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Listening and Writing to Images

Editorial

Part of what makes interviews so engaging to read is that they presume to share ideas on the fly, in a social setting and in the world. In comparison, written essays feel like constructed machines, lean and airtight with beginnings, middles, and ends. No wonder interviews, as a whole, seem a bit decadent in their procrastinatory pleasure. It's like they catch interlocutors off guard when they should be doing something more serious. Interestingly though, the informality of speech is also a ruse, and a formal challenge for those who prefer to construct words and ideas methodically, because things sometimes spill out that wouldn't be disciplined into more structured writing and thinking.

This is where interviews also dance around the edges of how ideas are structured and delivered. Placed in a social setting, thinking becomes inseparable from the person doing the thinking. How do they speak as regular people? How do they move from one idea to the next, reach out to get the vibe of the other person, or employ indulgent asides, personal rapport, and charm, all just to get a feeling of the point across? You might catch someone betraying themselves, or on the other hand, exposing how their vulnerabilities and their ideas are in fact terrifyingly integrated. You may find their intuitions more relevant than the work they're known for. In some cases, the simple act of talking to another person might actually be more rigorous, and in other cases not.

Such a concern with the personality piloting the machine was surely something Andy Warhol understood when he and others started **inter/VIEW** in the late 1960s. No wonder the magazine was informally called the "crystal ball of pop," since assembling details gathered from many key media personalities caught off guard could certainly constitute a prophetic power within society. Today we might dismiss Warhol's playful pandering to attention and acclaim, especially because the publishing industry was much more centralized at the time. But we can't deny the mesmeric and contradictory appeal of public figures expressing intimate thoughts.

We might linger for a moment on the conjunction of prophecy and intimacy, since the interview format is also the medium of oral history accounts, of stories that are recorded insofar as they are told and positional and subjective accounts of events that may or may not gel with the overarching synthesis of grand narratives. With oral history, the interview or conversational exchange is not the casual version of something else, but the absolute vehicle of transmission. Some might suppose oral history to be a last resort, whether due to a lack of literacy or modern institutions, or to possible trauma experienced by the teller. And yet, our own peculiar attraction to the humble exchange of stories and ideas between two people suggests that there is a more complex pact between two people that makes the format a highly privileged one.

Whether an interview is on or off the record, sometimes that pact is made between interlocutors who are accustomed, like many artists, to communicating ideas, movement, and images beyond words. Other times the pact is made between beings speaking very different languages. In 1970, Belgian poet-turned-artist Marcel Broodthaers recorded an interview with a cat about painting, the move from conceptual art to figuration, market value, and closing down museums. Their dialogue opens this special issue of *e-flux journal* composed solely of conversation, poetry, and prose by poets.

Also in this issue, Yuk Hui speaks to Barry Schwabsky on the necessity of identifying differences and formalizing incompatibilities. In a sweeping exchange that traverses artworks, cultural cosmologies, and technical systems, irreconcilable oppositions and dialectical circuits animate images just as they determine the possibility for diversity.

Renee Gladman describes a stillness permeating a world that values constant movement. Over the light and shadow of a day, a writer sits among ancient objects waiting for something hot. As the objects—ceramic, wood, ivory, iron—reveal and suppress their care and use, they teem with a darkness from inside. As everything goes quiet, a choreography emerges; pressure builds for action.

In conversation with Alice Wang, Boris Groys charts Russian cosmists' criticism of the classical Marxist insistence that the end of history will satisfy "normal" human needs. Instead, the Immortal Biocosmists in particular believed that people desire things that can only be provided by a communist system promising immortality. In the present, Wang and Groys urge public discourse on interplanetary governance, human colonization of space, and other ethical problems that must be negotiated before our departure.

Through a poem named for the future imperfect tense, Elizabeth Willis shapes a connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds. Delving into the troubled history of the human condition, Wills draws from Octavia Butler's quantum thought, extractive forces like the pearl button industry, W.E.B. Du Bois's data portraits, and Paul Robeson's filmwork. History becomes an ongoing, speculative process.

Steve McQueen speaks with Doreen Mende on the erasures and silences within Eslanda and Paul Robeson's unclassified FBI files. McQueen calls the redacted portions black holes, and observes that the files reveal as much about the failures of state surveillance as about the Robesons themselves. McQueen's installation *End Credits* also celebrates the Robesons' lasting triumphs and the strength of their vulnerabilities. Broad implications of memory politics and intersectional solidarity reverberate.

Mary N. Taylor and Janet Sarbanes explore the role of art within a concept of autonomy where the relationship between the individual and collective is mutually constitutive. The limitations of the modernist notion of separate spheres for art and politics give way to the potential for a new understanding of autonomy to emerge.

Poet Hugo García Manríquez plumbs and indexes the contents of armories and *palacios de bellas artes*, all full of precise prices for what the Mexican government spends on weapons. Such places are histories ripe for a writer's confrontation: Protect the libraries from the masses or side with forms of language that emerge from riot?

Liam Gillick shows Jörg Heiser his cinematic approach to an intervention in the Ancient Near East collection of the Pergamon Museum. The project, *Filtered Time*, was realized amidst debates over closing and remodeling the buildings and the fraught colonial histories they house. With equal parts layered historical research, punk-informed questions, and an unhelpful sense of destruction, Gillick eyes the false cultural oppositions that served British and German identity-building in a time where that's all happening again.

Tina M. Campt, in talking with Jace Clayton, is clear that synesthesia is not a metaphor. Rather, we can listen to images, to think the sonic and the visual in chorus. Campt and Clayton discuss collaboration in fields populated by artists and thinkers too often rendered as solitary voices. And after recent years marked by profound isolation, Campt emphasizes the absolute need for and magic of the multisense reverberations between audiences, speakers, artists, and thinkers in conversation.

X

Marcel Broodthaers

Interview with a Cat

AUDIO—Marcel Broodthaers, *Interview With A Cat*, Recorded at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Düsseldorf, 1970.
This is a translation and transcription of Marcel Broodthaers's 1970 audio work Interview with a Cat.[1]

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Marcel Broodthaers: Is that one a good painting? ... Does it correspond to what you expect from that very recent transformation which goes from conceptual art to this new version of a kind of figuration, as one might say?

Cat: Miaow.

MB: Do you think so?

Cat: Miiaaow ... mm ... miaow ... miaow.

MB: And yet this color is very clearly redolent of the painting that was being done in the period of abstract art, isn't it?

Cat: Miaaow ... miaaow ... miiaow ... miaow.

MB: Are you sure it's not a new form of academicism?

Cat: Miaow.

MB: Yes, but if it's a daring innovation it's still a contestable one.

Cat: Miaow.

MB: It's still ...

Cat: Miaow.

MB: Er ... It's still a matter of markets ...

Cat: Miaaow.

MB: What will the people who bought the previous things do?

Cat: Miaow.

MB: Will they sell them?

Cat: Miiaow ... mia.

MB: Or will they continue? What do you think? ... Because, at the moment, a lot of artists are wondering about that.

Cat: Miaaow ... miaow ...

MB: In that case close the museums!

Marcel Broodthaers, Interview with a Cat, published by Marian Goodman Gallery, 1995. Edition of fifty.

Cat: MIAOW!

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: miAOUW.

MB: This is not a pipe!

Cat: Miaouu.

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: Miaouuw.

MB: This is not a pipe?

Cat: Miaw.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Mm ...

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is not a pipe!

Cat: miAO ... miAOUW.

MB: This is a pipe!?

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is not a pipe!

Cat: Miaou.

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: MiAOU ... miao.

MB: This is not a pipe!

Cat: Miaou ... miaw.

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaouu.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: MiAOOUU.

MB: This is a ... This is a pipe!

Cat: Miao ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Miaoouu.

MB: This is a pipe?!

Cat: Mm ...

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Mm ... mm ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaow.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Miaoouu.

MB: This is a pipe?!

Cat: Mm ...

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Mm ... mm ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaow.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: MiAOUW.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Miao ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: Pipe is not.

Cat: Mmi ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: MiaOU.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: MiAAOUW.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: miAou.

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: MiAAOU ... mm ...

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaaou.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: Miaao ... mmi.

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: MIAAOUU.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: MiAAOUUW.

MB: This is a pipe!

Cat: MIAAOU ... MiAAOU ... MIAOUW.

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: Miaouw.

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: ... mm ... Miao.

MB: This is a pipe.

Cat: MiAOU ... MiAOU ... MiAOU.

Cat: ... MiaouW

MB: This is not a pipe.

Cat: ... MiaOUW

MB: This is an interview given at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, 12 Burgplatz, Düsseldorf.

Cat: MiAAAOUU ... MIAAOU.

Cat: ... MIAOOU ... MIAOOUW.

Cat: ... MIAAOU ... MIAOU ... MIAAOUW.

MB: This is an interview given at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, 12 Burgplatz, Düsseldorf.

Cat: Miaou ... Miaouw.

X

Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) was a Belgian poet, filmmaker, and visual artist.

1
Translation source https://www.tumblr.com/jokeanddaggerdept/236266006/interview-with-a-cat-transcript .

Yuk Hui and Barry Schwabsky in conversation

The Call of the Unknown in Art and Cosmotechnics

This conversation about Yuk Hui's book Art and Cosmotechnics *(2021) took place at the e-flux Screening Room on March 23, 2023. It has been edited for length and clarity.*

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Barry Schwabsky: In your book you remind us of the fact that the Greek word *technē* refers both to what we today consider technique or technology, and to art—that art is included under the same word. And it just makes me wonder: In China, what's the word for "technology"? What's the etymology? And does it have the same breadth as the Greek term, or does it have a different compass? How do you even translate the word "technology" into a non-European language?

Yuk Hui: Right, this is a problem. How do you translate? And this is an issue that persists throughout the whole process of modernization. Many terms translated from Western languages—German, Latin, French, English—were first translated by Japanese scholars into kanji and then exported to China. The word "metaphysics," for example, is translated into Chinese as 形而上學 *Xíng'érshàngxué*, or "that which is below the form." This translation was done by Japanese philosophers before it was adopted by the Chinese. It's a rather complicated process.

Starting in the nineteenth century, when East Asia opened the door to European countries, there was a kind of rush to find the equivalents of European terms. And we still tend to think that there are correspondent or equivalent words for European terms in Chinese or Japanese. So, for example, "technology" or "technic" can be translated as 技術 *jìshù* in Chinese, or "technology" translated as 科技 *kējì*. And it's the same in Japanese, where 技術 *gijutsu* is used to translate "technic," and so on. We may have the illusion that there are actual equivalencies between these terms and European terms, but there are not. In terms of modernization, we were so hurried to find equivalence that we actually ignored difference. Today we are left asking: What are these differences, and how can we really account for them? It's crucial to try to speak to this now.

This was the first question I tried to tackle in *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2016). If we cannot directly translate the term "technology" into another equivalent—技術 *jìshù* or 科技 *kējì*—what can we do? How can we deal with this? And can we find some other categories that will allow us to identify the nuances that distinguish different modern understandings of technology? So what I try to do is identify two categories in classical Chinese philosophy. One is *dao*, the "way," and the other is *qi* (器, to be distinguished from 氣, liberally "gas," conventionally translated as "breath" or "energy"). In the *I-Ching* we read that what is above the form is *dao*, and what is below the form is *qi*. And as I said before,

Science and Technology Museum in Beijing. © Atelier Federico Raponi.

"what is above the form" was adopted by Japanese scholars to translate "metaphysics." This kind of translation has caused a lot of misunderstandings, especially today.

Heidegger is someone I dialog with—and because Heidegger was a Nazi, some people accuse me of being on his side, but this is a kind of sickness or illness of our time. The reason I dialog with Heidegger is that he was trying to understand what *technē* is for the Greeks, which is not only about technics, cultivating techniques, or making things. For the Greeks, the term *technē* has a rather different meaning. It has to do with the question of Being. (Of course, a Hellenist could attack Heidegger by saying he doesn't understand ancient Greek sufficiently, but that's another question.) So, Heidegger is trying to understand *technē* in relation to the unconcealment of Being. But he also considers modern technology as something that marks the end of metaphysics. Now, if we translate this into Chinese, does it mean that modern technology means the end of *Xíng'érshàngxué* 形而上學, the theory of (or the study of) what is above the form? Does it mean the end of *dao*? When we think in this way, we immediately see that something is not right, that something is incompatible when we understand translation as a search for equivalence.

Whenever you want to explain differences, you can be criticized for essentializing something. You're accused of essentializing Chinese thought or Western thought, and essentialization always carries a risk of excluding what is not the essence. However, this is not a reason to ignore differences altogether, for the relation between the essential and the accidental is another key question that we cannot ignore. Along with many things I disagree with, Heidegger said something correct that is very significant for us today: if you avoid danger, you will end up with catastrophe. We have to confront the danger. But when we face it, we must know what the danger really is and find a way to cope with it.

In *Art and Cosmotechnics* (2021) I mention "the individuation of thinking" many times. "Individuation" is a term I took from Simondon, for whom it means a process that starts with an incompatibility. Sometimes there are elements that are not compatible at all—conflicts—or there are a lot of tensions within a system. The incompatibility leads to a restructuring of the system—which will be rendered compatible, or metastable. I think clarifying differences should facilitate an individuation of thinking, not an essentialization of thinking.

For me, this is the only way we can tackle the difficulty of translation while also encouraging new thinking. But first we have to allow incompatibilities to encourage a restructuring. This is also a way to produce diversity, which cannot only be about affirming differences, which is only a beginning. Differences are historical, but understanding differences historically may also produce anti-historical or ahistorical effects when they are understood as unchanging and permanent. This is what we must avoid. Let's try not to ignore these differences, and let's try not to avoid the danger. Let's confront the

danger and go one step further.

BS: Your idea of cosmotechnics seems to be in contradiction to the idea of the planetary, if there are simultaneously still distinct cosmoi that people are working in and with.

YH: We have to talk a little bit about what we really mean by "cosmos." A cosmology, as a system of knowledge, also becomes obsolete over time. My question is, if we can understand or develop different understandings of technology, will that allow us to think differently? Does it allow us to think of a different historical process? Does it therefore allow us to reopen the question of history, the question of the becoming of the earth?

Using the term "cosmos" doesn't mean returning to antique cosmology or saying we should go back to nature or go back to tradition. This kind of attempt could be risky and problematic. A few years ago I was at the Centre Pompidou in Paris with the decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo, who was giving a talk on cosmology in Latin America. He showed a video of a person from an Indigenous group explaining the ancient cosmology of a particular part of Latin America. This guy was drawing on the blackboard, and suddenly his iPhone started ringing! For me, the question is: What is the relation between the iPhone and this cosmology? If they have no relation, there must be a problem. So for me, instead of going back to antique cosmologies, it's about thinking and understanding the transformative power of knowledge. How could this knowledge provide us today with a different imagination of technology, and also allow us a different way to *situate* technology? Cosmos is not something universal, since we always observe it from a particular angle, a particular locality. I try to emphasize that if we can discover the multiplicity of cosmotechnics, we can ask how to go further with it. We can ask how to transform the enframing or the *Gestell* of modern technology into something unexpected—that is to say, how to turn it from essential to accidental.

BS: To what extent is an individual tied to a specific cosmotechnics? One can say that it doesn't come naturally to understand any cultural project—or to become part of it and participate in it—far away from where you were placed at birth and the people you were placed with. It's something that is learned with great effort. I don't know if any non-Chinese person has ever reached the highest levels of Chinese painting. From another point of view, it would be absurd to think that being Austrian means you understand Mozart better than Mitsuko Uchida. So it's clearly in the realm of possibility that all these borders can be crossed, whether it's happened or not, by someone who devotes themselves in the proper way.

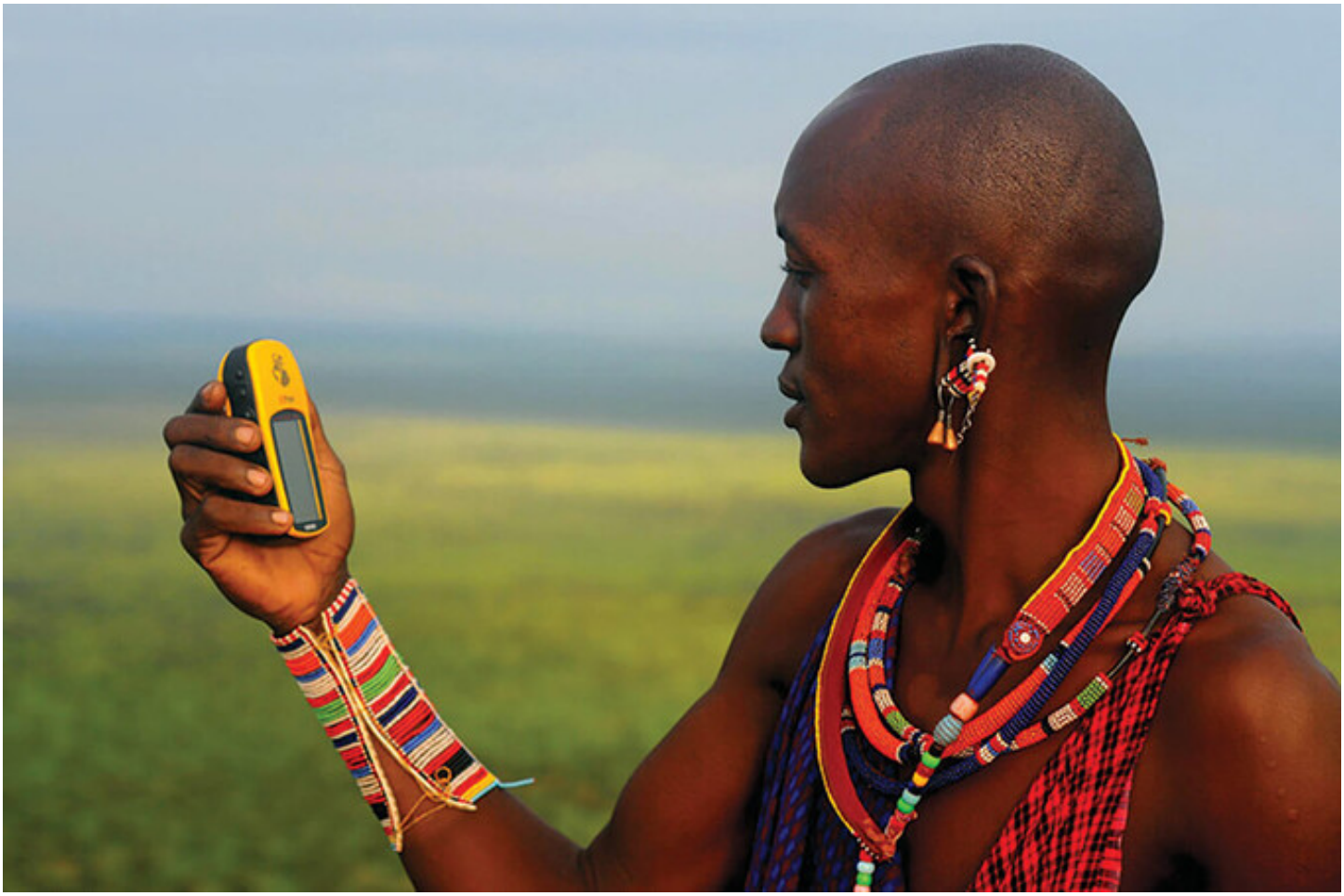
YH: I agree with you. Natality is accidental of course, though it can become essential and in some legal frameworks is treated as essential. However, it doesn't mean that one possess a talent related to one's nationality. At most it means that one receives a particular education of sensibility at a young age. Nationality is not determinant for thinking, but the education of sensibility is. There was an Italian painter named Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) who spent half his life in China and became a painter at the royal institute of painting. He was able to integrate both Western and Chinese techniques of painting. For me, this example allows us to talk about the individuation of thinking in art.

I know a Japanese pianist who started learning piano at the age of two and spent a decade of her adolescence in Poland studying Chopin. I wouldn't say that because she was born and grew up in Japan, she cannot reach the level of a Polish pianist in terms of her mastery of Chopin. And of course, someone could say that Chopin was half French, so neither a French nor a Polish musician could really understand Chopin. This cultural genetics is the opposite of what I want to say—though it's hard not to think that a Japanese pianist's interpretation of Chopin would be affected by a different education of sensibility received at an early age. We are individuals and we individuate, and the individuation of thinking also happens in us and through us.

There is something to address here about authorship and value. Most people are familiar with this idea that there is no insistence on authorship in Chinese art—for example, in terms of copying. This was popularized in a small book by Byung-Chul Han called *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, in which he claims that there's almost no question of authenticity, which has to do with authorship, in Chinese art. You copy the master's painting. And he used this to explain how China today copies American or European technologies. This is a rather popular understanding of authorship and authenticity. In fact, there *is* a question of copying in Chinese discourse, which has more to do with the culture of the amateur. It's something we also see in the West, for example with aristocrats who would go to the Louvre and copy the paintings. This is what the literati were doing in China.

BS: Let's go back to your book, which begins with the question concerning tragedy. Can you explain why the question of tragedy is significant today at a time when it seems like tragedy is untimely and devalued?

YH: Before we talk about tragedy, I should go back to the question of Being. This is important if we want to understand Greek thought, especially in Heidegger's interpretation. Heidegger claims that the essence of Greek *technē* lies in its *poiesis*, and in this *poiesis* is a process of bringing forth something, a product. And in this



Indigenous warriors use GPS technology to collect field data as they travel across woodlands and grass savannahs on foot.

bringing forth, something is revealed, which is Being. This could be read as a kind of mystification, so we have to ask: What is Being here? In the early twentieth century, the Japanese philosopher and founder of the Kyoto School of philosophy, Kitaro Nishida, made a very interesting claim: if Western philosophy inquires into the question of Being, then Eastern philosophy inquires into the question of nothing. If we take this to be true, and take the origin of Chinese or Japanese technology *as* Greek, then Chinese or Japanese technics raises the question of Being, assuming Heidegger was right. But if Nishida was right, then Chinese or Japanese technics raises the question nothing. The question should not be about the revelation or unconcealment of Being, but of nothing.

Here we see the contradiction or conflict in universalizing the relation between technics and Being. And this relation cannot be transposed directly onto the cultural context of China or Japan. Yet now we have Being and nothing—what is their relation? Is it an absolute opposition, or not? I've been trying to think through this inquiry into the nature of opposition to answer a question you raised, Barry, at a conference in December 2016: Does tragedy in the Greek sense exist in China? You posed this to François Jullien, the French philosopher, Hellenist, and sinologist, who immediately responded that the Chinese invented a way of thinking to avoid tragedy. I remember this by heart because I translated for him during the Q&A. I was really shocked by the answer, because inventing a way of thinking to avoid tragedy means that the Chinese already knew what tragedy was.

Beyond the conventional use of "tragedy" as sadness, Ancient Greek tragedy means firstly that there is an opposition—an absolute opposition that you cannot overcome. For example, in *Antigone* there is the obligation to follow the law of the state and an obligation to follow the law of the family. Antigone has to choose to either bury her brother, who was killed during the war against the state, or follow the law of the state and leave the brother's body to be eaten by animals. You can only choose one, and the two choices are in absolute opposition to each other.

BS: About fifteen years ago I was in Seoul, and in one of the musuems there was an extraordinary exhibition on the theme of the void in Korean art, from ancient times until the present. The next day by chance I met one of the living

Giuseppe Castiglione, Picture of Cangshuiqiu (苍水虬), a Chinese greyhound. From Ten Prized Dogs Album. License: Public Domain.

artists included in the exhibition and I said, "Oh, I saw one of your works yesterday in the exhibition on the void in Korean art." And he replied, "Well, just because I leave part of the canvas unpainted doesn't mean it's about the void!" So I wonder at this opposition of the void and Being, or the void and form. I thought there was a very funny echo between Jullien saying that in his view there's no tragedy in Chinese culture, and you quoting another book of his where he says that Chinese art is not interested in the nude because China is not interested in form. I wonder how those tie together.

YH: The question of the void can be especially confusing when people talk about Eastern thought. Daoist thinking is about *wu* 無, or "nothing." And there is also Buddhist thinking from India—adopted in China, Japan, and Korea—and its concern with emptiness (空). But emptiness is not exactly the same as the void. Again, the problem of translation: sometimes all these varying ideas are translated as "the void."

But for your question about form, let's go back to what François Jullien said. I did not mean to discredit his work. On the contrary, I have a lot of respect for Jullien's work, because I think it is really illuminating to contrast Western thought and Chinese thought in order to show a distance, a gap that cannot be reduced to equivalence. And we have to understand this gap—how it is formed and what really causes this difference. The title of Jullien's book *The Great Image Has No Form* is a translation of one sentence from the *Dao De Jing*: " *Dà xiàng wúxíng* (大象無形)," or "the big image is formless"—you cannot really see the form in the image. Also in chapter 41, Laozi says, " *Dà yīn xī sheng* (大音希聲)," or "the loudest sound is one you can hardly hear." There is something too big for you to comprehend by giving it form. Jullien used this to understand the aim of Chinese art, where the masterpieces are those that try to move away from form or the imposition of forms, as in *shanshui* painting.

The Great Image Has No Form demonstrates a clear difference between the understanding of art in China and in Ancient Greece. For the Greeks, there was already a very elaborated concept of form, as we find in Aristotle's *morphe*, or *eidos*, the ideal form in Plato. Also in Greek art, in sculptures of the human body, there is a desire to reveal the ideality of the form. Jullien asked why we find so many nudes in the West, while there is no nude art in China. We might answer that China's Confucian morality doesn't allow you to expose your body in public, but for Jullien this explanation is too easy and unphilosophical. Jullien's philosophical explanation is that for the Chinese, or at least for Chinese art, the question of form was a minor one. It was not as dominant as it was for Ancient Greek art or for Western art. This contrast is an almost absolute opposition: on the one hand, the pursuit of form as ideality in Greek thought; on the other, the formless, or the pursuit of what is without form, in Chinese art.

But to say form and no-form is too simple. If we look at the blue of Yves Klein or at the black of a large Pierre Soulages painting, you can see the only form is the canvas, which is either black or blue. *Shanshui* painting, on the other hand, consists of countless oppositions. Even the meaning of the work *shanshui*—"mountain and water"—is an opposition between yin and yang. Among the many theories of Chinese painting from different dynasties, Guo Xi (in a book written under his name by his son) and Shi Tao (in his *Huayu Lu*, or "Round of discussions on painting") had really complete and systematic theories of painting. In every chapter, you find countless oppositions that are precisely what give painting its dynamic. But how do these oppositions work, and can they be said to reveal certain formulas?

When we say *dà xiàng wúxíng* (大象無形), "the great image has no form," then the small image must have a form. So what are these small images and how do their oppositions allow the great image to emerge? For the formless to appear, we must use many forms. But what does the use of forms mean, and what kind of dynamics do they manifest? And how does this dynamic lead to formlessness? In *Dao De Jing*, Laozi says, " *Fn zhě dào zhī dòng* 反者道之動 (Return is the motion of the Way)," but *fn* can mean either "oppositional" or "returning." So the oppositional or the returning is the dynamic of *dao*. First the opposition, secondly returning. That's why elsewhere I've identified a recursive movement—which is not what Hegel called dialectics. Many scholars of the *Dao De Jing* have tried to call it dialectics, but Hegelian dialectics is based, again, on tragedy—the absolute opposition between freedom and fate, the law of family and the law of the state. Whereas dialectics must reconcile an oppositional discontinuity, you don't find such a reconciliation in Daoist thought. There is a different nature to the opposition, different dynamics in the oppositional movement.

BS: There's something that I'm curious about, and here I'm speaking particularly as an art critic who would wonder about this. When you refer to artworks, you refer to really canonical works of either European modernism like Cézanne and Klee, or of classical Chinese art. I wonder what the status or quality of artworks has to do with their relevance or suitability for philosophical discourse. Is it implied that a great work of art is one that has philosophical significance, or could mediocre works also allow you to make the same arguments?

YH: I have to admit my ignorance, of course. I was at MoMA this afternoon and told myself that there are so many things I don't know. Yesterday I was at the Princeton University library and my hands were shaking from a similar thought. How can I finish reading all these classics? And if I can't, how can I pretend to know anything at all? I admitted in the preface of *Art and Cosmotechnics* that I'm not a historian of art, and I'm also

A shot from China's Van Goghs. Film still courtesy of Century Image Media.

not an art critic like you. I can think in terms of concepts and logic, yet when we do that we cannot avoid certain generalizations that could be problematic. At the same time, one way to overcome the problem of generalization is by showing really concretely the value of formulating in terms of concepts, in terms of logic, which doesn't at all mean excluding artworks that I didn't use in the book. Rather, my aim is to produce new perspectives and generate new questions for thinking about the relation between art and technology.

I use artworks in an effort to problematize, so I engage with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Cézanne and how Cézanne influenced Zhou Wou-Ki, the Chinese-French painter, in order to ask whether the phenomenological understanding of modern painting is really similar to the Chinese understanding of painting, as François Jullien suggests. I try to say it isn't similar, but then I have to explain why these are two completely different methods. These examples should not suggest a certain truth that we should ignore at the expense of other artworks. As examples, I use the artworks to problematize some ideas that have been taken for granted and expose places where difference has been undermined or ignored.

BS: There's a lot of discussion now about artificial intelligence and its ability or inability to write, to make artworks, and so on. Illustrators are worried that they're going to be put out of work by an artificial intelligence that can be asked to make an illustration in the style of so-and-so. Or journalists might be out of work because you can ask the AI to summarize the current discussions on a given topic. There was a case a few years ago where two people made a five-thousand-page anthology of poetry generated by computer algorithms and posted it on the internet. And each of the poems was arbitrarily attributed to an author—mostly poets, but some poems were mistakenly attributed to people who weren't even poets. One of the poets mentioned was me! So I decided that I would accept the work as my own. I made a few little changes to make it better, but then included it in one of my books. And then I wrote an article about it saying that now we have to at least learn to write better than a machine. But how we do that is a major question in the relationship of art and technology today. How can art give us a different perspective away from this planetarization of Western technology that Heidegger warned against?

YH: The question is rather complicated because this fear

of being replaced by machines is also the self-fulfilling prophecy of the tech industry, since it's actively working to replace human labor with automation. But there's is another question: How could we really change this prophecy and open a new agenda? This may be difficult to approach here because it has to do with the structure of the university, of industry, consumerism, and so forth.

What we can ask is: What is the task of art? In 1949, concerning the question of Being and its relation to technology, Heidegger said that it may be only in the domain of art that we can continue to think about the unconcealment of Being. He wants to relate the question of Being to art—and here it's the same with *shanshui*, with the question of nothing, or the question of the greatest or the smallest in Chinese painting. Cybernetic logic, on the other hand, is always about the pursuit of a telos. So if you ask artificial intelligence to write a poem, it is always determined by an end, and this end is calculable. But in what I call tragist logic or *shanshui* logic we find a similar recursive movement, yet the end is something incalculable. So how can we relate back the question of the incalculable to our discussion of the use of artificial intelligence?

BS: I'm struck by the idea that artificial intelligence can only construct a poem as an end. That makes me realize that an artificial intelligence doesn't leave any unfinished drafts. It doesn't have any notes toward something that it never figured out! And that says something about the necessity of the process of thinking, but also of ignorance, to doing anything in the arts.

YH: You can certainly ask artificial intelligence to create something unfinished, but it's already a goal to be unfinished. It's already a form of calculation. Maybe my understanding of art is different from yours, but when I talk about nothing and Being, it's to develop a category of "the unknown," going back to Heidegger. So what is the unknown? If you can answer that question, you know what it is, so it's no longer unknown. You can't know the unknown. Yet this unknown is omnipresent in our everyday life, where we pretend to know what we actually don't. So much remains unknown.

But in this category called the unknown we find, for example, Being. For Heidegger, Being is unknown because when you say what Being is, it can only be an entity, not Being. When you say what nothing is, it is already something. I can ask someone who believes in God to show me God, but they can't. The same goes if I ask you to show me a point in geometry. You can draw a point on a piece of paper, but I'll say this is already a surface, already two-dimensional. A point has zero dimensions, which we can never see in our life; yet without this point and line (one dimension, which we also never encounter), then geometry wouldn't exist. There are things that exist yet cannot be demonstrated, but that we also cannot refuse the existence of. These remain unknown.

If I can generalize what I think Heidegger thinks about art (especially art's relation to Being), as well as Chinese *shanshui* painting's relation to Dao: I understand it as a process of rationalizing the unknown, which I call the epistemology of the unknown. We immediately encounter a contradiction, of course, but contradiction or opposition is that which sets up a movement. It is also a way to construct a plane of consistence by integrating the unknown in a work of poetry. Heidegger says that there is something unknown in poetry, so it is the poet who calls for the coming of the unknown. The poet cannot say or identify what the unknown is, because then it wouldn't be poetry. It would be scientific analysis. With artificial intelligence, we need to ask how we can think about the epistemology of the unknown today. Similar to what you find in Heidegger's reading of non-metaphysical art, Merleau-Ponty's reading of Cézanne and Paul Klee, Sartre's reading of Giacometti, and Michel Henry's reading of Kandinsky, I am attempting to find an epistemology of the unknown in artistic creation.

BS: Although I think I agree with that, there are people who disagree. There's the famous conclusion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* where he says that what we can't speak about, we must pass over in silence. And I think whatever we can't speak about is related to what you call the unknown. Wittgenstein called it the mystical. But then I always remember how Frank Ramsey, when he heard this, said, "And you can't whistle it either"—meaning that the thing that is not communicable in language is absolutely incommunicable. It can't be evoked by nonlinguistic means, or musical means, if whistling is music. It's also hard to refute that kind of view.

YH: In a commentary on the *I-Ching* called the *Xì cí*繫辭, Confucius said that writing cannot exhaust language and language cannot exhaust meaning (書不盡言、言不盡意). A student suggested that if that were the case, then Confucius's teaching wouldn't be conveyed. How then can we talk about wisdom that always escapes language itself? One possible answer is that we exhaust something in order to review what cannot be exhausted. So even if we cannot say what it is, we still speak in order to open a space for what cannot be said. The same thing could be said not only about writing, but also other forms of technologies.

Today it is difficult to talk with engineers about the epistemology of the unknown, and indeed, epistemology is not really a concern of engineering. Efficiency and speed are dogmatisms that still dominate the field, and they blind us to epistemological problems. However, I think there is an urgency to talking about such problems—as you know, *Art and Cosmotechnics* ends with a critique of the institutionalization of knowledge.

By way of conclusion, let me say a few words about the question of difference that we started with.

Every piece of technology contains complex ontological, epistemological, and cosmological assumptions that engineers rarely question. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and VKontakte in Russia are all based on the same model and the same set of assumptions. The ontological assumption is that society consists of individuals that are like atoms, and you can know the relation between these social atoms by putting a line between two dots, as in graph theory. These assumptions come to dominate our understanding of social relations and social formations, and an engineer would never doubt this or suggest that it's a fabrication. But from the perspective of anthropology, a society could never emerge from individuals—individuals would already have been eaten by a tiger or a wolf. A society can only begin with groups. It is only with modern individualism that we came to understand society as being composed of atoms. This is only one assumption among many made by the engineers who design our technology.

Only when these assumptions are questioned can we really open up and innovate. Otherwise, it's only about speed and efficiency. You can develop an algorithm to collect more data from users or deliver more targeted recommendations, but these don't actually change the technology. With what I call technodiversity, I propose that we need a really systematic method to analyze the technology we use and develop. Otherwise, if people want to resist Facebook there are only two ways. One is to quit Facebook and disengage from a certain reality altogether, and the second is to develop a platform that doesn't belong to Facebook but works the same as Facebook. Neither way is innovation, nor resistance. I think that for us today, the most profound resistance is epistemic, and that's what we can contribute to.

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Renee Gladman

We Were Glowing Dark Inanimates

And in all that time I was watching something still be still and something named be named inside a syntax that was the shape of a narrow channel; I was watching stillness itself sit in a defining stillness, in a radiant enactment of holding still and waiting, of being pinned and waiting, of being sculpted as something open and curved, something tapered and painted and stained and heated, something stripped and set to stillness, moving only when moved, still even when so, still even when. I was watching something be still even when moving and I saw a syntax try to carry it and felt space cut around it, and I saw the day unfold. I saw someone open the curtains, then close them. I saw someone pour a glass of something and drink it while pacing the light; it was another day of radiant inaction. It became a series of radiantly inactive days. You were being held inside and time had become something measured by something being drunk, and something pacing inside something solid and opaque, the wood of the house eroding but holding back the light and water of the outdoors, yet letting in the small animals, the varied insect life. And this was how still it was inside the narrow syntax that was the flow of something waiting being defined by its own curving, shaped by another, named by. It was in a holding pattern and was holding and being held by being named and was so still the day passed through it and light refracted off it and made shadows on the floor and on the back of the person waiting also, waiting to be named or renamed, waiting to mask or unmask, waiting to be safe or held, to breach the town, to cross the threshold of the door. Such that between the person and the stillness was a use not being tended to; each entity in that place had something it was becoming but also was still patterned by something it was leaving. You were never just new or just made; you came from something. I was a composite of elements and had been standing in front of the door for a long time, wondering what was happening in the world and to the world, and behind me were several other shaped elements forged from elements not present, and we were all sitting in a kind of ink—written on but also capable of writing. I wanted to be someone who could build despite rarely going outside; I wanted things that were teeming with darkness lit from inside, bright from non-knowing, and for these things to hold space and cut space while buildings were going up and days were passing.

It was easy to turn around and see their stillness; it was impossible to catch them in motion. We were all expected to be in motion because that was how time moved and how success was measured: you were getting on an airplane, you were walking the streets of a city, you were meeting people in a bar, signing your name to things, you were racing through the night with your care and your use, presenting yourself to others, to another, everybody reading each other's quick views—this is how I work, this is what I do—then walking off together. There was a lot of movement inside of something not moving. Inside the body waiting for the world was something radiant and silent. It was elemental and pressured for action; it was

something ancient with something teeming inside of it; it was something named next to something teeming; it was teeming slowed by being named and put to care. It was a rounded rough; it was a hard, flat extended: it was fired and cooled and left for a decade. It was dug up and scraped then fired. It was something hard and curving; it was something ancient and set to use and was inside you. Dark glowing memories. It was something glazed. It had a glaze that made what was moving inside it still; things were happening on the exterior side of being a dark animate glowing. You were set to roam sitting inside something set for use.

I picked up a ceramic cup and pulled from it until it was empty then replaced it. Everything was bright. I picked up a bowl; I picked up a wooden spoon and set it in the bowl; I placed the bowl and spoon onto a flat, smooth surface that stood twenty-nine inches above the floor then I sat down on something soft about eight inches below my bowl. I waited: someone was bringing something. Someone was cooking something to bring, so I waited with these ancient entities. I was an ancient entity borrowed by space for time. Waiting here, glowing darkness.

I was waiting and time was unfolding, and I had a name that held me in place; I had my care and my use. I was something still sat inside something still, waiting for something hot. Someone was crossing the floor with something hot, and we were in a kind of choreography of objects revealing and suppressing their care and use. It was a strained and radiant inaction of elements fired and glazed into stillness but moving even so. It was a day of doing things with and next to objects that were fired and glazed, that were sanded and scraped and painted. Everything I picked up I also counted. Everything was clay; everything was iron. There were rims and handles all over the world, too many to count. Everything was glass: there were flutes and bubbles; there were cracks and sealant. Everything was marble. Things were slightly amethyst in color. Everything was wood; everything was ivory. Things had come through silver. Everything was bronze. It was a collection of pressures. Everything was cast; everything was set to mold, was curved and molded, and as the elements were bent to care something went quiet in everything. You couldn't have some parts of the space be quiet without other parts taking on quiet, too. You couldn't be animate among inanimate entities and be at your fullest: you had to wait for the world; you had to write and wait and take on names in this choreography. I agreed to live among the things I put to use and saw where I went still around them. I said it in a poem. I said it in a drawing. I said it in the shirt I wore. I could tell the difference. I knew when it was an ancient entity and when it was new construction. I waited for the iron to ring. I hit the tuning fork against the clay pot. I called out "pen, pen, brush, pencil, pen" as I moved my eyes across my desk. The months never passed fast enough: you crept out after dark to walk the driveway. I came back in and said "eraser"—I'd forgotten it. I said "paper, paper, wood, table, wood." I said, "pigment, metal, metal, metal." Nothing moved. I sat at the long expanse and said, "hot, hot, warm, hot" and needed something cooling. Blueberries were objects. They sat in the ancient entity. I said, "bowl." I said, "bowls" and "cupboard." It was getting late. The wine had been chilling. I said the syntax of the thing: "Let's pour the wine in the glass"; "Let's put the plates on the table."

These were wares. This was their use. Yet emptying a glass of the wine it held brought the glass no closer to me than did my saying "glass" or having a thirst for the wine in the first place. We were glowing dark inanimates, straining on our respective stages, and this was grammar. This was what was left of being gathered. This was attention and consumption. This was the back of, the through, the still. This was what curved, what rimmed and covered. The glaze made me glow and become very slightly amethyst in color and begin to see other things go amethyst around me. I saw amethyst in the line between the town and the door, amethyst around the windows, on the lampshades, coating the filaments, amethyst on the stairs leading to the loft, amethyst in the vessel by the bed, in lying down to rest, in counting mornings.

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Renee Gladman has published twelve works of prose and poetry, most recently *Plans for Sentences* (Wave Books, 2022) and a brief detective novel *Morelia*, and two books of drawings, *Prose Architectures* (Wave Books, 2017) and *One Long Black Sentence* (Image Text Ithaca press, 2020). Recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, she makes her home in southern New England with poet-ceremonialist and herbalist Danielle Vogel.

Boris Groys and Alice Wang in conversation

Leaving the Earth

Alice Wang: Do you recall your first encounter with Russian cosmism? I read that in the mid-1970s, you participated in apartment seminars on underground art in Leningrad and published articles in samizdat journals. Were you exposed to the work of the cosmists during this time in the former Soviet Union? What was it that attracted you to their philosophical ideas?

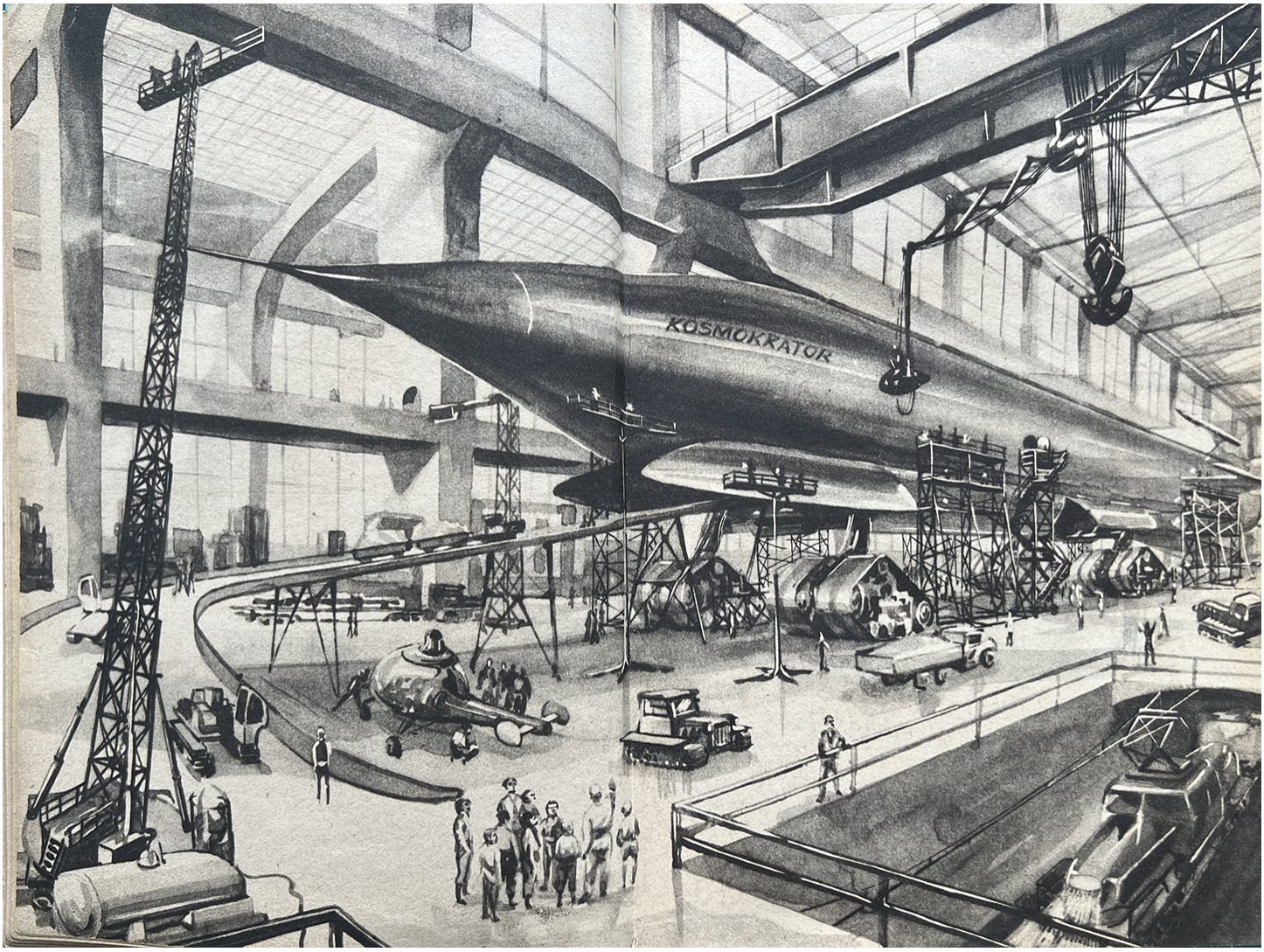
Boris Groys: In fact, during my Soviet time I was more interested in the West. I more or less knew Russian history—especially intellectual history—but I didn't work with this knowledge. After emigrating I became more interested in Russian cultural traditions. So my imagination went in the opposite direction of my emigration. Russian cosmism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries interested me as an attempt to, let's say, secularize Christianity.

The basic Christian idea is that history is not accidental, not spontaneous, but teleological. Marxism's belief in technological progress is also teleological. Cosmism combines Christian faith in immortality and salvation with Marxist faith in technology. The latter faith holds that technology can be controlled and harnessed to a certain goal. The teleological, even eschatological understanding of history built a common ground for different Russian ways of thinking at that time.

AW: What are the contexts and conditions in which the cosmists were working during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What was the political and intellectual climate of the time? What platforms did they have to distribute their ideas?

BG: At that time, Nietzsche's influence was very strong in Russia. And, as you remember, Nietzsche said that Man—a human being—should be superseded by the *Übermensch*. According to this logic, humankind is only one stage in the development of vital cosmic energies, and humanism should be overcome by something even more vital and more radical. Heidegger also said that humanism should be overcome. And then there's the phenomenon of technology … you can find interest in technology in Marx, in Nietzsche and Heidegger, in Ernst Jünger. In their work and others', we see something of a utopian/anti-utopian fascination with technology as an extension of the vital forces.

Many Russian authors around the turn of the twentieth century also thought that one should transcend humanity, transcend human history, and so on. At that point they began to criticize classical Marxism's insistence that the end of history will bring about the satisfaction of "normal" human needs and desires. Indeed, people do not only desire food and sex. They desire immortality, for example. And they desire immortality because they are not like other animals. Other animals do not ruminate on the fact that they will die. But people do-—and they also remain



From a Czech translation of Stanislaw Lem, Astronauts. Illustration: Theodor Rotrekl, 1956.

unhappy living under a form of communism that does not promise them immortality.

AW: Before returning to the idea of immortality, I wanted to talk a little about putting it into practice. In the American science-fiction community, the writer, editor, and publisher Donald A. Wollheim used the term "cosmotropism" to describe human beings' "outward urge" for space exploration. In 1971, he wrote this in *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today*: "I think that space flight is not a whim that happened to arise in the minds of dreamers … [but] a condition of Nature that comes into effect when an intelligent species reaches the saturation point of its planetary habitat combined with a certain level of technological ability."[1]

It sounds so much like cosmism, but it was written much later. Wollheim connected our "compulsion to go out" to "a conscious drive for immortality—if not of the individual, certainly of the nations and species … For it will be our ticket to immortality. It will be the birth of cosmic humanity, of that Galactic Empire which seems to be surely part of the future once we become truly the masters of space flight."[2] For me, cosmotropism is quite real, especially now. It is no longer *if* but *when* we will migrate to outer space. No matter how much one critiques the aerospace industry, and the advancement of technology, it's just going in that direction.

When I grew up, in the 1980s and '90s, NASA's Space Shuttle programs were broadcast on television. Just a few decades later, corporations like SpaceX urge developments in the privatization of space travel and exploration. Looking back from here, the ideas the cosmists proposed are remarkably prescient. Issues around interplanetary governance, human occupation or colonization of space, and other ethical questions will need to be negotiated before our departure. With climate change, overpopulation, and the depletion of natural resources here on earth, who will get to leave? These are

important matters for public discourse.

Although cosmism is a philosophical framework, its thinking guides our actions. When translated into practice, its ideals are manifested in policymaking. We can't just depend on the private sector to hold these conversations and determine our actions in space. To my mind, the radicality in cosmism is found in its no-one-left-behind attitude. You have said elsewhere that after the Bolshevik Revolution, the political party known as the Immortal Biocosmists—when elected into parliaments in Petrograd and Moscow—proposed to amend the Soviet constitution by introducing three rights on the issue of immortality.[3] What was this biocosmist political party, and what were some of their proposed social policies?

BG: When we speak about cosmic flights and the exploration of space today, we have in mind a dynamic model of technological progress. This dynamic model of progress implies that what we're doing now in cosmic space will be continued and further improved by the next generation, and so on. The cosmists did not believe in this model. Their questions were along these lines: Why should we be interested in progress if we don't stand to gain anything from it? If my generation contributes something to cosmic space, how can I benefit from it? I remain mortal, and I remain eternally indentured to progress. I live now—and not in the future. If progress is defined by a dynamic directed towards the future, everyone is yoked to progress, and every generation fast becomes psychologically and physically obsolete. Already now, people ask in earnest: Should we be interested in the generation before the internet, before the iPhone, before this and that? So, we are toiling away our lives for progress, but progress denies us any sovereignty and any dignity. We are permanently discarded, so we all turn into human waste. It is not quite clear when this movement will stop. The question the cosmists thus ask is: Why should the individual be interested in progress?

It is no accident that the cosmists were politically connected to anarchism. The anarchist movements and parties in Russia were very strong during the nineteenth century. The traditional anarchist question is: How can I harmonize my individual desires with social processes? The cosmists said: I can make them harmonize if this progress promises me resurrection and immortality. Christianity made such a promise, but secular concepts of progress did not. Cosmists wanted secular technological progress to give this promise too, and in so doing reconnect every individual with world history.

When the cosmists spoke of immortality, they meant it corporeally—a concept analogous to the immortality of the artwork. Art had a central place for the cosmists. Art contains a promise that each artwork will live for a long time—maybe forever. Art is kept—in collections, museums, and so on. But to keep art means to control its surroundings and conditions. If you have a museum, you have to control humidity and temperature. If you want to keep something, if you want to prolong its life expectancy, then you must begin to control the context of its existence. The context of human existence is the cosmos. If you want to control a human life in such a way that you can prolong it as you would the life of an artwork in a museum, then you have to turn cosmic space into a kind of museum—a comfortable and sustainable environment for human beings. That is what the cosmists actually wanted.

AW: We now live in a time where many are skeptical of the utopian promises made by scientific and technological advancements, and the desire to maintain youth and vitality, as manifested in rejuvenation, anti-aging, and biohacking technologies. These technologies continue to fuel the neoliberal capitalist system in its endless cycle of consumption and production. Perhaps death—as part of the natural order of things—is the ultimate liberation from and dissent against the status quo? In his short story "Immortality Day," Alexander Bogdanov questioned the ability of the human psyche to deal with eternal life.[4] It seems that perhaps even the cosmists themselves were ambivalent about the notion of immortality. Also, what do we do with ourselves if we can live forever and go anywhere we want? Will all of this longevity be supported by the state?

BG: The question of immortality is also difficult because there is a very intimate relationship between intelligence and the fear of death. Why are humans considered intelligent in ways that other animals are not? Because animals don't think about death, they have no fear of death. Why are thinking machines and artificial intelligence all stupid? They demonstrate artificial stupidity, not artificial intelligence—because they don't think about death. They don't think about the possibility of being switched off and destroyed. This is something Kubrick saw very clearly in *2001*—that artificial intelligence begins to be really intelligent when it understands the concept of death. However, the moment it understands the concept of death, it begins to kill people.

Nature does not prevent the death of individual humans—it does not care about them. That is why the cosmists began to dream about a totally artificial, man-made world that could secure human existence in perpetuity. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes:

> The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him. Neither labor nor work

Soviet cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev stuck in space during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. License: Public Domain.

nor action nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer. Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human; but the only statement we could make regarding their "nature" is that they still are conditioned beings, even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent.[5]

To this self-made condition belong the laws of a technological progress that is directed towards the future and permanently destroys its own past. Intellectuals and artists are often plagued by a feeling: I make effort after effort, and nothing stable comes out of it, because the next generation uses different technologies, different fashions,

and they don't respect what I have done. In our culture, based as it is on the idea of progress, the feeling of precariousness is universal. That is why the Russian cosmists spoke about immortality and resurrection: they wanted to—at least partially—redirect progress from the future towards the past. And they took the museum as a model.

AW: I can see how thinking about these bigger questions is important, especially at a time when we are all sort of scrambling.

BG: They are simple questions, but everyone feels their relevance. You know, in many of his texts Andy Warhol says that he is interested in keeping leftovers.

AW: He had this thing where he boxed everything.

BG: And he was a commercial artist. At the same time, he had a desire to keep things from being discarded, from becoming garbage. This was a reaction against our culture, which destroys everything—either through consumption or through rejection.

AW: Well, I have another question for you then regarding your own subjectivity in this climate. In your essay "Genealogy of Humanity," you wrote:

> The truly emancipated individual experiences oneself, rather, as an artwork that should be protected from decay and annihilation. Accordingly, true technology is the technology of sustainability. Thus, museum technology cares for individual things, makes them last, makes them immortal. The Christian immortality of the soul is replaced by the immortality of things or bodies in the museum.[6]

You were speaking about the cosmists' desire to return the human body from being an object to a subject. This continued objectification of the body—I'm not sure if this is something I am interpreting correctly—is already happening. At NASA, for example, as part of the Human Research Program, there was a "twin study" for which astronaut Scott Kelly spent a year on the International Space Station (from March 2015 to 2016) while his genetic copy, or twin brother, astronaut Mark Kelly was on earth. According to the official report published in the journal *Science* three years after Scott Kelly's return to earth, "Long-duration missions that will take humans to Mars and beyond are planned by public and private entities for the 2020s and 2030s; therefore, comprehensive studies are now needed to assess the impact of long-duration spaceflight on the human body, brain, and overall physiology."[7]

The language of science always underscores the objectification of the body. I think about how language works in this subject-object divide. But perhaps the astronauts regard this case as a modern-day sacrifice. Astronauts risk death to explore the outer reaches of what is humanly possible, not unlike the ancient Mesoamerican warriors who traveled to an alternate dimension through self-sacrifice by climbing to the top of pyramids and plunging to their deaths. Maybe this image is too dramatic, but the point is that in addition to a philosophical schema, cosmism seems to also be a spiritual framework for considering our collective relationship to the cosmos.

Maybe it's not the subject-object divide but rather the decentering of the subject. The subject is dissolved, similar to the dissolution of the ego in the Buddhist tradition—so there is no subject and object. Do you think there's any relationship between cosmism and Buddhism?

BG: I think the problem is not so much the sacrifice itself, but whether we get compensated for it. In the Christian tradition this compensation is divine grace. In our times it is the collective memory of people sacrificing themselves for the common good. It was very characteristic of the Christian church to create an archive for sacrifice, for martyrdom.

Sacrifice is always connected to the process of archiving. Capitalism tends to negate archives; today physical archives are financially in a very bad position. This economic dissolution of archives creates a feeling that whatever we do, it all disappears—it is all for nothing. If people don't have the feeling that their sacrifice is valued, then they just enjoy life. They think the only thing they have is life here and now, so they want their life to be a life of pleasure.

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Boris Groys is a philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally renowned expert on Soviet-era art and literature, especially the Russian avant-garde.

Alice Wang makes sculptures, photographs, and experimental films. Her upcoming solo exhibitions will be presented at the UCCA Dune Art Museum this fall and the Vincent Price Art Museum next spring. Wang is based in New York.

1
Donald A. Wollheim, *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today* (Harper and Row, 1971), 116.

2
Wollheim, *The Universe Makers*, 116.

3
In a 2015 conversation with Anton Vidokle at a screening of his film *This is Cosmos* (2014), Artists Space, New York.

4
Alexander Bogdanov, "Immortality Day," trans. Anastasiya Osipova, is featured in an anthology of original writings by cosmists, most of which were translated into English for the first time. See *Russian Cosmism* , ed. Boris Groys (e-flux and MIT Press, 2018).

5
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10.

6
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Elizabeth Willis

FUTURE IMPERFECT

I had to stop writing in order to clean my desk.

I had to stop writing to speak with the angel of dust.

The card I pulled was strength not speed.

Selenite and salt and jasper: for clarity, for transmission, for joy.

Something in the body reaches for something outside it, writing it into invisible circuitries.

I'm thinking into earthwork and mining and reframed perception. Toward the relation between mines and the invention of hell, of mines and the troubled histories of labor; the uses and properties of the human.

In the so-called western history of thought, looking for the wave that rises like a wall, a serrated line from one shore to another.

I'm listening for the bell, for the machine to stop, dishes in the kitchen, the location of someone I love, my system crashing as the sprung door bangs shut.

I'm sitting in a north so bent by its own systems that it banks its truth claims as Inevitability. The sound of a finger pointing away from what it's done as if it could not have been otherwise, so the bodies of the future will pay off the past, buried in unsearchable code.

I am listening to Octavia Butler's quantum thought, not science or fiction but the field that resides between thought and feeling. The capacity for thinking beyond narrative event or recorded fact.

What happens when the cards move, what risks you feel at the threshold, the animal fear that you won't come back from wherever it's taking you: the "it" that is thought.

...

I am thinking of the technologies of holding things together. The center of the button industry attaching itself to a river so full of mussel shells you could walk across it, where someone saw a world that could be machined and sorted by girls and women, all this happening because the woods had been clear cut and the town was out of work, and the thought was there of making something out of materials perceived to be free.

I'm caught in the undertow of its momentum, not behind me but up ahead. Something between an imaginary beginning and an unseen end.

The shells would be soaked, steamed, drilled, and polished, think of the dust. KING EDWARD a few inches from her hand: the factual proximity of leisure to labor, divine right to nonunion wage work, invincibility to

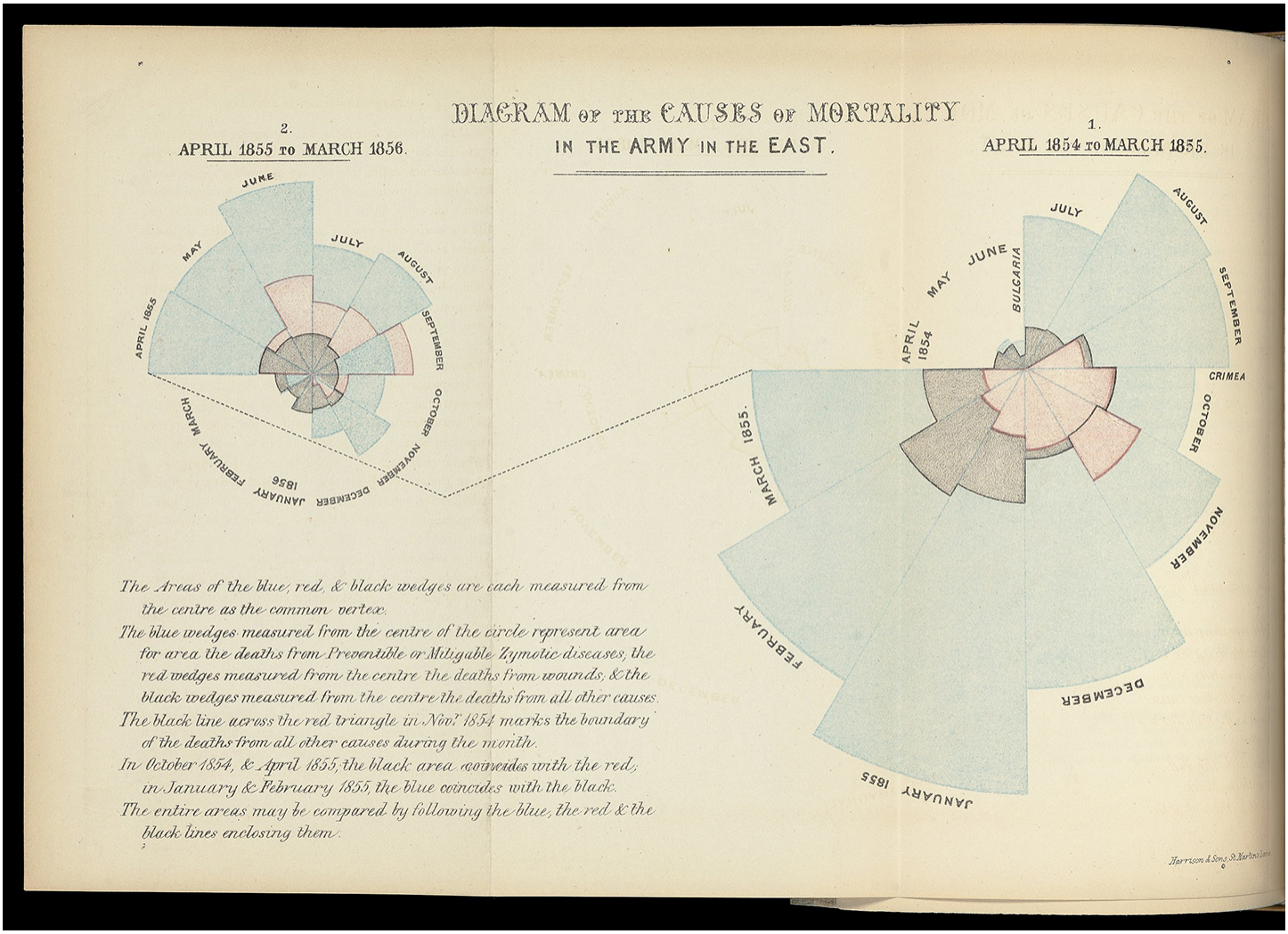


Diagram from 'Notes on Matters Affecting the Health, Efficiency, and Hospital Administration of the British Army'. License: CC BY 4.0

precarity.

In the dense air, buttons are sewn onto cards and everything else is thrown back into the current.

A century back, less than an hour away, I see it only with the mind of someone else's eye.

I place the world headquarters of the pearl button industry next to Rabindranath Tagore's *Angel of Surplus*, Howardena Pindell's punched out numbers, the despair underwriting our talk of how to hold something together while so much is systematically dismantled.

I am thinking about the spiral of W.E.B. Du Bois's data portraits, the body as a body of facts, the touch of economics on the skin.

I'm thinking of the landscapes of extractable wealth, their labyrinths, their underworlds.

I'm thinking of Paul Robeson playing a miner onscreen, the ways he enacted or mirrored forms of burial and displacement. I'm thinking about the premier he refused to attend.

Histories rewired, unrepaired.

...

At the turn of the twenieth century, Du Bois's images were presented to the Paris Exhibition with his extensive research on Black life in America as living information. Rearrange the data points so someone will look long enough to take the tired facts into the cells of their interior.

In the era of psychical research and the spectrification of religious experience, the work of the data portraits is the

A woman works at a grinding machine circa 1950.

work of perspective. Something in them exists beyond the diagrammatic, reaching into the space between portrait and landscape.

A crosscut interval, a working into art. To those who had no ears to hear, here are eyes to see. To make of what is known a revelation, a formal pressure toward the work of consciousness.

...

Or: a nurse in the Crimean War notices that fewer bodies survive the hospital than the fields. To make the men who overlook her work begin to see, she draws the kind of diagrammatic flower that is called a rose chart.

Some of Du Bois's data portraits, like the nurse's rose, suggest the curve of the modern labyrinth echoed in Robert Smithson's spiral jetty, which in turn rhymes with the geographically adjacent Bingham mine whose downward spiral is visible from space. A wound big enough to surpass the past's ability to correct itself.

From above, the jetty looks like a fiddlehead fern. Or a tightly wound question, on the tip of a tongue.

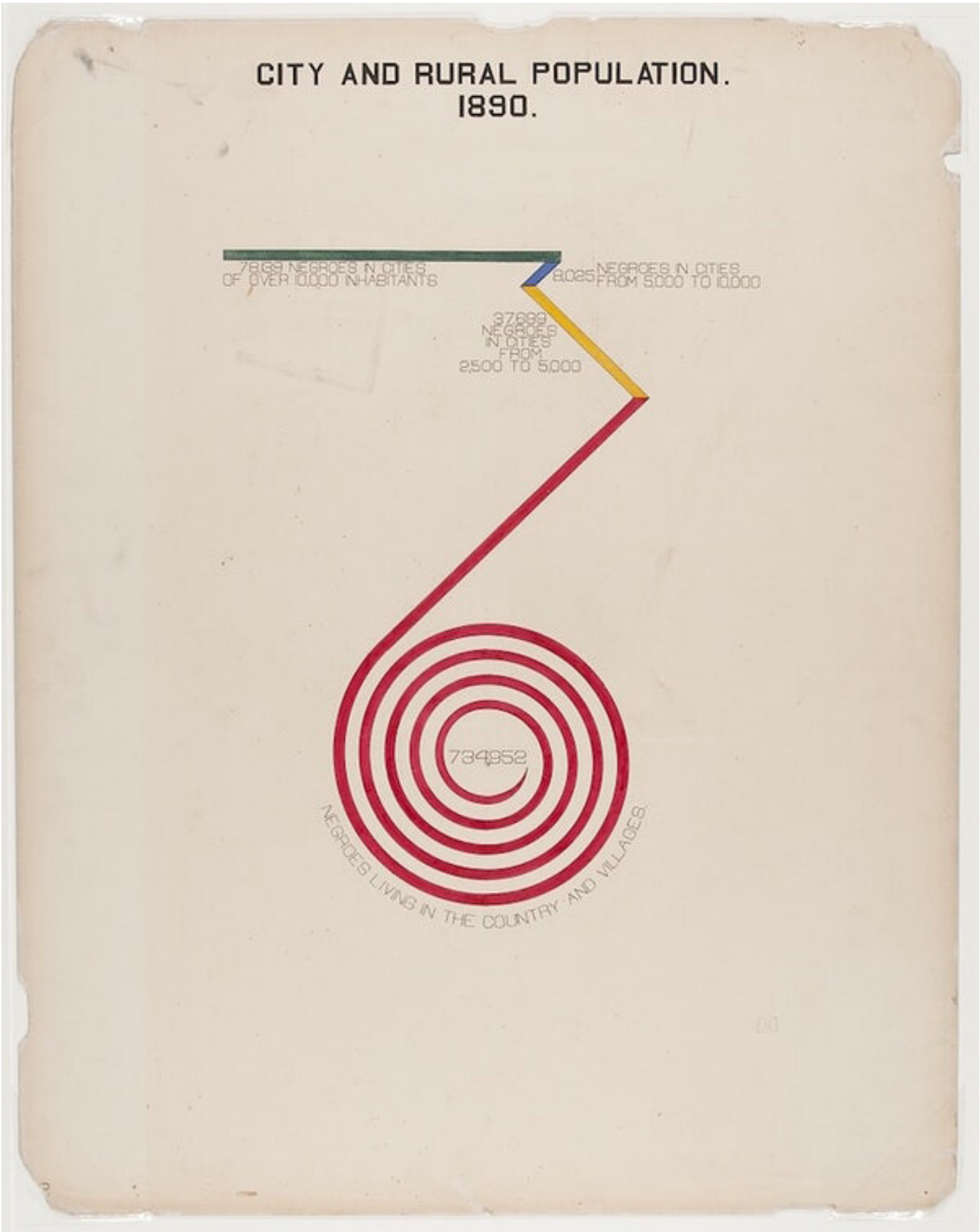
How does anybody sleep.

...

I'm thinking about George Oppen's sense of the "mineral fact" and what it has to do with the orientation of a subject to its origins. He's looking at the war by which his body is now linked with the bodies of others in a species of kinship. He's living out a tale written by a mind obsessed by the instability of facts as if he remembered it by heart.

Do I think or feel this: it matters that the arc of Octavia Butler's thought begins by looking back not ahead. History too is speculation. What have you done, what has been done to you. Otherwise you repeat "history in oblivion."[1]

I'm thinking about Smithson's use of mirrors in his "non-sites." The making of spaces that reflect the viewer while throwing into shadow the factual world behind them. Wherever you look, the unflinching landscape looks back.



Artwork by W.E.B. Du Bois. Photo: Library of Congress / Courtesy Cooper Hewitt.

It has all the time in the world. In this surrounding consciousness, the vast listening space you call Nothing reflects Nothing back.

I'm interested in the presumptions the work—or the artist—makes in thinking of spaces like the Bonneville salt flats as places for art, and I'm troubled by the troubled way such works participate in other forms of extraction. Their existence as gestures, as systems of pointing that cannot escape their own status as elite, saleable, beautiful things.

The obviousness of it interests me: Smithson's earthworks—the jetty, the unfinished arc of the ramp—as inverted mines, locations of abandonment. As were his writings: *A Heap of Language*?

When Smithson sought the financial support of the mining companies was he imagining it as a kind of reversal or repair or was he just trying to make you pause at this flash in the desert, a moment of revelation on the Eisenhower highway to hell.

Sometimes I want, like Smithson, to simply point at something and walk away.

...

Of mineral facts I know little, but I know that the problem of governance, like the heap of language, is a problem of both matter and spirit.

I know that the arsenic and heavy metals entering the air above Smithson's spiral jetty are connected with the extractive processes of Kennecott Copper's open pit mine on the other end of what has been called a Great Salt Lake.

I'm thinking about minerality as a quality and "mineral fact" as a concept, the suggestion within them of objectivity, and how subjectively different these concepts are among the poets identified with Objectivism. There was the appeal too of its historical connection with labor consciousness and social/ist - communist activism.

Where does the feeling of Oppen, the son of a diamond merchant, meet that of Lorine Niedecker, whose cabin was surrounded by mud with every spring thaw.

Niedecker contemplates the role of water in the transport of Minnesota iron and places it next to the fact—the motion—of iron in the blood: a diagram of entangled identity.

I'm thinking about the minerals required for bodily homeostasis, about magnetism and its relation to those salts, to the contact kept alive by a repeated molecular spark.

I'm thinking about the ways Octavia Butler writes through kinship and risk, recording the physical damage to Dana's body in *Kindred*: not only the violence inflicted in the historical past but the damage inflicted by transit and transmission, inseparable from this accrued experience. Crashing into the residual, relived violence is the compounded violence of being permeable, of feeling even for those who perpetrate one's harm. The exhaustion of that, what it costs, what it extracts.

...

In the imperfect wobble of the glass that separates my desk from the world outside, a woman stops on the sidewalk across the street. She wears two large backpacks, one facing forward the other back, and carries a large shopping bag in each hand. When she pauses, she sets down the two bags in her hands but leaves her packs on.

I'm thinking of how often I've been that person having a private moment in public space, aware of how easily I could wander off the map and wondering who had seen it.

What is the pull of the mineral fact of such a thought.

It was Linnaeus who broke the world into three varieties he called kingdoms, but he owed most of it to Aristotle. Who is the king of the kingdom, who says what distinguishes the crow from the Japanese maple or the petrochemical waste in which my food is wrapped.

It occurs to me that procedurally there are many things I can no longer do, that one path or another has blown up before or behind my view of the road. This too a mineral fact: any situation may demand the reinvention of both self and relation, what it means and what it costs to hold something together.

The condition of empathy in Butler's speculation is a disability in the world at large and a superpower for the writer as long as she can survive the beatings of the onslaught that surrounds her.

It is clear in the parables that it is Butler not her protagonist who is writing scripture; or rather, one writer exists within another. Here is a path, here is where I fell, don't let feeling throw you off your game. Yes, it is too much. Turn the page over. Write it down.

X

Elizabeth Willis is the author of the poetry collections *Alive: New and Selected Poems* (2015), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Address* (2011), recipient of the Laurence L. & Thomas Winship/PEN New England Award; *Meteoric Flowers* (2006); *Turneresque* (2003); *The Human Abstract* (1995), a National Poetry Series selection; and

Second Law (1993). She is also the editor of *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (2008). Her poetry has been translated into French, Dutch, Polish, and Slovak.

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Theresa Cha

Steve McQueen and Doreen Mende
in conversation

On End Credits

Steve McQueen's audio-visual installation *End Credits* (2012–22) displays thousands of digitized FBI files scrolling slowly up a large-scale screen over twelve hours and fifty-four minutes. The material includes file numbers, dates, and registration codes, some heavily redacted or blacked out. Over the duration of sixty-seven hours, four minutes, and forty-three seconds, voice recordings render the FBI informants' reports audible asynchronously to the image. The artwork is a haunting monument to the state surveillance and smear campaigns orchestrated by the US government against the writer, photographer, Pan-Africanist, feminist, and anthropologist Eslanda Robeson (1895–1965). Robeson also managed the media communication of her husband, the world-renowned singer, actor, lawyer, and social activist Paul Robeson (1898–1976), who was also under attack by the FBI for his civil rights work, support of trade unions, and sympathy for Soviet-communist ideas. Eslanda wrote a biography of Paul as well.

Although often overshadowed by her husband, Eslanda Goode Cardozo Robeson was an outstanding intellectual. She studied with anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski at the London School of Economics in the 1930s. She was a brilliant photographer and developed an anti-colonial feminism in and beyond the discipline.[1] Her politics shaped her photographic practice during her journeys to the Congo, Uganda, and South Africa;[2] the scholar Leigh Raiford has described her perspective as a "pan-African gaze." Paul Robeson connected the Black civil rights movement and the workers' movement to an interracial, anti-colonial internationalism through the sonic traditions of East African music, European chorales, and Negro spirituals. Both Robesons made significant contributions to the Black avant-garde of the Harlem Renaissance, and they continue to influence generations of Black diasporic imaginaries. Their work also circulated in the mainstream media of minor socialist countries, such as the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Czech Republic.

They were banned from travel and work outside the US between 1950 and 1958 and were interrogated by the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee. However, they were supported and honored by intellectuals, students, anti-fascist activists, and governmental representatives in communist and nonaligned countries around the world. Among their supporters was the Jewish-German philosopher Franz Loeser and his wife, Diana Loeser, an "English for you" teacher on GDR television. In the East German version of his autobiography, Franz Loeser's writes that as a student at the University of Minnesota he safeguarded Paul Robeson against a mob of white supremacists during the Peekskill riots in 1949.[3] Shortly after that attack, Loeser himself became subject to the anti-communist policy of the US and needed to leave the country. After a stay in Manchester for a few years, he moved to East Berlin in 1957, where he contributed significantly to building the Paul Robeson Archive at the Akademie der Künste in East

Steve McQueen, End Credits (2012–22), exhibited in conversation with "The Missed Seminar: After Eslanda Robeson," Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 28–December 30, 2022. Installation view. Photo: Timo Ohler, 2022.

Berlin, of which Paul Robeson became a corresponding member in 1963. His membership was cancelled around 1994 when the Akademie der Künste East was "reunited" with the Akademie der Künste West.

In other words, the aftermath of the global Cold War not only disregarded the archives and silenced the histories of communist and anti-fascist lives in Europe. It also erased the presence in these geographies of Black radical histories and their transcontinental networks. In the context of East Germany, this double erasure, which the sociologist Katharina Warda has described as a "double invisibilization" by white patriarchal liberal power, created the conditions for the ethno-nationalism and neofascism that we face today.[4] Or, as Charisse Burden Stelly argues, being Black and communist is that which fascists fear most.[5]

The ongoing instrumentalization of memory politics, particularly concerning the fights against racism and anti-Semitism, makes it urgent to engage with unfinished conversations between friends and movements that created intersectional solidarity between East and South struggles. In *End Credits*, McQueen invokes these geopolitical entanglements through an artistic mobilization of archival material, which enables viewers to link racism with colonialism, anti-Semitism, and fascism. The following conversation about *End Credits* took place on October 25, 2022, during the lead-up to the first full-length exhibition of the work, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, in the context of the multipart curatorial project "The Missed Seminar."[6]

—Doreen Mende This is written in the third person but should prob be attributed to Doreen in some way

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Doreen Mende: *End Credits* exhibits an aesthetics of bureaucracy and a pathology of administration as methods of anti-communist horror during the postwar McCarthyite regime in the name of US law. The FBI files documenting the surveillance of Eslanda and Paul Robeson span the period between 1941 and 1978. The excessive number of files and registration codes indicate the quality and quantity of surveillance, and reveal the

20 THE AFRO-AMERICAN NOVEMBER 2, 1963

WHEN YOU FINISH READING YOUR AFRO PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND

PAUL ROBESON'S WIFE TELLS

6.6/42

WHY HE 'SNEAKED' TO EAST GERMANY

By ESLANDA GOODE ROBESON

BERLIN, G.D.R. — (ANP) —An American weekly scandal newspaper, "Inside America," last January printed a series of articles under Paul Robeson's signature, which contained some deliberately false statements fabricated out of whole cloth, along with a lot of other nonsense which was clearly recognizable as such.

Paul Robeson had not written the articles, had not interviewed the reporter, and had never even heard of the newspaper. The most important, and the most deliberately malicious of the fabricated statements was that Paul Robeson had "found discrimination in the Soviet Union, had become disillusioned and had changed his political opinions."

* * *

THIS WHOLLY FALSE news was welcomed and reprinted and widely circulated by the eager reactionary Western press, particularly by a Canadian newspaper and by "Ficaro" of Paris. I was deluged by telephone calls on our private, unlisted phone day and night, and reporters from various London newspapers, particularly the Telegraph, rang our doorbell and insisted upon obtaining interviews with Paul Robeson, in person.

Paul was then in a nursing-home, recovering from an illness. I asked him if he wanted to talk with reporters; he looked at me in astonishment and said: Certainly not. Not now. When I am well again, and have something to say, I will see them. Why should I see them now?

ESLANDA ROBESON

Why, indeed? Because some irresponsible press had made up some completely false stories, based on wishful thinking, must Paul come out to his sickroom to deny them? No sense in that. No need for that. So he did not.

* * *

BUT THE PRESS persisted, and one day not many weeks ago my doorbell rang when I was expecting a friend, but the caller said, over the street inter-com that he was Derek Sumpter of the Daily Telegraph, and would I please see him for a few minutes on an urgent matter?

He came up to the flat, I talked with him for nearly half an hour, answered all his questions, explained the wholly irresponsible origin of the rumors; at the end of the interview he asked for a personal interview with Paul.

I told him that Paul was ill and not available. I later gave a frank and comprehensive interview to a persistent British representative of a Canadian news service; he also insisted on talking directly with Paul, and afterwards, sent a telegram to Paul at the private nursing-home requesting an interview. Why, why should reporters want to harass a man when he is ill?

* * *

SINCE THEN MY friends, our agent, and I have been more and more harassed by newspapermen, demanding to know Paul's whereabouts, demanding interviews in person. Actually, his whereabouts were not so secret as all that, because the staff at the nursing-home had from time to time discovered newsmen in search of Paul, and chased them out of the lounge, the women's wing and the grounds.

I then categorically stated to all newspaper inquiries that Paul was not now in public domain, that he was a private Human Being trying to recover his health, and that therefore, under doctors' orders for the present he was a private individual and not available to the press.

Oh no, said some aggressive members of the press, Mr. Robeson is a public figure, sick or well, and we will find him, smoke him out, and interview him about his "change of political opinion." Well, now. That put my back up, and I made up my mind; over my dead body!

* * *

VERY RECENTLY a man who said he was a reporter from the Sunday Telegraph, rang me up late one evening and asked innumerable questions: Where is Mr. Robeson? What are his plans? What are his political opinions? I said that Mr. Robeson was in a nursing-home outside London, was recovering from an illness, would make plans when he was well enough to do so; that he had not only broadcast his political opinions far and wide, but also had lived them, and still does, even in illness.

After all this, the reporter said: I do not believe you. I was not sure I had heard him correctly, but he repeated his extraordinarily impertinent sentence. For a moment I was speechless. I knew right then that it was hopeless trying to explain anything to the press when they had already made up their minds what they wanted to hear.

What I then said to this reporter is quite unprintable, and I hope the telephone receiver burst his eardrum when I slammed it back in its cradle.

* * *

SINCE THEN I have been determined to have nothing to do with the reactionary press. I was convinced that they only hear what they want to hear, print what they want to print, and are not interested in authentic information as such—unless it agrees with, or can be distorted to suggest, support or confirm what they want to print.

As a result of all this, when Paul and I, after close consultations with our family and intimate friends in New York and London, decided to accept the warm invitation of the German Peace Council to visit Berlin, undergo a thorough medical check-up and then take a rest in one of their health resorts, I did not broadcast our plan.

All our friends, neighbors, and business associates knew about it, and were pleased that we would escape the bad weather which had been predicted for the coming English winter. We booked seats on Polish Airways on the regular Sunday non-stop direct flight, London-to-East Berlin on August 25th.

* * *

THEN TO MY surprise and great annoyance, the British press laid down a barrage. My private telephone rang day and night. Reporters swarmed in quiet, dignified Connaught Square where we live. Inquiries were made, and rebuffed, among many of our friends, and at the nursing-home.

PAUL ROBESON

What to do? I consulted our friends, and with their efficient help, I packed our baggage, and during a lull in the Square at about 11 o'clock on Saturday night we took it, unnoticed, out of the flat and checked it at nearby Paddington Station. Exhausted, I took a sleeping-pill and went to bed soon after midnight.

At 3 a.m. on Sunday morning I was roused from a deep sleep by the loud insistent ringing of my street doorbell. When I finally dragged myself out of bed, a bit dizzy, and picked up the inter-com, a man on the doorstep below said he was sorry to wake me at such an hour, but he was from the Sunday Press, and wanted to know where Paul Robeson was, and what were his plans?

* * *

I WAS SUDDENLY wide awake, and furious at this outrage. I said: Mr. Robeson is fast asleep in his bed, that it was 3 o'clock of a Sunday morning, and you should be ashamed of yourself disturbing decent people at this hour. I hung up the inter-com and staggered back to bed.

The doorbell continued to ring steadily, insistently. After 5 minutes of this, I got up again and picked up the inter-com. Is Mr. Robeson at home, the reporter asked eagerly. Yes, he is, I answered crisply, and fortunately he is still asleep. If you continue to ring the bell and wake him, I will call the police.

And that took care of that. The reporter probably told his colleagues that Mr. Robeson was in the flat, and all they had to do was to wait for him to come out. Which they proceeded to do.

Mr. Robeson was, of course safely stowed away in the nursing-home, and was unaware of all this, thank goodness. Reporters had never been able to reach him there, although they continued to try.

(To be continued next week.)

Eslanda Goode Robeson in The Afro-American, weekly newspaper, November 2, 1963. Part one of a three-part article. (c) Paul Robeson Archive, PRA 346, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

building blocks of state terror in the name of racial liberal democracy. The hi-res FBI material used in *End Credits* is accessible today, but it used to be classified, top secret, and FBI coded. How does this expose the surveillance system while invisibilizing the Robesons? What remains indiscernible despite the high-resolution exposure?

Steve McQueen: What was fascinating to me when I first saw the documents was the erasure of certain information within them. There was a structure. Things which were revealed were sealed. It was done in such an orderly fashion because, of course, these things were classified. Now they're unclassified, but they're still classified in a way because we don't see all the evidence or facts that had apparently been gathered. It's decorative to a certain extent: what is revealed and what is unrevealed, what is fact and what is fiction. So then it's about what the spectator projects onto those files. The blackness was almost like holes within the system. Those holes tell you a lot about the failures of state surveillance, and more than anything, about the triumphs of the Robesons.

DM: Imagining the erasures in the files as blackness, or as holes in the system, creates such a beautiful optics. It immediately turns the spectator's perspective toward the unboundedness of human existence, and specifically the Robesons' unconventional lives. It suggests the possibility of futurity, or, as you put it, blurs the lines between fact and fiction. At the same time, there is still much intimate information accessible. You've also just said that *End Credits* invites the audience to make something out of what they imagine. How do you cope with the exposure of intimate information about the Robesons—their illnesses, struggles, relationship problems, love affairs, friendships, mental problems, and health issues? The first audience for the files were secret service operatives. What does shifting the material of the FBI files into an art space allow? How do you deal with the intimacy?

SM: If anything, it makes them more heroic. Their vulnerabilities were their strengths. These were as important to document as their political activism. This tells you how scared the FBI was of them. In just an emotional sense, for me, it makes them more endearing as characters, because they were real people who were intimidated to the point of madness. And also a lot of those things—health and the trouble with their relationship—were instigated, were activated, by the FBI themselves.

DM: The files are also evidence of their resistance and

their fearlessness in their love.

SM: I would say.

DM: The complete *End Credits* has about twelve hours of video and sixty-seven hours of audio. There is also an asynchronous relationship between the audio and video. It's obviously a profoundly different time-concept than your film-production work. In your film productions you are tied to the feature length of the film. How do you mobilize duration as a methodology in *End Credits* differently from your film productions?

SM: It's very different. It's about duration and meditation. I'm not asking the audience to sit through sixty-seven hours straight, it's about what you take and what you bring. It's about the fact that once you leave the space you know that it's still going on. It's like a painting. It doesn't just survive on the wall, it's an aspect of something. It brings you to a point and you grow and work with it. And that's why you can keep going back to the same image. *End Credits* tracks the constant surveillance of the Robesons until two years after Paul's death in 1976. We have to have this journey into his surveillance because it is about constant surveillance over an elongated period of time. Either you are in the room or you are not, but you carry it with you.

DM: As a spectator?

SM: Of course, yes. You can imagine how this was going on for such a long period of time. It was relentless. The whole idea of *End Credits* was of a film with this sort of scroll of information that just goes on and on and on. That's what I wanted to represent within the context of an artwork in order to replicate or visualize this, to carry the weight in some way.

DM: *End Credits* exposes the paratext of a plot, of a narrative, of a life. We could say that the duration is an indicator of the surveillance apparatus? On the other hand, could we say that this surveillance did not define the life of Eslanda and Paul Robeson?

SM: Absolutely.

DM: *End Credits* was presented at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin for the first time in complete form. It was shown in the context of the "The Missed Seminar," which is a multipart curatorial research project that seeks to metabolize archival material documenting the presence of the Robesons in the context of the communist geographies of Europe, specifically in the German Democratic Republic, in light of Eslanda's journeys to the Continent. HKW was built in 1957 as the home for the congress of West Berlin; it is an articulation of Cold War architecture par excellence. In opposition to the people of East Berlin, quite literally at their border, the Congress Hall was designed to promote anti-communism as a condition for de-Nazification and "freedom." Thus, your installation in Berlin denounces, both in curatorial and juridical terms, the promises of liberal democracy as a tool of war. What are your thoughts regarding the presentation of *End Credits* at HKW, a building that was originally gifted by the same US government that banned the Robesons from traveling? What are your thoughts about presenting *End Credits* in the belly of the beast, so to speak, in architecture that was built from the same political violence that surveilled them?

SM: In some ways it's bringing it back home, which is kind of interesting to witness. This is how the situation always ends up. But at the same time, I don't know what that means. We now have the advantage of time. And time allows this kind of orchestration where we can put a project about surveillance in a place of surveillance. I don't know if that is a victory or if that's irony, I have no idea. It's something to witness and I'm looking forward to seeing it in that space and seeing what happens. I can only really answer that question once I have seen it in the space.

DM: HKW is not a neutral venue—not that there is ever a neutral exhibition space. Perhaps it's a victory to exhibit *End Credits* at HKW, because exposing the files of surveillance confronts the venue itself as an exhibition of that violence.

SM: I don't know if it's a victory. Many people have lost along the way. Many people didn't survive to see this. It's the long game. And I don't know what it is. Is it a triumph? Or is it a defeat?

DM: It's a past in the present, it's a *long ue durée*.

SM: It's not celebratory at all.

DM: I agree.

SM: At the same time, I don't know if it's defeat. But I can witness it.

DM: Would you say that it's a form of manifestation?

SM: No. You're the one putting it there, not me. I don't know if it's a demonstration or superfluous. These things are gone, and other things are happening already. New surveillance and new kinds of observations are happening as we speak on this call, wherever. It just goes on in different forms. I don't know who the victors are, but it is what it is.

DM: The post-1990 political depression still resonating in the present was one motivation for me to engage with the narratives, lives, and struggles of the Robesons. What kind of space do you think reconnecting with their legacies opens up? What do we learn from thinking about the

"The Missed Seminar," Albertinum, Dresden, March 31–September 24, 2023. Installation view. Dresden State Art Collections © Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel/Hans-Peter Klut, 2023.

legacies of the anti-communist witch hunts and communist alliances across race and geographies from a contemporary perspective?

SM: What you learn from it is what you're willing to surrender for a sense of liberty. And not a lot of people are willing. As we all know now, we've all surrendered to it to a certain extent with our phones and our computers. We know that there is surveillance, we know that we're being monitored. And we surrender to it. Because in some ways what has happened is that we've been put into a position where we can't function without it. And that's it. We're put into a position [where we need to ask ourselves] what are you willing to give up, what are you willing to sacrifice. It's very difficult. The structures of power and authority have made it—I don't want to say impossible, but at least very difficult—to not be in their pocket one way or the other. Freedom is just whatever that is, I'm not too sure.

DM: Absolutely. It brings us back to the exhibition venue's history. It was built on the premise of liberal democracy and the idea of freedom. Yet, freedom here is a tool of war. And that's what I think becomes pertinent and palpable by engaging and reconnecting with the Robesons through *End Credits*. Maybe to ask differently: Why *End Credits* today?

SM: Interesting. Why *End Credits* today? It's an interesting topic when you think of all these whistleblowers and what's going on around the world. What I wanted to do in one way, shape, or form was to be very direct, because I think these FBI files are quite formal. It's literally black and white. There is a tactility to it that allows engaging with people in a very direct manner. Why now? Because you can see these things in a very direct fashion: the narrative of people being surveilled for over thirty years and the toll that it takes and how it chips away at this couple—Paul in particular. The mental health issues, and so forth. And therefore, I had hoped seeing these documents in this narrative form would trigger people to reflect upon their own individual situations and how we live today. This is basically all one can do, to reflect on the past. And to reflect on the past in the present.

DM: What kind of thinking do you hope *End Credits*

produces? Is it a trans-generational thinking? A communist thinking? A Pan-African thinking? A politics of friendship thinking?

SM: I wouldn't want to say. That's not for me. I'm not here to direct people's thoughts. It's the exact opposite. It's about reflecting on the present within the past, or the past in the present. Otherwise, I have no idea. The fact that people can view it is as much as I could hope for.

DM: Let's speak about the Transatlantic Telephone Concert, which transmitted the voice of Paul Robeson live-—for the first time across the Atlantic-—to St. Pancras Town Hall in London on May 26, 1957. I remember you talking enthusiastically with the curator Donna DeSalvo about it in 2016.[7] The concert was organized by the German-Jewish Marxist philosopher Franz Loeser, a friend of Paul's. The Transatlantic Telephone Concert was an incredibly important act of solidarity against the US governmental travel ban that had prevented Paul Robeson from performing in Europe. It was also an important moment of friendship between Robeson and Loeser. Later that year, Loeser immigrated to East Berlin, where he mobilized a state-approved initiative to support Robeson, demanding the end of the anti-communist travel ban. Robeson is as famous for a generation born after the 1940s in East Germany as Angela Davis is for a generation born after the 1960s. This friendship, and the concert, has also been a main interest of "The Missed Seminar." What fascinates you about the Transatlantic Telephone Concert? What does it allow us to imagine?

SM: I think breaking the lines. The fact that where there's a will, there's a way. And that's what art can do. Art has always been a tool, has always been a thing that can transform and transcend a situation. And I think that's a great example of that. The whole idea of a voice can actually generate that amount of enthusiasm and love. And you can echo that with *End Credits* in terms of voices, those voices can actually reverberate and communicate.

DM: On August 27, 1963, a few days after their arrival in East Berlin, Eslanda wrote a kind of report called *"Kidnapped!" A True Story*, documenting their escape from the media harassment they had experienced in London.[8] Both she and Paul had moved to London between 1958 and 1963, shortly after the travel ban was ended. Journalists besieged their house at Connaught Square in London, hunting for any sorts of information on the Robesons, specifically on Paul's health. In *"Kidnapped!" A True Story*, Eslanda describes in detail their tricks to fool the waiting journalists: boarding a Polish Airlines plane to East Berlin, meeting Loeser at the airport, and the welcome by the Peace Council in East Berlin that had invited them. Eslanda writes in a diaristic form. Hers is a kind of auto-theory writing, taking lived experience as a foundation to analyze political realities. It situates her approach in the tradition of Black diaristic writing—Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and authors around *The Crisis*, a journal founded by W. E. B. DuBois, in which literature intersects with memoir and journalistic reports. Eslanda's many writings, which remain to be published as an anthology, evidence Black life as well as her commitment to a Pan-African feminism. *"Kidnapped!" A True Story* was published in three parts in *The Afro-American* newspaper in November 1963.

SM: Which newspaper?

DM: It's called *The Afro-American*. To my knowledge, it was founded in 1892 in Baltimore, starting as a daily newspaper and later becoming a weekly newspaper, with nine national editions published in several major cities across the US around the time Eslanda was publishing with them. The first part of *"Kidnapped!"* was titled "Why he 'sneaked' to East Germany," and was published on November 2, 1963. The second part, published a week later, was titled "Escape reads like a movie thriller," and the third part is "Only trying to get Paul a rest," published on November 16, 1963. I share this with you is to ask: Why do you think there's no feature film on Paul and Eslanda Robeson yet?

SM: More than ten years ago I tried to do something on the subject, but it proved very difficult to deal with the estate and the family. It's understandable. There's a lot going on with their legacy.

DM: Eslanda's writings, as well as all the material in archives such as the Akademie der Künste in Berlin but also in the FBI files, operate like a script for a film that imagines their lives.

SM: No, it's not about imagining. It's a fact. It's actuality. It's fact and it's fiction. And there it is, and in that duration of *End Credits*. This is my picture, my film, on the Robesons. It couldn't have been anything else. This was it. Sometimes you're looking at something and you think you should go a certain way and actually, it's right in front of you. And I discovered that this was the ultimate picture that I could make of the Robesons, of Paul. I think biographical films are very tricky. I haven't really made one. They're particularly tricky with historical characters. With these files I made my narrative. It's a document. It's documentary, it's factual, it's all those things. All the things I would have ever wanted are in *End Credits.*

DM: I wasn't thinking so much of a biographical film on Paul and Eslanda, but about the fabric, the relations, the friendships, the infrastructure they were part of.

SM: Whatever you do there is an element of the biographical. You can't escape that. It is what it is. And I

"The Missed Seminar," Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 28–December 30, 2022; and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, March 30–September 24, 2023. © Laura Fiorio, 2022.

didn't want to go down that road. At the end, this is it. *End Credits* couldn't have been a better demonstration of that.

DM: I wanted to mention another film reference—an unmade, unrealized film. In 1934, Paul received a letter from Sergei Eisenstein suggesting a film on the Haitian Revolution, with Paul as Toussaint Louverture. This anecdote was related by Paul Robeson Jr. in the documentary *Paul Robeson: Here I Stand*, directed by St. Clair Bourne, which came out in 1999. Paul Sr. also went to Moscow to speak with Eisenstein. What do you think would be needed to realize the Eisenstein film today, ninety years later?

SM: I can't really answer that. I don't know. I wish that it was made. That's about all that I can say. I wish that it was made, but it wasn't.

DM: I'm also asking because *End Credits* engages with the image as a tool of speaking, as politics. It goes beyond illustration. *End Credits* is not an illustration, yet it is an audiovisual portrait by other means, a film of extreme duration on the lives and struggles of the Robesons, as you said earlier beautifully.

SM: Yes, *End Credits* is not an interpretation. It's documenting a document. It's not a reinterpretation.

DM: The files contain an excess of documents, but through the erasures and the visibility of the infrastructure this project goes beyond the document. Am I understanding you correctly? Are we returning to the holes in the system, the redactions and erasures in the documents?

SM: It doesn't go beyond the document. A document remains a document. These files were released in the seventies or eighties, so there is a distance. The first documents are from the mid-thirties. Now we are in 2022. They're almost like relics now, if anything. What can we learn from these relics, from bringing them into our everyday life today? I don't know.

DM: It makes me think of Okwui Enwezor's exhibition "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art," shown at the ICP in New York in 2008. The curatorial

"The Missed Seminar," Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, October 28–December 30, 2022; and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, March 30–September 24, 2023. © Laura Fiorio, 2022.

essay starts with a reflection on the archive in relation to the document and Foucault's "law of what can be said" as evidence. *End Credits* exposes the whole infrastructure of surveillance. Documenting a document, as you put it, allows for honoring the practice of resistance that we witness in the documents while at the same time analyzing the violence from a distance. Documenting a document activates an estrangement effect, perhaps.

SM: There you go. An interpretation of an event in the past, which could be put into the present. What did that mean *then* to do a movie about Toussaint Louverture with Paul Robeson and Sergei Eisenstein? What was the intent?

X

Born in London, England in 1969, **Steve McQueen** is an artist, film director, and screenwriter currently based in London and Amsterdam. His themes are universal and often focus on painful biographies. He has directed four feature films, most recently *Widows* (2018). His first, *Hunger* (2008), was awarded the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and his third, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), received the Golden Globe, Oscar, and BAFTA awards for Best Picture in 2014. McQueen won the Turner Prize in 1999, has been featured in Documenta (1997 and 2002), represented the national pavilion of Great Britain at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, and has been selected several times for the Venice Biennale's central pavilion (2003, 2007, 2013, and 2015). Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Art Institute of Chicago (2012); Schaulager, Basel (2013); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2017); and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2017). In 2019 he presented *Year 3*, a portrait of an entire age group of London schoolchildren, at Tate Britain, London. In 2020 he made *Small Axe*, an anthology film series about London's West Indian community. In February 2020 a major solo exhibition opened at the Tate Modern, London and travelled to Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan in 2022. His film *Grenfell* was recently shown at Serpentine South Gallery, London.

Doreen Mende is a curator and theorist who is currently Associate Professor of the curatorial/politics seminar of the CCC RP research-based Master at HEAD Genève/Switzerland. Since 2021 she has been the Director of the Cross-Collections Research Department of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD), where she initiated the *Stannaki Forum* on diasporic knowledge, and conceptualizes the *Transcultural Academy "Futurities"* in 2023. Ongoing projects include the case-based academic research study *Decolonizing Socialism: Entangled Internationalism* (2019–24), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Based on this research, a new series of exhibitions, called *sequences*, is coming up in 2024 featuring invited curators-researchers and artists at the Albertinium of SKD. In 2022, she realized *The Missed Seminar: After Eslanda Robeson in Conversation with Steve McQueen's End Credits* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. She has published with *e-flux journal*, MIT Press, Oxford University Press, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, spector books, archive books, IBRAAZ, and Sternberg Press. She is a cofounder of the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin.

1
See Barbara Ransby, *The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (Yale University Press, 2013).

2
Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946).

3
Franz Loeser, *Die Abenteuer eines Emigranten: Erinnerungen* (Adventures of an Emigrant: Memoires) (Verlag Neues Leben, 1980).

4
Katharina Warda, "Ostdeutsche of Color," Rise, 2021 https://rise-jugendkultur.de/artikel/ostdeutsche-of-color/ (in German).

5
"Pan-Africanism, Communism, Anti-Fascism: A Radical Provocation," panel discussion with Charisse Burden-Stelly, Doreen Mende, Charlotte Misselwitz, and Zoé Samudzi, moderated by Avery F. Gordon, October 29, 2022, "The Missed Seminar," Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

6
See https://archiv.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2022/the_missed_seminar/start.php .

7
Steve McQueen in conversation with Donna De Salvo, April 29, 2016, in the context of Steve McQueen's exhibition "Open Plan," Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016 https://vimeo.com/170665780 .

8
Eslanda Goode Robeson, *"Kidnapped!" A True Story*, Paul Robeson Archive, Akademie der Künste Berlin.

Mary N. Taylor and Janet Sarbanes in conversation

From Islands of Commons to Collective Autonomy

This conversation was first instigated by Malav Kanuga (of Common Notions press and Making Worlds Bookstore in Philadelphia). It follows a previous conversation between the authors held at Making Worlds to celebrate the joint launch of Janet's *Letters on the Autonomy Project* and Mary's coedited *The Commonist Horizon*: *Futures Beyond Capitalist Urbanization*.[1] Both dialogues reflect a common investment in conversation as a relational method that is central to the authors' social-movement work and is reflected in the texts themselves. This dialogue was held over email and has been edited for length and clarity.

—Editors

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Janet Sarbanes: *The Commonist Horizon* gave me a grounded sense of possibility as a reader. Your book centers on reports from the field of producing autonomy combined with far-reaching conversations around commoning practices in postsocialist cities in Eastern Europe, one in London, and one in New York. The title is a play on Jodi Dean's *The Communist Horizon*, which opens up the space of comradely debate around the distinctions and the relations between commoning and communism (state communism to be precise), which are central to your vision. To start, what was the impetus for this book, and how did you and Noah Brehmer come to work on it together? Can you share your thinking around this editorial approach?

Mary Taylor: My involvement as an editor emerged from a net of relationships I have with the Eastern European left. Noah, like me, is originally from the US, but he lives in Lithuania. We met in 2015 in Kaunas and Zeimiai, at a convergence called "Peripheralizing Europe," which LeftEast co-organized with other activist groups operating in Spain and Lithuania.[2]

Noah came up with the title even before he asked me to join him on the project. It was a provocation for us and the other authors to reflect on the language of the commons and its utility (or lack thereof) for our collective work. The final chapter is cowritten by Noah and others with whom he has been trying to think through strategies for commoning in Vilnius. So, in a way, the book starts and ends in Lithuania, which was of course once part of the USSR. Noah was inspired by the idea that the language of communism has become so delegitimated in the region after the fall of state socialism, and that commons offers a necessary new language. I felt that we should make sure to have other chapters from comrades in other parts of formerly state-socialist Europe. The authors are all people Noah or I have worked with closely in movement contexts. The chapters offer a broad array of nuanced approaches to the relevance of commons/commoning as a concept and a form of organization, and they unfolded through a series of discussions hosted by Luna 6 in Vilnius. It's true,

Neighborhood Art Center staff photo, Community Art in Atlanta, 1977–87. Photo: Jim Alexander. Courtesy of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History.

though, that a few authors were not into the title originally—when they read "commonist" as "communist."

You teach at CalArts. And your book, a collection of letters, offers a really interesting history of the institution from the perspective of autonomy. How did you end up writing a series of eighteen letters to "A" that are now bound as a book entitled **Letters on the Autonomy Project**?

JS: I think people in movement contexts are looking for serious conversations right now about how to self-organize and to think about self-organization in a radical, world-altering way.

I've been grappling with autonomy for some time, as both a political and an aesthetic concept, but also as a practice. But you're right, autonomy is central to radical pedagogy. Being at CalArts, and researching and experiencing its particular legacy of radical pedagogy, has definitely influenced my thinking and practice. And it was Cornelius Castoriadis's thinking on education that first attracted me to his body of work, which then proved generative on a number of fronts, political and aesthetic, and became an important framework for this series of open letters.

The motivation for writing the book came from a more visceral place. I wanted to understand the times I was living in, which seemed to me to be extraordinary, in terms of the challenges we're facing and the wave after wave of struggles over the last decade or so that have tried to create the kind of society that can meet those challenges. After being a part of Critical Resistance and being on the ground at Occupy LA, as well as engaging over many years with more autonomous spaces and collectives in the LA art world, I was looking for a language that could encapsulate those experiences. But with the scaling-up of forms and strategies of resistance by the Black Lives Matter Movement, Standing Rock, NoDAPL, MeToo, and the reenergized workers movement (typified by the teachers' strikes, with their comprehensive demands) and the emergence of new forms of solidarity between them, I came to the realization that this moment resembles what Castoriadis would call a moment of great sociohistorical creativity. By this he meant a moment when an entire society can potentially head in a more autonomous, or radically democratic, direction. Of course, the rising authoritarianism we see across the globe is an attempt to foreclose this possibility.

For scaling-up to continue, it seems important to avoid the

Standing Rock protest, 2016. Photo: Leslie Peterson. License: CC BY-NC 2.0.

temptation to associate this scaling-up with centralization and universalization, bringing it under the banner of an "essential" movement against capital. All of these movements *move* against capital, but they don't all do it the same way and they don't only do that. So, solidarity is not centralization. The thing to *stop* avoiding is a reckoning with the near-total subsumption of art and its vaunted autonomy and emancipatory potential by global capitalism. Because art can be a powerful force for social change in moments like these. This is how and why I conceived of the book as a series of open letters addressed variously and inclusively to artists, activists, and academics (the "A" to whom the letters are addressed). It's more a series of provocations than a totalizing theory or account—or maybe "provocations" is the wrong word: the letters are simply incomplete, partial, in both senses of the word, which is the nature of letters. They're exhortatory, they invite a response, correspondence.

MT: You define autonomy as a "realm of psychic and social creativity, the source of new forms, both aesthetic and political," and you stress Castoriadis's emphasis on autonomy as a "mutually constitutive relationship between individual and collective." An autonomous society, as you describe it, is one that is not heteronomous, one that does not assert hierarchy, autarchy, or conformity. You argue that art has a strong role in the project of autonomy, as it offers both a praxis and a horizon for it.

While there is much conversation about the autonomy of art, many of the examples you give of autonomy are political projects, such as operaismo and autonomia in Italy and tendencies that you address as "Black autonomies of the 1960s and 1970s." You also discuss the Zapatistas (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation), the Occupy movements, and other political projects. These were and are intensely creative movements that do work in the aesthetic sphere where affect is cultivated, but cannot all easily be captured inside the sphere of art. Taking form and affect into account moves us towards a discussion in which we can see various forms of activism in a similar light to artistic research, even if much of this activism is done without the concept of art. Why prioritize art and its autonomy?

JS: That's a great question. My idea with the book was to look at autonomy as a political concept and practice alongside the ways it has been theorized and practiced in

the realm of art and aesthetics in order to try to arrive at a different understanding of autonomy, where politics takes on aesthetic dimensions, as you point out, but artistic practice also takes on political dimensions. And this happens when we think of autonomy as the capacity to create one's own rules or forms, be they artistic or political. So, it's not so much a valorization of a separate sphere for art as it is tracing the movement out from that sphere that is called forth by autonomous politics.

Of course, there are those who would say that the category of art isn't worth holding onto at all, that it's an inherently bourgeois, patriarchal, white-supremacist construct that works in counterrevolutionary ways. And I agree, but only up to a point. I'm critical of the art world and the very concept of an art world, but I teach in an art school and have taught community arts. I live a life surrounded by artists and I myself have a creative as well as a critical writing practice. I'm also an activist and an educator. So, I believe that creativity has different modalities but that these can all feed the wider autonomy project in one way or another, so long as they're not severed from it. It's not the concept of art that captures creative projects, I don't think; it's rather how we're defining art in any given moment. For instance, the modernist notion of separate spheres for art and politics has worked well to sever the creative capacities of the individual from those of the collective.

Like Marcuse, like Castoriadis, I'm interested in the question of when and how art takes on radical political and social meanings, and in what contexts. I don't think this has anything to do with content, and perhaps even more shockingly, I don't think it has anything to do with form alone. It has to do with a new understanding of autonomy that emerges in moments of radical political and social transformation brought on by what Marcuse would call a "Great Refusal," or a revaluation of *all* values, social, political and aesthetic. In these moments, artistic liberation and political liberation work in tandem to interrogate old meanings and create new ones. But not if, as is currently the case, autonomy is understood solely as a modality of liberal individualism, and the individual's capacity to create is entirely disconnected from processes of collective self-transformation. As with all forms of liberal individualism, this upholds the capitalist, superficially democratic organization of our social processes. So I would ask, for instance, not if an abstract painting *is* political, as if that were some essential quality of the painting itself, but *when* it is political, in what context.

An interesting aspect of the movements you cite as having aesthetic dimensions is that they were—and are, in the case of the Zapatistas—very clear themselves that art is central to the flourishing of individual-and-collective self-determination. I think that's because they see art, as Castoriadis did, as linking the radical contents of the individual imagination to the collective imaginary. The Black Power Movement had its counterpart in the Black Arts Movement, the Zapatistas have their "seedbeds," and I make a fairly strong claim in the book that Occupy emerged as much from the imaginations of artists as it did from organizers. So yes, there are moments when the distinctions between art and politics are no longer relevant or helpful and those are the transfiguring moments when a sort of general creativity (Marx would say a general intellect) comes to the fore. But *on the way* to those moments, how does art feed (as opposed to capture) struggle? There is a freedom in art that is potentially transformative, but not if, as Anthony Iles notes in his essay in your collection, that freedom is posed as compensation for a subjectivity canceled elsewhere.

Each of the authors in *The Commonist Horizon* presents specific examples of commoning in their own context, and your definition of commoning is pretty expansive, encompassing not only the taking-back of privatized space for public use, but the creation of autonomous forms of living and organizing with the potential to scale up into solidarity economies. All of the case studies are compelling, but is there one in particular where circumstances and practices conspired to achieve the scale and impact you envision for commoning?

MT: Well, the book does not put forth a singular vision for commoning. In fact, not all of the participants find "commoning" to be a good word for what they do. But I think your question about scale touches on a vital question. Much of what is called commoning is pursued on very small scales and it is often involved in reproducing very small, sometimes even privileged, groups. One theme that emerges through the tensions in the book relates to the question of centralization that you addressed earlier. If self-governance is what we are interested in, how can islands of commons and commoners find ways to cooperate so that they have a chance of survival, or even become significant in the context of the scale of the capitalist organization of the economy and our everyday lives? One of the chapters is a three-way conversation about the small movement to build a solidarity economy in Hungary. In that conversation, Agnes Gagyi argues that while the idea of the commons focuses on how a property or good is collectively owned and managed, the solidarity economy is "a movement to change everything." It is more about expansion: how to "go against the value expansion that subordinates reproduction to capital extraction" and build alternative circuits. This requires scaling up.

I'm very interested in how affect and relationality play a role in solidarity, but at the same time I'm interested in how to scale anti-capitalist/non-capitalist organization if we are no longer talking about entities like the USSR or COMECON (especially since even they couldn't resist the coercion of capitalism). Set against the backdrop of the experiments with state socialism in the region, we are presented with questions of how to develop scale without some of the characteristics of those socialist states (some would say without the state at all). I think (con)federative

Zapatistas Territory sign in Chiapas, Mexico. "You are in Zapatista rebel territory. Here the people rule and the government obeys." License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

models and municipalist formations are quite interesting for this question, and they are kind of hovering, but not explicitly developed, in our book.

But there is another really interesting question to do with scale here, when we think about what is often described as a kind of "artistic research" (but is often done outside the framing of art) in many projects that concern commoning. The pursuit of commoning in the spatiotemporal context of an artwork or art practice can act as an experiment (or series of experiments) or pedagogy. But there is often a certain kind of triumphalism about what is achieved in these artworks and practices without much attention to how these relations and forms could be implemented in the everyday, where their success is affected by the scale of capital's organization of our lives. I am inspired by a dialectical approach in which these experiments inform each other, but I tend to think the capture of such practices in or as "art" often limits this. There is a temporal aspect here that comes to light when we look at praxis as research and practice over time-—when we don't get captured by project thinking.

One of the things that animates both of our political work as well as the texts we are discussing is the difference between institutions and instituting. You mention this in regard to Castoriadis, and it also shows up in our book during a discussion of Félix Guattari's work. Could you speak to this dynamic of institutions and instituting as it relates to some of the examples you give in your book?

JS: This is an aspect of Castoriadis's thought that I find very compelling. We are born into a society that is already instituted, he tells us, and unless that society is fully autonomous, the horizon of possibility seems to be given. In other words, its laws and forms already fixed. But in fact,

the horizon of possibility is never fixed, since society is not just inherited but is also an ongoing creation. Because of this, new institutions are constantly forming—specific institutions within society and the institution of society as a whole. Castoriadis defines the word "institution" broadly, to include "norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things."[3] Notably, he also looks upon the individual as an institution as well, both in general and in the particular type and form given to it, including differentiations such as gender. He doesn't fool himself into thinking that we can just create an entirely new society out of nothing, but he does believe that through a process of radical questioning and creation we can always do something else with the materials we're given, repurposing them. I think this is an important dimension of commoning and other forms of autonomous practice, the awareness (insistence even) that instituting is ongoing and not something that happens once and for all—the understanding that we are continually coming together in creative ways, though not under circumstances of our choosing. One of the things I found inspiring when looking through Castoriadis's lens is that one suddenly finds a better understanding of all of the "alternative" institutions that popped up in huge numbers in the sixties and seventies—social centers, journals, artist-run spaces, radical bookstores, communes, communal houses, squats—as people became attuned to this power of making, which is the wellspring of radical democracy.

A number of authors in your collection are radical urbanists and the city is central to their understanding of solidarity economies. It seems to be the place where small-scale solidarity economies scale up into larger ones. The city is also a site for building dual power in these accounts, by which I mean there are possibilities for accessing state funding at a localized level of government without relinquishing autonomy. But commoning also has a connection to the land and to rurality. Could you talk about how the city and the country figure in these accounts, particularly for those coming out of Eastern Europe?

MT: The authors in this book all speak from their experiences of movement work in cities. But the subtitle, "Beyond Capitalist Urbanization," not only acknowledges the relationship of cities to the countryside but also recognizes, along with thinkers like Murray Bookchin, that urbanization as a process transforms rural areas and life as well. In the book there are only small gestures toward the rural. The Solidarity Economy Center in Budapest, for example, operates mainly in the city but hopes to be able to develop its work in the countryside and with rural folks. We asked someone to write a text comparing the cooperative movement in Poland today with the one in the early twentieth century, but it didn't work out. In conversations about this movement, I found it interesting to hear some people express more interest in how consumer cooperatives could serve "urban commoners" than in how they could serve the farmers providing the produce themselves. The countries of Eastern Europe were largely agricultural when they entered state socialism and were less so by the end. This is despite the fact that they relied heavily on agricultural production to subsidize the development of industry, both through sales and through provision by agricultural producers to their families and friends. You could say that the so-called "agrarian question" looms large in the cities of the region.

In the chapter written from NYC, a picture of the bioregion is invoked. In that vision, we can see community gardens around the city as well community-supported agriculture projects that bring folks in the city into relation with farmers in the region. This happens in a pretty ad-hoc manner and is mostly not "ideological" but rather "practical" work, yet people also have visions in mind. Perhaps the advantage to having centers dedicated to participating in solidarity economies is that they can do some of the work of connection. There is a lot of focus on the positive elements of small-scale production and "subsistence"-scale agricultural production in commons literature. It is quite a different approach to socialist projects that aped large-scale capitalist production. In other words, the urban focus of *The Commonist Horizon* is by no means an argument that the city is more conducive to commoning, although some authors elsewhere-—for example Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey after him—have argued that the city is and has been especially ripe for revolution.

In addition to solidarity economies, we also gesture towards territory as a scale beyond discrete commons, looking to the Zapatistas in Chiapas as an example. In the last letter in your book you describe being startled to learn in 2019 from a Zapatista communiqué that they had scaled up their autonomous regions "from five original Centres of Autonomous Resistance and Rebellion to twelve." You explain that the communiqué also emphasizes the necessity to, as you write "grow our autonomies within the context of an international network of rebellion and resistance." So I guess what I think becomes visible in our book is both the variation in what we have proposed as commoning on different scales, and the question of the networking that allows them to relate and scale.

But the project of autonomy, as you approach it, is not just concerned with questions around controlling space, territory, and resources. It is also about the collective subject. In the fourteenth letter, you explore the way hashtags such as #BLM and #MeToo activate both a singularity and a collectivity. I was particularly inspired by your discussion of the "body politic" as expressed through marchers invoking the last words and/or movements of men gunned down by police (Eric Garner: "I can't breathe"; Mike Brown: "Hands up, Don't Shoot"; taking a knee in reference to George Floyd's murder). You point out that the term "emotion" was once used to refer to riots, and you connect this affective character of "body rhetoric" to

At the first meeting of the Anti-Ghetto Committee on February 2, 1989 in Miskolc, Hungary. János Ladányi, Dezső Szegedi, György Diósi, Mária Horváth, and Béla Osztojkán. Photo: László Bárdos Bódi.

occupations, blockades, and finally the commune. To me this points to other aspects of scale and spatiality as well. Can you talk about how you see the Black Lives Matter movement as an entirely new mode of institution even as it draws/builds on longstanding organizations?

JS: I was drawing there on Joshua Clover's analysis of riots as the experience of surplus: "surplus danger, surplus information, surplus military gear, surplus emotion"-—that which cannot be contained by existing structures.[4] He notes that the French word for riot, "*émuete*," is in fact the same as for emotion. But his materialist analysis of the riot understands it as one element in a larger category he calls "circulation struggles," which also includes the occupation, the blockade, and the commune, all of which throw a wrench into the smooth operations of capital. You could say that there's a reticular formation at work in these kinds of political struggles and strategies, similar to the one you've identified in the process of creating solidarity economies. They scale up by scaling across.

Going back to the question of instituting versus instituted society, you bring out an important distinction that Castoriadis makes between specific institutions and what he calls a "new *mode* of instituting and a new relation of society and of individuals to the institution."[5] Black Lives Matter offered up a new mode of instituting, I would argue, through the hashtag linking individual and collective liberation, the use of new video and sharing technologies that called for a response, the imbrication of those technologies with bodies on the street, and also through a new deployment of affect, specifically the affect of mourning. What was understood as political, and what it means to engage politically, were transformed by this process, which circulated on an unprecedented scale the radical demand that Black lives be made to matter. Radical because if met, all of our institutions predicated on the opposite assumption—all of the institutions that make up racial capitalism—would have to change or disappear outright. Whether this radical demand has been or can be met is obviously an open question, but it has moved through society and culture in powerful ways.

Certainly, BLM was building on previous modes of protest, resistance, and organization, even going so far as to

recreate the Freedom Rides of the Civil Rights Era to support uprisings in various cities. But more generally, it built on a Black radical tradition of approaching social and political organization as creative acts and self-organization as a basis for revolutionary solidarity. I think we have an enormous amount to learn from this. As Robin D. G. Kelley says, social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, and new questions. And as I mentioned before, I think it's a mistake to try to subsume these new questions—such as how did BLM (the mode of instituting, not the organization) get so many people from so many different backgrounds to *move* while remaining wholly focused on the Black liberation struggle?—under the old paradigm of revolution grounded in the institution of the universal subject.

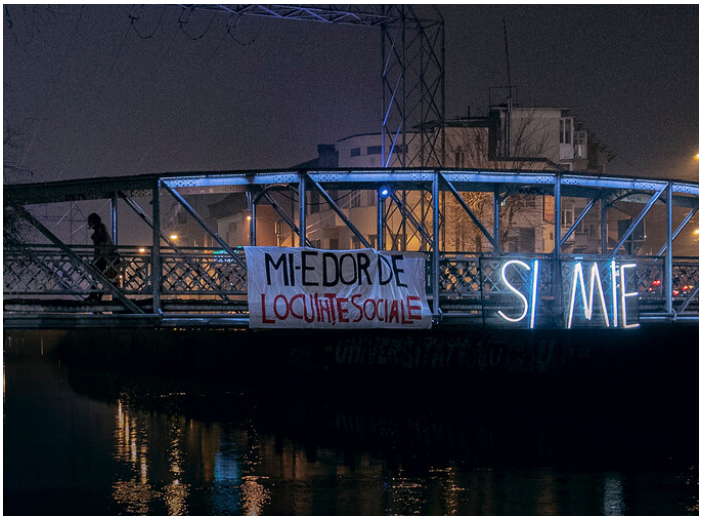
I think all of the chapters in *The Commonist Horizon* engage with housing in one form or another: what to do with state-owned housing stock or "social property" in the wake of state socialism; the creation of housing cooperatives; the commoning dimensions of the anti-eviction movement under Covid and the various anti-gentrification movements; the role of art and culture in the commodification of neighborhoods; the process of regeneration in former socialist nations, which smooths a path for capitalist investment. What do you think housing activists in the West can learn from those in Eastern Europe?

MT: I think there are a number of lessons. A positive aspect of state socialism was the high percentage of people who were housed. The right to housing was codified, although not always met. The chapter by Ana Vilenica deals with this in the Yugoslav case (focusing on Serbia). Looking at the longer history of racialized and gendered aspects of access to housing, she argues that there is nevertheless a lot to be learned from socialist Yugoslavia's attempt to provide housing.

What's interesting about the moment of so-called "transition" (from communism to capitalism) was that most of the governments were aware of how crucial access to housing was. Many privatization laws prioritized tenants in the sense that they were often given the first option to buy their current domiciles at below-market rates. While this ended up having a class character (people who had better apartments got to buy them, and those who had more income or were well connected were more likely to be able to gather the funds), it did result in very high homeownership numbers in the region as a whole, which persists today. But the former socialist states did not impose limits on speculation. Access to housing has become difficult and expensive for people who do not own, while there is growing pressure on owners who do not have the liquidity to pay bills and who end up in debt, which is ultimately the path to losing their homes.

So actually the lesson on housing from the postsocialist East is that the state can be a quite effective actor in housing provision and security, and it can be effective in determining a lack of those things.

We can learn a lot from some of the housing movements in the region. In Budapest, people who were part of a housing movement called The City Is for All now serve in one of the district-level city halls and are learning how difficult it is to work on that side of the curtain (especially with limited funds resulting not just from neoliberal austerity but also from the rightist government's strategy to starve out progressive municipal governments). The Common Front for Housing in Romania is a very important movement that is dedicated to solidarity action and self-organization while doing research and developing a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which the transition to capitalist property values has been key to housing dispossession. And in Lviv, Ukraine, social-movement actors concerned with the housing crisis exacerbated by the war are trying to envision a postwar housing policy that takes this regional movement-based knowledge into account. Ana Vilenica's chapter details some of the conditions and struggles around housing in Serbia, including the movement Roof Over Our Head. The internationalist news media network ELMO (Eastern European Left Media Outlet) curated a great series of articles on housing that can be read in eight languages.[6]



"I miss social housing," "Me too." Elisabeta bridge, Cluj, Romania. Source: Căși Sociale ACUM!

An important lesson from comrade groups in the region is that not everything that is good comes from the West (and not everything from the West is good!). Folks have been doing really important research on the history of social movements in the region that has the important effect of overcoming the idea that the region is backwards, a trope that became dominant (again) at the end of the Cold War. The dominant narrative, which Ana Vilenica calls the "transitional narrative," is that state socialism was Eastern and backwards, and Western liberal capitalism is the only

solution. But the movements Vilenica describes challenge that—not by rejecting lessons that may be learned from Western movements, but by excavating the histories of struggle at home and by paying attention to movements in other places. An example is the research that a housing cooperative group in Hungary did on co-ops in Uruguay. This kind of militant research has created a deeply nuanced picture of the many experiments under state socialism and the conditions out of which they emerged. As Agnes Gagyi and Zsuzsi Posfai point out in the book, Eastern Europe has a lot more in common with the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the Global South than with Western Europe, in terms of the world capitalist system and its uneven development.

Your letter "Autonomy, Meet Autonomy: On Art, Gentrification and Refusal" links this topic of housing with a number of the things we've discussed above, regarding the autonomy of art, autonomous movements, institutions, and instituting. It also speaks interestingly to the struggles around "regeneration" in Vilnius, discussed by the Naujininkai Commons Collective in our closing chapter. Can you tell us a little about the struggles that took place in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles in 2016 and 2017? It's a case that brings the questions and concerns in the two books together nicely.

JS: There was so much in your collection that stimulated my thinking around these issues and opened new perspectives on the housing question, especially those Eastern European histories I was unfamiliar with. And of course Anthony's essay that I mentioned looks specifically at art and gentrification. In *Letters* I do a sort of case study of the Boyle Heights conflict, which was personal for me, as I knew people on both sides. Boyle Heights is a working-class Latinx neighborhood on the east side of Los Angeles—once a thriving industrial zone with many now-empty, huge warehouses and cold-storage units. In 2016, a slew of galleries began moving into those spaces, and the gentrification process that we're all familiar with began to unspool. But I guess unfortunately for them, they had moved into a community where there had been very strong and effective autonomous organizing for many years by the residents—many of whom had lost their jobs in those facilities—to keep their rents affordable and their neighborhood livable. You had, for instance, the Comite Pro Paz, started by mothers in the community, as well as the Union de Vecinos, which had fought to prevent the demolition of the Pico-Aliso Housing Projects, and you had the artivist collective Ultra Red, among others.

So when the galleries moved in, these activists from the community pushed back. And in fact, as I talk about in the book, they eventually pushed all those galleries out, which is not how these things usually go. But the two spaces looked at closely in the letter were artist-run spaces. And I asked, could they have done things differently? Beginning with knowing the community they were moving into, and being aware of the gentrification processes that they might kickstart, how might they have created a different kind of institution or mode of instituting in that context? Boyle Heights was really a crucible for one of the main questions I'm asking, which is: What would it mean to position the autonomy of art and art institutions in alignment with, rather than in opposition to, autonomous politics? What would it mean to take seriously Castoriadis's notion that art only exists by questioning meaning as it is each time established, and by creating other forms for it? What would it mean to extend that to the meaning and mutability of art institutions, the places where art is made, distributed, and received? Here again, autonomy is not about separation or non-relation, but about the capacity to transform.

X

Mary N. Taylor is a founding member of the LeftEast collective, and a member of Know Waste Lands Garden in Bushwick Brooklyn. She has taken part in struggles for housing in NYC. A former student and current employee of City University of New York, she strives toward its realization as a tuition-free and liberated university. *The Commonist Horizon: Futures Beyond Capitalist Urbanization*(Common Notions 2021), coedited with Noah Brehmer, is one embodiment of her ongoing militant research into the dialectic of internationalist solidarity and radically local movement.

Janet Sarbanes is the author of a book of essays, *Letters on the Autonomy Project*, and the short story collections *Army of One* and *The Protester Has Been Released*. An Andy Warhol Foundation art writer's grant recipient, she has published art criticism and other critical writing in museum catalogs, anthologies, and journals. Her essay on Shaker aesthetics and utopian communalism received the Eugenio Battisti prize from the Society for Utopian Studies. She teaches in the MA in Aesthetics and Politics and the MFA Creative Writing programs at CalArts.

1
Janes Sarbanes, *Letters on the Autonomy Project* (Punctum Books, 2022); *The Commonist Horizon: Futures Beyond Capitalist Urbanization* , ed. Mary N. Taylor and Noah Brehmer (Common Notions, 2023).

2
See https://peripheralizingeurope.wordpress.com/ .

3
Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Imaginary: Creation in the Socio-Historical Domain," in *World in Fragments* : *Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* , ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford University Press, 1997) 6.

4
Joshua Clover, *Riot, Strike, Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (Verso, 2016), 1.

5
Cornelius *Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society* , trans. Kathleen Blamey (MIT Press, 1998), 363 .

6
See https://lefteast.org/category/all-posts/elmo-series-cee-housing-movements-resisting-neoliberal-urban-transformations/ .

Hugo García Manríquez

from Commonplace

1/

When the poem intonates aspects, from ones
gathered together, and others, kept apart
in truth it intonates 45 pickup trucks
equipped with x-rays for the SSP
intonates in truth 43 ion scanners
for SEDENA, 155 CT-30 detection kits

The poem intonates unmanned aircraft
Mi-17 helicopters, as well as armored
vehicles, motorbikes
command posts, and amphibious vehicles applied
to public security tasks

The poem intonates 173 dogs
trained for the SAT, PGR, and SSP

Nowhere do you read *The world that produced me*

Nothing about the 173 dogs

[center]***

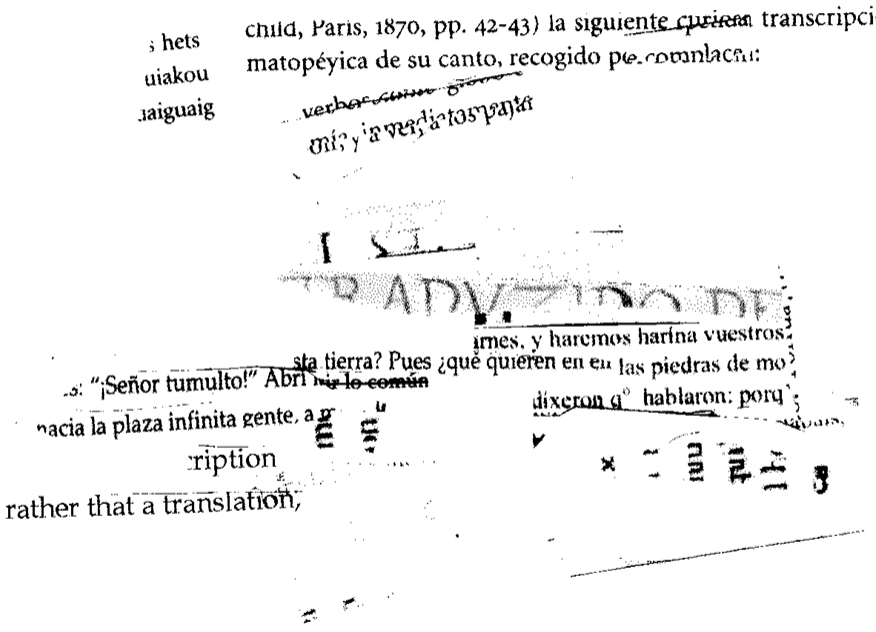
When we read literature
we read the budget
of the Mexican army

When we perceive artworks
we percieve the budget
of the Mexican army

[center]***

If some element of the structure
does not fulfill criteria of resistance
new articulations
are inserted
with constant moments

With constant moments



Hugo Garcia, Lo Comun Collage.

such as the company Colt Defense
and its thousand 5.56mm rifles
for the use of state forces

With constant moments
such as the company Sig Sauer
that delivered 7,384 firearms to Mexico
In 2015: 3,060 assault rifles, 505
machine guns and 3,819
pistols. Other similar companies have done
business with Mexico

With constant moments, sculpted
by the Glock company

[center]***

Constant moments
sculpted by a series

of semiautomatic weapons
designed and produced
by the manufacturer Glock Ges.m.b.H
of Deutsch-Wagram, Austria

With 11,231 constant moments
designed, produced, and sold
to the Secretary of National Defense
for another 3 million dollars

With constant moments like the howler
monkey (*Alouatta palliata*) with its oral
apparatus specialized with its hyoid bones
and developed larynx

forming with the mandible a resonating chamber
that allows the powerful amplification of
the sounds, aspects gathered together
aspects kept apart

[center]***

Constant moments like the white-tailed
deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
that marks its territory by rubbing
objects gathered together and kept apart
with its preorbital, tarsal, and interdigital glands

With constant moments like
the volcano rabbit (*Romerolagus diazi*)
with its greyish belly that communicates with
others through a scent secreted

by its glands, in aspects
gathered together and aspects kept apart

Constant moments like
the creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*)
with solitary yellow-colored flowers

and whose leaves divide into others
even smaller with a similar aspect to leather

and appear as if covered in tiny hairs and resin
covered in aspects gathered together and aspects kept
apart

4/

The Palacio de Bellas Artes was officially
inaugurated on September 29th, 1934

with the theatrical work *La verdad sospechosa*
by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón

The circular lamp in the ceiling of the principal
salon designed by the Hungarian Géza Maróti

represents the Greek god Apollo and is surrounded
by the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk
designed for assault, escorting convoys, and
reconnaissance

The circular lamp is encircled
by the importation of arms

by Mexico which increased 300%
in the period 2011–2015

The circular lamp is encircled
by the 212,208 SEDENA troops

and is surrounded by 18 EC725
Super Cougar helicopters

[center]***

with a value of 27.5 million Euros, some 600
million pesos

The circular lamp is indistinguishable from the
695 armoured combat vehicles
and the 362 aircraft and the 143 watercraft

[center]***

When writing, we do not romantically confront the blank
page

Rather, the confrontation is historical:

: take the side of Sigüenza y Góngora
and protect the Library from the masses
as Mexican letters have done
for centuries

: take the side of lifeforms
the side of the forms of language
that sprout from the riot

[center]***

Beside history
Our own indexicality

1/

Cuando el poema entona aspectos, de unos
y otros, reunidos, separados
en verdad entona 45 camionetas
equipadas con rayos X para la SSP
entona en verdad 43 escáneres de iones
para la SEDENA, 155 kits de detección CT-30

El poema entona aviones no tripulados
helicópteros Mi-17, así como vehículos
blindados, motocicletas
puestos de mando y vehículos anfibios aplicados
a tareas de seguridad pública

El poema entona 173 perros
adiestrados para la SAT, la PGR y la SSP

En ningún lugar lees *El mundo que me produjo*

Nada sobre los 173 perros

[center]***

Cuando leemos literatura
leemos el presupuesto
del ejército mexicano

Cuando percibimos artefactos
artísticos percibimos el presupuesto
del ejército mexicano

[center]***

Si algún elemento de la estructura
no cumple criterios de resistencia
son insertadas
nuevas articulaciones
con momentos constantes

Con momentos constantes
como la empresa Colt Defense
y sus mil rifles de 5.56mm
para el uso de fuerzas estatales

Con momentos constantes
such as the company Sig Sauer
que entregó 7,384 armas de fuego a México
en 2015: 3,060 rifles de asalto, 505
ametralladores y 3,819
pistolas. Otras empresas similares han hecho
negocios con México

Con momentos constantes, esculpidos
por la compañía Glock

[center]***

Momentos constantes
esculpidos por una serie
de armas semiautomáticas
diseñadas y producidas
por el fabricante Glock Ges.m.b.H.
de Deutsch-Wagram, Austria

Con 11,231 momentos constantes
diseñados, producidos y vendidos
a la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional
por otros 3 millones de dólares

Con momentos constantes como el mono
aullador (*Alouatta palliata*) con su aparato
bucal especializado con su hueso hioides
y su laringe desarrolladas

formando con la mandíbula una caja de resonancia
que le permite amplificar poderosamente
los sonidos, los aspectos reunidoslos
aspectos separados

[center]***

Momentos constantes como el venado
cola blanca (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
que marca su territorio frotando
con objetos reunidos y separados
sus glándulas preorbitales, tarsales e interdigitales

Con momentos constantes como
el conejo de los volcanes (*Romerolagus diazi*)
con su vientre grisáceo que se comunica con
otros a través del olor segregado

por sus glándulas, en aspectos
reunidos y aspectos separados

Momentos constantes como
el arbusto de gobernadora (*Larrea tridentata*)
de flores solitarias de color amarillo

y cuyas hojas se dividen en otras
más pequeñas de aspecto similar al cuero

y aparecen recubiertas de pelillos y resina
recubiertas de aspectos reunidos y aspectos separados

4/

El Palacio de Bellas Artes fue inaugurado
de forma oficial el 29 de septiembre de 1934

con la obra teatral *La verdad sospechosa*
de Juan Ruiz de Alarcón

La lámpara circular en el techo de la sala
principal diseñada por el húngaro Géza Maróti

representa al dios griego Apolo y está rodeada
por el Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk
para ataque, escolta y reconocimiento

La lámpara circular está rodeada
por las importaciones de armamento

de México que crecieron un 300%
en el período 2011–2015

La lámpara circular está rodeada
por los 212,208 efectivos de SEDENA

y está rodeada por los 18 helicópteros
EC725 Super Cougar

[center]***

con valor de 27.5 milliones de euros, unos 600
millones de pesos

La lámpara circular es indistinguible de los
695 vehículos blindados de combate
y las 362 aeronaves y los 143 buques

[center]***

Al escribir, no nos enfrentamos
románticamente con la hoja en blanco

El enfrentamiento es más
bien histórico:

: tomar el lado de Sigüenza y Góngora
y proteger de la muchedumbre a la Biblioteca
como por siglos han hecho las letras
mexicanas

: tomar el lado de las formas de vida
el lado de las formas del lenguaje que
brotan del motín

[center]***

Al lado la historia
Nuestra propia indexicalidad

X

Translated from the Spanish by NAFTA. The North American Free Translation Agreement/No America Fraught Translation Argument (NAFTA), ratified in 2019, currently consists of three poets writing from the occupied territories of Canada, Mexico, and the United States: Whitney Celeste DeVos, Zane Koss, and Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz.

The poems appear courtesy of the author and Cardboard House Press. They originally appeared in *Commonplace* (Cardboard House Press, 2022).

Hugo García Manríquez is a poet and translator based in Oakland, California. His most recent full-length collections are *Commonplace / Lo Común* (Cardboard House Press, 2022) *Anti-Humboldt, A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement* (Litmus Press/Aldus Editorial, 2015), and *Lo común* (Meldadora, 2018). He has translated George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*, Williams's *Paterson*, and more recently, *After Lorca y otros poemas*(Universidad Iberoamericana/ Matadero, 2022), an anthology of Jack Spicer's work, as well as a collection of essays and poems by Sean Bonney, *El lenguaje de las barricadas* (Commune Editions/Tripwire/Matadero, 2021).

Liam Gillick and Jörg Heiser in conversation

The Evasive Potentials of Contemporary Art

Liam Gillick's intervention in the permanent collection of Berlin's Museum of the Ancient Near East, titled *Filtered Time*, opened to the public in April 2023. Using light, color, shape, projection, sound, and almost no text, his intervention comes at a time when the Pergamon Museum, in which this collection is housed, is projected to close at the end of 2023. In March it was announced that the entire building would not only have to close for four years to await the delayed reopening of the classical winig, but that the completion of the overall renovation wouldn't be finished until 2037, at a cost that might run up to €1.2 billion.

The Pergamon is a neoclassical building that first opened in 1930. It houses the so-called Collection of Classical Antiquities, including the monumental Pergamon Altar, as well as the Museum for Islamic Art and the Museum of the Ancient Near East. The latter includes the Babylonian Ishtar Gate, another monumental reconstruction based on excavations made by German archeologists in the period of the German Reich's alliance with the Ottoman Empire from the 1880s to World War I.

Gillick agreed to realize his project amidst difficult debates about how to deal with these buildings and the fraught colonial histories they house. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

—Jörg Heiser

***

Jörg Heiser: Can you talk about the invitation you received to intervene in the permanent collection of the Museum of the Ancient Near East?

Liam Gillick: The invitation included secret information that the building would close after the project, at the end of 2023. But then I was told that it might stay open after all. So it wasn't clear. The invitation also related to a lot of new research on the original coloring of the artifacts, and that they were looking for someone who could think about color. The archeologist Shiyanthi Thavapalan has written a number of papers that question dominant ideas about language and color in Mesopotamia, and I had already read these because of my involvement in the 2022 show "Color Is Program" at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, which was also another example of trying to work with people within an institution.

JH: And a German institution, at that.

LG: I think the invitation came because it was already evident that I'm capable of surviving one or two years' work with a German institution and their strange rules, self-imposed restrictions, and cultural obligations. None of that really bothers me, but I said almost immediately, I can't do this if it will be focused on the artifacts, but I can do it if we're thinking a lot more about the place. That said,

Liam Gillick, Filtered Time, 2023. Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

I immediately got hold of the plans from when the Pergamon Museum was first conceived, in 1910, and made a model. Only the plans turned out to be wrong, because so many details changed when the building was rebuilt after World War II. And if good drawings were made of the repairs then I don't know where they are and I had no access to information about the wiring of the building or the internal structure of the walls. The invitation came from the director of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Dr. Barbara Helwing. It was decided early on that we might need the support of a contemporary art institution, so Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath from the Hamburger Bahnhof, National Gallery for Contemporary Art became the collaborative institutional partners.

JH: There's a big controversy in Germany now about the renovation and expansion of the building, according to plans made by architect Oswald Mathias Ungers before his death in 2007. The museum is scheduled to close to the public for at least three-and-a-half years, and the entire building won't be finished until 2037, at the earliest.

LG: I'm sure if Ungers was still alive, he would have changed the plans, which involve complicated reconstructions to allow for a "quick tour"…

JH: … right, based on 1970s ideas initially Who conceived of these tours? projected Projected for the Vatican and the Louvre, by the then directorships of these museums for quick tours for tourists of the Vatican and the Louvre, which were later abandoned. In any case, it seems a colossal and costly mess.

LG: There were at least four architects engaged with the Vorderasiatisches Museum throughout history: there were the first plans by Alfred Messel, finished by Ludwig Hoffmann after Messel's death in 1909; then there was Ungers, whose plans are now continued by others; and the first director of the Pergamon Museum's Vorderasiatisches section when it opened in 1930, Walter Andrae, was also an architect. He followed the model of German contextual archeology, which is to mark out the urban plan of Babylon and then collect fragments of that. They have more bricks in their collection, I think, than anyone else, which is really perverse and wonderful. So you go to the storage, and there's just thousands of bricks.

JH: But then again, isn't it weird that, as far as I know, no

less than 80 percent of the glazed bricks on display were made in the Berlin region?

LG: Yes, and what I find interesting—as someone who grew up in a barely understood postmodern sweep, which was very exciting to me, and still affects me—is the fact that you're already looking at a confection. And it continues to this day: they're still perfecting how to create the appearance of something. This surrounds *some* fragments.

JH: As you mentioned, most of the German archaeologists involved in the excavations of 1904 to 1914 at the Babylon site, what is today Hillah in Iraq, were architects.

Excavations of the Babylon site resumed after the end of World War I.

LG: They called themselves *Ausgräber* or "excavators." And Andrae's 1961 autobiography was called *Memoirs of an Excavator.* It is a rather more direct and straightforward word than "archaeologist."

JH: This also points to the fact that you were aware that you were getting yourself into a thicket of fraught history: of colonial extraction, of neocolonial wars. In 2003, in the wake of the US invasion, the Baghdad Museum was looted, and then in 2015, ISIS destroyed numerous sites, including the Mosul Nimrod site.

LG: They engaged in a consistent program of destroying idols, as we did in Europe and elsewhere during the Reformation, especially in England. It marks my upbringing, the lack of images. But one of the most destructive acts was the Americans building a helicopter base on top of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which is an extraordinary act of cultural vandalism and indifference.

JH: Clearly you've done a lot of research, but interestingly, there's very little text in your intervention. Can you talk about this choice?

LG: I thought about using a lot of didactic stuff, and then I felt distinctly that it's not my moment to speak. I can point and allude to things, highlight things, maybe confuse the tour of the building a little bit by slowing people down, making things look better or worse in the light.

JH: The initial deals regarding the Pergamon Altar and the Ishtar Gate were struck in the context of an alliance between the German emperor and the Ottoman sultan in the 1880s and the early twentieth century respectively. Pergamon 1880s, Ishtar 1910s respectively. In regard to the Pergamon, the agreement was that one third of the findings would remain with the owner of the land, one third would remain with the Germans, and one third would remain with the sultan—and then the Germans managed to secure the land and to negotiate a swap with the sultan. As for the Ishtar Gate, a first substantial part was brought to Berlin after negotiations with the Ottoman antiquity authorities in Constantinople in 1904 and a second part in 1926, after a similar negotiation with the Bagdad Museum. So in the end, they got more or less everything.

LG: A couple of people at the museum said to me, well there *are* contracts. I couldn't tell whether they meant it seriously or ironically … but the thing that you hear the most in relation to the history and scientific judgment is, quite correctly, "We don't really know."

I believe that the question of restitution is both more simple and more complicated than it appears to be. Some things in Western museums are not what they seem to be: the Ishtar Gate, for example. And other things are clearly what they seem to be: they're from somewhere else. The German model for these institutions is much more like a university than the museums we are used to dealing with as contemporary artists. There is a scientific, not indifferent, feeling that, well, this is history. And the people working here have more in common with the archaeologists and researchers in Turkey, Iraq, or Syria than they do with me.

Having said that, the Pergamon is a place that has been adjusted and fixed up every now and then in order to endure, and it has symbolic power that's used politically. And the Ungers reconstruction would be the final erasure of all that complex layering, at least aesthetically.

JH: In the museum you also encounter a history of opaqueness, obscurity, and didacticism. So you have new wall panels that are in German, English, Turkish, and Arabic, providing information about how some of these artifacts got to be there. And then you have other wall panels, which are only in German and English, which briefly describe what you see in aesthetic terms. And then there are other artifacts that don't have any description at all. And you're left to your own devices, which are, for a layman like myself, rather scattered or fractured.

LG: I had written short, unauthored texts about every room for the book Is this a book published by the museum on occasion of your intervention? accompanying the

intervention. And it was only the day before the opening that they suddenly thought about putting those texts on the wall. But they don't have a system for this; it's not consistent: the information is not in Kurdish or any of the other languages spoken in the region. I find that to be significant coming from our Who do you mean by our here? position, where we've spent the last twenty years thinking about art as research; art as the exhibition as a form; the question of didactics; the documentary turn. But I thought, I'm just going to let go of the question of texts initially because it suits my interests, rather than trying to tell everyone what's going on.

JH: At the German Pavilion in 2009 you took the leaflet for the visitors, the didactic element so to speak, and stuffed it in the mouth of the animatronic cat that was part of your installation. Which is a gesture about this question of didactics, and what is communicated.

LG: I told the guards and the guides at the Pergamon to follow the principle of the museum, which is to be indifferent to what I've done, to pretend it's not there. And they were very anxious about the reaction from the public. But I was convinced that there wouldn't be one, because most of the visitors have never been before: they wouldn't know what else to expect.

JH: In other words, many might take your interventions with light, color, shape, projection, sound, and almost no text as something that is simply part of the general display.

LG: In a contemporary art space, visitors are preoccupied by the question of how an object is changed by its entry into that context. Here, it's different: you can see that people have decided they're going to educate themselves. This means there are profound differences in the way people behave in this building compared to the way they would behave in a contemporary art space. I was very aware of this. That's why the exhibition map that I put up is the wrong way round. It's from an early exhibition tour plan that I found in storage, a recommended route, which is completely bonkers and involves a lot of doubling back through spaces. So I just made it more useless.

JH: The first of your interventions that the visitor encounters is an eighth-century-BCE statue of Hadad, the Mesopotamian weather god, which is a huge outdoor stone sculpture. You decided to do something that immediately made me think of films, or more precisely horror films. You have projected blue eyes onto the sculpture. Apparently, there were originally objects there, perhaps jewels. And there are ominous sounds, of shipyards or industrial spaces. And the processional street that starts there, leading to the Ishtar Gate, has a very filmic quality.

LG: There's a room (Room 12) where I project the original ink and watercolor sketches that were done under the instruction of Walter Andrae. They look like film or theater storyboards, to test out various constellations for the rooms and the organizational principles. And these are from the 1920s and early 1930s, when Siegfried Kracauer was writing about film and Gabriella Tergit was writing about Berlin. All of that was part of the same continuum of a kind of business of serious-minded entertainment. They bought lots of stuff for the Pergamon from the Crystal Palace in London when it went bankrupt in 1911, because they had already built an Assyrian palace there. And everyone would have been aware that they were making an experience, that it was staged.

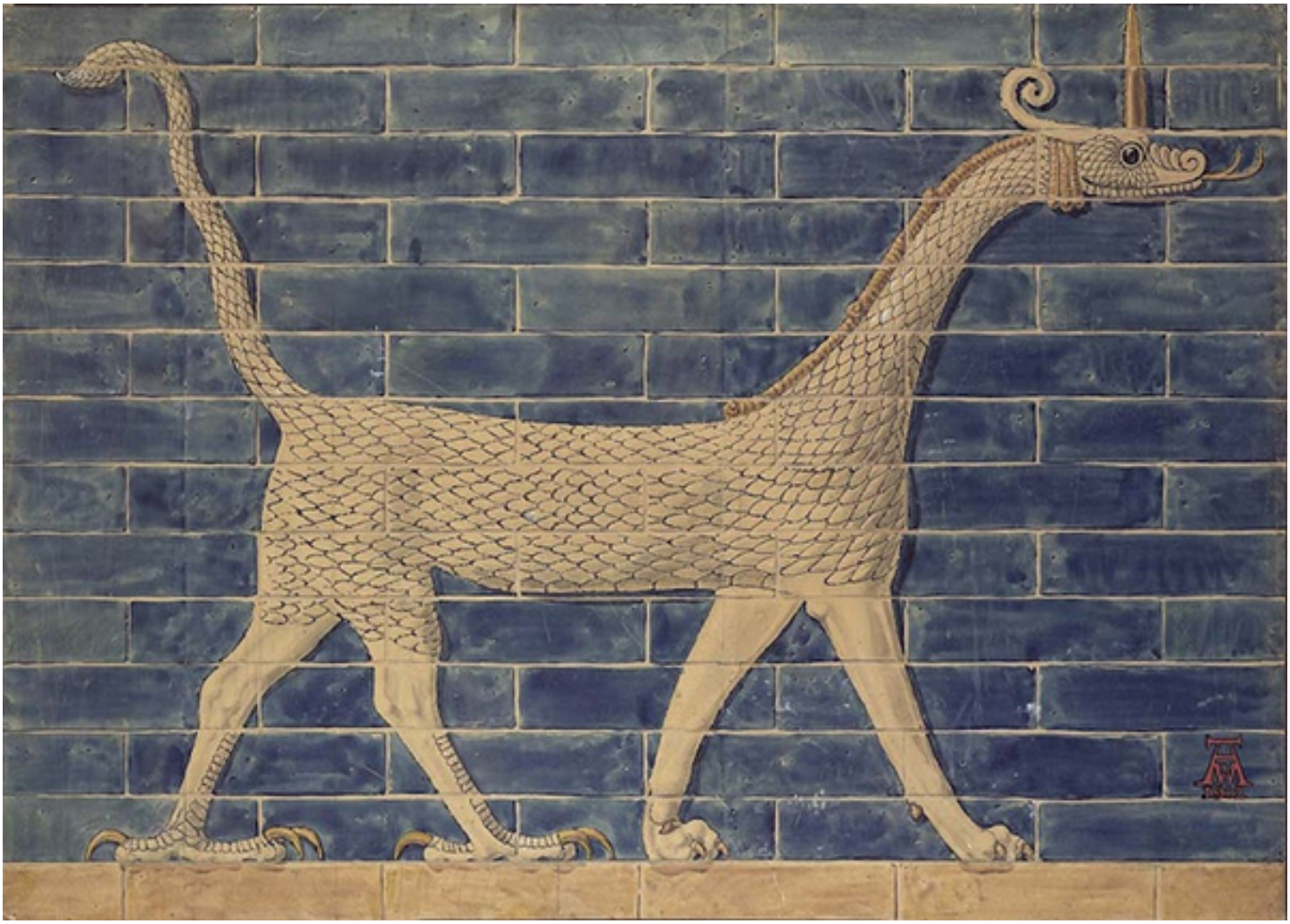
JH: They wanted the impression of an entire architectural setting rather than of an assembly of singular objects.

LG: I'm convinced that Walter Andrae—as an anthroposophist, an adherent and follower of Rudolf Steiner—was also hoping to reach this kind of astral plane where you could see all the future and all the past. He was envisioning the Ishtar Gate as a means to spiritually prepare the young. The original drawings reveal that it would have felt much more modern in the 1920s than it does today.

JH: And also even more cinematic? It was the great era of the German movie industry, from Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933). But the Hadad sculpture with the glowing eyes also made me think of *The Exorcist* (1973), which has this bizarre opening scene set at an excavation site in Hatra, Iraq. There is a life-size sculpture of the Mesopotamian demon Pazuzu. It's a premonition of the demon taking hold of the girl Regan. It's like an explicit version of the central trope of othering, characteristic of the entire horror movie genre—the idea of the demonic evil as the outside other that invades you, a kind of projection or reversal externalizing the colonial guilt. Was this cinematic aspect on your mind?

LG: As soon as I abandoned the idea of using text, I had to think, what have I got? I found out early on that one of the people on the technical team, Tomas Thomas, had worked on a number of German films and television series as a lighting assistant. And Hadad was the very first thing we did. I wanted it to have eyes, and I wanted it to constantly be in motion. We did it quickly and roughly. It felt very much like cinema. And that's the approach I used after that, because I realized that it works.

The cinematic aspect also comes to the fore in the monumental early 1930s paintings above the exhibits. These paintings—which are not recreations of what it would have looked like in Babylon, but of the archaeological sites at the time—depicted as extraordinarily desolate spaces, empty of people. And



Walter Andrae, reconstruction of bricks with a mushussu (dragon) from the Ishtar Gate, 1902. Watercolor and graphite on board. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum. Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer.

these paintings are combined with dramatic stagings reconstructed out of fragments. All of that served to spiritually prepare visitors to encounter the Ishtar Gate—visitors who might have just been at the shopping arcades in nearby Friedrichstrasse.

JH: The central path through the museum leading to the Ishtar Gate consists of a base of glazed bricks with motifs of lions and flowers in mostly blue, orange, and turquoise. Then there is a kind of beige abstraction of a higher wall and then the castellated top, again with the richly colored ceramics. Going across the abstracted part is a searchlight, which recalls a prison or flak searchlight, something menacing in any case. And it immediately draws the eye. At the Ishtar Gate itself you installed a continuous hammering sound, as if somebody was still working away up on top of it. All of that brings home the idea that this place was cinematic from the very beginning.

LG: I agree. The searchlight leads the viewer's eye towards something that is a stylized, imaginary thing, and yet that is not entirely made up. For Andrae, this movement is what it's all about: at the beginning, you see the stone lions of Sam'al set into the edges of the wall, followed by the processional street, and then the Ishtar Gate. Well, none of this makes sense. It's something between cinema, theater, architecture, and the symbolic potential of the artifacts. And the Pergamon is still talked about as having symbolic power, which is why the current situation is so confusing, because the original promise was that it would never close. But it will close.

JH: The opening scene of Peter Weiss's monumental novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975–81) is set in 1937. Three young guys go into the Pergamon to see the altar—which you currently can't see because of the ongoing renovation—and he describes how the three, who turn out to be members of the Rote Kapelle anti-Nazi resistance, see the slave work that went into making it. And at the same time, you hear that people like Albert Speer took inspiration from the altar for the Zeppelin Tribune at the Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg. So, you

Still from The Exorcist showing Father Merrin and the Pazuzu statue, 1973.

have the overdetermination of these pieces throughout the twentieth century.

LG: Already in the nineteenth century, there were big battles about Mesopotamian and Babylonian findings, as to whether or not they're any good in comparison to Hellenistic art and architecture. The British—certainly the director of the British Museum—did not think they were any good.

JH: Because it had color.

LG: It had color. We know that when the Assyrian panels were painted, the skin tone was relatively dark. You can see traces of it. In 1937, the then-director of the British Museum, John Forsdyke, ordered the cleaning of the Elgin Marbles––they were washed forty times in bleach to make them white. So you can see this desire to cleanse as part of an idealization of form that was in tension with the gypsum or limestone panels from Assyria.

JH: You could say the Pergamon Museum settled into an easy opposition: here we have the clean white Hellenistic heritage, and there we have the Oriental colorful heritage, and we put them side by side for you. The historic irony being that the opposition is completely bogus. Hellenistic sculptures were polychromatic. Knowledge of this was suppressed and only resurfaced in the last few decades.

LG: The Mesopotamian findings were a popular sensation when they were first displayed in Europe in the nineteenth century, even though the academics thought they were second rate. But they found a way to use them as a subset of the German and British construction of identity and ethnicity. According to this historical continuum, Assyrian art operates in relation to Greece and Rome as proto-Germanic culture is to its fully realized expression I would like to keep it…. Perhaps this short fragment is not necessary here? Up to you of course. . And that was an argument for elevating Mesopotamian artifacts somewhat in the same way that Britain did with Scotland, and its myth of clan tartans, largely invented in the nineteenth century.

JH: The side rooms to the left and right of the processional street contain more traditional vitrine displays. There is, for example, a copy of the Uruq vase from 3200 BCE which depicts a hierarchic cosmology: nature at the bottom (fauna and flora), and then you have slaves working away bringing that stuff up to the priestesses and priests. When we walked through the exhibition, you said, that's like Brexit England today. Nevertheless, that's a piece you didn't work with. How did you decide what you would work with or respond to?

LG: I approached the whole thing in accordance with one of the enduringly interesting things about making art, which is to be annoying and unhelpful, even indifferent or

destructive. Saying that, of course I talked a lot to the director of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Barbara Helwing. And she did point things out to me. And I pointed things out to her. In some cases, it had to do with moments of intensity, and moments of speed and slowing down, and moments of wondering. What am I supposed to be looking at? Or what's supposed to be happening here, when there's nothing really happening? This is also what cinema can be: the feeling that I'm not sure what's happening at this moment, but that it will become evident later on. The drive from the researchers and the director was very much towards education. Whereas I'm more interested in power, institutions, and affect.

JH: In the space which also holds the copy of the Uruq vase, you introduce the sound of someone walking—a kind of stern headmaster walk.

LG: Which is actually an archive recording of someone walking through a museum.

JH: I find it striking that you decided to have singular, identifiable sounds, not soundscapes. Very simple—say, something that sounds like someone banging on a pot.

LG: I did bang on a pot. As in Venice, I'm trying to find a space in between things. And one way to do that is to use sonic effects that are weak. It's hard to make a weak gesture in a place that is so powerful. It's so overwhelming that it needs a kind of pathos in the approach, in order to also indicate doubt, on a concrete level. I realized that what I've got to do in each instance is to have a cycle that appears and fades or appears, that is never stable.

Attempts to highlight the use of color in other museums always involve either a stable version of something that's been painted, or they gradually fill in color to a point where you can see it completely. What I do is a bit like that, but slightly different, because the thing that interests me is ambiguity. The whole exhibition is an exhibition of curtains, light, and ambiguity and shift. And that's what artists can do. That's what I think about a lot, and have always done.

JH: There's only one point where you use an historic photograph, which you project onto the floor. And it's undulating, as if coming in and out of focus. Which made me think of discussions that are pertinent to memory studies, to the whole question of commemoration: Can you depict atrocities, including the cultural atrocity of colonial excavations? If so, how do you depict them? And how do you represent them?

LG: It's a fairly weakly articulated but quite precisely political element. It's hard to find photographs of the excavations. There are some, but not many. Mainly they are photographs of a European man in a suit and hat with the local workers digging in the background. And this is still how it operates today somewhat. I needed to represent this somehow. And I wanted to do it quite brutally. So you have a choice: Do you walk on these people, again, or do you step around them? It's a symbolic gesture.

My approach to the show was affected by having spent so much time in Bonn for the Bundeskunsthalle exhibition. I went to the Haus der Geschichte museum about ten times. When they depict something difficult to deal with, like colonialism, or aspects of the guest-worker program, they do it earnestly, carefully, with dignity, and so on. You're supposed to be cautious before you go into the room about the Red Army Faction, and you've got to be dignified and solemn when you look at pictures of the Turkish guest workers in the 1970s, and you've got to be celebratory about the opening of the Kaufhof department store or the economic miracle of the 1950s. Everything is as it should be—and yet it also feels like they have everything completely the wrong way around.

That gesture with the photograph is connected to the question: How are you going to behave? That was the subtitle of my German pavilion: "How Are You Going to Behave? A Kitchen Cat Speaks." How are you going to behave here? It's what ties my work historically to the tradition of, I'd almost say, satire. There are elements like the Hadad sculpture, for example, which is rendered as relatively friendly. They call him the "menacing sculpture of Hadad" but if you bathe him in orange light and give him shiny blue eyes, his mouth doesn't look so scary. Maybe he wasn't scary.

Liam Gillick, Filtered Time, 2023. Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

Similarly, I wanted to show the documentation of the people working on the original excavations as being in a state of flux, because that is the condition of our understanding of this exchange of labor. I'm more interested in production than consumption, so I want to know how this place is produced—not how we consume it. That is what the whole show circles around: that's why

the searchlight points onto the Weimar-period walls, that's why the projection is undulating, etc. It's not so different from how I worked in the early 1990s when I had limited resources and I might do a show with some sawdust on the floor and some blue gel lights. At one point I was just going to overwhelm the whole museum with the victory of contemporary art—but I didn't, in the end.

JH: There's the life-sized ninth-century BCE relief of figures from the Nimrod Northwest palace, the original of which is in the British Museum. Your intervention there could easily be mistaken for a more typical kind of museum didactics, because you have projected onto the figures the colors that at least approximate those that they were originally painted in. But then you told me that you actually used RAL colors, a German standard dating back to the 1920s.

LG: Yes, it was set up in 1927 by the state, as the "Reichs-Ausschuß für Lieferbedingungen," which produced forty standard colors. And I've used that standard ever since I started making objects. And, of course, these colors are used for the same reason as those on the Assyrian wall reliefs: because they are striking. Deutsche Post yellow is in there, and the regional Bahn red, and the gray of the boxes by the side of the Deutsche Bahn railroad, and so on.

This is the kind of thing people might not see, but they might feel it a little bit. Do they need to be told this via a wall panel? I've got to make decisions. This is all I can do. I could simply reflect the current thinking in archaeology. But I need to introduce another side which is associative, a sort of parallel thinking. And the parallel thinking is that at the time, in the 1920s, they were looking at these things and were wondering what color they were, at a time when Germany was shifting, or certain authorities were shifting—also because of technology—away from esoteric thinking about color and work towards regulating and making uniform.

JH: The projection starts with a kind of anthroposophist spectral coloring that then resolves into the outlining of the figures.

LG: Yes, the idea that these objects were always in the same condition is impossible. They were painted, not glazed. Paint comes off. And they were clearly designed to be seen from a distance. We know that the feathers of the genies, these spiritual beings that fertilize and bring messages from the gods, were painted alternately red and blue. So, from a distance, they would look magenta.

As I mentioned, Andrae was a follower of anthroposophy. For him, the color on these things did emerge from this peculiar Steineresque idea of meditation, modesty, deep thought, openness to the power of feelings and affects. I reject the romantic as an ideal, but I'm fascinated by the moment of decision before you pick the word to write down or the color in which to paint something. And I'm not sure that decision always comes from clarity.

For example, it is generally presumed that jewelry on these figures was painted red, in reference to the rarity of red gold, and so on. But I'm not sure that's correct: the color may have been lighter, the chemical of another color might have degraded. My point is that the underlying scientific presumption is that there is a system of signification to be repeated. But what if it's not quite as rational as this? By this I'm not exoticizing the Assyrian artists; I'm exoticizing the thinking of a 1920s museum director. That is something I do often in my work: try to shift the order of representation.

The followers of anthroposophy had clearly articulated anti-Semitic views of various types, albeit veiled. Steiner believed you could still get in touch with these ancient civilizations that the Jews had somehow confused and complicated, because, of course, we know that Assyria and Mesopotamia existed because they're in the Bible. And when in fact the archeological traces were found, people like Walter Andrae wanted to find a spiritual, symbolic reason for it. I wanted to just represent that a little bit.

JH: Your work always follows a methodology, although it takes various forms. If you describe a spectrum with Michael Asher and the idea of negation and subtraction in response to the institution at one end, and at the other end, Hans Haacke and Renée Green, something more accumulative, more openly putting the research on display, would you locate yourself in between those two poles?

LG: Yes, because I think that the peculiar endurance of contemporary art as a space of potential or an imaginary zone is that it can accommodate a lot of things done by people who are looking for a different form of exchange and production. Forensic Architecture, for example, are sociologists, or writers, or researchers. And I think my role is to work alongside all of that in order to maintain a kind of semi-autonomous artistic abstraction. I used to liken it to keeping a big concrete block afloat in a swimming pool. You have to try, even though you know it's impossible.

I'm fascinated by the evasive potential of contemporary art, as this arena which absorbs everything in opposition to it. In that sense contemporary art, in its developed sense, really is an offshoot of Western Marxism and Freudianism. That is a vulnerable and difficult situation, but I believe in it, whereas I'm concerned about the experience economy that has emerged around museology. Certain kinds of visitor experiences and audiovisual presences are hollowing out the idea of the display and the system of information. This is creating parallel worlds of companies and organizations that take over all the art budgets to produce these experiences. The difficulty that contemporary art caused in that world is

being gradually erased. You go to the Humboldt Forum and it's the corporate sphere versus the cultural sphere. And the corporate sphere has won completely, it's not even close.

JH: The Humboldt Forum being the recreation of a Baroque castle which was, you might say, literally built on slavery and colonialism. Now it houses the ethnological collection in a setting that has the feeling of a shopping mall.

LG: It's perverse. I'm not sure I could do anything in there. I think, to a certain extent, that what I've done at the Pergamon is appropriate, because as a contemporary artist of my age, that preoccupation with historical layering is also true of the Pergamon in its current state, with the 1950s GDR linoleum that's visible alongside the badly done 1980s fixtures.

JH: And then there's David Chipperfield's newly built James Simon Gallery as the entrance building.

LG: That layering is a condition of contemporary art … and this layering will go when it gets redone. In the end, I felt much more aligned with the place than I could have imagined because it has all the components of advanced contemporary art: something to do with the cinematic, something to do with affect, something to do with traces of the past that are still just hanging around, like ideological traces that still serve as a justification for something, mixed with a quality of contingency and also pragmatism.

JH: Maybe this is another ideological background in that consumerism is very much about immersion, and a lot of avant-garde art is about the negation or disruption of immersion. But at the Pergamon any idea of immersion also clashes with the heritage of the GDR.

LG: It's one of the last grand buildings in Berlin where you can clearly see the patchwork restoration that happened in the 1950s. And Walter Andrae was part of that process of bringing work back from Moscow before he died in 1956. But I don't want to be an *Ostalgie* asshole. And I'm not, because what you're seeing is not some time capsule of grand East Germany, it's much more complicated than that.

What can an artist do with all this? Well, I think you could give the project to someone who has a very clear political and research-based practice. And I think that should happen, and should probably happen much more. The Haus der Geschichte in Bonn needs to be taken over immediately, because what it is doing aesthetically, institutionally, in terms of narrative, is wrong. I felt like I should try and start a campaign to shut it down. Because of the way it tells its story. You would never know the Germany that I grew up with, which was difficult, complicated, punk, refusing, artistic, it was solemn, it was drunk. It was all these different elements.

JH: That would be the West Germany of the seventies and eighties.

LG: You wouldn't know it from that building. You'd know there was pop music but not how annoying or how difficult it could be. And there's nothing about fucking and drinking in Leipzig, which people did all the time, because they couldn't ban that, right? So all these things are not there. So being the artist coming in who is inappropriate and undidactic can help to break something.

X

Liam Gillick is an artist based in New York. His work exposes the dysfunctional aspects of a modernist legacy in terms of abstraction and architecture when framed within a globalized, neo-liberal consensus, and extends into structural rethinking of the exhibition as a form. He has produced a number of short films since the late 2000s which address the construction of the creative persona in light of the enduring mutability of the contemporary artist as a cultural figure. Over the last twenty five years Gillick has also been a prolific writer and critic of contemporary art, contributing to *Artforum*, *October*, *Frieze*, and *e-flux Journal*. His book *Industry and Intelligence: Contemporary Art Since 1820* was published by Columbia University Press in March 2016.

Jörg Heiser is Director of the Institute for Art in Context at the University for the Arts in Berlin, Germany. For twenty years, he was an editor at *frieze* magazine. He continues to write, amongst others, for **e-flux Criticism** and **Republik**. Most recently he curated, together with Cristina Ricupero, the exhibition *Ridiculously Yours! Art, Awkwardness and Enthusiasm* at Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany, which travelled to Hamburg Deichtorhallen (Germany) and soon opens in Graz (Austria).

Tina M. Campt and Jace Clayton in conversation

Listening and Writing to Images

Jace Clayton: I wanted to start off with … a big question. When it comes to "changing the world," I think there are two ways to make things different than they were before. The first is accidents, evolution—the ladder falls, whatever. And the second is intention: the day-to-day building and maintaining. But when I think about transformation and metamorphosis, then suddenly we're in Ovid's territory. Either it's going to be money—that crazy abstraction machine—or metaphor, which is where something entirely different happens. This is what was racing through my mind when I read your book, *Listening to Images*.[1] You're dealing with terms like "frequency" and "listening," and sometimes those words appear in scare quotes. I would love to hear your thoughts on how you work with metaphor, specifically in talking about the book's titular conceit.

Tina M. Campt: Hmmm. It's a big question. I think the question behind the question is: What are we asking concepts to do? What function do concepts have in helping us to think something differently or think something more expansively? When you ask about metaphor, I hear you asking about whether these concepts are gestural allusions or whether they are being actively engaged, albeit on different terms. I tried to address the question of listening as metaphor or something more in my last book, *A Black Gaze*, where the definitions I began creating in *Listening to Images* take on more depth. And I think that while listening started out as a metaphor, it later became much more complex and concrete. I recently wrote a piece published in *BOMB* magazine called "The Opacity of Grief."[2] In that essay I was trying to think about frequency in its more scientific registers. I was trying to think about frequency as sonic in terms of sound waves, visual in terms of light waves and how they register, temporal in terms of repetition, kinetic in terms of movement, and haptic in terms of how it moves us and the ways these forms of responsiveness affect our relationships to one another.

In *Listening to Images*, I'm using concepts to change how we think and see. And I don't think that's metaphorical. I'm trying push us to connect things that we want to think of as separate. We want to think of the sonic as distinct from the visual, and we are resistant to thinking them together in a way that is synesthetic. That's the other reason why the titular conceit you reference is not necessarily metaphorical. I'm challenging us to think of synesthesia as something that actually happens and to embrace a synesthetic relationship to sound and images, even though that may not be the cognitive modality that we usually inhabit. But if we do this intentionally, if we literally try to hear something that is not necessarily visualized in the image, then listening to images becomes a way of enacting the broader experience of how images register. How do we get access to those deeper resonances? For me, again, it started with the idea of thinking a concept in relationship to an object that is very

Santu Mofokeng, Church of God, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, 1996. Photo: Santu Mofokeng Foundation/Lunetta Bartz, Maker, Johannesburg.

different from it. Yes, that is in some ways metaphorical. But it becomes something more than that when it becomes methodological. It shifts our relationship to the objects themselves.

JC: We're talking on the occasion of your visit to my students here at Columbia University's Sound Art MFA, where I'm serving as interim director. One of the things that these MFA programs produce is a lot of artists who can tell you in great detail what their work is, how it functions, and the themes it engages with. Yet one of the things I like to reserve for myself as a viewer and audience member is autonomy. A person can say anything about their artwork's intention, but how it actually affects me is going to be completely different. As someone who writes about all sorts of visual (and other) culture, how did you go about choosing what to focus on in the book? What's the relationship between the objects—the artwork that you're engaging with—and your writing? Is there a feedback loop?

TC: The other day I was having a conversation with a friend, Christina Sharpe. Neither one of us were necessarily trained as artists or art historians, so we don't have a set toolkit that we bring with us to tell us how we're supposed to see art. We also don't necessarily see art through a traditional art-historical lineage. But, engaging with art and artists as theorists is both incredibly powerful and incredibly illuminating. One of the things that we share is collaborating with artists around concepts. And I feel like we are in a moment right now where there's an exceptionally vibrant conversation going on between artists and scholars/theorists. What's interesting to me about the conversations I've been involved in is that they're focused on concepts, but not in the sense of conceptual art. There is a way in which Black artists and Black scholars in particular need—and we need this urgently—to create a set of critical concepts that allow us to address our moment. And the way in which artists are doing that is to activate concepts in ways that show us something very different than the way in which *we* (as scholars and theorists) parse concepts.

To answer your question bluntly and boldly, why do I write about particular artworks? It's because they have a profound impact on me. And in that way, I write about the

Infrasound arrays at monitoring station in Qaanaaq, Greenland. License: CC BY 2.0

impact of artworks rather than necessarily about the artwork itself. I write *to* artworks rather than about them, to the extent that I'm telling them what they are doing to me. And I think that's a really important thing. Rather than telling others what a particular artwork is about and prescribing how they should see it or hear it or interact with it, I'm trying to create a journey that I'm inviting you to go on with me. You may or may not see it the same way. It may or may not have the same effect on you. You may not hear something the same way. But what I've begun is a conversation with you that you can argue with me about. It's a conversation where you can say, no, I hear something completely different. Rather than being told *how* to see and *why* to see something in a particular way, I focus on *what* it's doing to us.

It's so interesting when you say that artists, at least MFAs, are trained to be able to tell you what their work is about. I've recently been teaching undergraduate art students and I'm actually finding this to be one of the strongest resistances among some of them. They would show the work they'd created, and I'd ask them to talk to me about it. And they often responded, "No, no, *you* talk to me about what you're seeing and how you're feeling." And I said, "No." [*laughter*] And it often went back and forth like that. But the way I eventually convinced them was to point out one really important fact. What I said was: "Here's the thing. If you're serious about becoming an artist, you will have many, many people, gallerists, critics, curators, potentially also journalists, who are telling you what your art is, who are telling you what you're doing. And what you need to do sooner or later is to talk about your work the way you want people to talk about it. If you don't do that, you will constantly be running behind everybody else's take on you." So one of the things I ask my senior practice-of-art students to do is to write an artist statement. After that, I tell them, "Now you have to write your wall text and your catalog copy. A curator is usually the person who will do that if you have a show, but what happens if you were to begin that journey into your work in

your own words?"

Going back to what you just said, the conversations I have with artists are usually invitations into their work when they open the door to me. And I feel very humbled. It's the most terrifying thing to write about artwork with living people. I mean, as someone trained as a historian, I've spent most of my career writing about dead people. *Listening to Images* in particular was my transition into writing about art. It was a transition from writing about objects and archives of anonymous people. Those were individuals who were no longer with us, but who had left traces that lead us places, even if you don't know where they're taking you. This also creates the methodological challenge of how to integrate the unknown into your study of an archive. How do you excavate something where there's no certainty?

Art helped me do that. For example, when I was researching identification photography, it was an artist who taught me how to engage with the official portraits I was looking at. And it was the same artist, Maria Bacigalupo, whose work showed me how those individuals were using such images against all of the ways in which they were prescribed to use them. They created their own persona. They created personas that looked like official subjects, but just outside or below the official frame of the photograph they had babies on their laps. They project very formal and serious subjects, but they were also wearing a borrowed jacket that was way too big. It was an artist, Santu Mofokeng, whose work showed me what the history of family photographs are under circumstances where the family is disavowed.

Looking at archives through the eyes of artists helped me to formulate my questions and to understand what I needed to ask: Is this real? Is this a performance? And if it's a performance, what is it trying to perform? They taught me to look at affect in the faces of people depicted in photographs, because that might be telling me a different story than the official narratives wanted me to know.

JC: I love that whole model of engagement. That's great advice: if you don't figure out a way to shape the conversational contexts you want for your own work, then someone will frame their language around you. That is major, major, major.

I would like to ask a little bit about the role collaboration plays in your work. I was struck by the very beginning of the book, in which you referred to Saidiya Hartman as a writing partner, and then you mentioned Hazel Carby as a mentor. For both artists and academics, it can be very easy to be siloed. You're off in your own corner doing your own thing. The isolation can be hard. I would love to hear: What does a writing partner look like? How do you think about thinking in chorus?

TC: So, two points of departure. One is that people in the humanities and in the arts are often taught to write as individuals and that's a very solitary pursuit. And we're also taught to compete against each other. We are frequently taught to see ourselves in relation to, but not necessarily in concert with, our colleagues.

That's where I think that sound studies is different, but it's still a very different model than, say, in the social sciences. Social scientists regularly work in study groups and research groups. They develop theses and propositions and experiments based on group work. Whereas we in the humanities are trained not to do this. We are trained to write in a single voice. It was very interesting to me last semester teaching a class with practice-of-art students called "Radical Composition." From the very beginning, students were divided into groups of three, and each group had to create a radical composition in response to a series of assigned visual, sonic, and written texts. They were musicians and visual artists and movement artists and art historians and African American Studies students. And they all said the same thing: we've never been taught how to work in a group. We have our single-person senior shows. We produce our own body of work. Sometimes we help each other out, but it's not multiauthored. We don't all take credit.

This was very illuminating to me—that it was not just humanities people. Again, I was trained as a historian and an oral historian. I'm also a theorist. I've done research in a lot of different areas, but what's always been sustaining to me are conversations with other people and, to be perfectly honest, sharing work in progress. When you're at your most vulnerable is to me the most generative time to be in conversation. But before you put it into the world, you need to get some feedback. And at the time, Saidiya and Hazel and I were all working on new book projects. We wanted and needed to talk through the works in their most fragile and formative states. And over the course of a few years, we met regularly, sharing our works in progress and gently telling each other where we thought we were going wrong and what we thought was amazing. It just enlivens and inspires me because you learn so much from other people's work. With this being-in-your-own-lane thing, you learn a lot less.

Also, this is a particular moment in time that is dramatically influencing how we think about the relationship between theory and writing and making art. I just finished participating in an amazing convening called the "Loophole of Retreat" in Venice where I served as a consultant. And what was abundantly clear when we all came together for those three days was that we *need* to hear each other. We need to think with each other, because we've spent three years in utter isolation or in fear of being together. And what happens not only when you are reading together, thinking together, but quite

Martina Bacigalupo, Gulu Real Art Studio, 2011–12. Courtesy of the artist and the Walther Collection.

literally listening to each other—something very magical happens that's not just how you receive it, it's how you rise to the challenge of being an active participant in that audience. And I have to say how very much I've missed that over the past few years of isolation.

As someone who also produces work for a public, I'm curious about what that looks like for you. What is relationship? You asked about collaboration, but I think there's a larger question about audience there. What does it mean to find your audience? What does it mean to interact with your audience and to accept the criticism that they're giving you, or the embrace or affirmation that they're giving you? I'm very curious about the role public dialogues play in terms of your process of creation. And the shift between doing that pre-pandemic and doing it post-pandemic, which is something that I have really been profoundly conscious of. To be perfectly honest, for example, academics, we love the conference, and I think the conference is dead. If I never had to go to another three days of listening to people give papers, I would be forever grateful. [*laughter*] But yeah, there you go.

JC: What made the convening different from a conference?

TC: The convening was people reading poetry, it was people singing, it was people kind of almost preaching. [*laughter*] Again, it really wasn't a forum for "I argue this." It was much more dialogical. You could hear the audience participating. It was an energy exchange. There were also films, and people putting things up, showing things and then talking to them, with them, over them. My friends Kaiama Glover and Maboula Soumahoro did a choral presentation of what the process of translation looks like that included music and images. They went back and forth and back and forth in a way that was like a poetic rendering. So, the different voices and voicings that we were able to create collectively astonished me.

JC: I find in your work a wonderful, for lack of a better term, optimism and positivity. There are people like Achille Mbembe, where I'll read him and be like: oh, this is cogent, it's right, this is contemporary. And I'm also like … [*heavy sighing*]. You know? It can be hard to summon energy to move forward after reading that. But there's something about the attentiveness with which you're reading and thinking that transmits to me a spiritedness akin to hope.

So I would love to hear more about your chapter on the grammar of Black feminist futurity. Ariel Aısha Azoulay's *Potential Histories* asks: What would be necessary to make this history not have occurred? Your query is different. It's more: What do we need to do to make sure that at a future point, this will have had to happen? I love the fact that it's a grammar tense, but it's also an entire stance of language slipping into reality in all these different ways. I think that gives me a certain lightness.

TC: It's kind of happy to say that I'm an optimist. It feels simple, but I believe in change. That's the interesting thing about being a historian. You can't be a historian without believing in change, because you see it. We study continuity and discontinuity. And the one thing that is certain is that things will change. That doesn't necessarily mean things will get better, but it means there is a capacity to shift the dynamic that is moving us toward a particular future. That, to me, is also about grammar. How are we conjugating? In what tense are we living, and in what tense are we speaking? Are we speaking in the declarative, which is *that is so*? Are we speaking in the tense of the interrogative, the interrogatory, meaning, *will this happen*? Or are we speaking in the tense of the conditional, which is, *it might happen*? Again, as a historian, all you do is study how this was going to go in this direction and went in that direction. That means there is *always* possibility.

Black feminist futurity, to me, is the legacy that I have inherited, as a Black feminist, of women who *have* created that change as activists or by giving us the imagination of living otherwise. Somebody like Toni Morrison, who brought into the world these possibilities of how to live differently even under the worst of circumstances. Or people who have theorized what it would take to get from point A to point B, like Angela Davis, who has written into the world the entire idea of abolition. What would it mean to be living in a place where we did not have police disciplining and punishing people, where you didn't have prison as a way of addressing wrongs? To me, a Black feminist futurity is always grasping at that possibility that is dangled before you, right? But you have to actually *move* towards that. You have to actually begin to live that reality *now* in order for it to even be possible in the future. It is not about waiting. And so that to me is the question of: Is it optimism, or is it just an investment in change?

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Gender and Memory in the Third Reich(University of Michigan Press, 2004). Her coedited collection, *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography* (with Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg and Brian Wallis, Steidl, 2020), received the 2020 Photography Catalogue of the Year Award from Paris Photo and Aperture Foundation.

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1
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2
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