you push that idea, as William Morris did for example, it means changing every single aspect of our relationship to art, to labor, to the environment, to the natural world, according to a transformation of what it is that a society values. What is important to us? What do we

Tag "No Bassaran" in Nantes (slogan of the Bassines Non Merci movement, against megabassins, a play on words between the Spanish Republicans' slogan "No pasaran" and "bassines"). On the right, the logo of Soulèvements de la Terre has been drawn. 2023.License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

care about? And that's what I mean by a transvaluation of value.

AP: I'm reminded of a photograph that you reproduce in your earlier book on the Commune, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, of Napoleon Gaillard, the barricade artist of the Commune, where he's shown next to the barricades he helped build, proud, as though next to his own artwork.

KR: It's just that. He was a shoemaker, and a drunk. But he insisted on always being called an "artist shoemaker." He also wrote a whole treatise on the foot and invented numerous shoes, including the first rubber galoshes. So, he was a very talented man. He was also in charge of barricade construction and began to make more and more ornate barricades. Anti-Communards made fun of him for thinking of his barricades as works of art and luxury, which was indeed the case. This reminds me of one of my visits to the ZAD, when I learned that they were busy building a lighthouse out in the middle of a field with the sea nowhere in sight. "Why are you building a lighthouse?" I asked. "Is it defensive? Are you worried about being able to see the cops when they come in?" And someone said, "No, it's communal luxury. It's the seventh wonder of the ZAD."

AP: They also had a floating rap studio, which is so cool! You've also thought with Maria Mies and Veonika Bennholdt-Thomsen's writing on the "subsistence perspective." As you write: "A movement's duration plainly depends on its ability to involve itself directly in the means of subsistence." Here, it becomes clear that subsistence isn't just about surviving, but about flourishing.

KR: The subsistence perspective isn't really an elaborated theory. Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen insist that it is rather a perspective, an orientation. It's the point of view of

subsistence. Today in France, 50 percent of the land is agricultural, and 50 percent of that land is going to change hands in the next ten years, as farmers retire. So that means that a great deal of land is either going to be subsumed into the large holdings of agribusiness, or paved over. The war in the countryside right now is the one between agroindustry and something we can still call subsistence, which might just be a non-accumulative, non-productivist kind of agriculture that's attentive to all the questions surrounding growing: What do we want to grow? How much do we want to grow? How do we want to grow it? And I think it's a good way of thinking about this war in the countryside because what some of us are now calling the agro-industrial complex can include everything from seeds and seed patents to farm equipment, to supermarkets, to the distribution of food, to research, to the whole bureaucracy determining who has access to land and who doesn't. Capital's real war is against subsistence because subsistence means a qualitatively different economy. It means people living differently according to different concepts of what constitutes wealth and what constitutes deprivation. It is oriented toward the intrinsic value and interest of small producers, artisans, and *paysans*. It involves the gradual creation of a fabric of lived solidarities and a social life built through exchanges of services, informal cooperatives, cooperation and association—the two guiding words of the Paris Commune. It seeks to expand the spheres of activity in which economic rationality does not prevail. It means a life that is not molded and shaped by the world market. These are the outlines of the commune form.

AP: In 2022, we published communiques from autonomous collectives and groups that were organizing collective forms of food production, agriculture, and cultivation. One of the pieces came from people defending the forest in Atlanta from the construction of a massive police training facility known as "Cop City," which has sadly been built (though the fight against it continues).[4] Running from a police helicopter, the trees of this huge forest, which are now gone, protected them from the eyes of the police. They even stop under a mulberry tree to have a snack. In this case, subsistence and defense are rooted in a completely different set of (use) values, made material in collective defense against an expanding, racialized carceral apparatus.

KR: Exactly. I was also struck by the point from Mies that in Germany, where she grew up, most farming was subsistence farming up until around the 1970s. So, all of this is a very, very recent transition. From this perspective, the intellectual production of the seventies becomes much more interesting. You have people like Murray Bookchin, Ivan Illitch, Andre Gorz, Henri Lefebvre, Mies, Silvia Federici, Francoise d'Eaubonne, Félix Guattari, and so on who were essentially coming into an ecological perspective. And they were doing so because the transformation of their own everyday lives was so dramatic.

AP: I'm reminded also of Nanni Balestrini's novel *We Want Everything*, which dramatizes the Fiat workers' revolts in Torino in 1969, which was led primarily by migrant workers from the South of Italy. There's a scene where the protagonist returns to the South to find that the tomatoes grown in the village garden were no longer shared communal goods—the enclosure of the commons continued. It's heartbreaking, but it's also a shocking scene in the book because much of it takes place at the epicenter of the mass industrialization of the country in the postwar period. Speaking of farming, I wanted to ask you about the relationship between creativity and the commune form. As you write, the commune form may not only be the most rational way for people in our historical moment to organize their own forces and social forces, but also the most pleasurable as well.

KR: That brings us back to communal luxury. I guess what amazes me the most is the panic that the state exhibits in the face of these sort of occupations. The French government keeps announcing that it will never again allow a ZAD to emerge on French land. But they keep happening. Right now, there's a movement outside of Toulouse to block the construction of a highway which would pass through farmland and old forests, which would all be destroyed. Once again, like the proposed airports I describe in *The Commune Form*, the highway is redundant. There's already a highway between these two towns, and the new proposed one would only cut the commute time by eleven minutes. The minister of transportation, Clément Beaune, was recently quoted as saying that a ZAD was not a festival or a joyful gathering, but rather a violation of the elementary rules of private property and public space. Now, the second half of his statement is undoubtedly true. But I think that what M. Beaune was really worried about is revealed in the ressentiment oozing out of the first part of his statement. The state's fear has to do with the fact that there might exist some kind of pleasure associated with these movements that is not, you know, state sanctioned. A kind of conviviality outside, say, of the society of consumption and the programmed pleasures of next-day delivery. When you look at educated young people today, how many of them truly want to be app designers or hedge fund managers or any of these kinds of joyless activities? And then there are the uneducated, many of whom who are just sort of adrift in the Uber-ization of labor everywhere, in a kind of abject isolation. Given the complete loss of being able to work with other people to have some kind of influence on our future, it's no wonder the conviviality and pragmatism of the ZAD appears threatening to the state.

Bruno Braquehais, Barricade in a street 1871 France - Paris Commune Coll. Jacques Chevallier. License: Public Domain.

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Kristin Ross is the author of a number of books on modern French politics and culture, all of which have been widely translated: *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minnesota, 1988; Verso, 2008), *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (MIT, 1995), *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago, 2002), *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015), and most recently *The Politics and Poetics of Everyday Life* (Verso, 2023) and *The Commune Form:*

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1
Kristin Ross, *The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life* (Verso, 2024).

2
See Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, "Flourishing," *e-flux journal* , no. 124 (February 2022) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/124/446244/flourishing/ , an excerpt from *We Are "Nature" Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* (Pluto Books, 2021).

3
Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015).

4
Autonomous Farming Collectives, "Planting and Becoming," *e-flux journal* , no. 128 (June 2022) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/128/472900/planting-and-becoming/ .

Leopoldina Fortunati

Housewives, Prostitutes, and Workers

The man/woman relationship is not a relationship between individuals, even if it is represented as such. It is a relation of production between women and capital mediated by men. It is a complex relationship, played out through *duplicity*, and notable for the contrast between its representation on levels of the formal and the real. This complexity is obviously reflected in the *exchange* presupposed by this relationship.

The exchange implied in the man/woman relationship has a twofold nature: on the one hand, it is an exchange between variable capital and domestic labor; on the other it is an exchange between variable capital and prostitution. On the formal level, it represents itself as an exchange between the wage and domestic labor or prostitution labor and between male worker and housewife or prostitute. However, in reality it is an exchange between variable capital and the labor of domestic work or prostitution and between the houseworker or sex worker and capital, mediated by the male worker. In other words, the exchange of the wage for domestic work (or prostitution) between the male worker and housewife or prostitute is the *form of the real exchange* that takes place between the houseworker or sex worker and capital. The fact that the exchange between variable capital and reproductive work adopts a twofold character is a necessary condition for the exchange itself. Capital cannot exchange directly with the labor power of reproduction because it has established the capacity of reproduction as a natural force of social labor. Capital is thus forced to resort to the mediation of a third party in exchange with the woman: it must pass through the male worker who engages with the female houseworker and sex worker as a form *of capital*, which is the true subject of this exchange.

In relation to the male worker, capital imposes a representation of the labor power of reproduction as a form of personal service, domestic labor or prostitution. At the same time, it imposes a representation of the woman as housewife or prostitute, instead of representing her as a houseworker or sex worker, and a representation of the labor of production and reproduction of male labor power as personalized services, instead of indirectly waged work.

Compared to the exchange between the male worker and capital, the greater complexity of the exchange between the female houseworker and capital is immediately apparent. But this complexity is necessary for its capitalist functioning: it is precisely this complexity that implies that it is not only the form but also the very act of exchange (and the essential conditions required for it to occur) which are very different on the formal level from those necessary to the exchange between male workers and capital. More precisely, the exchange between the female houseworker and capital differs from that between male workers and capital more profoundly than the exchange between the female sex worker and capital mediated by male waged workers. The reason for this differentiation is that the labor of prostitution, unlike domestic labor, has a

A Wages for Housework march, 1977. Source: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute / Bettye Lane.

price, so that even if neither are waged, the latter assumes characteristics similar to the exchange between male workers and capital. Besides the differences these two forms of exchange assume with respect to that between workers and capital, the most relevant factor remains the dissimilarity of both from the exchange between male workers and capital.

In contrast to a popular view, our argument is that such dissimilarity does not mean that these exchanges are not organized in a capitalist manner. The dissimilarity must instead be considered as the prerequisite and condition for the ordinariness of the exchange between male workers and capital. Although these forms of exchange diverge formally, in reality they work in a related fashion in that, as we demonstrate below, the exchanges between houseworker or sex worker and capital are not exchanges of equivalents. As with the process of exchange between capital and waged labor, in which capital appropriates the male worker's labor time not through direct exchange but through the waged form of exchange, likewise in capital's exchange with the labor power of reproduction, capital appropriates the female houseworker's or sex worker's labor time not through the mediation of the wage but indirectly through the exchange with the male worker.

The fundamental relationship to reproduction no longer coincides strictly with the man/woman relationship, but is articulated through many other relationships: man/man, woman/woman, men/women, and so on. Similarly, the fundamental exchange of reproduction is no longer merely that between woman and capital through the male worker, which is the one we are considering here, but it is articulated in many other forms. A major struggle against the macro-inequalities of exchanges, such as those between man and woman, has emerged on a mass level both through struggle within the exchange relationship itself, and through the refusal of the exchange altogether. Exchanges within communes, or homosexual and lesbian relationships, are behaviors with significant consequences. These exchanges are potentially less unequal than the heterosexual exchange. We say "potentially" because, we repeat, the heterosexual model is so dominant as a power relation on a social level that it is hard to practice equality within such a structure. Reduced inequality in the exchange between subjects, however, does not necessarily mean less surplus value is appropriated by capital; it only means a more equal redistribution, on four shoulders instead of two, of the exploitation of labor power on the grounds of its own reproduction. Nonetheless, these upheavals can have devastating effects for capital on the overall functioning of

reproduction. For example, they inhibit the kind of income redistribution within the proletariat which capital requires. If the male wage, which is typically higher than the female wage, is paired with another male wage, it ceases to subsidies the notoriously low female wage and ceases to command domestic work from women.

We consider here only the man/woman exchange, which is to say the one between the female houseworker and capital mediated by the male worker. We do so because, even if the reproductive exchange takes on other forms, the man/woman exchange is still the most common on the level of reproduction. A first difference stands out with respect to the exchange between male workers and capital. While the exchange between male workers and capital is formally an *exchange of equivalents*, the man/woman exchange is not, even formally, one of equivalents because the objects that capital and the female houseworker exchange through the male worker (variable capital and the labor power that produces and reproduces labor power) are not defined as exchange values. The labor power at issue is a non-value in terms of exchange—a mere use value. Does this mean that it has absolutely no exchange value? Not at all. The female houseworker can in fact establish her domestic labor as a unity of use value and exchange value only insofar as her labor power exists for capital as a natural force of social labor. She can do so only insofar as capital does not present itself as the owner of the objective conditions of reproduction. The houseworker's labor power has an exchange value not as labor power, but as domestic labor, because the latter has use value for the waged male worker. In other words, the female houseworker can sell domestic labor to the male worker, because he needs it for his personal consumption and for his reproduction as labor power. The male worker appears to buy domestic labor while in reality he buys female labor power as the capacity of production and reproduction of labor power. The exchange value of female labor power cannot represent itself in formal, *monetary* terms as exchange value. However, such value can still be defined through the quantity of labor objectified in her labor power itself, which is to say through the quantity of labor expended to produce the female houseworker. If, on a formal level, female labor power represents itself as non-value, it is indeed exchange value on a real level though appearing under the guise of domestic duties of the housewife.

The primary object of exchange, variable capital, on the other hand, is represented as exchange value. It is, however, a particular kind of exchange value, because it does not appear as exchange value as such. As Marx says, variable capital—the object of exchange between the male worker and capital—poses itself as follows:

> The object of his exchange is a direct object of need, not exchange value as such. He does obtain money, it is true, but only in its role as coin; i.e. only as a self-suspending and vanishing mediation. What he obtains from the exchange is therefore not exchange value, not wealth, but a means of subsistence, objects for the preservation of his life, the satisfaction of his needs in general, physical, social etc. It is a specific equivalent in means of subsistence, in objectified labor, measured by the cost of production of his labour.[1]

But this is true for the male worker. For the female houseworker, variable capital operates as capital. The exchange between the female houseworker and capital via the male worker does not formally involve exchange value. On the one hand, there is an object of exchange value: variable capital, which is not exchange value as such. On the other hand, there is a non-exchange value: female labor power, which, for the woman, can only become exchange value as domestic labor. The fact that these two elements *do not represent themselves as exchange values* does not mean that they are not such in reality. They do not represent themselves as exchange value because this exchange must not appear as capitalist, because it does not include capital on a formal level, as a subject of exchange. They are both, however, in reality, forms of exchange value. Although this exchange does not formally appear as one of exchange values and thus not as an exchange of equivalents, it is still, in reality, *an exchange of exchange values*. The very fact that these cannot be represented as exchanges of equivalences, even on a formal level, is the very condition of their existence as exchange values. In other words, the fact that the exchange does not appear capitalist is the condition for its capitalistic functioning.

Assuming that, on the level of the real, this exchange involves exchange values, we should ask ourselves if, on the same level of reality, it is an exchange of equivalents. While the male worker exchanges a portion of his wage which corresponds to the value of the housewife's means of subsistence, the female houseworker exchanges her domestic labor. The housewife receives money, or the means of subsistence, directly, while the worker receives a commodity, which has a price that, for him, is equal to the money, or to the means of subsistence, that he paid for that commodity. Everyone here appears to receive an equivalent. In reality, the male worker *does not receive an equivalent*. In this exchange, what he acquires is domestic labor only on a formal level, while in reality he acquires labor power as an equivalent in the exchange. With this, the worker "has acquired labour time—to the extent that it exceeds the labour time contained in labour capacity—in exchange *without equivalent*; it has appropriated alien labour time *without exchange* by means of the *form* of exchange."[2] While the worker receives such added value, he does not take possession of it for himself. As the purpose of his exchange with capital is not exchange value as such, but the fulfilment of his needs, likewise his

exchange with the housewife is not the appropriation of the value created by the living labor of the woman herself, but the fulfilment of his needs. He operates solely as a conductor of capital. Thus, when capital buys labor power through the wage, it appropriates the value created by women's labor power, which is incorporated in waged labor power as capacity of production. Such appropriation does not usually happen through a direct exchange with the houseworker but is mediated by her exchange with the worker. To conclude, we have proved that such exchange is not an exchange of equivalents, because the worker receives much more value than the value he gives to the woman, even if he does not appropriate such value for himself, but for capital.

The possession of a wage by a woman who is both a houseworker and a worker in the production process obviously affects the exchange between her and the male worker. She has, in fact, more contractual power in relation to him. In the last few decades, the possession of wages by women has become more common and sustained. This means that the terms of exchange between women and waged male workers have been considerably redefined. The supply of female domestic labor appreciably decreases, while the male supply increases. However, reduced inequality of the objects of exchange for the male worker and the houseworker does not automatically mean that capital appropriates less surplus labor from domestic reproduction. Rather capital appropriates surplus labor from two subjects, instead of one. However, it is an established fact that the increase in male workers' domestic labor does not compensate for the decline in female domestic labor due to the great momentum towards the socialization of such labor (we eat out more and more, we send our clothes to laundry services, etc.) and due to the increasingly persistent demand by women for either more money or more commodities from men for the labor they supply.

Just as the exchange between the worker and the housewife takes on particular significance, the way in which the two parties are positioned as individuals in the act of exchange takes on specific connotations. Because the female houseworker is established as non-value, as opposed to the free male worker, she cannot, with her domestic labor, buy money or receive a wage from the male worker. The legitimate holder of the wage is always the one who earned it, that is, the male worker. Variable capital remains always the product or outcome of the production process, and thus the male wage. Variable capital is never a formal object of exchange between the worker and the houseworker. Because "money only gives the equivalent its specific expression, makes it into an equivalent in form, as well," the nonmonetary nature of the exchange between domestic labor and wage has a precise consequence.[3] The worker, exchanging his labor power with money, which is to say with the general form of wealth, "becomes co-participant in general wealth up to the limit of his equivalent—a quantitative limit which, of course, turns into a qualitative one, as in every exchange."[4] The houseworker, whose labor power is domestic work performed for the male worker, cannot exchange her labor power for money, that is, for the general form of wealth. As opposed to the male worker, she cannot formally own that part of variable capital that corresponds to her own means of subsistence. If we consider that her equivalent (her labor power) does not have a limit, because it does not have a price, it is evident that the houseworker is not entitled to participate in the enjoyment of general wealth. She does not, through the exchange, have the right to the money that expresses the value of her labor power. She only has the right to consume that part of the wage that corresponds to the value of her means of subsistence.

The difference between the houseworker and the waged worker described above indicates that the houseworker is bound by a major constraint. While the male worker "is neither bound to particular objects, nor to a particular manner of satisfaction," the houseworker *is always bound to the agreement of the male worker in terms of the details of her consumption*.[5] Because her relationship with money is not a relationship of ownership, but just the *use of someone else's ownership*, it is almost irrelevant for the houseworker whether the worker provides her with means of subsistence in their natural form, or as money. *Almost* irrelevant because, in reality, money is less restrictive than means of subsistence. Moreover, the equivalent of what the houseworker gives to the waged worker within the exchange does not have a formal limit, because it does not have a price. This implies that:

1. The houseworker's consumption has a quantitative limit which always tends to be lower than that of the factory worker;

2. The sphere of her enjoyment is also *qualitatively limited*, and this is true in and of itself, while for the waged worker this is true as a reflection of the quantitative limits of his consumption.

It is important to note that, since the Second World War, women have initiated a cycle of intense struggles over the dynamics of consumption within the family. First, women started to demand that husbands deliver their paychecks to them, so that women could handle them themselves. It is in this period that the wage becomes a crucial site of struggle between workers and capital. The direct management of the male wage by women within the family is as strategic in the struggle between women and capital as it is between women and male workers. This crucial move has been passed off by many women simply as an ideology of rational management of consumption but, in reality, it is simply a different, clearly anti-capitalistic management of the male wage. In fact, the direct management of the male wage does not aim at guaranteeing the steady reproduction of the working class, but, on the contrary, at determining a reproduction of the class constantly opposed to capital. The criteria of

consumption become both more unproductive for capital, and more disruptive for the hierarchy of family consumption. More generally, these criteria help to dismantle the stratification of power within the class. It is now the woman who determines the priority of needs and their satisfaction among the family members and decides the quality and quantity of consumption with respect to the wage. She is the one who, as a strategic workerist defense, refuses the pressure to scrimp and save every penny, and makes the total consumption of the wage a normal condition, and a factor in the continuation of struggle. It is, of course, always the worker who has the last word, because the one who earns the wage is always the one in power. But now his words carry a different weight, and many mediations occur between the possession of money and its transformation into something that can be used. It should be noted that women in the 1960s made use of the wage mostly for their children, and not for themselves. One of the few simple achievements made by women for themselves in these years in the realm of consumption was establishing a weekly appointment with the hairdresser.

But in the 1970s, family consumption shifted again in the sense that: 1) women began to consume for themselves as well; and 2) families came to consume more than they earned.[6] It was women's mass achievement of their own wage that contributed to the development of their new agency, with full rights over their own consumption and even more control over the management of family wages. With the 1960s, the policy of abstinence, sacrifice, and saving as criteria to manage the family budget ended. The 1970s began with a new phase of management of the proletarian wage, based on mass indebtedness. Credit cards and loans became instruments for exceeding the wage on the level of circulation. To spend today what you can earn tomorrow is the new motto characterizing the dynamics of consumerism, especially in the United States. Once again, women are the battering ram that creates these breakthroughs. If workers have always calculated that their wages will arrive after a month or a week of work, these new social behaviors and patterns of consumption by the working class now assume consumption before paying for it with labor.

The formal nonequivalence of the objects involved in this exchange relation between man and woman leads to specific formal consequences. These consequences are very different from those related to the exchange between worker and capital, in which labor power in its capacity of production is sold as a commodity by the worker as its free owner. When the worker encounters the owner of money on the market, they "enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law."[7] On the contrary, the exchange between women and capital is mediated by the worker. Women's labor power, under the guise of domestic labor, is sold by the housewife to the waged worker as a commodity. However, domestic labor is not formally a commodity. When the free woman worker meets the owner of money (in the form of the wage) on the market, they enter into relations with each other, but not on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, and not as equals in the eyes of the law. It follows that the inequality in the relation between man and woman is neither a dysfunction in the capitalist mode of production nor a legacy of some precapitalist barbarity. It is, instead, inherent and ingrained in the functioning of the capitalist mode of production. Equality of exploitation between man and woman cannot exist in a capitalist society precisely because such exploitation is based on power differences that are present within the class itself. Either the struggle for *equal rights*[8] becomes a struggle against the dominion of capital, or it becomes nothing but the impracticable program of a reformist utopia.

X

Excerpted from Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcana of Reproduction: Housewives, Prostitutes, Workers and Capital*, trans. Arlen Austin and Sara Colantuono (Verso, 2025). Originally published in Italian as *L'arcano della riproduzione: Casalinghe, prostitute, operai e capitale* (Marsilio Editori, 1981).

Leopoldina Fortunati was a core member of Lotta Femminsta and the Wages for Housework Movement internationally. Along with Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Silvia Federici, she composed many of the group's core theoretical and political texts.

1
Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857) https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm .

2
Marx, *Grundrisse* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch13.htm .

3
Marx, *Grundrisse* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm .

4
Marx, *Grundrisse* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm .

5
Marx, *Grundrisse* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm .

6
These phenomena are especially observable in some countries, including the United States.

7
Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch03.htm .

8
This is in English in the original.

Charles Tonderai Mudede

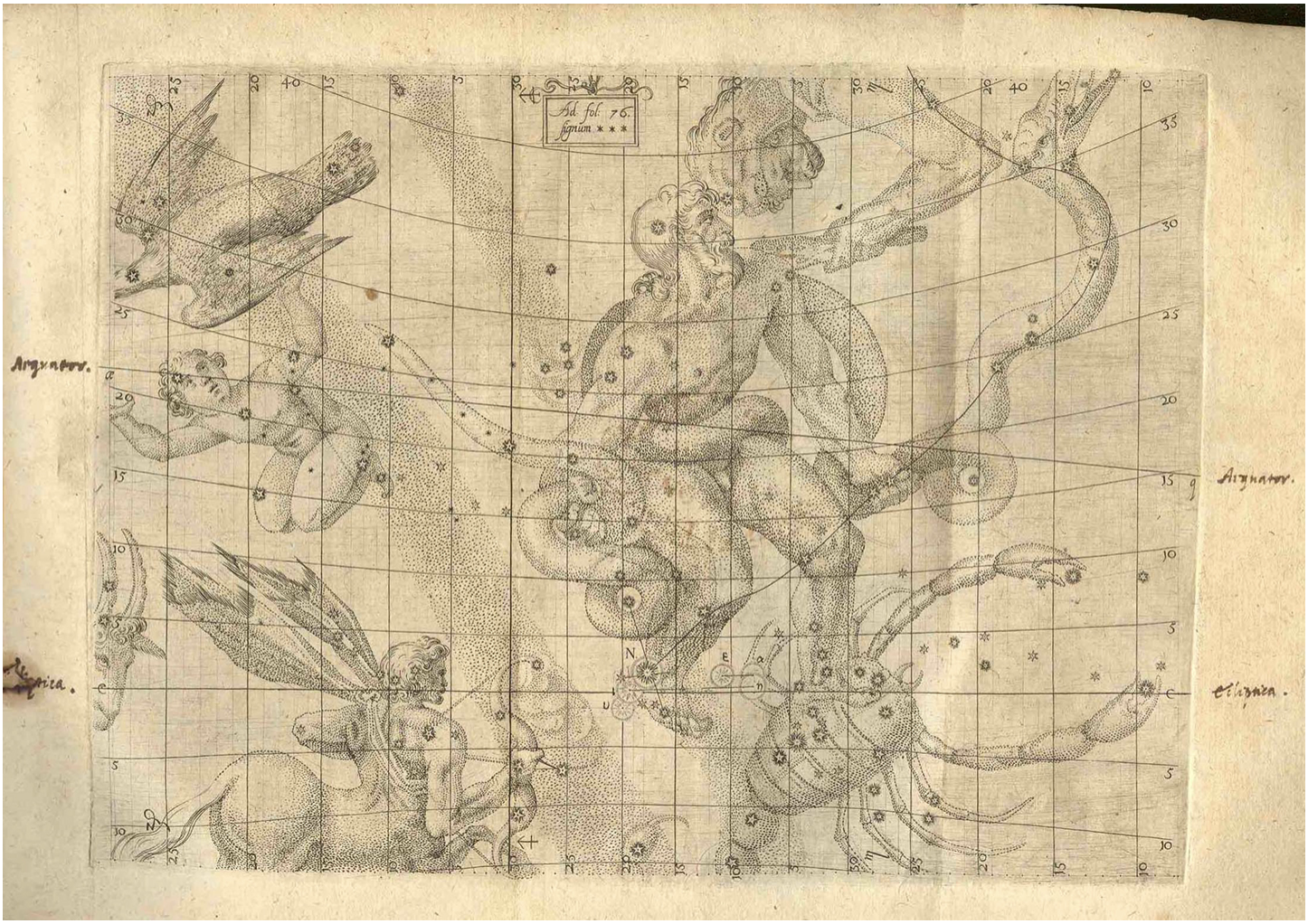
The Economic Possibilities of Lucid Dreaming

The Christian era was heralded by a bright star over Bethlehem. The age of global capitalism, not to be outdone, was ushered in by not one but two celestial phenomena appearing in the night sky in 1572 and 1604. With little fanfare beyond scientific circles, these astronomical events consolidated a new secular orientation that would ultimately eclipse the world that had been exhaustively described by Aristotle. They did not involve stars per se, but rather supernovas: massive stars that spectacularly explode after running out of material to fuse.[1] If we now attribute these superlunary events to events on earth, it is because we know what was happening at the time in the small world of Dutch commerce.

The two explosions are named after astronomers who helped launch the scientific revolution, Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler—a Dane who collected observations and a German who interpreted these observations, respectively.[2] Supernovas were already known as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) by Chinese astronomers, who called such events "guest stars" (客星, kèxīng). The years 1572 and 1604 are significant not so much for what was happening in the sky as for what was taking place on the ground in the small, newly instituted Dutch Republic. A conjunction had occurred between the market, originally confined to the city, and the territory of the state.[3] This transition was not predestined, and resulted from a set of terrestrial events that were not spontaneous.[4] Changes in monarchical power, wars, vacillations in religious doctrines and edicts, all occurred a few years after Tycho's supernova and led to the formation of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands in 1579.

The key difference between the city markets of antiquity and the state-backed market inaugurated by the Dutch is the simple fact, explained by the American physicist P. W. Anderson in 1972, that "more is different." A statewide commitment to capital accumulation transforms a market into an empire, but in such a way that merchants no longer serve the court, but the other way around. Under the rule of merchants, long-established forms of business exchange, such as the government securities established by Venetian bankers in the thirteenth century, expand to a historically significant scale. The Dutch Golden Age began a rapid movement towards the universalization of capital that Marx and Engels would valorize in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Instead of prognosticating, simply looking at stars and recording their movements ultimately broke the ancient power of Aristotelian metaphysics because the obsessions of merchants—shipping logistics, quality control, balance of payments—were, unlike those of churchmen, practical and concerned with the world as it is experienced by the senses: cause and effect. It was called "natural philosophy" in the days of Dutch capital accumulation, but today's name for this kind of knowledge



Johannes Kepler, De Stella Nova, 1604. Depiction of the 1604 supernova in the constellation Serpens. License: Public domain.

is "science." The Enlightenment was a byproduct of this emphasis on what is practical, on this revolutionary mode of interpreting physical phenomena. It was only accidental that the instrument devised to check the quality of cloth, the microscope, revealed the invisible world of microorganisms.[5] But it wasn't accidental that the first major achievements of these new philosophers—one of whom was, of course, Dutch—involved transforming the entire universe into a machine.[6] And this machine conception has never left us: there is classical mechanics (Newton), statistical mechanics (Boltzmann), and quantum mechanics (Bohr). Capital can only exist in a machine.

Just as "a fool and his money are soon parted," so merchants, the first capitalists, must reduce their risks with reliable equipment, accurate accounting, maps, and weapons to overcome obstacles to their return on investment. For this, the Dutch had technical assurances, some originating from the Islamic world, with much of the innovation in optics that characterized the Dutch Golden Age having been theorized at the end of the first century by the scholar and mathematician Ḥasan Ibn al-Haytham.

The formation of a market economy (merchants as masters) widens and expresses something not new—capital—in a very new way. With the supernovas, academic knowledge divorces the church and marries capital. And this new union, this encompassing fate for the world, was not written in the stars (or spontaneous). It's conceivable that after 1579, a thousand more years might have passed without a break from Aristotle. Civilizations might have risen without any concession to the market economy. West African drumming might have continued its dominance over long-distance communication.[7]

It was the second supernova that sealed the deal for the emergence and expansion of the universal market. Giambattista Vico, Adam Smith,[8] Hegel,[9] and ultimately Marx[10] confused this specific form of universal history with the transhistorical history of "mankind."

The debate about how capitalism began is long and dreary, and it roughly looks like this: For world systems

Tycho Brahe's mural quadrant in Uranienborg (Uraniborg). The quadrant (radius c. 194 cm) was made from brass and was affixed to a wall that was oriented precisely north-south. The observer (far right) views a star through the opposite opening (upper left) to determine the star's altitude as it passes through the meridian. An assistant (lower right) reads the time off a clock and another one (lower left) records the measurements. The area above the quadrant is filled with a mural painting showing several other of Brahe's instruments. License: Public domain.

thinkers such as the late Giovanni Arrighi, it began in fifteenth-century Italy with the city market. According to this view, the period saw a movement from productive capitalism to financial capitalism, a shift that world-systems thinking identifies in all leading capitalist societies: the Italian city states (particularly Genoa[11]), the Dutch, the British, the Americans, and presently China.[12] You begin with goods and you end with paper. Ellen Meiksins Wood, a key figure of political Marxism, dismissed Dutch imperialism as a starting point and instead located the birth of capitalism in rural Great Britain—a description challenged by the expansion of capital from the limits of the city to the scale of the state, eliminating the city-rural distinction that so bothered Raymond Williams in his influential 1973 book, *The Country and the City*. In fact, one only has to look at Jacob van Ruisdael's painting *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields* to see country and city as a unified field of capital accumulation in the seventeenth century.[13]

Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy famously debated the point of transition from feudal economy to market economy.[14] Though I side, in part, with Dobb's position, I also side with Wood's political Marxism, which, like the Neue Marx-Lektüre inaugurated by Adorno's return to postwar Germany, emphasized the historical specificity of capitalism. But what's needed in these and other attempts to determine the origins of a culture that's become truly universal is the recognition of a unique temporality, one that moves, as with entropy, in one direction only, which appears to us as forward.[15] The experience of this direction, from which there is no going back, is made sensible by technological advancements actualized by the scientific accumulation of knowledge.

Capitalism is not cyclical but progressive. And so we, the present subjects of this system, the stuff of exploded stars (in both the physical and cultural sense), are in the same temporality as Hegel at the beginning of the nineteenth century: stadial temporality. The Geist of the German philosopher can be none other than the spirit of capitalism.[16] Hegel confused this temporality with the universal temporality of our system of commercial exchanges.[17] His Geist is spontaneous. To identify the supernovas with the origins of capital accumulation can only render impossible Hegel's spiritual teleology.[18] And this understanding liberates us from capitalist spontaneity completely, from saying Victorian-sounding things like "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape." Despite their sophisticated theoretical apparatus, what Marx and Engels couldn't see in capitalism's historical specificity is that the chimpanzee is, after all, as evolved as we are. We can blame this bad thinking on the fact that they couldn't see capitalism as accidental, as a culture that might easily not have been. The supernovas make apparent this accident.

But what follows? Must it be disenchantment? When the merchants attach science to capital accumulation, the entire world is gripped by number, calculation, precision.[19] Everything has to be accounted for. Time and space must be measured. This determination is captured in capital's first artworks, the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. The disenchantment of the era is made apparent in the stark church paintings of Pieter Saenredam: the absence of decoration, the sobriety of walls and windows, the businessmen gathered in a corner to conclude some matter related to the stock market. There is also the emphasis on exactness, on detail, on cataloging. Insects appear in paintings, which is truly astonishing. The Italian tradition hardly saw any animals other than humans (which were often angels), let alone bugs. But they are everywhere in Dutch art, buzzing around food (fish, wine, bread, the wilting flowers of Clara Peeters). Indeed, the art historian Svetlana Alpers argued that in capital's formative period, the line between the telescope and microscope did not exist. The painter becomes an instrument:

> One is struck by the almost indiscriminate breadth of Leeuwenhoek's attentiveness—he turns his microscope on his sputum, feces, and even his semen as easily as he did on the flowers of the field. Leeuwenhoek combines absorption in what is seen with a selflessness or anonymity that is also characteristic of the Dutch artist. Indeed, the conditions of visibility that Leeuwenhoek required in order to see better with his instruments resemble the arrangements made by artists. He brings his object, fixed on a holder, into focus beyond the lens. He adjusts the light and the setting as the artists were to do. To make the object of sight visible—in one case globules of blood—Leeuwenhoek arranges the light and background (in a way that is still not completely understood) so that the globules will, in his words, stand out like sand grains on a piece of black taffeta. It is as if Leeuwenhoek had in mind the dark ground favored by Dutch still-life painters.[20]

But this kind of sobriety is well known. It's announced in *The Communist Manifesto*. We are told there that "the bourgeoisie" has through "callous 'cash payment'" drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor … in the icy water of 'egotistical calculation.'"[21] We hear it again and again. "Cash [Calculation] Rules Everything Around Me."[22] And we are impressed, again and again, by its apparent facticity.[23] The disenchantment side of capitalism is not, however, as interesting as its re-enchantment side. Indeed, the latter, despite being almost ignored or confused with Marx's concept of fetishizing commodities (a spell that's broken by examining the "hidden abode of production"), can be even more important than the former. And here we reach the main point of this essay: capital does not do away with enchantment's "structures of feeling," but relocates and reinvests them in a way that makes its cultural mode distinct from all other cultural modes.[24]

Jacob van Ruisdael, View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds, circa 1665. License: Public domain.

How can we confirm that the Dutch made the first complete transition to a culture we can identify as capitalist? Though its size and extent is still debated by historians, the "tulip mania" of 1634 was the mother of all bubbles. Its cultural embeddedness is attested to by the fact that trading took place in taverns rather than in the

Jan Verkolje , Portrait of Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723), circa 1680. Rijksmuseum. License: Public domain.

stock market.[25] There are features of the mania that capture capitalist re-enchantment. It must be recalled that, while the flower originating in Central Asia was initially of scientific interest to the Dutch, it soon gained the same luxury status it had in the Islamic world. Indeed, the key to capitalist products is not their use value but their uselessness, which is why so many goods driving capitalist growth were (and are) luxuries: coffee, tea, tobacco, beef, china, spices, chocolate, single-family homes, and ultimately automobiles—which define capitalism in its American moment. It's no accident that the richest man of our times is a car manufacturer.[26]

The story of how the tulip fueled an inflationary bubble that began in 1634 and reached its peak in the first months of 1637 has all the features of bubbles that have appeared ever since. Trading in the commodity quickly transitioned from the object itself (bulbs) to sheets of paper, facilitated by a very mature futures market. It then became a matter of making sure that one had a chair when the music stopped, mainly by pushing dodgy paper over to a sucker.

But capital's re-enchantment is best captured by the flower itself. Like coffee, tea, and tobacco, it is utterly useless in terms of nutrition or medicine. Moreover, at the time the most prized flowers suffered from a viral infection that increased their color variegation. In fact, one of the most popular tales of the tulip mania bubble involves a sailor who mistakenly thought tulip bulbs were useful:

> A wealthy merchant, who prided himself not a little on his rare tulips, received upon one occasion a very valuable consignment of merchandise from the Levant. Intelligence of its arrival was brought him by a sailor, who presented himself for that purpose at the counting-house, among bales of goods of every description. The merchant, to reward him for his news, munificently made him a present of a fine red herring for his breakfast. The sailor had, it appears, a great partiality for onions, and seeing a bulb very like an onion lying upon the counter of this liberal trader, and thinking it, no doubt, very much out of its place among silks and velvets, he slily seized an opportunity and slipped it into his pocket, as a relish for his herring. He got clear off with his prize, and proceeded to the quay to eat his breakfast. Hardly was his back turned when the merchant missed his valuable Semper Augustus, worth three thousand florins … The whole establishment was instantly in an uproar; search was everywhere made for the precious root, but it was not to be found. Great was the merchant's distress of mind. The search was renewed, but again without success. At last someone thought of the sailor. The unhappy merchant sprang into the street at the bare suggestion. His alarmed household followed him. The sailor, simple soul!, had not thought of concealment. He was found quietly sitting on a coil of ropes, masticating the last morsel of his "onion." Little did he dream that he had been eating a breakfast whose cost might have regaled a whole ship's crew for a twelvemonth.[27]

The sailor was, according to the story, sent to prison for "months on a charge of felony preferred against him by the merchant." Though likely a tall tale, it nevertheless goes to the heart of capitalist re-enchantment: use value (onion) is nothing compared to exchange value (tulip bulb). What makes an onion useless is precisely that it is socially, biologically useful. Capitalism has never been about use value at all, a misreading that entered the heart of Marxism through Adam Smith's influence on Marx's political economy. [28] The Dutch philosopher Bernard Mandeville's economics, on the other hand, represents a reading of capitalism that corresponds with what I call its configuration space, in which the defining consumer products are culturally actualized compossibilities—and predetermined, like luxuries associated with vice. The reason is simple: capitalism would simply die if it met all of our needs, and our needs are not that hard to fill.

This is precisely where John Maynard Keynes made a major mistake in his remarkable and entertaining 1930 essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren."[29] He assumed that capitalism's noble project was to alleviate its own scarcity, its own uneven distribution of capital. Yes, he really thought that the objective of capitalism was capitalism's own death.[30] And indeed, the late nineteenth-century neoclassical economists universally believed this to be the case. They told the poor to leave capital accumulation to the specialists, as it alone could eventually eliminate all wants and satisfy all needs.[31] It's just a question of time.[32] It is time that justified the concentration of capital in a few hands, the hands of those who had it and did not blow it. And this fortitude, which the poor lacked, deserved a reward. The people provided labor, which deserved a wage; the rich provided waiting, which deserved a profit. This idea was pushed in an economic textbook by John Maynard Keynes's teacher, Alfred Marshall.[33]

What was missing in Keynes's utopia? [34] Even with little distinction from socialism, what was missing was the basic understanding that capitalism is not about producing the necessities of life, but about using every opportunity to transfer luxuries from the elites to the masses. This is the point of Boots Riley's masterpiece *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), a film that may be called surreal by those who have no idea of the kind of culture they are in. The real is precisely the enchantment, the dream. Capitalism's poor do not live in the woods but instead, like *Sorry to Bother You*'s main character, Cassius "Cash" Green (played by LaKeith Stanfield), drive beat-up or heavily indebted cars; work, in the words of the late anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, "bullshit

jobs"; and sleep in vehicles made for recreation (RVs) or tents made for quick weekend breaks from urban stress, or for the lucky ones, in garages (houses for cars). This is what poverty actually looks like in a society that's devoted to luxuries rather than necessities. Cultural theorist Noam Yuran writes:

> As an example of the orthodox concept of the economy, we can [turn] to Keynes's paper "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren." Almost a century after the writing of this essay, we cannot avoid the question of how this great thinker was so naive as to believe that in our time humanity would have freed itself from the problem of scarcity. An answer can be found in the paper itself. Keynes distinguishes between two types of needs: absolute needs, which are unrelated to the situation of our fellow human beings, and relative needs, which drive us to feel superior to our fellows. Keynes acknowledges the fact that the latter type of needs, in contrast to the former, has no theoretical possibility of satisfaction. Yet, he claims that with reference to absolute needs "a point may soon be reached … when these needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes." This conclusion rests on the commonsensical idea that absolute needs are prior to relative needs. That is to say, people toil to have what they absolutely need and, once they have it, may try to have more than others (but being rational, they will tend to give up on this goal). In other words, Keynes's prediction rests on the idea that having is logically prior to having more.[35]

Yuran is getting at something very powerful. Capitalism is not, at the end of the day, based on the production of things we really need (absolute needs), for if it was, it would have already become a thing of the past. Or, in the language of thermodynamics, it would have reached equilibrium. (Indeed, the nineteenth-century British political economist John Stuart Mill called this equilibrium "a stationary state."[36])

For example, an apparent shortage of housing—an absolute need or demand, meaning every human needs to be housed—could easily be solved. But what do you find everywhere in a very rich city like Seattle? No developments that come close to satisfying widespread demand for housing as an absolute need. This fact should sound an alarm in your head. We are in a system geared for relative needs. And capital's re-enchantment is so complete that it's hard to find a theorist who has attempted to adequately (or systemically) recognize it as such. This kind of political economy (or even anti-political economy) would find its reflection in lucid dreaming. Revolution, then, is not the end of enchantment ("the desert of the real") but can only be re-enchantment. We are all made of dreams.

Boots Riley is a lucid dreamer, which is why his political economy is closer to reality than anything you find in the neoclassical school's rational man, rational markets, rational outcomes. The same goes for Noam Yuran and the Jean Baudrillard of his neglected post-Marxist masterpiece *The Mirror of Production*. What young Baudrillard grasped, and what communists, socialists, and Keynesians missed, is that the manufactured ("Main Street") products of capitalism are as fantastic as the financial fabrications of Wall Street.[37] A tulip, a collateralized debt obligation (the famous CDOs of the financial crash of 2007), have as much use value as America's best-selling pickup truck, the Ford F-150. They are all "ectoplasms."[38]

The supernovas that opened the gates of capitalist dreamtime reappeared during the end of the world's first bubble.[39] In *Tulipomania*, Mike Dash writes: "By the beginning of February, money and bulbs—the twin fuels of the flower mania—were both exhausted. And like a sun that has burned the last of its fuel, the tulip mania 'went supernova' in a final, frenzied burst of trading before collapsing in on itself."[40]

LaKeith Stanfield in Boots Riley's Sorry to Bother You, 2018. Annapurna Pictures.

X

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1
"A supernova produces a burst of light billions of times brighter than the Sun, reaching that brightness just a few days after the start of the outburst. The total amount of electromagnetic energy radiated by a supernova during the few months it takes to brighten and fade away is roughly the same, as the Sun will radiate during its entire ten-billion-year lifetime." W. Shea, "Galileo and the Supernova of 1604," in *1604–2004: Supernovae as Cosmological Lighthouses* , ASP Conference Series, vol. 342 (2005): 13 https://articles.adsabs.harvard.edu/pdf/2005ASPC..342...13S .

2
"Galileo did not hear about the supernova for several days, and his first recorded observation is dated 28 October. By then the news had become a sensation, and everyone wanted to know what the professor of Astronomy at the University of Padua had to say about it. Galileo had held that position since 1592, but this was the first time in twelve years that he was called upon to give a public lecture. The subject was so hot that he gave not one, but three lectures. Only the first page and a fragment of the end of his first lecture have survived, and we do not know exactly when he delivered these talks, but it was probably during November while the star could still be seen in the evening sky. From the last week in November until after Christmas, it was too near the Sun to be visible. When it reappeared it could be seen just before dawn in the East." W. Shea, "Galileo and the Supernova of 1604," 15.

3
The last major stateless market city was Antwerp, which was sacked in 1576.

4
I use "spontaneous" in its thermodynamic sense, as a natural tendency. There is nothing spontaneous about capitalism.

5
Much to the disappointment of Leibniz, the Dutch cloth merchant Antoni van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) treated the microscope not as a scientific object but as a secret asset an enterprise can use to maintain what Marx called "relative surplus value."

6
Christiaan Huygens (1629–94) is credited with determining the connection between mass and velocity. This resulted in one of the most famous equations of the first mechanical age: $F = mv^2/R$.

7
James Gleick writes that the African talking drum "was a technology much sought in Europe: long-distance communication faster than any traveler on foot or horseback. Through the still night air over a river, the thump of the drum could carry six or seven miles. Relayed from village to village, messages could rumble a hundred miles or more in a matter of an hour." *The I nformation: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (Pantheon, 2011).

8
Ronald L. Meek writes: "This line of inquiry, says Stewart, began with Montesquieu, who 'attempted to account, from the changes in the condition of mankind, which take place in the different stages of their progress, for the corresponding alterations which their institutions undergo.' As a description of Montesquieu's approach this is a little inept: few clear traces of a stadial view of this type can in fact be found in the Spirit of Laws. As a description of Smith's approach, however, it is very accurate indeed." But the stadial theory of human development begins with Francis Hutchenson, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment, which might be more important than the French Enlightenment (referred to as "the Enlightenment"). *Smith, Marx & After: Ten Essays in the Development of Economic Thought* (Chapman & Hall, 1977), 21.

9
Though György Lukács's masterful *The Young Hegel* substantially describes Adam Smith's impact on Hegel, he doesn't connect Smith's stadial theory of history with Hegel's theory of history progressing, as Geist (Spirit), from lower to higher stages. Hegel's Spirit might very well be a combination of Spinoza's unmoving substance ("the oriental conception of emanation as the absolute is the light which illumines itself" but doesn't reflect) and the motive force of the stadial theory elaborated by the Scottish Enlightenment.

10
Though Marx did emphasize the cultural specificity of capitalism, particularly in *Grundrisse* and *Capital* volume one, he never really broke with the stadial view of history, made clear by his late and unproductive statement that "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape."

11
Giovanni Arrighi writes: "It so happens that Braudel's notion of financial expansions as closing phases of major capitalist developments has enabled me to break down the entire lifetime of the capitalist world system (Braudel's longue durée) into more manageable units of analysis, which I have called systemic cycles of accumulation. Although I have named these cycles after particular components of the system (Genoa, Holland, Britain, and the United States), the cycles themselves refer to the system as a whole and not to its components." *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (Verso, 1994), xiii.

12
Giovanni Arrighi includes China in the list of capital's dominant accumulation cycles in his final book, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (Verso, 2007).

13
The steam engine also played an important role in concentrating capital in cities. The machine was, unlike rivers, portable.

14
Ellen Meiksins Wood, who provides an excellent summary or the long and as yet unresolved "transition debate" in *The Origin of Capital: A Longer View* (Verso, 2002), writes: "The central question at issue between Sweezy and Dobb was where to locate the 'prime mover' in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Was the primary cause of the transition to be found within the basic, constitutive relations of feudalism, the relations between lords and peasants? Or was it external to those relations, located particularly in the expansion of trade?" p. 38.

15
Does a cultural system see what it wants to or can believe? I ask this question because it's curious that entropy, which now plays the role of the leading description of the motion of the whole universe, was discovered by engineers and scientists seeking to improve the efficiency of the steam engine.

16
Helmut Reichelt: "In Marx's thought the expansion of the concept into the absolute is the adequate expression of a reality where this event is happening in an analogous manner … Hegelian idealism, for which human beings obey a despotic notion, is indeed more adequate to this inverted world than any nominalistic theory wishing to accept the universal as something subjectively conceptual. It is bourgeois society as ontology." Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalsbegrifs bei Marx* (ça ira-Verlag, 2001), 76–77, 80. Translated by Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva as "The Neue Marx-Lektüre: Putting the Critique of Political Economy Back into the Critique of Society," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 189 (January–February 2015).

17
Moishe Postone writes that Marx "explicitly characterizes capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject. In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat, or with humanity. Rather, Marx analyzes it in terms of the structure of social relations constituted by forms of objectifying practice and grasped by the category of capital (and, hence, value). His analysis suggests that the social relations that characterize capitalism are of a very peculiar sort—they possess the attributes that Hegel accorded the Geist. It is in this sense, then, that a historical Subject as conceived by Hegel exists in capitalism." *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

18
Following the Neue Marx-Lektüre and Moishe Postone, the young Marxist scholar Søren Mau writes: "The resemblance between capital and the subject in this Hegelian sense comes out very clearly in Marx's analysis of capital. For him, capital is fundamentally a movement, or 'value-in-process.' The beginning and the end of this movement are qualitatively identical: with capital,

value 'enters into a private relationship with itself,' thereby elevating its being-for-others—that is, being-for-consumption in the case of simple circulation (C-M-C)—to 'being-for-itself.'" *Mute Compulsions* (Verso, 2024).

19
The most rewarding chapter in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "Ithaca," moves between the cosmic and the commercial with great ease. The two cannot be separated. Measuring economic activity and the distance to stars are directly related. The accounting intensity (or mania) of the former made the latter inevitable. How much did you spend today? How bright is the moon tonight? How long does it take for a ship to cross the ocean? How long does it take for light to arrive from that galaxy? What are the assets in your mother's will? What is the composition of water? "Ithaca" is the stuff of a disenchanted society.

20
Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the 17th Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 83. In the way Alpers's book was inspired by Foucault's *The Order of Things*, this essay is inspired by Roland Barthes's brilliant but too-brief "The World as Object." Barthes's reading of Dutch Art: "The Dutch scenes require a gradual and complete reading; we must begin at one edge and finish at the other, audit the painting like an accountant, not forgetting this corner, that margin, that background, in which is inscribed yet another perfectly rendered object adding its unit to this patient weighing of property or of merchandise." *Critical Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 1972), 7.

21
We know this line in the same way we know Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner." It's not an accident that Raoul Peck's *The Young Karl Marx* ends with a classic tune by Bob Dylan.

22
Wu-Tang Clan, "C.R.E.A.M.," *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (Loud Records, 1994).

23
Marx writes in *Capital* volume one: "In the midst of all the accidental and ever fluctuating exchange relations between the products, the labour time socially necessary for their production forcibly asserts itself like an overriding law of Nature. The law of gravity thus asserts itself when a house falls about our ears" https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm . I must here point out that what Marx calls "socially necessary," I call "culturally necessary." The social is transhistorical; the cultural is not. A society is the object investigated by sociobiology; a culture is the subject of anthropology. The productions of the former are spontaneous; those of the latter are not.

24
I transport this concept coined by Raymond Williams in 1954 to the post-Althusserian structuralism spelled out in Stuart Hall's 1973 lecture "A 'Reading' of Marx's 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* " (Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham). Personal feelings are structured by the culture one is in. In our case, that culture is capitalism. It must also be noted that Hall's Althusserian point of departure has greater explanatory power than Foucault's.

25
The oldest known book about the stock market is Joseph Penso de la Vega's *Confusión de Confusiones* , which was published in the twilight of the Dutch Golden Age (1688) and presents the speculative mania in way not so different from how films like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) and Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) depict it.

26
Not long after Donald Trump was reelected on November 5, 2024, *Bloomberg* reported that Elon Musk's market value exploded from $200 billion to over $400 billion https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-11/elon-musk-net-worth-tops-400-billion-a-historic-first .

27
Charles Mackey, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841). The description of tulip mania is not as competent as the book's description of the "Mississippi Scheme" that gave us the expression "bubble."

28
However, one thing that can said about Adam Smith's sprawling survey of commercial society is that all the defining positions of the leading schools of economics, from Marxism to modern monetary theory, can be found, in some form or another, expressed in it. For example, Smith is aware that capitalism is not about needs but desires. This fact is captured in the famous diamond-water paradox. Smith writes in *Wealth of Nations* : "The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarcely anything; scarcely anything can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarcely any use-value; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it." "Of the Origin and Use of Money," in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* , 1776. This is only a paradox if you refuse to recognize capitalism's reenchantment. Tulips and diamonds, property values and AI—what matters is not what you can eat, but what melts into air.

29
John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), 358–73.

30
Marx thought capital produced its own gravediggers, the workers. Keynes believed capital was its own gravedigger. It could dig its own grave by becoming too abundant. In the latter case, the Sweezy school of Marxist economics borrowed from an early American Keynesian, Alvin Hensen, to solve this enigma. Abundance, the result of capitalist re-enhancement, is wasted in one way or another. In *Monopoly Capital* (1966), Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran identify the growing importance of marketing in the postwar US as serving the key function of wasting capital.

31
John Maynard Keynes on capitalism in the nineteenth century: "Thus this remarkable system depended for its growth on a double bluff or deception. On the one hand the laboring classes accepted from ignorance or powerlessness, or were compelled, persuaded, or cajoled by custom, convention, authority, and the well-established order of Society into accepting, a situation in which they could call their own very little of the cake that they and Nature and the capitalists were co-operating to produce. And on the other hand the capitalist classes were allowed to call the best part of the cake theirs and were theoretically free to consume it, on the tacit underlying condition that they consumed very little of it in practice. The duty of 'saving' became nine-tenths of virtue and the growth of the cake the object of true religion. There grew round the non-consumption of the cake all those instincts of puritanism which in other ages has withdrawn itself from the world and has neglected the arts of production as well as those of enjoyment. And so the cake increased; but to what end was not clearly contemplated. Individuals would be exhorted not so much to abstain as to defer, and to cultivate the pleasures of security and anticipation. Saving was for old age or for your children; but this was only in theory—the virtue of the cake was that it was never to be consumed, neither by you nor by your children after you." *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Macmillan & Co., Limited), 1919.

32
To use the words of Depeche Mode, "A Question of Time," *Black Celebration* (Sony Music, 1986).

33
For a fascinating examination of Marshall's theory of waiting, and also his adoption and then abandonment of Marxian socialism for what we now call marginalism (the cement of the neoclassical school that has ruled economics since the 1980s), see Kiichiro Yagi, "Marshall and Marx: 'Waiting' and 'Reproduction,'" *Kyoto University Economic Review* 62, no. 2 (October 1992).

34
Much of political economy can be boiled down to a dreamer refusing to believe they are dreaming.

35
Noam Yuran, *What Money Wants: An Economy of Desire* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 39–40.

36
John Stuart Mill: "When a country has carried production as far as in the existing state of knowledge it can be carried with an amount of return corresponding to the average strength of the effective

desire of accumulation in that country, it has reached what is called the stationary state; the state in which no further addition will be made to capital, unless there takes place either some improvement in the arts of production, or an increase in the strength of the desire to accumulate." *Principles of Political Economy* , vol. 1 (Parker, 1857), 210.

37
His concept of transeconomics should not be confused with transhistoricism. The former is about the market as totality specific to a culture we call capitalism; the latter naturalizes the categories of our market culture: wages, profits, money, exchange, and so forth. Baudrillard on transeconomics: "There is something much more shattering than inflation, however, and that is the mass of floating money whirling about the Earth in an orbital rondo. Money is now the only genuine artificial satellite. A pure artifact, it enjoys a truly astral mobility; and it is instantaneously convertible. Money has now found its proper place, a place far more wondrous than the stock exchange: the orbit in which it rises and sets like some artificial sun." *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (Verso, 1990), 33.

38
Baudrillard writes: "Exchange value is what makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power is what makes its use value, the concrete origin and end of the act of labor, appear as its 'generic' alibi. This is the logic of signifiers which produces the 'evidence' of the 'reality' of the signified and the referent. In every way, exchange value makes concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear only in distorted, abstract forms. But it foments the concrete as its ideological ectoplasm, its phantasm of origin and transcendence (*de passement*). In this sense need, use value, and the referent "do not exist." They are only concepts produced and projected into a generic dimension by the development of the very system of exchange value." *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (Telos Press, 1975), 30.

39
It's telling that Victorian anthropologists saw Aboriginal Australians as inhabiting dreamtime, but themselves. They, the masters of progress, were in the real; their subjects were lost in a dream. But a culture, no matter what form it takes, demands for its coherence a good deal of dreaming.

40
Mike Dash, *Tulipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower & the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused* (Crown, 2001), 167.

Emilie Renard, Claire Staebler, and Mathilde Walker-Billaud

Globalism à la Française: A Conversation on Okwui Enwezor's "Intense Proximity" Triennale

What does the concept of a global exhibition mean within a French context?

—Elvan Zabunyan[1]

When writer, curator, and theoretician Okwui Enwezor took on the artistic direction of the 2012 edition of the Paris Triennale (La Triennale), he approached France and its artistic scene from the perspective of an immigrant. Far from taking a universalist position—so dear to a certain French philosophical tradition[2] —he considered the reality of the country's expansive global history and its immigration policies. Enwezor worked with four associate curators—Mélanie Bouteloup, Abdellah Karroum, Émilie Renard, and Claire Staebler—who he invited to breach the limits of France's national frame of reference in order to encompass wider, more complex translocal and postcolonial contexts.

While revisiting the traces left by La Triennale, including the monumental 695-page catalog Intense Proximité: Une anthologie du proche et du lointain (Intense Proximity: An Anthology of the Near and the Far) *, and four digital journals edited by the associate curators, I have been struck by the simultaneous artistic and geopolitical density of this project. Held from April to August 2012 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and seven other associated venues, it presented works by over a hundred visual artists, filmmakers, and ethnographers of diverse nationalities and generations.*[3]

I wanted to discuss this ambitious project with curators Émilie Renard and Claire Staebler, and how it came to fruition during a political shift in France which saw the rise of identitarian debates and the normalization of the far right.

La Triennale offers a rich case study for the e-flux journal *series After Okwui, which aims to uncover new narratives around art history and globalized curatorial practice by reflecting on Enwezor's critical and curatorial work. Although it has not been widely discussed, Enwezor's Triennale articulated the challenges that globalization—and the movements of denationalization, decentralization, and de-hierarchization that arose from it—posed to the writing of modern and contemporary art history. Paris and its "excess of cultural capital"*[4]

constituted, in Enwezor's eyes, a fertile ground for revisiting the ethnographic model of otherness and reviving certain lessons from cosmopolitanism in the context of a tense cultural landscape.

This interview was conducted remotely in French in October 2024. It has been edited for clarity.[5]

Rirkrit Tiravanija, Fear Eats the Soul, 2012. Installation view, "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photograph: André Morin. Courtesy the artist and La Triennale.

—Mathilde Walker-Billaud

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Mathilde Walker-Billaud: In the catalog for La Triennale, Okwui Enwezor writes that the event had its origin in the "rising visibility of a politics of anti-difference" and the public debates that this created.[6] In 2006, he was profoundly affected by a *New York Times* article which described a controversy surrounding a French soup kitchen in Paris.[7] This kitchen, supported by far-right groups, was effectively excluding Muslim populations by only offering pig-based soup. How did this French debate come into play in the elaboration of the Triennale titled "Intense Proximity"?

Claire Staebler: The article you are referring to, Mathilde, was indeed at the heart of our discussions from the very first meetings about La Triennale. What Okwui Enwezor pointed out in the "pig soup" episode were the new tactics developed by far-right groups to marginalize entire immigrant segments of French society, in this case Muslim people. He was shocked by the violence and strategy of these militants, and had the incident in his mind four years later when he was invited by the French Ministry of Culture to carry out a project on French territory. This constant interplay between what he called the "shallow distance and disturbing nearness," and the ambivalent nature of proximity, was one of the pillars of La Triennale. We then moved on to a process of anchoring the project in the ethnography of the French interwar period, focusing particularly on how this material has been incorporated into modern film, photography, and literature, and what it generated in terms of concepts such as "neighbor-stranger," "citizens-not-citizens," and "belonging-not-belonging."

Émilie Renard: Enwezor rooted the notion of proximity in

the context of French ethnography, and this was of course a criticism he raised with regard to this heritage. The title "Intense Proximity" designated the acceleration of relations in a world where every distance has been shortened and every territory mapped.

MWB: The notion of "intense proximity" served as a tool for reconsidering the national frame of the invitation to La Triennale (formerly called "La Force de l'art" [The Strength of Art]), which had been reserved up until then for French artists. After reading the "pig soup" article and understanding the political uses of cultural traditions, Enwezor concluded that it was impossible not to question the meaning of "an exhibition in which the status of the national artistic scene and cultural visibility takes absolute priority."[8] He wanted to rethink French territory beyond its political borders, as a porous "contact zone"[9] made up of interactions and mutual influences, a "land of migrations"[10] marked by its colonial and imperialist history. Can you tell us more about La Triennale's institutional history and Enwezor's intervention in this exhibition model?

ER: It is indeed important to contextualize La Triennale as a counterproposal in its very model, both within the French political context and within the context of artistic institutions. As Claire mentioned, the "pig soup" phenomenon was a way for far-right movements to bring nationalist identitarian questions back into the media spotlight. In May 2007, newly elected president Nicolas Sarkozy created the infamous Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. When Enwezor was invited by the Ministry of Culture to take on the artistic direction of La Force de l'art in 2010, we were caught in the middle of unapologetic right-wing forms of expressions which promoted a national narrative of French colonial heritage. Suffice to say, for Enwezor La Force de l'art was problematic, not only because of its title, but also because of its implementation, structure, and methodology. He wanted to first bypass the objective of promoting the "strength" of the French scene, and to reformulate this representation of an art scene limited to a national territory, as well as the highly hierarchical institutional landscape that this scene comprised. He therefore sought to undo all the ongoing centralities, first by moving the event: instead of the monumental site of the Grand Palais, he established La Triennale in the Palais de Tokyo and other associated institutions around "Grand Paris" (Greater Paris, which wasn't called that at the time). With regard to the geography of the exhibition, he wanted to show that alternative art scenes also have an immense part to play. He wanted to affirm that La Triennale could be a motor for the recognition of the diversity of the French artistic scene as well as an asset to enrich it, and not merely a mirror of the status quo. Similarly, from a methodological standpoint, Enwezor began by sharing the curatorial functions with four other people, and sought out artists well beyond national borders.

CS: He positioned himself clearly in his catalog text: he preferred to work with France in its globality, its link to its colonies, to the world, to its heritage … rather than working with contemporary French artists.[11]

MWB: Taking La Triennale out of the Grand Palais was a powerful symbolic gesture, when you think about the history of this building dedicated to French art and built for the 1900 Universal Exhibition. Its identity is shaped by the edification of France as a colonial and industrial power at the turn of the twentieth century.

ER: Exactly, and the Grand Palais, just like London's Crystal Palace before it, is constitutive of the white cube, a concept eloquently described by Brian O'Doherty. It's a type of architecture that establishes the primacy assigned to vision over the other senses. Enwezor's answer is a meaningful gesture; not only did he move La Triennale to the Palais de Tokyo and seven other locations on the outskirts, but he also turned the Grand Palais into the stage for another play, with *Soup/No Soup* by Rirkrit Tiravanija. During this inaugural event for La Triennale, the venue was emptied and later filled with a crowd that gathered to share a meal. The space was organized in a horizontal layout, divided by tables and benches, on a human scale.

The exhibition "Intense Proximity" was principally located at the Palais de Tokyo, and it seems important to mention a few prior debates at the space. When Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans opened the art center in 2002, they made it the setting for a rather festive and spectacular experience of "relational aesthetics"—which Bourriaud theorized in 1998 in his eponymous book. In her 2006 essay "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," Claire Bishop criticized the apolitical dimension of Bourriaud's proposal, positioning herself in favor of collaborative practices shaped by their own contexts of emergence and reception. Bishop used Tiravanija, one of the artists Bourriaud regularly worked with, as an example to criticize small-scale actions, akin to closed circles grounded in intersubjective relationships. Today, when I think about Enwezor's invitation to Tiravanija to organize this soup kitchen at the Grand Palais, I wonder if he was bringing a large-scale political context to the conversation, as if in response to the shortcomings pointed out by Bishop.

CS: It's true that Enwezor shifted this element of "spectacle" of *Soup/No Soup*, or in any case this image of an artform that is intended to build communities but ends up being considered an event reserved for the "happy few." All of a sudden, this gesture went beyond these questions to return to narratives of giving, of "contact zones," of hostility and generosity.

ER: In addition, Tiravanija wrote "FEAR EATS THE SOUL" in the entrance hall of the Palais. This sentence, borrowed from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's movie of the same name,

Rirkrit Tiravanija, Soup/No Soup, 2012. Installation view, Grand Palais, "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Paris.

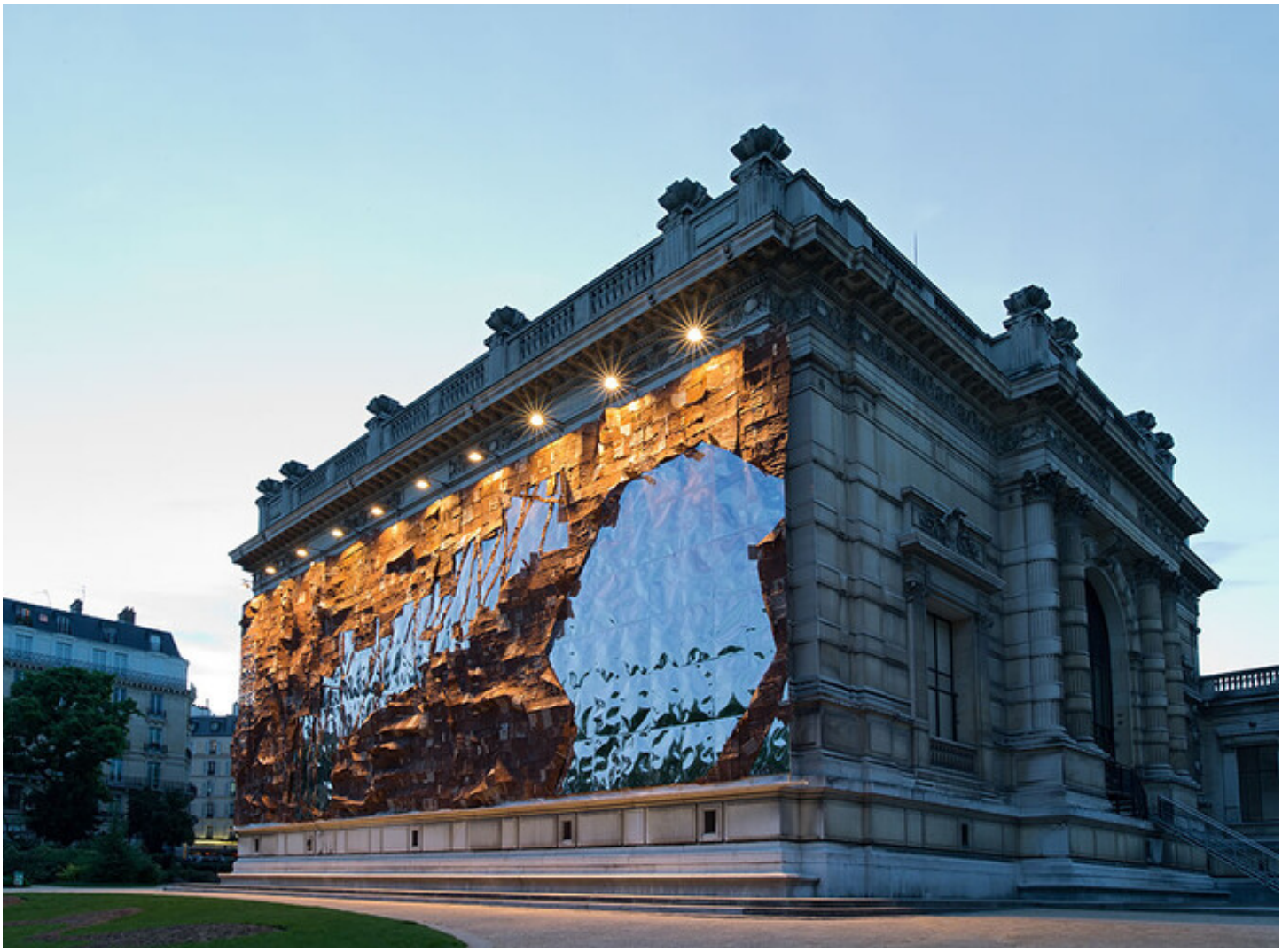
refers to this fear of the other, a soul-eating racism. Here again, it's not a monumental work; on the contrary, it's very simple: written in capital letters with black paint applied directly on the wall, evoking the prevailing racism in France, right from the exhibition entrance.

CS: Right from the start, Enwezor wanted to highlight edges; the edges of Paris, of France, of Europe … The exhibition was on display at the Palais de Tokyo, but it was part of an ensemble, a variety of interventions and disciplines, places and temporalities. The first thing you saw when you arrived at the Palais de Tokyo was El Anatsui's monumental intervention covering the Palais Galliéra. Here we can already observe a reflection about the Grand Paris project at its outset.

During the making of the exhibition, different worlds came together; some artworks required challenging production and installation solutions, tailored specifically for the Palais de Tokyo, such as the first iteration of *Est-il possible d'être révolutionnaire et d'aimer les fleurs?* (*Is it possible to be a revolutionary and love flowers?*) by Camille Henrot. The exhibition route offered a continuous evolution through universes that confronted and communicated with each other, with a great deal of freedom with regard to considerations of aesthetics, form, and scale. Lastly, some "islands" operated independently, with more interstitial interventions, such as Sarkis's *Frise des Trésors de Guerre* (*The Frieze of War Trophies*).

Enwezor talked more about positions than artists. He had a great willingness to innovate, to open the door for other fields and transdisciplinary practices. At the same time, his use of the exhibition space was fairly classic, with the presence of "museum moments" in the exhibition that contrasted with the Palais de Tokyo's programming at the time. The loan of artworks with insurance value from major museum collections, such as those by David Hammons and Öyvind Falström, is not common in the history of an institution that defines itself as a "Site for Contemporary Creation."

MWB: Could you expand on the role of the book *Tristes Tropiques* within the project? It seems that Enwezor turned La Triennale into a platform for questioning the legacy of this landmark work, whose author, Claude Lévi-Strauss, had recently passed away.



El Anatsui, Broken Bridge, "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Paris. Photo by André Morin.

CS: *Tristes Tropiques* is definitely a cornerstone of the project, and an entry point to Lévi-Strauss's pictures kept at the Musée du Quai Branly, which Enwezor loved so much. It may also be relevant to mention that the catalog cover is a photograph by Timothy Asch, in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss's photographic collection practice. In the exhibition, we integrated a photographic corpus referencing other works by ethnographers and ethnologists, including Pierre Verger, Marcel Griaule, André Gide, and Marc Allégret. This set of photographic and film archives calls for different narratives around the close and the distant.

Lévi-Strauss appeared elsewhere in "Intense Proximity" too, for example in Wifredo Lam's *Carnets de Marseille* (1941)—a rather singular work in the artist's career, but one which took on special significance in the context of La Triennale. This series of surrealist-inspired automatic drawings is said to have been produced on Captain Paul-Lemerle's famous boat, which made the Marseille-New York crossing in 1941 with Lévi-Strauss, André Breton, and a whole clique of surrealist artists on board. Despite the fact that Lam and Lévi-Strauss didn't meet on the trip, and that Lam didn't embark for the United States, Enwezor was very inspired by these historical links. They affirmed his intuition that Lévi-Strauss's work went beyond the scientific frame. It's interesting to create a dialogue between Lévi-Strauss's photographs and Lam's drawings. Some cross-disciplinary links appear in the process.

ER: *Tristes Tropiques* is undeniably an important reference that Enwezor integrated into the project. He did this first by invoking Lévi-Strauss's critique of the way ethnography exoticized non-Western cultures; *Tristes Tropiques* begins on a critical note ("I hate traveling and explorers"), which is not without ambiguity when put alongside the practices of international curators like Enwezor. Second, Enwezor echoed Lévi-Strauss's assessment that a radical elsewhere had been lost, replaced by a world without exteriority; Enwezor likewise wrote in his catalog essay that "we are all travelers … we

Alfredo Jaar, Le siècle Lévi-Strauss, 2007. "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Paris. Courtesy of the artist and Kamel Mennour (Paris).

live in the relentless flow of capital, commodities, subjectivities, objects."[12] Starting from the observation that ethnography has forged our representations of the distant by associating them with an imaginary anteriority, or even a certain idea of ancestrality, Enwezor wanted to reexamine the photographic sources, the majority from the Quai Branly collections, in order to bring a critical perspective to them. This focus was visible in the display itself: it was important for Enwezor to keep the documents within the physical context of the archive, with the corresponding nomenclatures to organize them. This was particularly true of Lévi-Strauss's photographic series (the portraits of Caduveo women in Brazil), as well as Marcel Griaule's (the pictures from the Dakar-Djibouti mission), which were annotated, labelled, and exhibited with their cardboard backings. This arrangement provided information on the provenance of the images and their uses within the collections of a museum that is itself halfway between art and ethnography. As an indirect result, the setup also revealed hidden recording devices, whether photographic or cinematographic, such as those in the work of Jean Rouch and Timothy Asch.

Enwezor wove a whole genealogy throughout the exhibition, made apparent by the positions of artists like Georges Adéagbo, Ahmed Bouanani, and Joost Conijn. Other critical positions oscillated between fiction and document, as seen in the works of Lorraine O'Grady, Hiwa K, Marie Voignier, and Neil Beloufa, while other artists documented and provided testimonies of uncharted facts to compose alternative narratives, such as Eva Partum and Bouchra Khalili.

MWB: Enwezor said in an interview that "'Intense Proximity' deals with the poetics of ethnography, not ethnography itself."[13] How did this ethnographic gaze, which haunts the humanities as much as the arts—as evidenced by Hal Foster's 1995 text "The Artist as Ethnographer?," reproduced in the catalog—come into play in your own curatorial work?[14]

ER: Within our curatorial group, we each tried to define and problematize our own positions. I think Enwezor brought us together for our complementary positions, but also because, as curators based in France and Morocco (in the case of Abdellah Karroum), we served as bridges between our contexts. This reflexivity was induced by his own multicultural perspective, as a Nigerian curator who immigrated to the United States.

CS: He was extremely interested in people's stories and paths. He made rather spectacular connections between dates, people, and artistic groups. I had travelled to Romania, Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine prior to La Triennale, and it was very stimulating to return to these contexts with Enwezor and to reexamine certain historical artistic practices in light of cultural exchanges between Africa and different Eastern European countries.

MWB: In France, we can mention Jean-Hubert Martin as one of the contemporary art curators who tried to depart from cultural Euro-American centers and grapple with a global scale through his famous and controversial 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre."[15] While clearly critical of Martin's ethnocentric postmodern approach, Enwezor acknowledged the French curator's ambition to "address [the West's] relationship to non-Western aesthetics and discursive systems institutionally" and the significance of precisely connected to this objective of identifying contexts that revealed counter-histories, whether a moment from the French colonial past or from a multicultural Eastern European territory like the so-called "Balkans." The relationships between the Souths, between peripheries, between edges—everything that didn't pass through the filter of Eurocentrism was of interest to him. I think this could be ascertained in the exhibition.

Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants (with Yo-Yo Gonthier, Les cultures sont variées et riches et Petite zone peu sûre, ensemble Outre-Mer, 2012, and Edouard Bouët-Willaumez, Carte des côtes occidentales d'Afrique, 1848, Collection de la Bibliothèque Historique du Cirad). Installation view, "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Bétonsalon – Centre for Art and Research, Paris, 2012. Photograph: Grégory Copitet. Courtesy the artists and La Triennale.

ER: The territories that we visited or planned to visit were

his project to the development of so-called global exhibitions.[16] Was La Triennale conceived as a response to "Magiciens"?

ER: It seems to me that Jean-Hubert Martin's project with "Magiciens de la terre" was primarily to decentralize the occidental perspective on contemporary art that was still prevalent at the time, and to open it up to a global scale. But this decentering manifested itself in a strangely binary way. A major criticism made of the exhibition was that it established proximities between artworks on a formal basis, even though they came from radically different contexts—and always with an already-recognized work as a reference. I suppose this project was founded on an implicit—or typical—dissociation between aesthetic and political dimensions. I wonder if, in France, this contributed to reaffirming the bias that form overrides content and that, conversely, form is less relevant in so-called political art. I would say that within the framework of the exhibition, Enwezor put effort into offering a very dense aesthetic experience in which specific perspectives and political issues were expressed without losing their complexity. I think he helped to reintroduce the possibility of addressing political issues in France at the scale of a big event that offered prolific and intense experiences.

On the curatorial side, we traveled a lot, in France as well as abroad. You could say we took a similar route to that of "Magiciens de la terre," where curators went in search of these "magicians" on every continent—although on a different scale and with different intentions. Our scouting work, which involved a form of field study, was motivated by a different approach: to see artists in their own contexts, within their institutional and intellectual networks, in order to better understand the social, collective, and personal implications of their practices. This work of investigation and recontextualization, as well as the encounters that stemmed from it, shaped the exhibition.

CS: When I think about it, there are other important aspects of La Triennale, more intangible ones, like music and the physical nature of sound—a term that came back often in our conversations with Enwezor, who was very well-versed in musical culture. One of the most moving and successful projects, in my opinion, was by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc. It was a great challenge to reinterpret the works of Julius Eastman, a little-known figure in American music at the time, who has since reemerged in many places. Between Abonnenc's concerts, Tarek Atoui's sound performances, and Konrad Smolenski's sound sculptures, La Triennale shaped a full-fledged soundscape: raw, physical, and with rage.

MWB: Do you think that this departure from formalist concerns contributed to La Triennale's lack of resonance, at least with the French public?

CS: I'm more inclined to think that the subjects covered by La Triennale were not yet widely discussed in France at the time. Once again, this multifaceted project opened up a vast field of reflections and references, whose foresight and resonance we are now discussing more than ever, I believe.

I also have to admit that, at times, the exhibition was a bit challenging, a bit unfiltered. Today we'd be looking more closely at the way the artists are presented, the way the public is addressed, and the language we use. In the context of La Triennale, this lack of mediation seemed to lay the groundwork for an unlearning structure—an issue I expanded on in what we called the *Journal of La Triennale*. If unlearning becomes a way to connect with the world—an individual or collective tendency, allowing everyone to rethink, renegotiate, and question our beliefs—then art, inevitably, can help us reshape our perceptions of the world.

ER: There is a certain radicality with Enwezor in his determination to preserve complexity and give direct access to artworks, without mediation. In terms of exhibition experience, he refused any clear chronological order or thematic focus. The exhibition brought together a great number of artists and authors inside the vast Palais, which had just reopened its doors with double the exhibition space. Yet the tools that accompanied the public were reduced to the bare minimum: simple labels, no headings or signage. Our interpretation of the works was only provided in the exhibition brochure, organized chronologically by artists. The exhibition offered no coherent reading of the world, and, likewise, wandering through these rooms meant composing your own itinerary and following several paths. And if you add the number of video hours, it was impossible to see everything in a single day. It was this overflowing effect, like "You're on your own with this forest of signs." There was a sense of profusion that displayed the condition of the contemporary world. An "Intense Proximity."

Besides this intentional complexity, Enwezor also wanted to de-hierarchize practices by exhibiting artworks, documents, ethnographic photographs, and documentary films on the same level. Here we can observe the cultural studies framework of considering the artworks themselves as documents of their production, and conversely, considering documents as aesthetic propositions that compose a visual culture—a perspective that, at the time, was met with a lot of resistance in France.

MWB: How was this project, which attempted to deter any institutional strategy of large-scale visibility, received by the boards and partners?

CS: In my opinion, La Triennale did not get the reception it should have had in the French art scene. There was a real lack of awareness regarding Enwezor, his influence and

Installation view, "La Triennale 2012: Intense Proximity," Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photograph: André Morin. Courtesy La Triennale.

accomplishments—even if this wasn't the case with all the artists and thinkers we met.

ER: The discontinuation of La Triennale is in itself an admission of failure and sign of a lack of interest in the exhibition, when its model only required further deployment and refinement. Enwezor defended the importance of collective curatorial work to the boards, as well as an ethical approach to the choice of sponsors, which ended up having a significant impact on the overall budget. He had an impressive talent for negotiation and the ability to bend the terms of the invitation, starting by deconstructing and rearranging its very frame. His determination made this edition possible, and perhaps explains the resistance to continuing the project afterwards. In the same way, the complete disappearance of the website dedicated to La Triennale shows either a lack of interest from the institutions that initiated it, or dysfunctions in the valuation of such archives. The event has not been fully integrated into the history of the Palais de Tokyo either. I hope that the Palais's team—which has engaged in a process of introspection around the institution's history[17]—will acknowledge and archive this moment.

CS: In the end, it's a bit of a miracle that it happened at all. The project was made possible by a handful of people, including Nicolas Bourriaud, who supported the project from the outset, when he was at the Direction Générale de la Création Artistique (General Directorate for Artistic Creation). Enwezor had this tendency to look further and further ahead, at a bigger scale, with more collaborations, more platforms … His project was a bit scary. It was reduced, but in the end it was still quite ambitious compared to what had been commissioned. To impose four associate curators and attach the Palais de Tokyo to seven other venues, that went far beyond what the Ministry had originally imagined.

X

Translated from the French by Hellene Aligant.

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1
Intense Proximité: Une anthologie du Proche et du Lointain , ed. Okwui Enwezor (CNAP and Artlys, 2012), 112.

2
A tradition that leads to "thought-continents" that are "effective for all and at all times," in the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, to which he opposes his "altermodern" model of archipelago and constellation. *Intense Proximité* , 62.

3
The main website dedicated to the event has been taken down, but the La Triennale journals are accessible on the Centre National des Arts Plastiques website https://www.cnap.fr/le-journal-de-la-triennale . As of this writing, the Palais de Tokyo still has a webpage about the event. It includes three images of the exhibition and a short paragraph on the curatorial concept (with no reference to guest artists or access to the exhibition guide) https://palaisdetokyo.com/exposition/la-triennale-intense-proximite/ .

4
A term Enwezor used to explain the absence of the French artistic scene from Documenta 11: "It would have been an easy choice to give Paris a privileged position in this edition of Documenta. However, discussing art in Paris and in New Delhi is different. I thought it preferable not to show something that already represented an excess of 'cultural capital' in Kassel." Okwui Enwezor, "Triennale de Paris," interview by Paul Ardenne, *Art Press* , May 12, 2012.

5
This interview would not have been possible without the invaluable involvement of Émilie Renard and Claire Staebler. I am also grateful to Serubiri Moses for inviting me to take part in this series. This investigation has given me the opportunity to nurture one of my intellectual obsessions—related in part to my immigrant journey from France to the United States—by putting into perspective French intellectual and artistic traditions. I wish to thank James Merle Thomas, a close collaborator of Enwezor and editorial director of the La Triennale catalog, who took the time to discuss Enwezor's work philosophy with me. I am also grateful for the help of Yoann Gourmel, director of publics and cultural programming at the Palais de Tokyo, who shared with me the La Triennale press review put together by the art center's team.

6
Intense Proximité , 11.

7
Intense Proximité , 29.

8
Intense Proximité , 34.

9
A recurring notion in Enwezor's catalog text. He refers in particular to Mary Louise Pratt, who defines "contact zones" as social spaces where disparate cultures clash and modern antinomies confront each other. *Intense Proximité* , 24.

10
Aurélie Romanacce, "Expo sans frontière," *Arts Magazine*, June 2012.

11
"Even my initial sympathy with this attempt at a political project, directed through contemporary art and culture, could not reconcile the schism in the French debate about identity and its place in a supposedly secular society. I took the fact that this strategy of territorialized exploration of the French artistic scene and its yet unremarked extraterritorial projection to the world is largely untenable." Enwezor in *Intense Proximité*, 35.

12
Intense Proximité , 25.

13
Okwui Enwezor, "Intense Proximity," interview by Rahma Khazam, *Flash Art*, January–February 2012, 118.

14
Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?," in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Anthropology and Art* , ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (University of California Press, 1995). Enwezor's essay "Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World," written for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997), connects the work of the curator with that of the ethnographer: "My perspectives have been enriched and broadened by moments of contact, which in the discipline of anthropology will address the rather problematic connotation of doing 'fieldwork." *Trade Routes: History and Geography* , ed. Okwui Enwezor (2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997), 9.

15
"The significance of 'Magiciens de la Terre' in terms of

modernism or postmodernism and its postcolonial or neocolonial position continues to be debated. The nature of its globalism is the subject of ongoing analysis in these debates, and its ambition to present worldwide internationalism is generally acknowledged—if often with caveats—as radical for its place and time." Lucy Steeds, *Making Art Global (Part 2): Magiciens de la Terre 1989* (Afterall Books, 2013), 25.

16
"Magiciens" was the starting point for a discussion on global exhibitions between Enwezor and other art professionals, including Catherine David and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. See Tim Griffin et al., "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artforum International* 42, no. 3 (November 2003). For an analysis of Enwezor's take on "Magiciens" and the connections between La Triennale and this historic exhibition, see Steeds, *Making Art Global (Part 2)* , 84–85, 92.

17
A reflection on the institution's history and its shortcomings was carried out at the Palais de Tokyo under the initiative of its president Guillaume Désanges, who published *A Small Treatise on Institutional Permaculture* https://admin.palaisdetokyo.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Petit-traite-de-permaculture-institutionnelle.pdf . Excerpt: "Agricultural permaculture begins with the idea that there is no such thing as soil neutrality. Every terrain is different, thus one does not sow in it before getting to know it. At the Palais de Tokyo, our soil is our architecture and our history. A rich and chaotic history, exciting and epic, which intersects with that of French cultural policies since the beginning of the 20th century. To get to know more about this soil, we've launched a project called 'Le Grand désenvoûtement' (The Great Disenchantment), loosely inspired by institutional psychotherapy, a theory that reflects on institutional pathologies that need to be treated, as psychic beings would be."