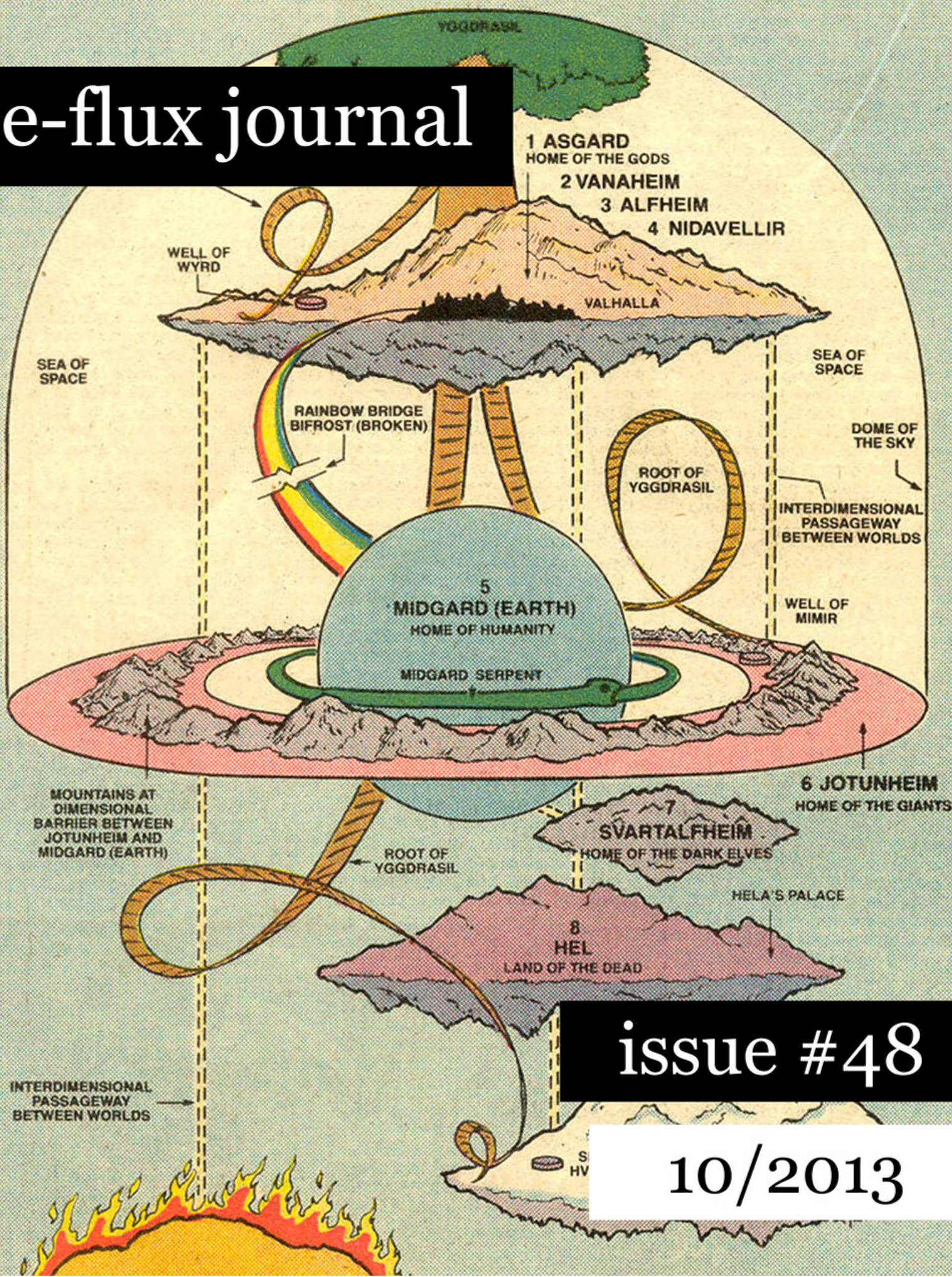


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Chapter Zero

Editors

Editorial— “Pieces of the Planet” Issue One

Once there was an idea of a vast human family ready to realize humanistic ideals and internationalist partnerships like the United Nations, and some people called it Globalism. But then the idea got bundled with a way of carrying the sentiment of internationalism over to economics, turning jurisdictional partnerships and trade relations into pretty much the same thing. And its name sounds less like a principle than a process—a making global, a globalization of the earth. And since at least the 1980s it was decided that this is how we would all come together, with the globe as market and the market as globe. But at the same time it is impossible to deny what globalization has confronted us with: our own planet—not as an abstract idea but as a massive geological material fact. Now we live the sensation of tracing our hand over a globe on a tabletop, only the globe is the actual earth itself.

Around the same time this massive reach was first being celebrated, it was also starting to show its limits. The many borders that dissolved in the 1990s did not take long to return in other places and even multiply—between sects, tribes, classes, and of course nation-states. And yet the planetary view of the earth is still there, just split into two entities—a system inhabited by humans on the one hand and, on the other, a big spherical body that is profoundly indifferent to us. Our all-encompassing mastery immediately hits a wall when we realize we know nothing about ourselves on this thing. It is as if the moment the world shrank into the palm of our hand, it also exploded into trillions of tiny microcosms.

In the meantime we need to figure out what to do with all these scattered pieces that seem to be held together by tape, and are likely to explode again into smaller micro-microcosms. And what would they look like? Some of them look like the pieces of world that were not included in the world before, or at least that of the internationalist project. Other pieces look like rogue bits of information left by the road—old game consoles, used batteries, deleted mail, libido, some recordable CDs of soft rock, an old tribe, a fake sect, expired film stock, an animal carcass, or Danish modern furniture with bad upholstery.

But then there is another kind, and these are basically all artworks. These are the action paintings of the planet. They are historical counter-narratives. They are exceptions. One piece wants to join with other pieces to heal the scars of breaking off. Another little Promethean piece wants to explode again and again to make infinitely more of itself. Yet another wants to retire with a good pension on a plinth. These little worlds come in editions you can buy, but their volatility makes them impossible to possess. And that keeps them somewhat market friendly, but a really horrible challenge to historians who at this point can only watch as historical narratives multiply faster than they can ever hope to keep track.

This issue of the journal is one of several issues to be developed in parallel with Ashkal Alwan's Home

Workspace Program, with its third edition starting in November as a free, experimental school based in Beirut led by Jalal Toufic and Anton Vidokle.

—Anton Vidokle, Brian Kuan Wood, Julieta Aranda

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Jalal Toufic

Middle Eastern Films Before Thy Gaze Returns to Thee— in Less than 1/24 of a Second

Did the descent of the standard film camera lenses from Renaissance Western monocular perspective place early Muslim filmmakers at a disadvantage when it came to a genuine formal contribution in the medium of cinema, since these filmmakers came from a tradition that until only a century or so ago (the age of cinema) was, especially in its Arabic regions, still resistant to, rather than ignorant of, Renaissance perspective? Cinema would appear to disadvantage Muslim filmmakers steeped in their religion's tradition if one pays inordinate attention to the kind of space favored by the standard film camera lenses and disregards cinema's temporal atomicity facet, which makes cinema very close to the predominant Islamic conception of time but about which comparatively little has been written in works on the basic cinematographic apparatus. The notion of *renewed creation* in the kalām (theology) of the Ash'arites and in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabi provides a way of considering the world as subject to processes akin to those of cinema. For Ibn al-'Arabi, the things of the world, unlike God, do not have a necessity of existence, so when God gives actual existence to anything, it reverts instantly to inexistence, disappears.¹ God "then" gives existence to a similar thing the next moment. This process goes on indefinitely, making of the world an ever-renewed creation (Ibn al-'Arabi's gloss on the Qur'ān's "a new creation" [50:15]). In Paradjanov's *Ashik Kerib*, Ashik Kerib, a poor minstrel who promised his lover to become rich (in order to gain the approval of her wealthy father) and to return, from wherever his instrumental pursuit of riches might lead him, to marry her before a thousand days have passed, has to journey back in that period's remaining two days a distance of one hundred days' travel. He prays for help. It is jarring that the horse rider who appears in response to his prayer flies him to his native town in one day, presumably in a similar manner to the way the *jinn* in the Qur'ān story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba would have transported her throne to Solomon's palace; I would have expected, in this film of jump cuts, the displacement to occur by a new creation, that is, by means of the disappearance of Ashik Kerib from the point of departure and the appearance of a very similar version of Ashik Kerib at his destination, especially since in Paradjanov's previous two films horses with their riders often suddenly disappear then suddenly appear again (in jump cuts). I would have regretted a missed opportunity here were it not (a) that the one-day miraculous trip that ostensibly covers with no discontinuities (as is implied by the revolving globe in the background) a distance that would have otherwise required a hundred days of travel is introduced by Ashik Kerib's prayer presented in jump cuts and his repeated attempts to mount the supernatural horse also presented in jump cuts; (b) that Ashik Kerib's miraculous trip on the flying horse to his native town is anachronistically preceded by another visit that he makes from that distant land to his mother's ruined house and that does not happen by means of the flying horse; and (c) that Ashik Kerib's proof of his miraculous one-day trip on a flying horse deconstructs itself: through the miracle of

healing his mother's blindness with dust from the horse's hoof, Ashik Kerib conjointly proves to his incredulous audience the supernatural power of the flying horse and thus his miraculous trip on it, and disproves that he covered the distance in one day since he was back *before the return of the gaze* of his mother—who became blind years earlier on being told that he died—in other words, in the twinkling of an eye.

If, with very rare exceptions, people are unaware of the universal and perpetual acts of appearance, disappearance, then appearance, it is both that the appearance, disappearance then appearance occur “before thy gaze returns to thee” (Qur’ān 27:40) and that the form that appears following the disappearance of an earlier one is very similar to it. Is this not reminiscent of cinema, where within the same shot the next frame replaces the largely similar earlier one “before thy gaze returns to thee”? With films as well as the world according to Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Ash‘arites, very similar frames/things replace each other before the eye can detect this. There are several ways to know of renewed creation. Extremely rare people become aware of it directly, through *kashf*, unveiling. A slightly larger number of people become aware of it indirectly, symptomatically, by sensing that the other person is not identical to himself or herself, but merely a similar person—are some of the cases of the Capgras syndrome to be attributed to sensing such renewed-creation substitutions? A still larger number resort to it to resolve certain paradoxes. By means of it the Ash‘arite theologians tried to maintain the absolute omnipotence of God despite the apparent causal linkages in the world. In my case, it has happened that while looking at a half-filled cup of coffee placed on a table, I had the clear impression that it cannot be moved, that no alterations were occurring in or to it, that it does not change. How can I explain then that I myself or someone else did displace the vase a short time later, and that the disjunction between the preceding certain impression of its immovability and its later motion was not strong enough to unsettle me, but induced instead merely a mild surprise? Since while looking at the vase on the table I was certain that I could not gradually displace it, if I nonetheless ended up moving it and was only mildly surprised at my success in doing so, it must be another vase. Both I and the bottle returned back to the nothingness from which we arose (and, it could be argued by others, in relation to which each represents an imbalance, a fluctuation), and then were recreated, appearing again in a changed state, the vase no longer inducing the incontestable impression of immovability and I feeling that it can be moved or already moving it. Is the impression of a progression of time, of change, of movement—that of the cat that has just elegantly glided through the narrow door opening—more incontestable to me than the previous impression of the immovability and, more generally, unchangeability of the vase on the table? No. It is easier for me to reconcile, as a secondary, special effect of it, the ostensible sequential passage of time with

this ultrafast recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of a largely similar entity than to reconcile the indefinite immovability of the vase with its induced motion a few moments later. From the perspective of ever-renewed creation, gradual change is as illusory in the world as it is in cinema: there is an impossibility (*istiāla*) of change of state (*istiāla*). Nobody and nothing changes: every thing is recurrently appearing then disappearing then being replaced by a largely similar thing. Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer* remains the best example of the conjunction of stasis and quick recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of largely similar entities since it exemplifies both modes: in its projection form as a 6 minutes 24 seconds long film, it instances the flicker of recurrent appearance-disappearance; in its installation form as 35mm filmstrips mounted on a wall, it instances immutability. Things, not having a necessity of existence, are directly related to the Being who created them and/or to the nothingness to which they are bound to instantly return, and only indirectly related to the ostensibly previous and subsequent chronological moments. We are constantly, ontologically distracted from the ostensibly chronological, mundane “action”: this is our aristocracy—is aristocratic what is detached from other things, other moments.^{2]} perceptible barriers, is that unexpected, invisible obstacles will spring up everywhere, resulting in motionlessness where there is no discernable barrier. Many of these barriers will be objects that for no apparent reason cannot be removed, objects that put one in a trance, depriving one of one’s motor ability”); over-turns; and the empty space-time zones of the labyrinth, which produce lapses not merely of consciousness but also, more radically, of being. In *Over-Sensitivity*, it is encountered in the guise of the ahistorical fully-formed unworldly entities that irrupt in radical closures, and the empty space-time zones in the realm of altered movement, body, silence, music, space and time into which dance projects a subtle version of the dancer. And here, it is encountered mainly in the mode of the atomistic temporality of Islam according to the theology of the Ash‘arites and the sufism of Ibn al-‘Arabī.] We are constantly returning to nothingness: this is our poverty. With its recurrent appearances-disappearances, Paradjanov’s cinema presents a felicitous mixture of aristocracy and absolute dependency. While quick recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of a largely similar entity is discernible in pixilation films, as well as in the jump cuts and the discrete replacement of the young by the old in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* (1968) onward (for example, in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, 1986, the actress Leila Alibegashvili playing Vardo as a youth steps behind the actress Sofiko Chiaureli playing her as an old woman, this indicating young Vardo’s replacement by, not her growth into, the old Vardo), it finds its purest form in two films that are a sort of diagrammatic, abstract tracing of it: Tony Conrad’s 30-minute *The Flicker*, 1966, and Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer*, 1958–60, with the filmstrip in

both an alternation of dark frames and blank ones. Conrad's film is prefaced with a warning and disclaimer, which reads: "WARNING. The producer, distributor, and exhibitors waive all liability for physical or mental injury possibly caused by the motion picture *The Flicker*. Since this film may induce epileptic seizures or produce mild symptoms of shock treatment in certain persons, you are cautioned to remain in the theatre only at your own risk. A physician should be in attendance." Indeed, the exposure to the flicker effect may induce epileptic seizures in the spectator. In the world of Ibn al-'Arabi and the Ash'arites, the material camera projecting this flickering film would itself be flickering in and out of existence. Does the actual witnessing of the ever-renewed creation, of the ultrafast recurrent appearance then disappearance of one entity and its replacement by a largely similar one, induce a more basic kind of seizure, no longer merely "a transient occurrence of signs and/or symptoms due to abnormal excessive or synchronous neuronal activity in the brain,"³ but an ontological seizure, a *fanā'*, an annihilation in God? The very rare people who actually witness recurrent creation doubly undergo *fanā'*, since, in addition to their recurrent disappearance on account of their not having a necessity of existence, witnessing the flicker of the ultrafast recurrent disappearance of entities itself produces a temporary disappearance of the consciousness of the witness. Were one to manage to accompany consciously this return to nothingness that occurs almost always outside awareness, then the chain of karma would be broken. From this perspective, animals are in the worst situation, since, unlike inorganic matter, which following each of its recurrent creations is limited to returning to God/nothingness, they evince some "attention" to the durational "action," albeit in the mode of being "*simply given over*" to it "*without being able to grasp*" it "*as such*,"⁴ abdomen is carefully cut away while it is sucking, a bee will simply carry on regardless even while the honey runs out of the bee from behind.... the bee is simply taken [*hingenommen*] by its food.... When the bee flies out of the hive to find food it registers the direction in which it stands in relation to the sun.... If we ... take the box in which the bee has been imprisoned back to the hive and place it some distance behind the hive, then the newly freed bee flies in the direction in which it would have to fly in order to find the hive from the feeding place, even though the hive is relatively nearby, and it does so for the appropriate distance once again.... [the bee] flies back in a pre-established direction over a pre-established distance without regard to the position of the hive. It does not strike out in a given direction prescribed for it by the place in which it has found itself. Rather it is absorbed by a direction, is driven to produce this direction out of itself—without regard to the destination. The bee does not at all comport itself toward particular things, like the hive, the feeding place and so on. The bee is *simply given over* to the sun and to the period of its flight *without being able to grasp either of these as such* ... the animal ... is taken [*hingenommen*], taken and captivated [*benommen*] by things."] but, unlike humans, cannot accompany the

return to Being/nothingness in an aware manner. Out of the clash of any two images, but even more clearly of any one image, does not arise, unlike in Sergei Eisenstein's films, any concept, but a *dhikr* (invocation, remembrance) of the one necessary Being (and then a heedful absentmindedness regarding the "God" beyond concepts and memory?); or the notion of the absolute dependence of the myriad entities. The jump cut, "the sound of one hand [or image] clapping,"⁵ is a silent *dhikr*. Forgetfulness of God is a macro illusion, since creatures, not having a necessity of existence, are always returning to that which alone endures, God. If one is enjoined not to forget God for an instant, it is that that is the maximum that one can possibly forget Him, since one instantly reverts to Him, thus remembering Him. From the standpoint of renewed creation, we are not forgetful of God, but of our return to, of our remembrance of, God. As in Buddhism, where though we are in Samsāra, ignorant and unenlightened, we have Buddha-nature (*bussā* *ō*) and Buddha face, in Islam, we—Muslims and non Muslims—are, through this renewed return to Being/*al-aqq*, involved in a perpetual *dhikr*. The explicit *dhikr* in the form of the repetitive remembrance and invocation of the one necessary Reality echoes an implicit *dhikr* in the form of the recurrent reversion of the ontologically poor entity to the Reality. The disciple must have meditated enough temporal atomicity and the *dhikr* it implies that however much he reiterates the name of God during a *dhikr* ceremony, "Allāh, Allāh ..." he does become entranced, since trance would be a symptom of obliviousness to the ontological *dhikr*. Our as well as every other entity's (ontological) attention is drawn in the direction of change; if change is the reversion to nothingness/Being rather than continuous alteration then that is where our attention is basically drawn. This detachment from, clinamen in relation to the ostensible chronological change applies not only in the case of humans but also in the case of inanimate matter, including of atoms,⁶ which as a result of this askew attentiveness in relation to the ostensible chronological change has a face.⁷ 36), in a conception of recurrent appearance, disappearance, then appearance of entities, including atoms, the atom recurrently faces away from the linear "action" toward nothingness/the Being who recurrently creates it.] "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise" (Qur'ān 17:44): the entities' constant going back, from moment to moment, to the Being is this praise. The snapshot, even the one in Harold Edgerton's stroboscopic works, does not capture the instant but is clearly an abstract arrest of the movement,⁸ otherwise it would disclose to us a distraction from the apparent chronological "action"; to reach the instant is to reach the element where we see this ontological distraction, where humans are distracted ontologically from psychological distraction, ontologically turning away from any psychological turning away from the mundane "action." What we witness in Paradjanov's films from *Sayat Nova* onward is this askewness of the gaze in relation to the

apparent chronological “action.” The direction of the gaze in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward is not toward the spectator (whether to trigger or enhance distantiation or in an interactive manner), but, ontologically, toward the nothingness to which the figure instantly reverts. If the characters in Paradjanov’s films face the camera, it is because he, intuitively, places it in the non-spatial direction in which the return to nothingness/Being happens. When in *The Legend of Suram Fortress* Osman Aga interpellates Durmishkhan, and the latter looks in the direction of the camera, the film spectator is witnessing the resultant spatial turning of the character toward his interlocutor, but also the facing of the character away from his interlocutor toward the non-spatial direction of his reversion back to nothingness/Being/the camera. Like Muslims in general, during their explicit prayer Osman Aga and his companions turn toward the Kaaba in Mecca, this locus of orientation in exoteric Islam. But this should not mask from the film spectator what *Ashik Kerib* intimates: since Ashik Kerib’s prayer is shot in jump cuts, hence in appearances-disappearances, and since the disappearances back to Being are remembrances of the latter, hence a form of prayer, the exoteric prayer is itself full of these other, esoteric prayers. We should thus be aware with regard to the prayer of Osman Aga and his companions that since every entity’s disappearance is a turning aside from apparent chronology to the one Being, God, thus a facing toward Him, at that more fundamental level “whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God” (Qur’ān 2:115). Paradjanov’s world evinces a different kind of aside than the conventional one in traditional theater. While in the latter the thoughts made manifest in the aside remain related to the progression conflict-climax-resolution, in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward the aside is the turning away from the apparent chronological “action” toward the real action, that is, toward the reversion to nothingness/Being or, in *Ashik Kerib*, to the camera. Moreover, while the conventional theatrical aside manifests various intimate thoughts of the character, the Muslim aside manifests, when in the form of jump cuts, a silent *dhikr* of the only self-subsistent, true ontological reality; or, when in the form of words and thoughts of the character in voice-over, a *adith qudsī*’s assertion: “I [God] am ... his tongue through which he speaks” (indeed in *Ashik Kerib*, the diegetic songs and music are not fully synchronous with the movement of the lips and of the hands on the musical instrument of the one purportedly singing and playing, Ashik Kerib); or, more frequently, both: Paradjanov’s cinema makes clear that there is a correlation of the jump cut, as a symptom of renewed creation, with the voice-over, the “I [God] am ... his tongue through which he speaks.” What interpellates the film spectator is not the frontally looking diegetic character but the latter’s recurrent disappearance in jump cuts. Unlike the interpellation Althusser conceptualized, this interpellation does not transform each individual into a subject through the always-already attempted turn around he or she

makes to answer the structural “Hey, you there!” but alerts the film spectator to his or her substitution by another, similar entity, and to his or her subsumption in the one and only Subject, Who is “his hearing, and his sight, and his tongue through which he speaks.” Whether such a cinema is popular or not, it has no audience, since it basically recalls the spectator to his or her fundamental nonexistence. Even ghosts and revenants—who ostensibly cannot disappear for good until they settle some outstanding symbolic debt⁹—vanish definitively then are recreated again by God, to haunt.¹⁰ Paradjanov’s cinema is an ontological cinema not really because of the stasis of the shots at the chronological level—shots thus ostensibly connected to being rather than to becoming—but because its entities are constantly returning to the only necessary, self-subsistent Being. In temporally atomic artworks and films there is little urge or temptation to return to a chronological source (whether it is assumed to be a golden age, a certain kind of chaos ...), because everything at every moment is reverting back to the more basic and immediate source, Being/nothingness. That is partly why in the case of his films from *Sayat Nova* onward, and despite his pre-twentieth century characters (in *Sayat Nova*, the Armenian troubadour Sayat Nova [1712–1795] ...) and his folkloric references (*The Legend of Suram Fortress* is based on a Georgian folk tale about a fortress whose walls keep crumbling however many times they are restored—until a young man is bricked up alive in them ...), Paradjanov cannot be legitimately accused of making retro works.

A view of reality where what seems to be one enduring entity is considered to be actually myriad very similar entities recurring in atomic time is apt to produce at the spatial level if not the arabesque then something akin to it. A sense of recognition occurs to me in front of an arabesque (one that lasts an instant, to be seamlessly replaced by another sense of recognition the next instant), for the person in front of the arabesque is himself or herself a temporal arabesque, myriad very similar versions of himself or herself. The arabesque is a rendition of temporal atomicity at the level of extension. A Muslim who subscribes to atomism knows, if not perceives, that whenever he looks at any entity he is seeing an arabesque—a temporal one. The flower that I see in the courtyard of a mosque whose walls are lined with floral arabesques is itself in reality myriad very similar flowers that momentarily replace each other—the Muslim floral scroll is a bouquet of one flower. The arabesque, especially the one where the figures are juxtaposed rather than interlaced, is doubly my mirror: the multiplication of its basic figure gives me a spatial rendition of my temporal multiplication; the abstraction of its unit figure reminds me of my own abstraction, my being without a nature and proper characteristics. He had seen in museums centuries-old ornamented silver mirrors that belonged to Muslim rulers: in their silver side, which certainly did not reflect as well as modern glass mirrors, he saw that he was one and that he had features, but in their reverse side,

ornamented with floral arabesques, he had the inkling that he was myriad entities and that he had no nature and no proper characteristics. Looking in such a mirror, day after day one side showed him that he was aging, while the other intimated to him that he was always one instant old. In a worldview of renewed creation, the flowers of the arabesque of some mirror decorated by a Muslim craftsman can be accurate reflections of the ostensibly much longer-lived human being, since the latter really is as ephemeral, lasts one instant only, and has no nature and proper characteristics. From a temporal atomicity viewpoint, what seems to us even for a moment to be one enduring plant is in actuality myriad ones that replace each other from (atomic) time to (atomic) time; from the related occasionalism viewpoint, what seems to us to be rich in characteristics and possessing a nature is in actuality without them (it is not intrinsic to a flower to have the scent and color we associate with it given its chemistry [and our sense organs and brains]). T. E. Lawrence: "A first knowledge of their sense of the purity of rarefaction was given me in early years, when we had ridden far out over the rolling plains of North Syria to a ruin of the Roman period which the Arabs believed was made by a prince of the border as a desert-palace for his queen. The clay of its building was said to have been kneaded for greater richness, not with water, but with the precious essential oils of flowers. My guides, sniffing the air like dogs, led me from crumbling room to room, saying, 'This is jessamine, this violet, this rose.' But at last Dahoum drew me: 'Come and smell the very sweetest scent of all,' and we went into the main lodging, to the gaping window sockets of its eastern face, and there drank with open mouths of the effortless, empty, eddyless wind of the desert ... 'This,' they told me, 'is the best: it has no taste.'" ¹¹ Many of the Muslim artists who produced floral arabesques would be delighted with tastelessness not only, like the Arabs mentioned by T. E. Lawrence and like Walt Whitman ("The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it" [*Leaves of Grass*]), in the case of the air, but also in the case of the most particular smells, those that for others are most likely to evoke and sometimes reactivate the past. Many of these artists could have told Whitman and the Arabs mentioned by T. E. Lawrence that the very sweetest scent of all, the one they are in love with, is that of a flower for the latter, intrinsically, "is odorless," "has no taste." Indeed even the desert air in a non-occasionalist view of reality, where objects have natures and therefore characteristics, is, despite its ostensible tastelessness, still an approximation of the absence of any intrinsic scent of flowers in an occasionalist worldview. From a standpoint alien to occasionalism, one can speak about a procedure of abstraction in Islamic art aiming at eluding the possible accusation of usurping God's prerogative of creation; but judged from the standpoint of the *mutakallimīn's* occasionalist denial of nature, one cannot legitimately speak about a proper and basic abstraction of Muslim art in relation to everyday reality, for that would imply that the

objects outside the artwork have certain qualities and characteristics, when actually they are as devoid of these as the figures in Muslim art. The Muslim floral arabesque does not manifest any abstraction in relation to the flower in the world, since there are, basically, no nature and proper characteristics of the latter. Primarily and fundamentally, in Islam abstraction applies before the Muslim artist plans an artwork and touches his tools; the primary abstractionists of Islam are the atomistic occasionalists. Islamic art abstracts only secondarily, merely accentuates that primary abstraction advanced and argued by occasionalism, through pushing toward a geometrization of the shapes of animals and plants. The incredible colors in Muslim miniatures, for instance the blue, turquoise, green, mauve or white of rocks and the rose or sky-blue of grass, are not used necessarily to avoid verisimilitude in order to avert the condemnation of the 'ulamā', but are there in many cases because they are allowed by or a result of the occasionalist denial of nature—for a custom of God—and consequent separation of accidents ¹²]).¹³ for the *mutakallimīn*, when a black die touches a white object, the latter is then black not because it was causally changed by its contact with the black die, but because God chose to give it a black color when He recreated it anew—God could possibly have given it a red color. Deploying an amazing practical ingenuity, Muslim artists managed to validly inscribe the same motifs and designs across different media, scales and materials. This is most probably and cogently a consequence of the absence of nature and proper characteristics of the various media and materials according to the majority of Muslim theologians. Muslim abstraction in the arts is thus double: it is an abstraction not only within a given medium, in the form of arabesques or, in miniatures, human and animal figures with no perspective, shadows or modulation and with unworldly colors; but also at the level of the media and materials: by creating the same designs across various media and materials, they abstracted such media and materials, intimating that none of the latter has a proper nature,¹⁴ that nothing intrinsically distinguishes textiles, jade, ivory, metalwork, glass, wood, ceramics, bricks, and paper.¹⁵ Undecorated objects are rare in Islamic art, but in Islam one decorates with what has no proper nature, one enriches with what is implied to be poor in characteristics, one clothes with what hints to us its fundamental inexistence—luxurious poverty, in other words, poor luxury. For the perceptive person, the world itself, with its recurrent creation and its absence of nature, of characteristics, is a vast arabesque that ornaments Allāh. The same way that in copies of the Qur'ān arabesques surround many of the words, especially the sūras' titles, the world itself surrounds (while also being surrounded by) the eternal God (or, in Ismā'ilism, one or more of the divine emanations), Who alone has essential attributes.

Even when full with figures and objects, a successful Islamic miniature does not give the impression of overcrowding. Even with figures filling the entire space,

leaving no gaps, the Muslim arabesque does not induce the sense of suffocation one experiences in the *regular division of the plane* works of M. C. Escher, an admirer of Muslim arabesques. The void in Muslim miniatures and Muslim art in general, while not seen in the frame, is implied in it: the Muslim miniature breathes not so much through some space left empty in it but by the recurrent return to the void, and thus disappearance, of the figures and objects, and this even if there is no temporal interval between their disappearances and appearances^{16]} disappearance from its place is the same as its presence with Solomon, by virtue of the renewal of creation Therefore do not say 'then,' which implies a lapse of time, for the word *thumma* in Arabic implies a process of cause and effect in specific situations, as the poet says, 'Like the quivering of the spear, then it shook.' Now the time of its quivering is the same as that of its shaking. He says 'then,' although there is no lapse of time. Similarly with the renewal of creation ... the moment of the nonexistence of a thing is the very moment of the existence of its like ..." Ibn Al 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translated and introduced by R. W. Austin, preface by Titus Burckhardt (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 193.].¹⁷ Now you see it—and now you see it. Muslim miniatures and Muslim art in general are virtually as linked to the void as Chinese art, but in a different manner and to a different kind of void. What strikes me as paradoxical about the contorted rocks in many Persian miniatures, which rocks appeared first during the Mongol dynasty of the Ilkhanids, are not their unworldly colors but that they are anomalously connected to two different, virtually antithetical kinds of void, evincing a valid coexistence of the discrete modality of the breath of the all-Merciful (*nafas al-Ramān*) that recurrently gives existence to the entities that instantly revert back to God/nothingness, punctuating even the seemingly continuous line; and the continuity of Taoism, where the continuous breath-energy (*chi*) underlies even the seemingly discontinuous brushstroke (Li Jih-Hua: "This means that the movements of the painter's brush must be interrupted [without interruption of the breath that is animating them]"¹⁸). These rocks most probably belong to ' *ālam al-khayāl*, the Imaginal World, which, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, "brings together all opposites (*al-jam' bayn al-aād*)."¹⁹ How different is the subtle fullness of many a Muslim miniature from the present crowding of the majority-Muslim city of Cairo! The constant meditation on the notion of renewed creation, with its recurrent disappearances, affects the quality of the presence of the people who practice it: their presence is subtle. I recommend placing signs that would indicate the differential capacity of a particular space: "The capacity of this room is ten Ibn al-'Arabi disciples but only six persons who are oblivious to recurrent creation although they too are recurrently created."

The poetic can take the form of:

— the absence of metaphors through the literalization of figurative expressions in altered states of body and

consciousness. During his traumatic stay at Count Dracula's castle in Transylvania, how many times did the vampire's victim Harker witness "the mountains ... move like clouds"²⁰ (a time-lapse allowed by the freezing of the vampire in the coffin)? Talking about Harker, who traveled from Bremen to Transylvania ostensibly a few weeks earlier, his yearning fiancée Mina says to her friend Lucy: "I haven't seen him in ages." A few weeks after she says these words, Harker appears in Bremen, his hair now totally white.

— the universal extension of the metaphorical. In the Qur'ān, Solomon declared that he wished to have the throne of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, in his court. Someone "who had knowledge from the Scripture" (27:40), Aṣif b. Barkhayā (?),²¹ responded: "I will bring it to thee before thy gaze returns to thee" (27:40). According to Ibn al-'Arabi, he accomplished this by invoking God's renewed creation. The throne was at the court of the Queen of Sheba, then the cosmos disappeared, and when the cosmos appeared again before the gazes of (very similar versions of) Solomon and his guests had time to return to them (in less than 1/24 of a second), the throne—not the identical throne but an extremely similar one—was at Solomon's court. "Aṣaf's only merit in the matter was that he effected the renewal [of Bilqis' throne] in the court of Solomon."²² Was Solomon aware at that point of renewed creation? No; consequently, he was unaware of the full measure of his fitting response: "This is of the bounty of my Lord ..." (27:40). One would have expected that Solomon would have then presented the throne to Bilqis as a proof of the omnipotence of God, thus inducing her, who "was from a disbelieving people" (27:43), to become a Muslim. Instead—I would imagine to the surprise of those present—Solomon said: "Let the throne be altered, so that we may see whether or not she will recognize it" (27:41). When Bilqis arrived, she was bidden to enter the palace. She experienced then an encounter with the figurative in its most manifest guise; mistaking the floor made of transparent glass for a pool, she bared her legs. Solomon was quick to inform her of her error. She was introduced in the palace and presented with what appeared to be her throne. She examined it carefully then she said: "It is as though (*ka'annahu*) it were my throne" (27:42). I imagine that on hearing these words, Solomon underwent a kind of satori ("on a soil very unlike" Japan), a sudden knowledge, becoming aware that the throne that was presently in his court wasn't strictly speaking Bilqis' throne but as though it (*ka'annahu*), actually its recreation by God. Thus had God favored Solomon over His newest believing slave, Bilqis, who too received knowledge ("My Lord! Lo! I have wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon unto Allāh, the Lord of the Worlds" [27:44]), but not of renewed creation—which she might have received had Solomon not altered what looked very much like her throne at his court ("And We had certainly given to David and Solomon knowledge, and they said, 'Praise [is due] to Allāh, who has favored us over many of His believing slaves'" [27:15]). When the hoopoe

said to Solomon, who had “been taught the language of birds” (27:16), “I have found out (a thing) that thou apprehendest not, and I come unto thee from Sheba with sure tidings” (27:22), are these tidings to be limited to what he went on to tell him? I would think that they included also the sure knowledge of renewed creation. In Islam, the task of a human is not to be himself or herself (in Islam he or she—who has no necessity of existence—is basically nothing) but to become cognizant that he or she is in the likeness of himself or herself, by becoming aware of God’s renewed creation, and in the likeness of God—notwithstanding that “there is nothing whatever like unto Him” (Qur’ān 42:11)—since he or she is at each moment one of the infinite Self-Disclosures of God. Taking into consideration how the poetic function stresses selection over combination (Roman Jakobson),²³ there is a basic poetic modality to an atomistic occasionalist universe, where entities are recurrently replaced by what appears to be them, where we are not ourselves, but rather metaphors of ourselves: *ka’annanā*. It is thus felicitous that this atomistic occasionalistic view was the one prevalent among the Arab Muslim theologians, since Arabs were known to exalt poetry already in the pre-Islamic period. From *Sayat Nova* onward, Paradjanov’s cinema, with its atomistic occasionalist world and thus with its jump cuts, is one of the main instantiations of the metaphoric in cinema, since everything is in the image of itself in the jump cuts showing apparently the same entity. Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward are cinematic prose poems since the substitution of a term is not by another but by a very similar variant of itself. One can easily remark that the poet Sayat Nova made extensive use of substitution in the production of the poems included in Paradjanov’s *Sayat Nova*; but the spectator can also clearly see the substitution of the poet by very similar variants of himself in jump cuts in Paradjanov’s poetic film. *Sayat Nova* starts with a voice-over reciting these words from the Bible: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ...’” (Genesis 1:26). In the Bible these words are followed almost immediately by: “So God created mankind in his own image, / in the image of God he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Which is more basic, determinant: that mankind is made by God or that they are in the image of God? Is the second half of the quote from Genesis 1:27, where likeness precedes creation and being, a clarification of the first part? In case it is, man would be fundamentally related less to being than to likeness, characterized more as like himself than as being himself. Metaphor is usually based on ontology, derives from it (a poor kind of metaphor); but in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward, metaphor precedes ontology, is more basic. Paradjanov’s cinema from *Sayat Nova* onward is doubly a cinema of the image: because of its arresting images, but also and basically because the world it shows is in the image of itself. In comparison with Paradjanov’s *Ashik Kerib*, no other film has shown so much love not for the irreplaceable,²⁴ but for the singularity of the replaceable.²⁵ In such a universe, that which is extremely

similar but not identical to itself does not induce the kind of anxiety encountered in Capgras syndrome, undeath, and, as an unworldly entity, in radical closures. At the outset of Ashik Kerib’s journey in Paradjanov’s *Ashik Kerib*, his rival tricks him into entrusting him with his clothes while crossing the river, returns to town, announces that Ashik Kerib drowned and exhibits the clothes as proof. The universe of *Ashik Kerib*, a film dedicated to the memory of Tarkovsky (the filmmaker of, among other films, *Solaris* [1972]), not only can be melancholic but actually has an affinity with such a state, because in such a universe the state of death of someone is not a final one, a once and for all occurrence, but is an accident momentarily attached to the person and that has to be recreated by God from instant to instant if it is to appear to last (the Ash’arites’ view). While melancholic, this kind of universe does not require the selfsame beloved, but wholly accepts his or her or its replacement by a very similar entity! What would heal Ashik Kerib’s lover turned melancholic, and his mother become blind on hearing the convincing report of his death? It is the return not necessarily of Ashik Kerib, but of someone very much like him. Were the temporality of the universe of Paradjanov’s *Ashik Kerib* not an atomic one, I would be surprised and somewhat disappointed by the absence of any symptoms that Ashik Kerib was marked by death: even setting aside that, at least in art and literature, episodes of feigned or falsely reported death can be, and frequently are, indicative of dying before dying, the film spectator knows that while Ashik Kerib did not actually drown at the start of his journey, he was nonetheless, prior to his return, and unbeknownst to both his mother and his lover, beheaded at the court of Sultan Aziz. Notwithstanding that he was reported to be dead, Ashik Kerib’s mother and his beloved end up wholly accepting him when he appears again after an absence of several years, justifiably at no point feeling any suspicion that he is Ashik Kerib’s double or an imposter: once the accident of death is no longer recreated by God, Ashik Kerib is not merely no longer dead, he is not marked by death at all.

We who have no necessity of existence have one passion: to return back to nonexistence. The one act of creatures is facing toward the reversion back to nonexistence rather than toward the seeming chronological change. All other “actions” are actually occasions for the Reality, God, to act. To God and to those who are aware of His renewed creation of the world (“surely He begins the creation in the first instance, then He reproduces it” [Qur’ān 10:4; cf. Qur’ān 50:15]), we, who, lacking any necessity of existence, revert to nonexistence instantly, are portraits; to God, and to those who are aware of renewed creation, there is nothing but portraits. Taking into account the occasionalism of the Ash’arite Muslim theologians, each of these portraits is that of *the man without qualities* (to borrow the title of a Robert Musil novel). Like other things (“The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise” [Qur’ān 17:44]),

the face is praising God—but, if it is not beautiful, it is additionally (irrespective of whether it is laughing, sneering, or that of the dead body of a man or woman) imploring to be saved. That is why we feel that a beautiful face (but not necessarily the man or woman to whom it apparently belongs) is closer to God: it is just praising God (a face that while praising God is not also imploring others to save it is beautiful). While one of the tasks of other portraitists is to manifest the implicit imploration by the face that is not beautiful to be saved, the Muslim portraitist's task is to manifest that the face (but not necessarily the man or woman to whom it apparently belongs) is praising God, Whose face is the only thing that is not perishing ("Each thing is perishing except His face" [Qur'ān 28:88]); and to treat it and show it as a mask, as something that does not change, since, not having an intrinsic necessity of existence, it *instantly* goes back to nonexistence/God.

Paradjanov's ostensibly static *Sayat Nova* (as well as his subsequent feature films) is not an abrupt departure from his hectic preceding film, *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), with its pervasive camera motion, but pushes the motion in the latter to a more basic level. To someone who senses the universal and perpetual appearances, disappearances then appearances in Paradjanov's later films, even the exacerbated camera motion in *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* seems tame. How slow are the most frenetic MTV music videos in comparison to Paradjanov's *Sayat Nova* or *The Legend of Suram Fortress*!

Reaffirming their Islamic faith, during the early 1990s a large number of Egyptian actresses went back to the veil. One is not to expect much from mere actresses, especially ones working in the Egyptian film industry. But one should expect and demand much from Muslim filmmakers, even ones who have not had a tradition of investigating the medium of the art form in which they are working: they could and in a way ought to have indirectly reached this investigation simply by taking into account the kind of temporality most characteristic of orthodox Islam: atomism. Is this atomicity the only temporality to be found in Islam? No: to the highly Hellenized Muslim philosophers, the *falāsifa*, time is continuous; to the Ismā'ilis, time is cyclical ... Nonetheless, it certainly is the one most akin to the basic cinematographic apparatus. Cinema is the first medium adequate to represent and reflect the world according to the Ash'arite view because it functions at the level of the basic cinematographic apparatus in terms of both recurrent appearance and disappearance of entities, and absence of causality between the separate still frames. From *Sayat Nova* onward, rather than being a capitulation of the cinematic to painting, Paradjanov's films manifest, on the contrary, the revolving of the film around a diegetic world akin to cinema, since subject to recurrent appearance and disappearance.²⁶ Cinema is the first adequate medium to represent and reflect the world according to the Ash'arite

view also because the *mutakallimīn* denied there being a fast or slow movement, the perception of slowness being a result of the recreation of the ostensibly moving object at the same indivisible spatial unit in several "subsequent" moments—a sort of double-framing—so that the more frequent such recreation of the object at the same indivisible spatial unit in "subsequent" moments the slower the object is perceived to be. Here's my Islamic (more specifically, Ash'arite) version of the bet—whether a trotting horse has all four feet off the ground at one time—which reportedly was behind Muybridge's setting up of his cameras, ropes and diagrams in May 1872 at a race-course in Sacramento, California: a future rich Muslim patron commissions someone to prove his contention that at certain points the same stage/frame of the horse's trot is repeated. It is unfortunate that Muslim filmmakers have produced very few pixilation films, and that pixilation films are rarely screened in the Islamic world, for pixilation is the kind of filmmaking closest to the kalām's view, where the movement is both atomic and an accident added to the thing that is shown moving, and is slower or quicker according to whether one repeats certain frames or not. With the exception of the films of Paradjanov (who was not a Muslim) from *Sayat Nova* onward, up to now Islamic *cinematography* can be located only in the atomistic temporality of Islam and not in the numerous films and TV programs on Islamic themes, motifs and figures,²⁷ of the pamphlet [*Japanese Cinema* (Moscow, 1929)] preceding this essay has contrived to write a book about the *cinema* of a country that has no *cinematography*. About the cinema of a country that has, in its culture, an infinite number of cinematographic traits, strewn everywhere with the sole exception of—its cinema. This essay is on the cinematographic traits of Japanese culture that lie outside the Japanese cinema.... Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage.... The Japanese cinema is completely unaware of montage. Nevertheless the principle of montage can be identified as the basic element of Japanese representational culture." *Film Form and The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York, Meridian Books, 1957)], 28.] which are content with parading Islamic tradition's arabesques, calligraphy, architecture, and music (accompanied by a commentary), and/or, when the film includes among its characters one of the Qur'ānic prophets (Muhammad [Moustapha Akkad's *The Message*], Joseph [Youssef Chahine's *The Emigrant*] ...) or the first four caliphs (Salah Abouseif's *al-Qādisiyya*), trying to tackle the thoughtless prohibition in mainstream Sunni Islam on the representation of not only the prophet Muhammad but also all the aforementioned personages associated with Islam.²⁸ Youssef Chahine's *Saladin*, Abouseif's *al-Qādisiyya*, and Moustapha Akkad's *The Message*, three (tasteless and thoughtless) "epics" revolving around major Muslim figures and events, convey far less of Islam than do three consecutive jump cuts in a Paradjanov film.²⁹

X

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Jalal Toufic is a thinker and a mortal to death. He was born in 1962 in Beirut or Baghdad and died before dying in 1989 in Evanston, Illinois. Many of his books, most of which were published by Forthcoming Books, are available for download as PDF files on his website:

<http://www.jalaltoufic.com>. He was most recently a participant in the Sharjah Biennial 11, the 9th Shanghai Biennale, Documenta 13, *Art in the Auditorium III* (Whitechapel Gallery ...) and *Six Lines of Flight* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). In 2011, he was a guest of the Artists-in-Berlin Program of the DAAD.

- 1
An Ash'arite theologian or an Ibn al-Arabi disciple, who believed in the ever-renewed creation of a world that is not self-sufficient, could, indeed might have said the same words through which, for different reasons, the woman of Duras' film *Le Camion* avers the end of the ostensibly continuing world: "Look at the end of the world, all the time, at every second, everywhere."
- 2
Discontinuity, whether stylistic or thematic, is encountered throughout my books. In *Distacted*, it is encountered in the form of aphorisms separated by blanks. In *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, it is encountered in the manner of the (quantum) tunneling of the undead and teleportation, as well as the "counterintuitive" side effect of these, motionlessness in the absence of any discernable barrier ("One of the tolls for tunneling or teleportation, by means of which one moves through [or finds oneself to the other side of
- 3
Robert S. Fisher, Walter van Emde Boas, Warren Blume, Christian Elger, Pierre Genton, Phillip Lee, and Jerome Engel, Jr., "Epileptic Seizures and Epilepsy: Definitions Proposed by the International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) and the International Bureau for Epilepsy (IBE)," *Epilepsia* 46, no. 4 (2005): 470–472.
- 4
Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 242–247: "It has been observed that if its [the bee's
- 5
Zen master Hakuin Zenji: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"
- 6
In Ash'arite atomism, atoms revert back to nothingness because the accident of duration (*baqā'*) imparted to them by God does not subsist for longer than an instant.
- 7
While for Bergson, the philosopher of duration, an atom, like whatever "is not a center of indetermination," is subject to a necessity "which obliges it to act through every one of its points upon all the points of all other images, to transmit the whole of what it receives, to oppose to every action an equal and contrary reaction, to be, in short, merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe" (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer [New York: Zone Books, 1988
- 8
According to quantum physics, the indivisible unit of time should be reached at the Planck time: $5.391\ 06\ (32) \times 10^{-44}$ s.
- 9
Revenants: creatures who have the presumption to themselves settle an outstanding symbolic debt, not leaving it to (the exoteric) God to do that on the Day of Judgment.
- 10
Why is it that nowhere in the New Testament is there an incident where Christ—who heals the possessed and resurrects the dead—meets a revenant and commands him or her either to come back fully to life or to die until the Day of Judgment?
- 11
T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, with an introduction by Angus Calder (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 22–23.
- 12
In some other Muslim miniatures, what may appear, color-wise, to be an unrealistic depiction of an earthly body is actually either a realistic presentation of an Imaginal World (*'ālam al-khayāl*) embodied spirit or Intelligence or a realistic depiction of an earthly body tinged by the various colored photisms that Sufis perceive in a suprasensuous manner as they progress along the spiritual path (to the state in which they perceive the *black light* [*nūr-e siyāh*
- 13
The separation and independence of dance, music and design, but also of the dance phrases performed by the different dancers or groups of dancers, that is, of what would traditionally be viewed as the components of an organic artwork of dance, in the collaborative work of Cage and Cunningham; as well as the separation and independence of words and images in the work of a number of avant-garde filmmakers and theater artists, for instance in Robert Wilson's theater production of *Hamletmachine* and in Duras' film *Agatha*, should in principle not be difficult to appreciate for someone who has an affinity with or subscribes to the occasionalist standpoint of the Ash'arites or indeed of the *mutakallimīn* in general, where the different accidents that adhere to the bodies and atoms are independent of each other and of the latter.
- 14
Here's a suggested question to some future interviewer: "If so, Jalal, why are at least some Muslim filmmakers to explore and experiment with this mode of temporality and linkage that is akin to the medium of cinema at the level of the basic apparatus, if the occasionalism connected to this temporality and mode of linking, with its denial of a nature in favor of a custom of God, is alien to reflexivity?"
- 15
The differentiation between the Kūfic script, which with its rectilinear and angular forms and its monumentality was up to the twelfth century the only script utilized in epigraphic decoration, and the cursive Naskhī script, especially the thuluth variant, which, except for certain titles, replaced Kūfic almost completely from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, shows that Muslim artists were at one level quite sensitive to the different characteristics and properties of various styles, media and materials. But this discernment of the difference of the various styles, media, and materials—and who could possibly be more sensitive than artists to the difference of styles and materials?—had to yield to their implicit more basic view of the lack of proper nature and characteristics of entities.
- 16
"The moment of its [the Queen of Sheba's throne's
- 17
In Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle*, whose events take place in Turkey, there is a resonance between two sorts of appearances out of nothing: one in the set radical closure, that of Lale; and one implied by the arabesques, that of ever-renewed creation.
- 18
François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 76–77.
- 19
"The imaginal faculty (*al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila*) and the World of Imagination ... is the closest thing to a denotation (*dalāla*) of the Real. For the Real is 'the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest' (Koran 57:3). Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz was asked, 'Through what have you known God?' He answered, 'Through the fact that He brings opposites together.' Then he recited this Koranic verse." William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 115.
- 20
Qur'ān 27:90: "You see the mountains—you think them firm, yet they move like clouds."
- 21
Or was it really Khadir, or else the angel Gabriel assuming the form of Aşif b. Barkhayā?
- 22
Ibn Al 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 193.
- 23
Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 71.
- 24
Can one say: is unique what can be replaced only by itself? One should go further: is unique, and thus irreplaceable, that which cannot be replaced even by himself/herself.
- 25
What is itself can afford associations away from itself, for example, metaphors; but what is ontologically not itself but only like itself cannot afford such associations, since its singularity consists in this: that the creatural association it induces is first and foremost to itself.
- 26
Sohrab Shahid Saless' *Still Life* (1974) is another film that should not, for other reasons, be viewed as a capitulation of the cinematic

to painting. It is rather, along with Paradjanov's *Sayat Nova*, one of the greatest films of the Middle East and Transcaucasia; one could give it an alternate, cinematic title derived from Beckett: *Stirrings Still—Life*.

27

Cf. Sergei Eisenstein: "It is a weird and wonderful feat to have written a pamphlet on something that in reality does not exist. There is, for example, no such thing as a cinema without cinematography. And yet the author [Naum Kaufman

28

Al-Azhar University objected to Youssef Chahine's first version of the script of *The Emigrant* because the protagonist was ostensibly modeled on and represented the prophet Joseph. When Chahine filmed an apparently insufficiently revised version and screened it in Egypt, he was soon taken to court and his film was pulled from theaters pending the court's decision. The film was subsequently rereleased after Chahine won his appeal (given the widespread degeneracy in Egyptian culture around the time of the release of the film, I was not that surprised that the uproar in certain Egyptian circles was all about the possible transgression of the prohibition of the representation of a Qur'anic prophet, in other words, that none of it was over the crassness with which ancient Egypt was shown).

29

In this bigoted age of religious and ethnic civil wars, whether in Transcaucasia, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or elsewhere, it is salutary to have the example of Paradjanov, this Armenian born in Tbilisi, Georgia, who, from *Sayat Nova* onward, created the films to which (many) Muslim filmmakers, including Azerbaijani ones, feel most affined.

Anton Vidokle

Energy of Kosmos is Indestructible!!!

This is a script for a film we shot last summer in Russia and Kazakhstan. The film is still being edited. The script is comprised of excerpts from poems, philosophical texts, scientific writings, academic papers, and historical studies by and about Cosmo-Immortalists, a surge of thinking that emerged in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It linked the Enlightenment with Russian Orthodox and Eastern philosophical traditions to create an idiosyncratically concrete metaphysics of its own. The script liberally combines these writings with recent news items and various personal details. It includes the poetry of Nikolai Zabolotsky and Maximilian Voloshin, writing by Maria Ender, and quotes from Nikolai Fedorov, Vladimir Solov'ev, and Alexander Chizhevsky. It's very much indebted to a number of scholars, including Svetlana Semenova, Svetlana Cheloukhina, Vyacheslav Stepin, and other writers whose work influenced my understanding of this complex and paradoxical field of thought. The script contains little punctuation and no footnotes and is broken into simple lines of text for subtitling. Some of the more significant quotes are italicized for emphasis.

—Anton Vidokle

ACTRESS

Here is what's going to happen
The man in bed is a professional actor
He is not asleep
He will turn on cue and start to speak in Russian
I will translate his words for you

Before he moves, I want to tell you something
My mother was born in the same town as the man who
flew into space from his apartment
Her father was a painter and a fighter pilot
He was killed in battle in China when he was very young
This film is dedicated to him

The footage you are seeing was shot in Ukraine a few days
ago
Liza found this place and I like it very much
Even though I have never been there and know nothing
about the area
We produced the snow by shooting at the sky with artillery

The actor will read a script for a film

It will be shot on location in Kazakhstan, in Crimea, and in
Siberia
It's based on the ideas of a Russian philosopher
Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov
Who, like others, was convinced that death is a mistake

Because the energy of cosmos is indestructible
 Because true religion is a cult of ancestors
 Because true social equality means immortality for all

Because of love
 We must resurrect our ancestors
 From cosmic particles
 As minerals
 As animated plants
 Solar, self-feeding, collectively conscious
 Immortal
 Transsexual
 On earth, in spaceships, on space stations
 On other planets

[CUT. ACTOR SPEAKS]

ACTOR

I have no idea what energy is
 No one does
 But it is subject to a law
 A law that has no exceptions
 An abstract, mathematical law
 About a numerical quantity
 That does not change when something happens

Trees fall, houses burn, cities flood, stars explode
 But the number remains the same, always
 It's peculiar

Life is impossible without energy
*A tree is saturated with solar energy.
 Branches are arranged by the most intense solar energy,
 Roots, along the paths of the most intense salts of the
 earth's force.
 The forest reveals the saturation of space in three
 dimensions;
 It captures the marrow of life.
 The frost on the window forms the image of force-currents
 caught on a single plane.
 I want to catch direction.
 The body grows out of the meeting of various movements.
 There are no boundaries—the connection of things.
 Things are nodes of various energies.*

Energy is life
 Life ends, but energy is indestructible

If you expect to find a scientific definition of
 consciousness, you will be disappointed
 Like energy, nobody knows what it is, but all know it exists
 In humans, in animals, perhaps in other things

What can be expressed mathematically can be recorded
 and transmitted
 Backed up like code or a music score
 That is what Russian cosmists thought at the beginning of
 the twentieth century

It carried over to America

Cosmos is not merely distant outer space
 Like cosmetics, cosmos means beauty and harmony
 It also means the world, a harmonious world
 In which this planet is a mere speck

Unlike cosmos, earth is full of chaos, suffering, and death

To reach cosmos, one does not travel upwards
 Climbing the Eiffel Tower to view the panorama of the
 world, to exalt oneself
 To reach cosmos one has to dive
 To immerse oneself
 In the ocean

Cosmos needs reason to be cosmos, not chaos
*Cosmos is a force without reason, while man is a reason
 without force
 But how can reason become force, and force become
 reason?
 Force will become reasonable when ruled by reason
 In this sense, everything depends on man*

Russian cosmists aimed to build cosmos on earth
 To construct a new reality free of hunger, disease,
 violence, death, need, inequity
 Like communism
 They happened at the same time

*We don't erect temples to cosmogony
 In order to reflect the external world
 But merely to see facets of our ignorance*

*All the systems of the world, casts of ancient souls
 Are mirrored phantasms of mutual reflection
 Two juxtaposed abysses*

*There is no exit from the labyrinth of knowledge
 And a man will never become other
 Than what he passionately believes*

[CUT. ACTOR CONTINUES]

ACTOR

Here is a simple idea
 Common efforts of all mankind should be directed toward
 a single task
 Victory over death
 Immortality
 Resurrection of all who ever lived
 By all means available to science and art

Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov called this the *common task*
 He meant it literally

Using their own genetic makeup, humans would resurrect
 their parents

From themselves, parents would resurrect their own
parents
And so on
Back to the first people on earth

The process could take several thousand years
Which is why it becomes urgent to begin immediately
Because we are all dying

This means
Museums should be moved to cemeteries
Libraries should become nurseries for the resuscitation of
writers.
Armies, factories, farms, hospitals, and universities should
work together to achieve the common task of immortality
All the productive forces of humanity should aim to
achieve the return of every resurrected human being
Each person with his or her own individual consciousness

A new grand synthesis of various sciences will be reached
on a new, cosmic scale
Nature, including the cosmos and humanity, will become a
scientific laboratory

During this time a new type of society will emerge
Fedorov called it *psychocracy*

Resurrection requires a new body to host consciousness
A rebuilding of tissue
Humans should understand the mystery of how plants
regenerate themselves
We need to study their mechanism of nutrition
For the necessary reconstruction of the human organism,
humans need to become self-feeding

We will build new organs
Change and adapt to new living conditions in the cosmos

As long as humans *reproduce* like animals, they will die
like animals

To exist as a gendered being is to follow the path to death
Man has a huge energy potential
Which he uses to multiply as a natural being

The energy of love is the most potent of all types of energy
Love can be used in a new, more powerful way

When sexual distinctions are overcome
A tremendous amount of energy will be unleashed
And it will increase as the need for sexual reproduction
decreases
Love will satisfy a more profound need

This is because
At present, sexual love is egoistic
The noblest ambition of love should be
To fight death
To develop a new creative personality

Immortality and resurrection for all!

In transforming nature's destructive forces
In making them constructive
We will gain control over evolution and the regulation of
the cosmos
We will conquer death itself
And release the endless creativity of life within the
universe

To that end, we must strive to acquire knowledge and
experience
To labor within the existing limits of knowledge and
technology
To use real means and opportunities available today

Gradually, our limits will expand
All that seems fantastic to us today
Will become real!

[CUT. A GROUP OF ANIMALS APPEAR ON SCREEN.
THEY RECITE FROM "THE MAD WOLF" (1931) BY
NIKOLAI ZABOLOTSKY]

Gathering of the Animals

CHAIRMAN

Today is the anniversary of the Mad One's death.
Let us honor his memory.

STUDENT WOLF

Most honored Chairman, all of us lament
the Mad One's sad, untimely death.
But I've been delegated
to seek your answer to a question,
formulated by our board of students.

CHAIRMAN

Speak.

STUDENT WOLF

Thank you. My question is plain.
We all know that the old forest is dead,
and that no boring mysteries remain
for us to believe in to the very end.

We are building a new forest, such as
has not been seen before on earth.
Men, women, children, all of us—
and I swear we shall complete the work.

Before your very eyes, we're altering
the universe, a wretched thing till now.

We sit before you on this day of reckoning,
engineers, judges, doctors, in a solemn row.

Mighty science sparkles like a waterspout.
The wolf eats pies and writes down figures.
He pounds nails. The world trembles at his shout.
And our technical block's already finished.

And so, most honored Chairman, tell me,
why do you trouble our sober world
with that apostate, that traitor's crazy dreams?
The Mad One's plans are totally absurd!

Just ask yourself this: Can a plant be turned,
simply by dreaming, into an animal?
Can a mere product of the earth
learn how to fly and then become immortal?

The dreams of the Mad One were crazy from the start.
He gave his life for them. Well, what of it!
The new century's song is ringing out.
We build a world, but you, you fly from it!

WOLF ENGINEERS

Arranging crossbeams in a special way,
we are throwing a bridge over to the other shores of
animal felicity.
We are constructing electrical men,
who will bake pies.
Internal-combustion horses
will carry us across the bridge of suffering.
And a coachman in a glass hat
will sing a ditty:

"Giddyup, gee-gee,
twice the ener-gee-gee!"

Of this sort is the builders' dream,
so their progeny should reign supreme.

WOLF DOCTORS

We, doctors, physicians,
interpreters of the beasts' emissions,
into the skulls of wolves insert glass tubes,
observe the brain at work, constructing,
the patient's coiffure not obstructing.

WOLF MUSICIANS

On the body's violins, we
squeak, as science hath decreed.
With our noses' bow we saw
through the new days' bolted door.

CHAIRMAN

Slowly, slowly, slowly,
the marvelous age approaches.

Like balls of thread, we roll into the distance,
trailing our deeds behind us.
For we have woven wondrous cloth
and countless miles our feet have trod.

The forest, with its hunger, misfortune, grief,
like a fiery neighbor, looms far off.

Look, beasts, at these woods. A bear
in them consumes a mare,
while we who dine on pies and ale
forget the caverns whence we hail.

Look, beasts, at this valley deep.
Consumed by beasts, a bullock weeps,
while we who have built our habitation
note down the magical equation.

Look at this world, oh valiant beasts.
Here the naked creatures course,
while we, with the sword of science unsheathed
to cut off all evil, go forth!

Slowly, slowly, slowly,
the marvelous age approaches.

I close my eyes and see a glass structure in the forest.
Handsome wolves, in lightweight clothing,
are engaged in long discussions on science.
One of them leaves the group,
lifts his slender paws,
rises smoothly into the air,
lies on his back.
The wind propels this floater eastward.
Below, the wolves are talking:
"Our philosopher has gone
to instruct the Burdock
in ethereal geometry."
What's this? Strange visions,
the soul's mad fabrication,
or simply the product of the mind?
Learned scholar, you decide!

The Mad One's dreams are quite absurd,
but you don't need eyes in the back of your head
to see that from the viewpoint of the old world,
we're mad as hatters to be baking bread!

The ages pass, years drift away,
but living things are no dream;
they live and, living, they prevail
over the old truth's stern regime.

Sleep, Mad One, in your noble grave!
May your head, unhinged by its thoughts, rest now!

You do not know who dragged you from your den,
who harried you into a life of solitude and suffering.
Seeing nothing ahead, hoping for nothing,
you roamed the earth, like a great captain of thought.

Yours is the first breaking of the chains!
You are the river that gave birth to us!
We stand at the frontier of the ages,
workers, our heads like hammers.
We have sealed the ancient graveyard of the forest
with your mangled, rotted corpse.

Lie now in your grave, at peace,
Great Flyer, Great Topsy-Turvy.
We wolves will carry on your work,
your eternal labors. Onward to the stars!

[CUT. ANIMALS DISAPPEAR. ACTRESS SPEAKS]

ACTRESS

Western leftists think Russians fucked up communism
And that the Soviets contaminated Marxism with
totalitarianism and repression
After all
Why did the Communist Revolution take place in such a
backward country?
Where three-quarters of the population could not even
read or write
Where science, modernity, technology
were largely introduced by force
Why did it not happen in France, for example?

I suspect there was something peculiar to Russians
themselves
That did not carry over to Western Romantic intellectuals
and artists
Who remained captive to their own dreaming

Because of Fedorov's unusual call for immediate action
The whole Soviet experiment was indeed
An applied cosmism

To this day, the Western Left remains stuck in the same
place
Communist hypothesis
Idea
Dream

It's so hard to accept
that with all their tragic and glorious moments
Russians already had it

What was behind that strange energy that realized such a
radical social experiment?
The energy that enabled a modernization so rapid
a new society that rivaled the most advanced capitalist
states
Propelling humanity into cosmos

And yet
If all energy is truly indestructible
Where is that energy now?

In a contest organized by an international cosmetics
company
Egyptians nominated their president to be sent on an
all-expenses paid trip
into the cosmos
The winner is slated to train at the Global Space Camp in
Orlando, Florida
In answer to the question, "Why do you want to go to
space?"
The Egyptian president quoted Russian scientist
Alexander Chizhevsky
*Man is not only a terrestrial being,
but a cosmicone connected by all his biology, all
molecules, particles of the body
with cosmos
with its cosmic rays
its flows and fields*

According to Hu Fang in China, a real estate developer is
planning to build luxury condominiums on Mars

Meanwhile in America
Google's director of engineering
is trying to achieve immortality and resurrect his father
He is trying to modify his own DNA
taking several hundred different vitamins every day
to deactivate the genes responsible for aging

In his house he set up a small museum
A room containing everything that belonged to his father
books, letters, photos, film and sound recordings, receipts,
clothes, tissue samples
because an advanced computer program
will soon be able to use this material to interpellate his
father's consciousness

I hope he succeeds

As for the young fighter pilot
who died over the Great Wall of China
The only object that remains
is a painting he made before he went to war
A landscape

It hangs on the wall in a room inside a housing unit
in the city where the man who flew into space from his
apartment used to live

I would like to see it

X

Anton Vidokle is an editor of e-flux journal.

Oxana Timofeeva

Communism with a Nonhuman Face

The title of this essay paraphrases the famous expression “Socialism with a human face,” which refers back to 1968, to the events in Czechoslovakia known as the Prague Spring, but also to the Soviet 1980s, the time of the late Soviet Union prior to perestroika, when the idea of changing the very nature of so-called “really existing socialism” from the inside according to human/democratic values was still popular among dissidents. Apparently, it was not a renewed and more refined socialism, but a good old capitalism which entered this space under the mask of the human. Apparently, something went wrong long before perestroika, when communism went in an unknown direction, like a strange animal that managed to escape from people and from the very really existing socialism. Here I would like to track this strange animal and read its traces as peculiar “signs from the future.”

I want to suggest not that something went wrong with socialism, but that something is wrong with the human face. Let me start from the argument, which sounds quite banal already, about the dialectical relationship between the ideology of democratic humanism and the racist social practices of neoliberalism.

Questions are posed here and there, in the entirety of Europe and further to the West, across first world countries and around: What happened to our nice and glorious multicultural world? How is it that our multiple identities, subjectivities, cultural diversities, and irreducible singularities are no longer taken into account? Where has our welfare paradise gone? Is it already lost? The enemy is easy to locate: the one percent, the rich, the bankers, the absolute capitalist minority that owns the world, together with far-right governments and politicians who provide this minority with silent support and hardcore austerity politics. Right-wing governments never defend the interests of people; they only pursue their own interests—the power of the rich over the poor, the power of capital over labor, the power of the one over the many.

Austerity policy is another name for state racism, since its first targets are migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees. But it equally abuses artists, intellectuals, the precarious, the disabled, the sick, the poor, and the retired—all those whose very existence does not correspond to the holy land pictured by the perverse imagination of the right-wing. In brief, the far-right is the evil attacking the freedoms and rights won by the people in the course of twentieth-century class struggles, and then carefully guarded by social democrats.

My object of critique here, however, is not the evil of the right-wing, but rather the good of democratic universalism, since they both form part of one and the same dialectical chain. My argument is very simple: if humanism, often used as a slogan for struggles against racism and xenophobia, proceeds from the assumption that there is some exceptional dignity in human beings and some



Film still from Soviet director Valeri Rubinchik's *King Stakh from Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Дикая охота короля Стаха), 1979.

exceptional value to human life, then it is just one step away from putting into question the value of any nonhuman life.

The institution of human rights is based on recognition. Someone should be recognized in his or her human dignity. If this concrete biped is recognized as human, regardless of his or her gender, race, or ethnicity, then this individual must have documents and the right to vote, the right to life, the right to property, and so on. He or she pays taxes to the state to which he or she is attached as a citizen, so that this state will provide for his or her security. The rights of citizens are becoming practically equal to human rights. And there is a certain logic here. The state is a guarantor of human rights; therefore, a certain human can enjoy his human rights as a citizen of a certain state. Citizenship is becoming a legal condition for someone's *humanship*, so to speak. Hence the enormous difficulties faced by those who have no citizenship at all, or who have the wrong citizenship.

Today, illegal migrant workers are the most vulnerable in terms of citizenship. They are being massacred in high numbers at the borders of welfare states while trying to enter illegally. If they have already entered, they are constantly trying to escape the police. They are living in the streets, in the basements of houses, and in slums, even as they enable the prosperity and economic growth of these glorious states through their low-paid or unpaid labor. The institutions of human rights and citizen rights are based on the exclusion of nonhumans and noncitizens.

However, my intention here is not to say that all we need to do is extend the realm of human rights to include animals, to bring them into the human universe—this is basically the agenda of animal rights defenders, which is totally fine. But if these changes were implemented within the existing capitalist regime, we would end up with something like animal citizenship, with related attributes like border control, dealing with illegal animals trying to reach happy European fields from forests on the global

periphery, and so on.

I would rather like to claim that the class struggle has to be carried forward by those who appear as nonhumans, or even as unhuman monsters, like the Hollywood aliens that symbolized communism during the Cold War. Revolution does not have a human face. It goes beyond the human and human rights, towards animality. This idea was perfectly drawn by Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in his “Ode to Revolution”: “You send sailors / To the sinking cruiser / there / where a forgotten kitten was mewing.”

This image of revolution is striking and powerful. It hits the mark. There is something absurd and irrational in the excessive generosity of the revolutionary gesture depicted by Mayakovsky—imagine how crazy an army commander would have to be to send a battalion of sailors, adult armed men, to risk their lives for the sake of some forgotten, tiny, politically insignificant creature. And yet, that’s precisely how the drama of revolutionary desire should be performed.

Almost like these sailors, I will now try to look back to the sinking cruiser of the Russian Revolution in search of, if not a proper animal, then at least for its traces, almost erased by history. First of all, let’s see how the Revolution dealt with animals and other nonhumans, or with those who were “not human enough.”

After the October Revolution of 1917, the idea of a “revolution in nature” and even of a “struggle against nature” was continuously advanced in all spheres of the nascent Soviet society. Nature was supposed to have changed—liberated from its reliance on necessity but also preserved from the precariousness of contingency. A diffuse avant-garde attitude unconditionally sustained the idea of a point of no return, a “giving up the ship,” a total transformation of the social and natural orders towards emancipation and equality. Nature was also considered a battlefield for class struggle. The central theme running through Soviet literature and poetry of the period is the potential or actual transformation of one species into another—of animals into humans, for example—accompanied by the acquisition of higher levels of consciousness and freedom.

Nature is not “nice”: the Russian Revolution sees nature, in a Hegelian-Marxist spirit, in terms of unfreedom, suffering, and exploitation, and the animal kingdom serves, in a way, as an example of society that should be transformed. It is not a matter of the predominance and superiority of one species over the other, but a matter of taking everything into account. As long as inequality remains untouched at the interspecies level, equality of people, too, can never be realized. Or, to put it in Adornian terms, history is the history of oppression, and the violent domination of humans over humans starts with the human domination over nature.¹

As the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov puts it, “I see the liberties of horses / and equal rights for cows.”² In his poem *The Triumph of Agriculture*, Nikolay Zabolotsky, one of the founders of the Russian avant-garde absurdist group OBERIU, describes nature as suffering under the old bourgeois regime. He compares animals to proletarians and creates a utopia of their progressive liberation facilitated by technology:

I saw a red glow in the window
Belonging to a rational ox.
The parliament of ponderous cows
Sat there engaged in problem-solving ...

Down below the temple of machinery
Manufactured oxygen pancakes.
There horses, friends of chemistry,
Had polymeric soup,
Some others sailed midair
Expecting visitors from the sky.
A cow in formulas and ribbons
Baked pie out of elements
And large chemical oats
Grew in protective coats.³

Andrey Platonov deserves special attention in this respect. Among the numerous intellectuals, artists, poets, and writers who were inspired by the Russian Revolution and invested a great deal of creative energy and work in it, Andrey Platonov is a unique figure. Coming from the industrial proletariat, he became a major Russian writer for whom the Revolution consisted in crafting a truly Marxist literary practice examining topics like community, sexuality, gender, labor, production, death, nature, utopianism, and the paradoxes of creating a new (better) future.

In his writings, not only humans, but all living creatures, including plants, are overwhelmed by the *desire for communism*, a desire which, as Fredric Jameson pointed out, still has not found its Freud or Lacan.⁴ A passage from Platonov’s novel *Chevengur* (1928–1929) is emblematic in this regard:

Chepurny touched a burdock—it too wanted communism: the entire weed patch was a friendship of living plants ... Just like the proletariat, this grass endures the life of heat and the death of deep snow.⁵

The desire for communism comes out of profound boredom (*toska*) in the face of the unbearableness of the existing order of things. “We should change the world as soon as possible,” proclaims one of the Bolshevik



Ilya Kabakov, Heads, 1967.

characters in *The Sea of Youth*. "Otherwise even animals are already getting insane."⁶

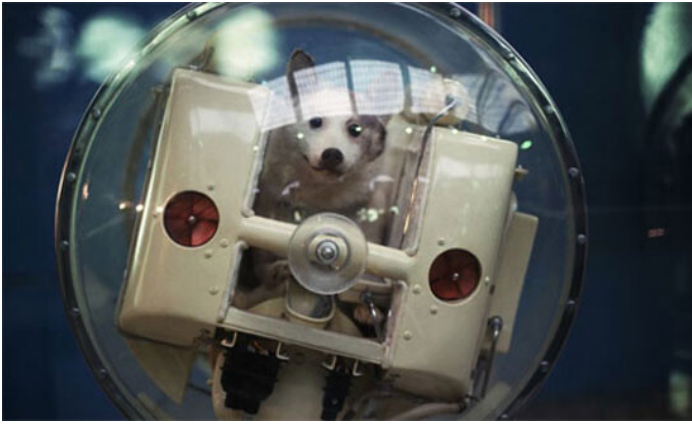
Platonov's expectations for communism go far beyond ideology and politics. The more depressive and tragic nature is, the stronger the hope for happiness and freedom. This hope is essential and it possesses all the force and passion of natural life. In animals, this hope consists in following their destiny without knowing any alternative besides death.

Platonov's communists and Bolsheviks are revolutionary animals. They literally recognize themselves in animals' faces and project onto animals their own revolutionary passion. And if, as human beings, they are ascetic and refuse the immediate gratification of bodily desires, they do so because their greater desire, or their *unbearable* desire, is the desire for communism. They are moved by their passion for the realization of happiness for everyone, including the smallest animals.

The necessity and urgency of revolution as a planetary change is already inscribed in unconscious animal nature, which seems to expect from humans, from communists, from *us*, a kind of salvation. Platonov's historical materialism is animated by the force of an anxious animal's intolerance against all that is and towards the happy anticipation of all that should be:

The desert's deserted emptiness, the camel, even the pitiful wandering grass—all this ought to be serious, grand, and triumphant. Inside every poor creature was a sense of some other happy destiny, a destiny that was necessary and inevitable—why, then, did they find their lives such a burden and why were they always waiting for something?⁷

From this perspective, revolution is not so much a move forward, but an absurd gesture of turning "back"—towards these weak forgotten creatures who are awaiting help,



Laika, the first dog in space. Photo: Marc Garanger/Corbis

towards Mayakovsky's kittens, but also towards ourselves as those unhappy animals. The only problem is that it is always already *too late*. The tragedy of animality consists in the fact that an impossible catastrophe happens at every moment. The animal (or the slave, or the poor) dies of sorrow and misery without achieving its long-awaited happiness.

Mourning functions as an internalization or preservation of what is lost. Memory is a faithful thought: by preserving what is lost, the one who remembers saves it from the emptiness of oblivion. Memory is a fidelity to what is no longer there, but what nevertheless endows us, as Walter Benjamin would say, with "weak Messianic power":

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.⁸

The claim of the Benjaminian past is that it affects the present and relates it to the urgency of revolutionary action, which can answer to the hope of those whose lives were interrupted by death. If the chance of life was lost, if the creature, in whose heart unknown happiness throbbed, died in poverty, sadness, and slavery, then only those who are alive can live up to its expectations. Platonov shares with Benjamin this paradoxical view of the materialist dialectics of history, when, for example, he writes about the responsibility of living people to those who died during the war:

The dead have no one to trust except the living—and we should live now in such a way, that the death of our people was justified and redeemed through the happy

and free destiny of our nation.⁹

In these lines, Platonov identifies himself with a certain nation, and the dead, too, are part of this nation. However, in his prose he does not describe some actual, existing nation, but rather, to put it in Deleuzian terms, he "invents a people."¹⁰ (This is similar to Kafka, who invents a Mouse Folk.) Deleuze describes this invented people as follows:

This is not exactly a people called upon to dominate the world. It is a minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary. Perhaps it exists only in the atoms of the writer, a bastard people, inferior, dominated, always in becoming, always incomplete. *Bastard* no longer designates a familial state, but the process or drift of the races. I am a beast, a Negro of an inferior race for all eternity.¹¹

It is precisely to this kind of bastard people that Platonov dedicates his novel *Soul*. Its protagonist, Nazar Chagataev, who was trained as an economist in Stalinist Moscow, is instructed by the Party to go to the desert and find a small nation in order "to teach it socialism." His novel *Soul* (*Dzhan*) is a generalized personification of the Soviet people, as well as an unexpected metaphor for the Jews (wandering around the desert in search of freedom). It is also a literary figure that gathers under the name of "nation" all the unhappy and lost humans and animals:

Seven days later, after taking the most direct footpath, Chagataev reached Tashkent. He went straight to the Central Committee, where he had been expected for a long time. The secretary of the Committee told Chagataev that somewhere in the region of Sary-Kamysh, the Ust-Yurt and the Amu-Darya delta there lived a small nomadic nation, drawn from different peoples and wandering about in poverty. The nation included Turkmen, Karakalpaks, a few Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, and people who had forgotten who they were ... The poverty and despair of the nation was so great that it looked on this work, which lasted for only few weeks in the year, as a blessing, since during these weeks it was given nan bread and even rice. At the pumps the people did the work of donkeys, using their bodies to turn the wooden wheel that brings water to the irrigation channels. A donkey has to be fed all through the year, whereas the workforce from Sary-Kamysh ate only for a brief period and would then up and leave. And it did not die off entirely; and the following year it would come back again, after languishing somewhere in the lower depth of the desert.

"I know this nation," said Chagataev. "I was born in Sary-Kamysh."

"That's why you're being sent there," the secretary explained. "What was the name of the nation—do you remember?"

"It wasn't called anything," said Chagataev, "though it did give itself a little name."

"What was this name?"

"Dzhan. It means 'soul,' or 'dear life.' The nation possessed nothing except the soul and dear life given to it by mothers, because it's mothers who give birth to the nation."

The secretary frowned, and looked sad. "So there's nothing they can call their own except the hearts in their chests—and even that's only for as long as the hearts keep on beating."

"Only their hearts," Chagataev agreed. "Only life itself. Nothing belonged to them beyond the confines of their bodies. But even life wasn't really their own—it was just something they dreamed."

"Did your mother ever tell you who the Dzhan are?"

"She did. She said they were runaways and orphans from everywhere, and old, exhausted slaves who had been cast out. There were women who had betrayed their husbands and then vanished, fleeing to Sary-Kamysh in fear. There were young girls who came and never left because they loved men who had suddenly died and they didn't want to marry anyone else. And people who didn't know God, people who mocked the world. There were criminals. But I was only a little boy—I can't remember them all."

"Go back there now. Find this lost nation. The Sary-Kamysh hollow is empty."

"I'll go," said Chagataev. "But what will I do there? Build socialism?"

"What else?" said the secretary. "Your nation has already been in hell. Now let it live in paradise for a while—and we'll help it with all our strength."¹²

Nation here is a kind of "substance," matter which can build communism out of itself, but which can also exhaust itself as a natural resource, since the poorer the life of a people is, the more greed it provokes. Nothing prevents the reduction of the substance of nation to pure labor force.

The life of this small population is disappearing; it literally disappears in the sands of the desert, together with the naked or almost naked people in rags. The reader of Agamben will immediately recognize here the idea of bare life. Platonov starts the history of his people from this zero-level of life, or as Agamben would put it, from the grey zone in between life and death. This life is not properly human; it is deprived of symbolic, real, and cultural wealth. It has nothing to identify with and nothing to defend itself against exploitation, which, according to Platonov, exhausts the living soul:

Chagataev knew from childhood memory, and from his education in Moscow, that any exploitation of a human being begins with the distortion of that person's soul, with getting their soul so used to death that it can be subjugated; without this subjugation, a slave is not a slave. And this forced mutilation of the soul continues, growing more and more violent, until reason in the slave turns to mad and empty mindlessness.¹³

This is how Platonov inverts the dialectic that, from Hegel to Marx, claimed that labor transformed an animal into a man and a slave into a master. The Hegelian slave changes the world with his labor and acquires self-consciousness, whereas Platonov's human-animal works to maintain its life and hopes for a better world, but finally exhausts himself and falls into despair, paradoxically finding his last refuge in the dumb body of an animal.

[figure

2013_10_08-bagautdinov-hands-up-50Watts_8WEB.jpg
Illustration from L. Davidichev's *Hands Up! or Enemy No. 1, A Novel for Young Adults* (1971).

Illustrations and typography by R. Bagautdinov.]

Platonov's escape route from the human is described in his story "Rubbish Wind," written in 1934. Its main character, Albert Lichtenberg, a physician of cosmic space, transforms little by little into an indefinite animal because he is unable to stay human in fascist Germany. He finds his last refuge in this animal body, which no one can recognize any more. And if in *The Sea of Youth* the zoo technician Visokovsky dreams that "the evolution of the animal kingdom, stopped in former times, will recommence, and all poor creatures, being covered with hair, who are now living in distemper, will finally achieve the fate of a conscious life,"¹⁴ in "Rubbish Wind" we see the inverse process:¹⁵ a man becomes covered with hair and loses his sanity, so he is put in a concentration camp because he is no longer human enough:

The judge announced to Lichtenberg that he was

sentenced to be shot—on account of the failure of his body and mind to develop in accordance with the theories of German racism and the level of State philosophy, and with the aim of rigorously cleansing the organism of the people from individuals who had fallen into the condition of an animal, so protecting the race from infection by mongrels.¹⁶

Paradoxically, this unrecognized animal, or animalized man—or, to put it in Agambenian terms, this Muselmann¹⁷—performs a feat at the end of the story: he saves a Jewish communist woman and helps her escape from the camp, and then finally sacrifices himself in vain when he tries to use his own flesh to feed an insane woman who lost her child. He exhausts himself to the extent that when his wife, who is searching for him with a police officer, finds his dead body, she cannot recognize it as human.

Rubbish Wind is one of the most hopeless of Platonov's works. In it, he inverts the entire picture and opens up—for a moment—the secret world of a human being “in distemper,” a human hidden in an animal body. He writes for this dying creature—as Deleuze would put it, “one writes for dying calves”—in order to fix the possibility that was not recognized and is already lost. The human becomes animal and then finally becomes waste, similar to Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. What is recognized is the animal. “Like a dog”—these are the last words of K. in *The Trial*. When someone puts a knife in his heart, he says: “Like a dog.” To this Kafka adds: “It was as if the shame of it was to outlive him.”

Commenting on this passage, Walter Benjamin relates this shame to Kafka's “unknown family, which is composed of human beings and animals,” and under the constraint of which Kafka “moves cosmic ages in his writings.” According to Benjamin,

To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable as the world of realities was important for him, and, we may be sure that, like the totem poles of primitive peoples, the world of ancestors took him down to the animals. Incidentally, Kafka is not the only writer for whom animals are the receptacles of the forgotten.¹⁸

Thus, Kafka's animal is the “receptacle of the forgotten.” Not of the *being* as forgotten, but rather of the forgotten as such, as a meaningful nothingness, around which our being constitutes itself as negativity, desire, and memory. Does that oblivion not come from the fact that “I am the other,” which points to, among other things, what Žižek calls “the un-human core of humanity”? Memory is restlessly lurking through the forgotten. The self-relation

of the human cannot but confront this paradox—the unhappy animal which we retrospectively produce out of our own despair dies ingloriously before we manage to fulfill its anticipation of freedom. The gates of *terra utopia*, where we might realize the last hope of our desperate animality, are always already closed. And on these gates, it is written: “Animals are not allowed.”

However, as Žižek notes, it is precisely and only among animals that Kafka was able to imagine a utopian society.¹⁹ His last story—the one he wrote in March 1924, just a few months before his death, when he already knew he was dying—was “Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk.” At least three contemporary philosophers—Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mladen Dolar—have written about this story, in which there are basically two protagonists: Josephine the singer and her fellow “mouse folk.” Of course, the mouse folk here constitute the kind of small “subhuman” nation which, in Deleuze, is invented by literature. The first-person protagonist in the story is one of the mouse folk. They wonder to themselves about Josephine's posture, her role in the society of mice, and her historical fate. One of the mice asks how it is possible that Josephine's voice is so attractive to her fellow mice. There is nothing special about her voice; she does not possess any talent as a singer; she is not an outstanding person. Apparently, she is just piping, like all mice do, except that the other mice don't pay so much attention to their own piping and sometimes are not even conscious of it. But when Josephine sings, they stay silent. The secret is probably in her special posture—she is an artist, an exceptional individual, she maintains an exceptional and marginal position in relation to the whole of the mice people. It is precisely this marginal position which makes the immanence and heterogeneity of the mice people possible.

This, claims Dolar, is the position of the artist, who produces a readymade, an artwork as the “non-exceptional exception, which can arise anywhere, at any moment, and is made of anything—of ready-made objects—as long as it can provide them with a gap, make them make a break, it is the art of a minimal difference.”

According to Jameson, the mice people praising Josephine is a paradoxical example of the utopia of radical democracy: Josephine's singing is a kind of excessive sacral performance that allows the mice people, through abandoning their individual identity, to finally become who they are. The essence of people appear in the essential indifference of the anonymous. “She constitutes the necessary element of exteriority that alone permits immanence to come into being.”²⁰

Žižek further radicalizes Jameson's statement and claims that this is an example of what communist culture should look like. “The mouse community is not an hierarchic community with a Master, but rather a radically egalitarian ‘communist’ community.” Žižek calls Josephine “the



Russian director Sergei Eisenstein with a mexican candy skull.

People's Artist of the Soviet Mouse Republic," and asks: "What would a communist culture look like?"²¹ He even provides an answer to his question—but I will not do that. Instead, my claim is that in order to answer this question, which is the question of both theory and art praxis, one needs, as Kafka's famous dog would say, more philosophy—more interpretation of what precisely an artist can and should borrow from the beast.

X

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- 1
See Vincenzo Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat* (Cambridge: Oleander Press, 2013), 67–103.
- 2
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Selections from the Triumph of Agriculture," *The American Poetry Review* (July 2005)
- 3
Ibid.
- 4
Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 97. See also Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 180.
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Andrei Platonov, *Chevangur*, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis Press, 1978), 198.
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Platonov, "Soul," in *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 27.
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Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254.
- 9
. Взыскание погибших. (Trans. by author.) See http://www.aplatonov.ru/read_plat/182.
- 10
Gilles Deleuze, "Literature and Life," in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.
- 11
Ibid.
- 12
Platonov, "Soul," 22–24, italics added.
- 13
Ibid., 103.
- 14
. Ювенильное море // Платонов А. На заре туманной юности, 302.
- 15
"The regressive metamorphoses of 'Rubbish Wind' suggest that in the fascist 'kingdom of appearances' all is not as it seems. In this kingdom of beasts evolution moves on the opposite direction, i.e. toward a human degradation, and this results in the animalization of man and a racist society that expels defective "subhumans" as extraneous zoomorphic beings" Hans Günther, "A mixture of living creatures: Man and Animal in the Works of Andrei Platonov," *Urbandus: The Slavic Review of Columbia University* (2012), 14, p. 271..
- 16
Platonov, "Rubbish Wind," in *The Return and Other Stories*, trans. Angela Livingstone and Robert Chandler (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 82.
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See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Boston: Zone Books, 2002).
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Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 132.
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Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 370.
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Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, 125.
- 21
Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 368.

*Lìchūn: Start of Spring**The cat is too clean to want to be human.*

Dear Navigator,

I don't know your real name, but I'm sure "Navigator" is an appropriate substitute that both reflects the place where I hold you in my heart and conveys the respect I've silently maintained for you these many years. If you permit, I'd like to continue addressing you by this name. Actually, I hear we're almost the same age, and this makes me all the more eager for us to share a sustained correspondence.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Xie Delin. My parents met working for the Party in the Soviet Union, and when I was born they gave me what was then a popular Soviet name, Vladimir Ilyich Xie Delin.

At the time, the Soviet Union was known as "Soviet elder brother." My parents diligently studied Russian, because it was the key to unlocking the future of International Communism. But quite soon China ushered in an anti-revisionist movement, and to avoid sabotaging my prospects, no more mention was made of my Soviet name. I still remember how melancholy and plaintive were the Soviet folk songs my mother would softly sing to herself at night. It's possible to find even more details about my parents' story in the archives of the Chinese Communist Party, and the reason I mention this is because I've recently resurrected my formerly short-lived Soviet name, which is directly related to the experimental project in which I am now involved.

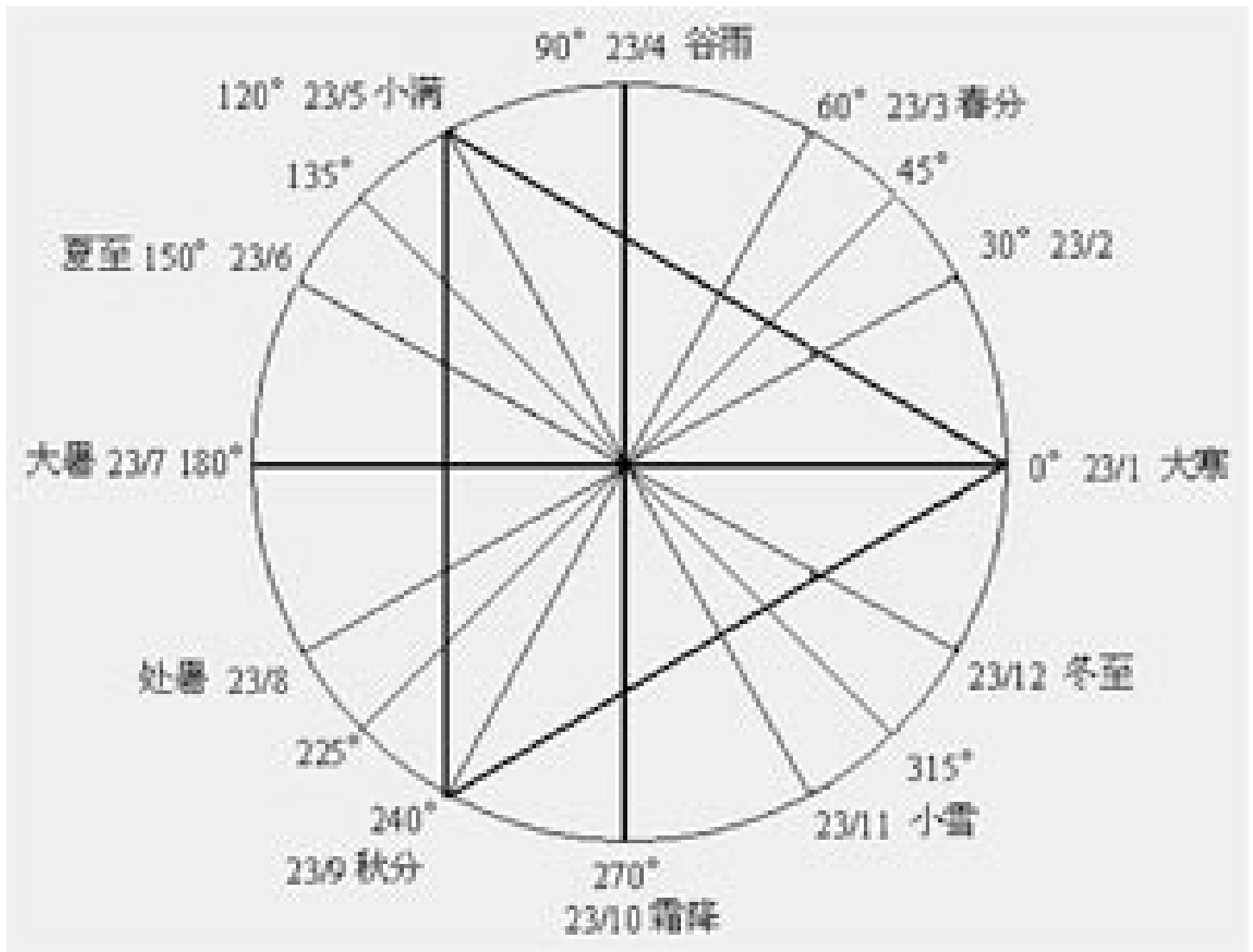
You've probably already heard about the spaceflight research facility on the outskirts of Moscow, where six volunteers from Russia, Italy, France, and China will enter an isolation module and embark on a 520-day simulated space mission to Mars; of the six volunteers, I am indeed the one from China. One of the objectives of this experiment is to gauge whether humans can physiologically and psychologically endure the round-trip journey from earth to Mars. If everything goes well, we will arrive on the 250th day, and possibly even have time for walking around outside, before using the remaining 240 days for the return.

I never doubted the incredible significance of this mission for humanity. Not only is this what motivated me to participate in the experiment, it's also my primary reason for accepting any challenges that arise in the course of it. But I still faintly sense something which, for reasons I can't articulate, perturbs me, makes me distracted and restless, gives me the foreboding sense that what I am going to confront is exactly the same predicament from which I am escaping. I'm even afraid that at a certain moment during the journey I could fall into an eternal state of vertigo.

I really had to think it over before deciding to write you. I

Hu Fang

Dear Navigator, Part I



sense a connection between us. I sense that it is only this intimate dialogue between us that can truly help me pass the coming days of extreme loneliness and tedium. I have knowingly risked violating the nondisclosure agreement in order to write you, but I have no alternative. Only our connection can save me from mental chaos.

Though the city before me is somber and ashen, the spring streets have suddenly burst forth with excitedly walking youths, who even manage to reveal hardened smiles from amidst the dense fog. If you are open, I believe you will support me in my preparations for embarking on this odyssey.

—Vladimir Xie, February 5

Yǔshuǐ: Rain Water

Behind every door I open, there is only nothing.

Dear Navigator,

The primary task here is to comb through the historical clues while constantly following the central axis northward through the uniform darkness, otherwise I will completely lose my way. There's a good possibility that this axis already exists in our pineal glands, although right now I know nothing of it. The primary task also includes: bidding farewell not only to my relatives, but also to humanity, in entering the one-person isolation module.

They say my activities in the isolation module will actually be recorded twenty-four hours a day, and I will live entirely under observation. This is exactly the means for developing relations with others to which I need to adapt: an indirect means of contact through video or some other medium—the hybridization of democracy and networked society, which fills my heart with a dull pain.

About 3.6 meters wide, twenty meters long, with six tiny sleeping compartments, a living room, a kitchen, a workspace, a toilet, a lab, and a greenhouse—truly an extravagant space, whether considered from the perspective of capital investment or of personal living. It

seems that as long as I have the blessing of all humanity, I can consume without a second thought these resources, these lives, along with my own life. I always felt my life had been undervalued, but perhaps it is precisely because of this that I was charged with penetrating certain mysteries of the universe. It looks a little comical, but this mission was actually launched in the name of all seriousness, in the names of political groups and of nations.

Before entering the isolation module, I strained to catch a glimpse of the world outside. Rain was falling from the sky, and the damp cement ground reminded me of some supermarket parking lot, or a listless afternoon during middle school. The materiality of the world is ever so frank, vividly exposed before me, just as the isolation module itself announces, through its precise, flawless materiality, how humans must adopt extreme measures of artificial control before they're able to realize hypermateriality and understand nature.

But the real obstacle is that, once you know that no matter the hypothesis, you're still carrying out your experiment in a familiar material environment, you have to confront a kind of split consciousness: you are controlled by the experiment, and are also the one in control. I'm not sure whether all this data monitoring is really about observing me as an individual, or observing my performance as an individual, and perhaps there's no way to even separate the two, and this is an experimental deviation that we simply have to accept. Similarly, I'm entirely unsure whether my perseverance here is for the sake of finding my inner voice, or for the sake of my performance before the instruments.

What I do know is that my career is destined to unfold in a claustrophobic, artificial environment with exaggerated lighting and big-budget effects, in an attempt to capture the attention of an unresponsive box office. Maybe the content of the performance itself and the real issues we are facing have become confused.

Dear Navigator, I feel so deeply that as long as we can maintain our intimate connection, I will be able to find my true reason for seeing things through. And in that last glance before entering the module, I had a premonition: that patch of rainy cement would become a reference for the measurement of my evolution.

—Vladimir Xie, February 18

Jingzhé: Awakening of Insects

If I can decide to buy that pair of shoes, I can also decide whether to live or die.

Dear Navigator,

Everything in this isolation module simulates an actual

space capsule; the only thing that could not be simulated is weightlessness, which is about as disappointing as a bride not showing up for her thoroughly planned luxury wedding.

When we try to reinvent ourselves in this world, what we really want to do is cast off gravity; it is only when we float through the air that all daydreams really begin; and now, walking in summer clothes through this wooden cabin, it's like we're at a resort. I once thought this isolation module could at least be a kind of retreat, but after just a few days, I realized that the tests we have to perform daily will keep us as occupied as office drones.

Every now and then, when I want to do a test on brain circuitry, I put on my hat (it's actually covered with a mesh of electrode wires), and once the foam on the crown has absorbed the saline solution—growing abnormally heavy and settling tightly on my head—electrical currents begin to prick my nerves. For the better part of each day I am glued to the readout monitors, responding to all kinds of test protocols flashing across the screen, while constantly receiving photoelectric prompts that force me to react rapidly.

Most of the time, I feel that instead of being about science, these tests are just a puerile way to kill time. Only in the dead of night can I finally extract myself from the grind of this routine, only then can I recall a sense of reality that is not so removed: night in the Moscow suburbs, rain still moistening the birch forests—all I have to do is push open the door of the module, and I can fall back to that damp cement ground.

It's not that I'm afraid of true solitude, the deepest solitude, the kind you experience among a group of boisterous people; on the contrary, that kind of unconditional solitude is exactly what enables me to stay here without any regrets.

Dear Navigator, they actually shouldn't keep me so busy. Instead, they should make me so lonely I go mad. That's the only way to truly find the path to Mars. Just as right now, it's only in the dead of night that I can return again to our connection.

—Vladimir Xie, March 7

Chūnfēn: Vernal Equinox

Every night I strain to fall asleep, strain until my heart is squeezed with pain.

Dear Navigator,

I constantly wonder what time it is where you are. In day after day of high intensity tests—especially after the frequent photoelectric stimulations and the screen

exercises with flashcards—I experience a kind of post-orgasmic exhaustion, and then everything becomes detached, such that I even detect my own bitter smile: in this completely isolated and prophylactic environment, it seems that all impure thoughts must be kept outside, and all unhappiness, all guilt thoroughly eliminated.

Food also aggravates this “sense of purity” that I have: everything we eat is either powder, liquid, or in capsules. The form of the food no longer has any significant material distinction, nor is there any difference, in the biological sense, between meat and vegetables. The only thing indicated on the packaging is the general flavor: for instance, whether it’s chicken or beef flavor. The original form of the food appears only as an association in our heads.

Beyond all doubt, the tone of the media is optimistic: these volunteers are enduring a loneliness that would be unbearable for ordinary people, they are throwing themselves into an enterprise that will benefit the future of humanity. Family, friends, lovers, they all exist in the form of a blessing on the other side of the screen, while I wave to them from inside. Usually at this point, shadows of things neglected in the past emerge, just like the trivial incidents that great enterprises never care to mention.

In the contract that we signed for the mission, after all the technical clauses, I wrote down a line of poetry from Tao Yuanming¹—“What is there to say after death? / Entrust my body to the mountain”—along with the following “testament”:

1. If the worst should befall me, please donate my organs to those in need. [This is actually a line my parents once taught me.]
2. Please use the five hundred thousand renminbi that I will receive from this experiment to establish an online foundation for research into and prevention of suicide, to be called “Hua_Sheng_Lai.”²

1. If the worst should befall me, please donate my organs to those in need. [This is actually a line my parents once taught me.]
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My parents did not live to see the smog over today’s Beijing. In the process of committing to the revolution,

most of the time they were treated as enemies of the revolution. All the same, they still loved the protagonist in the film adaptation of *The Gadfly*, and it seems that this and other literary images helped maintain their faith in the enterprise of Communism; these ideals also became bizarrely mixed up with that fable by Tao Yuanming of which they were so fond, “Peach Blossom Spring.”⁴

If the smog over today’s Beijing came about in exchange for the blood of the revolution, then, dear Navigator, how should we understand the once and current space race, as well as this journey to Mars? Are we in the process of completing the unfinished enterprise of Communism?

—Vladimir Xie, March 20

Qīngmíng: Clear and Bright

Somehow I’m always a half-beat slower than others; every time I want to say something, they’ve already turned away.

Dear Navigator,

Received on earth after a twenty-minute time delay, the communications I send from here function like a time machine. For some reason about which I’m no longer clear, when I push the key and the microwave data is sent off, a dull pain spreads from my fingertips through my entire body.

Those twenty minutes allow me to slowly enter a void of memory, to return to a long sealed-off building where, for a long time, I had no idea I was the only liaison between a certain group of things; a time when I had been settled for so long in that building, which resembled this module, that I lost track of time. I remember I still paid monthly rent, and could still recognize my room number in the corridor filling up with dust. Sometimes I even got the feeling that everyone in the building had already moved out, and I was the only person living there, like some holdout waiting for compensation.

Looking out through the dust-coated porthole window, the city was eternally ash colored, yet I could still make out the Imperial Garden and the Zhúbō [筑波]⁵. The first character, *zhú*, meaning to build or construct, has architectural connotations; *bō* is the character for “waves.” (*trans.*) fish market off in the distance, the only landmarks I could trust for gauging reality: the cycles of the plant life in the garden brought me news of the changing seasons, while the size of the crowds in the fish market told me how the economy was doing.

I was already used to that viscous, ash-colored mist filtering through the edges of the window, flowing into the room and dispersing there, gradually encroaching upon my windpipe, lungs, and entire body, until at a certain point the ash-colored mist would make me dizzy all over,

and then produce a fleeting ecstasy, which would release me from “thinking.”

When I tried to stand, I would end up tumbling lightly to the bed, and then, escaping earth’s gravity, drift through the window and beyond, where, striding across the planet’s surface, all humanity was so hurried and full of confidence.

I was twenty-four that year, an awkward-looking but dreamy programmer at a company called New Star, spending whole days camped in front of the computer developing a software called “PP Time Machine,” which captivated me, and also showcased my abilities, so that I became the driving force behind the project.

It was also there, in the midst of the cloud-computing boom, where our fates first intersected. That was the beginning of our acquaintance.

OK, I have to do another test, must stop here for today.

Chat later!

—Vladimir Xie, April 6

Gǔyǔ: Grain Rain

To celebrate my birthday, I bought clothes online without even checking the prices.

Dear Navigator,

I noticed the girl named Hua_Sheng_Lai one day when we were doing backend monitoring of the PP Time Machine’s user rate. Her name leapt off the screen, her data revealing that she liked to use Time Machine’s delay function to schedule the release of her Weibo messages, as though she enjoyed playing temporal games of hide-and-seek with everybody.

I took a liking to her Weibo feed, its brightness, humor, narcissism, self-deprecation:

*I feel sorry for the time, because it cannot kill itself.
If there’s time before I die, I’d definitely wash my
socks, get that feeling like in TV ads of being so fresh
people can’t help sniffing.
It’s pretty good to be an insect, because you’ll die
before this world can make you melancholy.*

I fell a little in love with her.

At the time, across the whole company and around the clock, everybody was working on perfecting Time

Machine’s functionality, especially me. As the person in charge of its development, I dreamt that PP Time Machine would become a breakout product, proving my brilliance. At the time, my only diversion each day was to read her Weibo. Checking out how she was using PP Time Machine was also without a doubt the most exquisite task of all when it came to the product.

In those days of round-the-clock, intense work, which were also the days when everybody was captivated by Time Machine, it seemed as though we could skip forward and rewind time like a tape player. In the days leading up to that fateful day, we were immersed in an almost festive atmosphere.

If only I had noticed your signs then, maybe I would have fewer regrets now. Maybe I could fly untroubled into that pure, starry space. But in reality, I have set out on this long and winding journey, which will truly, profoundly allow me to understand your teaching, and accept the turbulence of time, wherein the order of things is upended, wherein we meet again what has already passed.

—Vladimir Xie, April 19

Lìxià: Start of Summer

If you truly like me, why can’t I put my hands on you?

Dear Navigator,

The isolation module has an air of sadness. Everyday upon waking I take a sample of my urine, which always makes me wonder whether I’m not in the sterilization unit of a hospital.

And everyday I’m so eager to see that red-haired girl on the monitor—Ophelia, the Austrian mental health specialist who everyday records my facial expressions in a dossier, while I, too, inspect her facial expressions through the monitor. She is the only link we have to the outside world, and the only member of the opposite sex we get to see every day. Frankly speaking, my desire to see her is just like my desire to confide in you.

It’s strange how even though I spend every day with my comrades, they seem to be nothing more than my avatars and shadows; I have no sense that they are any more substantial than the images on the monitor. Perhaps because we’re all so professional, we get along the way that professionals are supposed to in civilized society, each with his own responsibilities. Probably because we’re all under pressure from the outside, a collective mentality exists among us, such that there is none of the friction that occurs in ordinary interactions.

However, among the six of us there have emerged two different convictions, neither of which is capable of

swaying the other: one group believes we're actually on a space mission to Mars, while the other believes we're only conducting an experiment inside a ground-based isolation module. For those who believe the former, time is spent worrying over whether everything is proceeding normally with the flight, time exists in a state of tension, and accordingly is relatively active; while those who believe the latter are just as actively engaged in killing the endless time.

The only consensus is: we ultimately have to leave earth in order to appreciate all the small gifts it provides us.

Dear Navigator, I must maintain this intimate connection with you—just like how on a retreat one must maintain the central axis in one's head—so that in this endless interstellar journey I do not lose my bearing.

I will hold your hand!

—Vladimir Xie, May 5

Xiǎomǎn: Grain Full

In my moment of confusion, I breezed through the next minute. It's time for bed.

Dear Navigator,

My brain has swollen, like in oxygen deprivation. Have the summer winds already blown across the Kunming Lake, are the pigeon calls already spiraling in the air above the drum tower?

In any case, in this process I must accept how, under the gaze of the media, I have let my body become a tool for export and import, for probing, at the intersections of different times, the possibility of humanity extending its longevity. Under general conditions on earth, this would be related to religious experience, but I am using an interstellar voyage to verify the possibility. In the process of approaching light speed, my time will slow to that of myth, suspended somewhere, just as reality can be preserved indefinitely in people's memories, where we can connect with time that has already passed.

Such as that day Hua_Sheng_Lai casually wrote on Weibo:

Been dealing with depression so long, I've got to give myself a break. Don't feel sad about my going. Bye-bye.

A chill rushed down my spine, and then I immediately experienced a strange excitement, like when a beast springs out at you from some dark recess. It rapidly engulfed me. Then a voice told me: The moment you have been dreaming of has arrived, PP Time Machine will become the center of everybody's attention. I could not bear the double shock that this inflicted on me, and I

turned to the company for help, but the managers demanded that we maintain our composure and not leap into reckless action.

By then, posts of consolation from the online community had already flooded her Weibo thread, and someone contacted the local authorities. Her body was discovered in the women's dormitory. One end of a colored nylon rope was tied to the upper bunk, the other tied around her neck. She committed suicide in the same place where she liked to log into her computer, only her computer was switched off when they found her body. Her parting Weibo message had been posted using Time Machine's delay function.

Dear Navigator, how can I describe to you the feeling I had then, the terror and the excitement of passing through the loss of innocence?

Because of Hua_Sheng_Lai's suicide, PP Time Machine garnered the popular recognition I'd been dreaming about. Schooled in crisis management, the company publicly apologized for the unforeseeable tragedy, while critics angrily denounced the company. As later market surveys confirmed, PP Time Machine gained users from the ordeal.

"Nobody was at fault. Nobody could have ever imagined that PP Time Machine's delay function would bring about this tragedy." The psychiatric counselor hired by the company continued, "Moreover, since the incident, PP Time Machine has been updated with an information monitoring system, which we believe will effectively watch out for this kind of situation in the future."

In truth, I was powerless to make any decisions or exert control over anything. With my colleagues looking at me enviously, I was transferred to a top-secret department, with twice the salary, and twice the responsibility.

Dear Navigator, what I want to say is, if I didn't have your guidance and protection, I'd probably be eternally, apathetically repeating the same injury against the innocent.

—Vladimir Xie, May 20

Mǎngzhòng: Grain in Ear

How I long to talk up the good things in this world, since it's all my fault.

Dear Navigator,

Hua_Sheng_Lai's Weibo account is still online, forever frozen on her last message.

Everything she wrote, the cloud maintains for her, as if she'd only left temporarily to attend to something. I

wouldn't be astonished if some new content appeared on her feed one day, for it's far easier to extend one's life in the cloud world than in the real world.

In the real world, there are too many encounters that stir our emotions. Once, when I was sitting by the door of a snack shop, facing out onto the street, my boiled tea eggs still steaming, the street light across from me seemed to become a studio stage light, and the movements of the passersby took on special significance, such that you could almost guess each person's story, each person's preoccupations.

From the ATM near where I was sitting there came the clear, sharp sound of keystrokes, as I ate up the piping-hot noodles. How does time compensate one's sorrows? All your friends, your mother (the mother you said on Weibo that you both loved and hated), how will they bear this pain? When I glimpse a girl on the street in a miniskirt, I think of you.

Enveloped in countless dark nights, I sense in the dimness a certain kind of impulse that comes from dark matter; if you stay still and quiet, you can sense the impulses generated by invisible material.

My parents believed that martyr's blood could be exchanged for today's blissful living, and their energy shaped the future and afterlife for which they hoped. But we have already been dispersed from the powers of the collective, atomized into scattered and aimless particles, returned to chaos.

As such, dear Navigator, however much I need the delicate impulses of your dark void, they unthinkingly, and incrementally, propel me along the trajectory of fate.

—Vladimir Xie, June 7

Xiàzhì: Summer Solstice

Even when I wake up, I tell myself to go back to sleep, because after all there's nobody waiting for me.

Dear Navigator,

Because of Hua_Sheng_Lai's suicide, I was transferred to New Star's top-secret M500 software engineering section, which I later learned was the branch developing software for the Mars project.

Unpredictable and fantastical events often prove to be a part of the world's normal process, like the way the Mars project originated from an audacious vision: all the world's investors should get together to develop extraterrestrial property. And I, just an insignificant speck swept along in all this—what I end up colliding with depends on fate.

Just think about it. The lives of my parents' generation were almost entirely cut off from the cloud world. Their lives exist in my head or in the files of the Party archives, but they are outside of the cloud world that, today, is shared by all. The cloud world—I can't think of a more reassuring way to extend life.

I also forgot to tell you about my dreams, which are becoming an ever more vivid part of my waking life. After spending the whole day as a test subject, I fall into a deep depression. I become indifferent to everything around me, and usually it's on these nights that my dreams appear incredibly real.

I dreamt my earwax bloomed like coral.

I dreamt of mountains and valleys, which seemed to have once been the site of fierce guerilla fighting, and forests, which once harbored the soldiers, and wild fruits, which once moistened the soldiers' cracked lips; but then what appeared before me was an ecological park built for tourists, with mountaintop villas and swimming pools.

As I dream, I suddenly feel I have been here before, so familiar are the roads, the terrain, the ridges of the mountains, the plant life. Breathing in the fresh air, gazing into the distance from the mountainside, the agony of the first time I was shot dead abruptly comes to mind: seeing myself fallen there, bleeding profusely, life index rapidly falling, completely paralyzed, helplessly watching myself go. Yes, my comrades and I have already rehearsed this war hundreds of thousands of times in our hypersimulation computer games, learning how to adapt to local conditions, how to guard ourselves—so it is no surprise that each blade of grass and each tree feels familiar, even elicits a queer sense of intimacy and excitement.

Frightfully lonely here, with only a faint breeze rustling the treetops, the landscape is so beautiful that it could hardly have anything to do with war. This gives me a supernatural sense of relaxation. Reality will quickly prove that this war is anything but a fiction, that the imagined enemies will not appear as they did in the computer game, that the feverish anticipation my comrades and I felt for their appearance was only for the sake of validating, should any of us get hit, that the blood we spill and the bodily pain we suffer will be equal to that of our enemies.

There is no need for me to imagine dying anymore—compared to sitting in front of the computer and imagining over and over the agony of getting wounded and dying, to be killed in action here would perhaps be liberating.

Liberation.

I dreamt that before I left this room, the ground was already crawling with insects, everything falling apart,

walls flaking. It was amazing how rapidly it deteriorated, but now I am moving to another place, where the ringing of Sunday church bells can be heard in the distance.

Dear Navigator, I urgently need the tolling of church bells, or temple bells, to feel the blessings of the masses.

—Vladimir Xie, June 21

Xiǎoshǔ: Minor Heat

In the entire galaxy, my existence amounts to nothing more than the addition of a minor blemish to the Pisces constellation.

Dear Navigator,

I don't know whether the six pills I swallow every day are actually necessary for replenishing vitamins and nutrients and fatty acids and other trace elements, or whether they're just placebos.

My colleagues have begun to hold heated discussions about food, although usually when their visions of a certain delicacy reach a climax, they abruptly stop. As for our three crewmates from Russia, there is an additional topic of discussion—vodka—which always ends in an argument.

As though meant to test our mid-flight emergency response capacity, yesterday there was a sudden blackout in the module: everything went pitch dark, followed by the ventilation system shutting down, and I soon had difficulty breathing. Then came a message from the crew commander asking everybody to remain calm.

I thought of the first time I went diving, and the terror when the instructor let go of my hand. Confronted by the vast ocean floor, I seemingly returned to the chaotic, boundless beginning of the world, completely losing my sense of time and space, the sound of my breath amplified like a voice tearing through my body. The slightest slip in attention would send me plunging into another world—perhaps this is the near-death experience of which people always speak. The space module could also be this kind of place.

Every time I leave, it always looks easy but it's actually hard, there's too much anxiety. In dismal weather, a middle-aged woman carries a plastic bag filled with vegetables, while the people getting off work for the day pour into the bus, signs of depression blackening the lights of the city. The thick of family life is near at hand, as the plump body of a young housewife (wearing pink see-through nightclothes) slowly vanishes from the street corner. I recall your childhood, "What a good and gentle person you are!"

Tell me, when is it that love and hate become so intensely

entangled that people feel they have to kill themselves in order to escape it all? The after-hours career women are still wearing their suit skirts and red heels, the food vendors already ablaze, the striped lamps of the salons turning, and I feel like vomiting, but then I think of you and feel better—even feel the happiness in this world of chaos, so intoxicated I don't want to move another step.

When those blinding lights switched back on, I surfaced drenched in sweat, the monitor before me coming back to life, the ventilation system letting out a roar, everything running again. Calmly fixing the breakdown in the spacecraft simulator's power system, the crew commander had saved our lives.

That fire burning in some dark corner below the overpass—in the post-rain twilight, its outline appeared incredibly sharp, suddenly leaping into sight.

Dear Navigator, I've finally smelled those wafts of incense.

—Vladimir Xie, July 8

Dàshǔ: Major Heat

If I believe in life after death, then I should be able to understand why the people I love must also die.

Dear Navigator,

Aviation is the same as seafaring, it's the science of getting lost, and one of our most important tasks each day is to check the heading and flight coordinates, to avoid getting off course. Although I don't know where we are, my sense of direction is still pretty functional, only I have the vague sense that time has slowed for me. In infinite space, the vacuum enclosing the isolation module seems to have buffered time. Since life inside the module is shielded from the complicated outer world, it's as though my relationship to time has also become purer, and therefore time has slowed. Fundamentally, is there any absolute difference between somebody sitting in prison and me sitting in this isolation module? Having once been tempered by the earthly world, and now being put in this isolated environment for tempering, everything inside the module has taken on a strange sense of freedom. In my parents' time, prison was a national apparatus that had to be destroyed, and they willfully smashed its concrete walls: in restricting the scope of physical activity, prison actually stimulated the free will of the people it contained, while the physical suffering of their bodies only hardened their conviction in the revolution and the future. But what I'm seeking is not some superficial equilibrium between good and evil that can be obtained from already existing national apparatuses. What is important is how to transform punishment into creativity through self-reflection: if prison and the isolation module flying to Mars both use the restriction of freedom as a means of

arriving at sublimation and the completion of a more ambitious calling, then the ruminations of the people in prison and my own ruminations in this isolation module should both lead us to a new consciousness of the misfortunes of the past. Dear Navigator, I think you will agree that ultimately being banished here is in fact my good fortune.

—Vladimir Xie, July 22

X

Translated from the Chinese by Andrew Maerke

Hu Fang is a fiction writer and curator based in Guangzhou and Beijing. He is the co-founder and artistic director of **Vitamin Creative Space** in Guangzhou and *The Pavilion* in Beijing. He has been involved in various international projects including the *documenta 12 magazines* as coordinating editor and Yokohama Triennale 2008 as co-curator. His published novels include *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* and *New Arcade, Shopping Utopia*.

1

Lived 365–427. The verse is taken from “Ni Wan’ge Ci San Shou” (*Three Poems in Imitation of Coffin Bearers’ Songs*). (*trans.*)

2

Evoking the unusual usernames of members of online communities, this name offers multiple interpretations depending on how its characters are grouped: *huā*, commonly meaning flower, or to spend, but it has other meanings as well; *shēng*, meaning to give birth or to produce; existence, life; raw; *lái*, to come. These can also combine to form other words: *huāshēng*, peanut; and *shēnglái*, by birth, innate. The name thus variously connotes: PeanutComes; Pay_Your_Life; flowersprout; Born Flower; etc. (*trans.*)

3

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4

In the fable, written in 421, a fisherman discovers a utopian community that has remained hidden from the world for centuries after its members’ forebears fled from civil unrest during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). (*trans.*)

5

A fictional name inspired by the famous fish market in Tokyo, Tsukiji [築地 in simplified Chinese

A few years ago, in November 2007 to be precise, I started a project on the history of the arts in the Arab world. I remember the month because I'd received a phone call that month from a woman by the same name.

November calls and asks me whether I am interested in joining a retirement plan just for artists, something she referred to as the Artist Pension Trust.

Until that point, I'd not even heard of retirement funds just for artists and I'd certainly not heard of the Artist Pension Trust. So I asked around and found out that The Artist Pension Trust—which I will refer to as “APT” from now on—was started in 2004 by two men. The first is a businessman, an entrepreneur whose name is Moti or Mordechai Shniberg. I soon found out that Moti had a partner, a man who came from the world of finance, and someone who turned out to be a risk management expert, even a guru of sorts: Dan Galai.

So how does APT work? How do Shniberg and Galai structure this retirement fund for artists?

They usually start by setting up shop in a city where they know that a lot of artists live and work—Berlin, for example. Once there, they contact a number of respected curators in that city. They then ask the curators to, in turn, contact up to 250 artists the curators know and respect. The curators subsequently call their artists and ask if they wish to join APT, just as November did with me.

If an artist says yes, APT signs a contract with the artist. This contract, to an extent, binds the artist to donate twenty artworks to APT over the next twenty years. On average, one artwork every year for twenty years.

When APT takes works in, it pays to store them. It insures them and preserves them. It may lend them out to exhibitions. But by signing the contract, the artist has also given the company the option, the right, to sell that artwork.

If and when APT decides to sell the artwork, 40 percent of the profits go back to the artist. If you work with a commercial gallery today, you usually get 50 or 60 percent of the sale price. A small, possibly significant 10 or 20 percent difference, but let's not dwell on this for now.

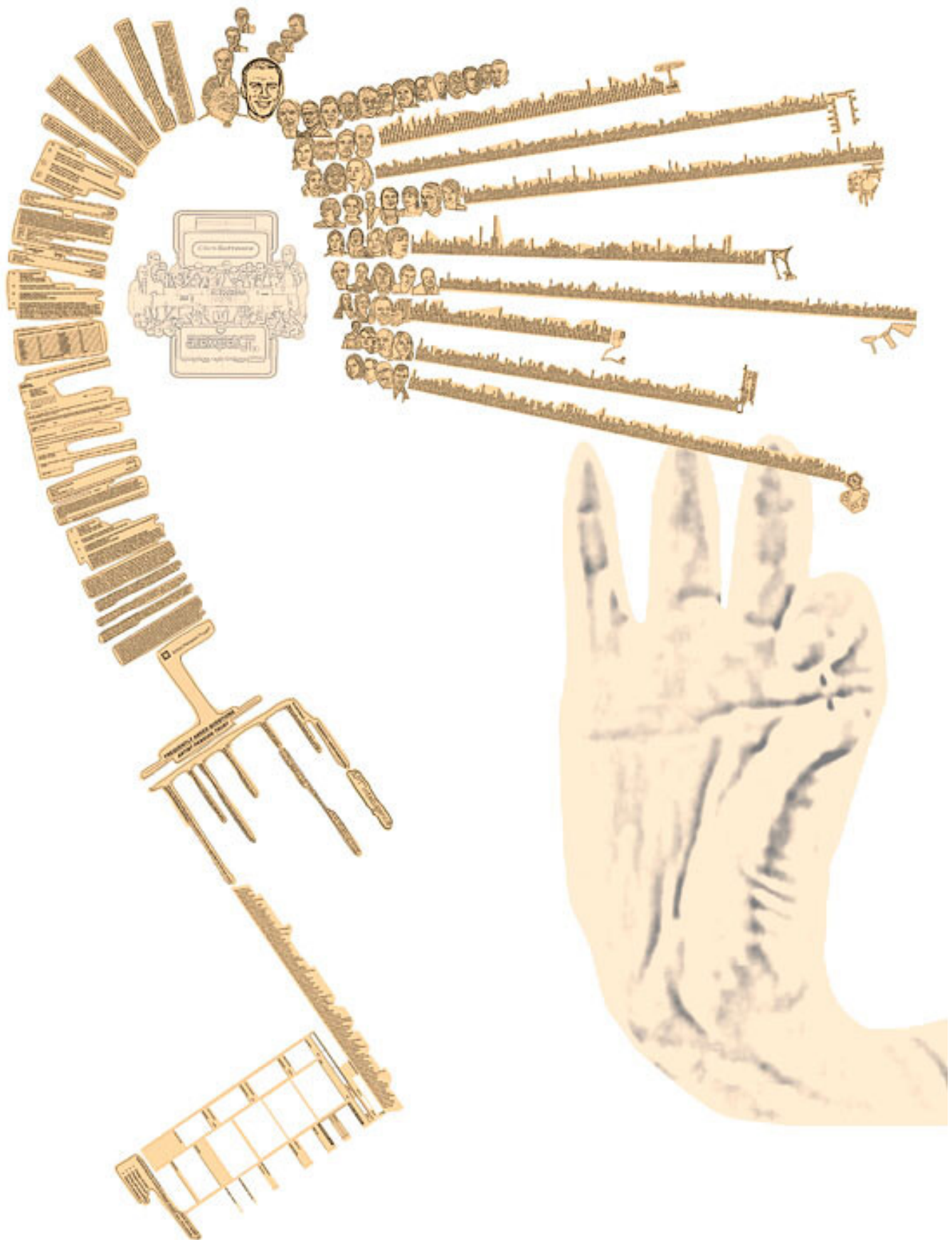
Twenty-eight percent of the profits are taken by APT to pay for storage, insurance, and administrative costs. APT has expenses and this is how it recoups them.

And the remaining 32 percent of the profits—and this is what made APT very interesting to me, what made me think I should seriously consider joining—is always split, divided, shared, distributed among the 250 artists in each regional group.

This idea may seem simple but it is actually quite

Walid Raad

Walkthrough, Part I



Detail of sketch for Walid Raad's project "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," 2007-ongoing.

interesting. It is interesting because Shniberg and Galai seem to have figured out something very basic about the commercial art world, namely, that the commercial art world tends to be very fickle. This means that an artist is usually “hot” critically—but more importantly from APT’s perspective, commercially—for a very short period. And “cold” for years thereafter.

I read somewhere that the lifespan of a contemporary artist in the art market today is around forty months. This means that for forty months you sell well, and then for months, years, or even decades thereafter, you are lucky to sell anything at all.

Today, an artist who sells an artwork for five or ten thousand dollars is usually not surprised if six or nine months later they are unable to sell the same work for five hundred dollars. Artists who expect to make a living from the sale of their work in the market know this risk. We know it all too well. And it is precisely this risk that Shniberg and Galai are trying to manage. They do this by grouping artists into pools of 250 potentially interesting artists (what they refer to as the regional trusts). They figure that statistically speaking, it is probable that two or three artists are going to be “hot” and selling well at any given time. And because 32 percent of the profits are always split, divided, shared among the 250 artists in the pool, this risk is minimized for everyone, and every artist benefits.

This, it turns out, is a classic technique used in the world of risk management, which is Dan Galai’s expertise. Shniberg and Galai are simply applying this technique to the art market. That’s all.

Today, APT has set up eight regional trusts: New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Mumbai, Beijing, Mexico City, and the trust I was asked to join, Dubai.

In a way, I was surprised that APT had started a Dubai trust. I did not know that in the Arab world in 2007, we already had 250 interesting artists—or rather 250 artists who were selling enough work that APT could build this kind of economy around them.

Today APT has signed contracts with around 1,400 artists, and these artists have already given the company around five thousand artworks. But if and when all the trusts close—meaning if and when 250 artists join each trust—then APT will have two thousand artists under contract who will give the company in the next twenty years forty thousand works, making APT one of the largest privately held art collections anywhere in the world—all this without the company spending a single dollar buying a single work of art.

I have to admit that this is not bad.

Alongside the retirement trusts, Shniberg and Galai also set up a parallel structure referred to as “APT: Intelligence.” But this unit is not for artists. It’s for curators. And here again, the idea is simple but fascinating.

Shniberg and Galai also seem to have figured out that today there are large institutional investors such as banks, universities, pension funds, and insurance companies that are interested in buying artworks as an investment. However, many are reluctant to do so because they know little about how the art market functions.

Let’s imagine that you are a state pension fund manager in Marseille and you are interested in investing in contemporary art from the Middle East to diversify your portfolio and because you keep hearing that this market is consistently outperforming the S&P 500. But you know nothing about contemporary art from the Middle East. Wouldn’t it be valuable if you had somewhere to go where you could talk to someone who knows a lot about this kind of art—someone who could advise you on which artworks to buy, when to buy them, and how much to pay for them?

To set this up, Shniberg and Galai contacted over one hundred curators. These were respected, renowned curators with expertise in different genres of art from different parts of the world. If you are interested in art from Mexico, you contact APT Intelligence and ask them if they have a curator who knows a lot about contemporary art from Mexico. They say yes. They put you in touch with the curator. You meet with the curator. The first ten minutes are always free, to see if you get along with the curator, if you like his or her sensibility. After this, for every thirty minutes you sit with the curator, APT Intelligence charges \$300.

It turns out that many curators love this arrangement. This is understandable. Curators are always telling people about interesting artists or artworks, and they usually give out this information for free. With APT Intelligence, curators finally get paid for it. They are compensated for their previously undervalued information and labor.

Institutional investors like the structure too, because institutional investors do not necessarily trust commercial galleries. They think these galleries tend to promote their own artists. With APT Intelligence, investors can talk to someone who is to some extent independent from the product traded.

In addition, with one hundred curators, over one thousand artists and five thousand artworks, APT also actively promotes its collections by funding its own under-contract curators to produce exhibitions with its own under-contract artists, and under-contract artworks. As such, APT only manages to increase the value of the curators, artists, and artworks under contract.

Again, this is not bad.



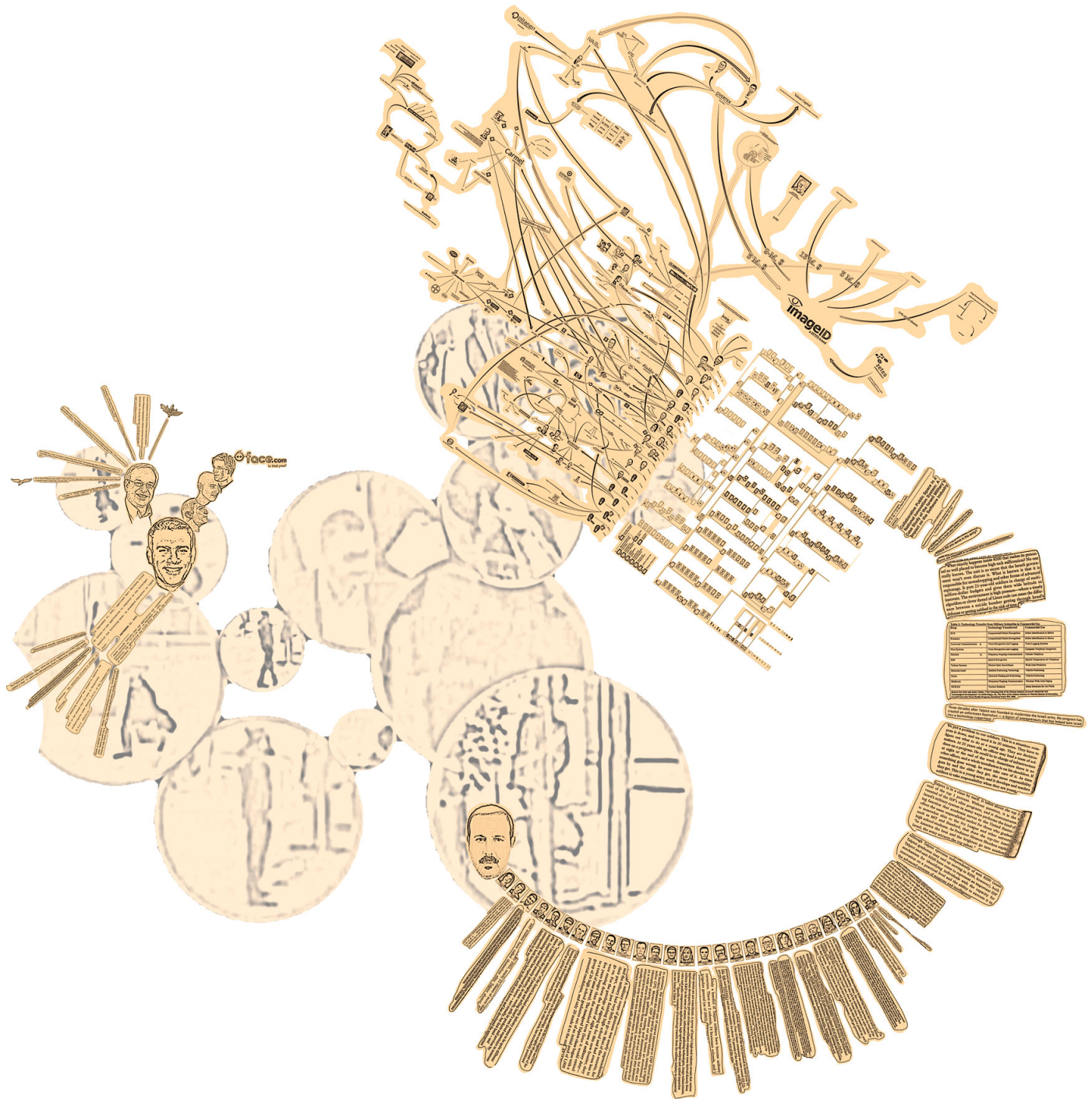
Detail of sketch for Walid Raad's project "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," 2007-ongoing.

It's now mid-2008. I have yet to meet November. So far, we've only communicated over the phone and by email.

For some reason, I become quite interested in the man named Moti Shniberg. I decide that I need to do some

research to find out how Moti made his money. After a few web searches over the course of a few weeks, I find out that Moti made a small fortune in the 1990s with an Israeli-based company called Image ID.

Image ID, it turns out, is a technology company that developed a system they called Visidot. Visidot scans tags



Detail of sketch for Walid Raad's project "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," 2007-ongoing.

and barcodes but instead of doing this with lasers, it does this with cameras, optically. But this is not what I found interesting about Image ID.

As I look more into Image ID, I find out that the company has a number of people on its staff and board who served in the Israeli army. This is not a surprise. We all know quite

well that in Israel most men and women have to serve in the army. A few refuse, with grave consequences, but most end up serving.

But it turns out that many of Image ID's employees and investors—and I discovered this after many more months and queries—not only served in the army, but served in

Israel's various elite military intelligence units: Unit 8200, Mamram, and Lotem.

The links between APT, Image ID, and Israel are already a problem for me for various ideological, political, and other reasons. One of the problems is simply the fact that Israel and Lebanon are still in a state of war. In Lebanon, any link between an Israeli person and a Lebanese person, or between an Israeli institution and a Lebanese institution, will spell trouble. And it does not matter if the Israelis you associate with are progressive, liberal folks. They may, for example, support the Palestinian cause more passionately than most Arabs. In Lebanon, it does not matter. Any link will spell trouble. I think to myself: Do I want to join a retirement pension plan started by an Israeli who made a fortune with an Israeli-based tech company where employees and investors have links to Israel's elite intelligence units? Regardless of any other consideration, if word about this got out on the streets of Beirut, it might actually be dangerous, and not just for me. This may be dangerous for any Arab artist who joins APT. And I just wanted APT to be transparent about this. I just want APT to tell its artists whether this is true so we know what we're getting involved in. That's all.

A few weeks later, I take all this research to my first face-to-face meeting with November. I also prepare three sets of questions I want her to answer.

First, I want to know: Who is funding APT? Who are its investors?

Second, I want to know: Why is APT starting a Middle Eastern Trust, the Dubai Trust? Who are the 250 interesting Arab artists?

And finally I want to know about the links between APT, Image ID, and Israeli intelligence, because at some point I began to think I'd over-Google'd Moti Shniberg and that the links were all in my head.

When I ask November these questions, she looks puzzled and embarrassed. Her face reddens and she says that she has no clue of what I'm talking about. She seems genuinely surprised and concerned by my questions and what they imply. She offers to put me in touch with her boss, a woman named Pamela.

A few weeks later, I meet Pamela and ask her the same three questions: The money? Dubai? Military intelligence?

Pamela also has no clue, but she does not seem surprised by my questions. I assume that November told her to be prepared for them. To her credit, Pamela is not only prepared, she also tells me that the only person who can answer my questions is Moti Shniberg. Am I interested in meeting Moti, she asks.

Am I interested in meeting Moti? Of course I am interested

in meeting Moti. This is the man I have been wanting to meet since November contacted me eighteen months earlier. Pamela sets up an appointment with Moti. A few weeks later I find myself going to the APT headquarters in Manhattan, somewhere in Midtown.

I enter a big loft space. The receptionist welcomes me and asks me to wait for a few minutes. Before I sit down, I notice that in the background, there are thirty or forty young men and women sitting behind laptops, earphones on, typing frenetically. A typical scene in today's tech world, so I don't pay much attention to it.

Within a minute or so, Moti comes out of his office to greet me.

I should remind you that I was expecting to meet Mr. Israeli Military Intelligence. But the man who greets me is simply *the* most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life. I begin to wonder why I ever thought that a former military intelligence officer would not be beautiful to begin with. Moti is also impeccably dressed and clearly comfortable in his skin. He shakes my hand warmly, grabs me by the shoulder, takes me into his office, and begins to tell me how and why he started APT. (This is clearly a well-rehearsed and oft-told story. Before meeting Moti, I read the same story in one of his published interviews.) And this is how the story goes:

Moti is in a cab in Manhattan riding with an artist friend of his. He asks her whether she has any retirement plan. His artist friend says, "Moti, I am an artist. Artists have no money. Do you think we have retirement plans?" He then asks her, "Why can't you invest your artworks like others invest their cash?" She looks at him and says, "There is no such thing. I wish there was such a thing."

A few days later Shniberg is on the phone with his former finance professor Dan Galai. They come up with APT. Today, they've already filed five patent applications on APT's investment model.

Anytime I meet an Israeli, especially one who is around my age, we inevitably talk about whether he or she "visited" Lebanon in the 1980s. We inevitably talk about Palestine, a one-state versus a two-state solution, and so on. Moti and I politely chitchat about all of this, and then I get to my questions.

"Where does the money for APT come from?"

As soon as I ask my first question, it becomes clear that Moti is not only beautiful but also very smart and very smooth. He replies, "Walid, I am sure you know that investors are people who prefer to remain anonymous." Then a hint of a smile forms at the edge of his mouth: "But I will tell you and only you that we have investors from the United Arab Emirates."

You understand what he is telling me. He is essentially saying: “If you are freaking out because you think that most of the money is Israeli, then relax. Even Arab businessmen are willing to invest with me, so why should you, as an Arab, be concerned about working with APT?”

And of course, now I want to know who the Emirati investors are. But Moti is so smooth, and I am so eager to get to my next question, that I don’t even ask about the Emirati investors.

Instead, I ask about the links between APT, Image ID, and military intelligence.

Keep in mind that I had been researching Moti and Image ID for over eighteen months. I had tracked every employee of Image ID. I knew what other companies they started, who they had worked for, and what army units they had served in. I had proof right there with me in my backpack in case Moti chose to deny his. I was ready. What could he possibly say?

As soon as I ask the question, something shifts. I cannot tell if Moti is bored or upset. I cannot read him anymore. He stays quiet for a few seconds and then says:

You are from Lebanon, right? So, I am sure you know how things are in Lebanon. I am sure you know how things are in Syria, in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia. And I am sure you know how things are in Israel. In Israel, many things are linked to the army. In Israel, the tech sector is often linked to military intelligence. Please don’t tell me that this actually surprises you? Please don’t tell me that you are one of those naive left-wing, head-in-the-sand pontificators who actually think that the cultural, technological, financial, and military sectors are not, and have not always been, intimately linked? Please tell me this is not who you are and what you think.

And of course, I am one of those—I would not say naive pontificators—but I also don’t want Moti to know this because all of sudden it all seems so embarrassing, so callow. And I am also not ready to leave his office. I’ve waited two years for this meeting. I cannot just leave now. I have to find a way to stay in the office. So I say to him, “Of course, Moti. Of course you are absolutely right.” And then I gaze into the office and I find myself asking, “Now these people out here, the thirty kids with headphones, what are they doing?” I had not prepared this question. I just asked it because I could not think of any other way to remain in the same room with Moti.

As soon as I ask this question, Moti sits up. His demeanor changes. He smiles broadly and says, “I can understand why you find APT interesting, but let me tell you what I find

interesting.” Then Moti tells me about yet another company (and I am sorry that I have to throw the name of yet another corporation at you): MutualArt Services, Inc.

MutualArt, it turns out, is the parent company of APT. It owns all the regional APTs. It also owns APT Intelligence. Later when I try to find more information about MutualArt, I can’t. The company is a BVI company—it is registered in the British Virgin Islands, which means that its investors and structure can remain secret.

Moti then tells me, “MutualArt’s biggest investments today are not the retirement funds. It is not APT Intelligence. It is actually a website: **MutualArt.com**. Do you know this site? Do you use it?” “I use it all the time,” I say. It is actually quite good. MutualArt.com is a website for anyone who loves the arts and wants to keep track of art matters in general. For example, if you like the work of Francis Bacon, you can sign into MutualArt.com and register this preference. You like Sophie Calle, Francis Alys, David Dia, or my work, you do the same, and the site’s algorithm is fantastic. It scans the net and delivers articles, essays, exhibitions, and catalogs that matter to you and only to you. Essentially, MutualArt.com is a database of its users’ preferences.

Then Moti tells me, “MutualArt has millions of users who have registered millions of preferences, and as such we are on our way to building the largest data set about the art world anywhere. Except that our data set remains a noisy picture, and in order to turn it into a clear picture, with reliable tendencies, clusters, and nodes, we hired Ronen Feldman.”

Of course they would hire Ronen Feldman. After all, Feldman is *the* computer scientist, the man renowned for having coined the term “text analytics” in 1995. And I later found out that Feldman is also a graduate of the most celebrated Israeli military intelligence unit: Talpiot. It’s the equivalent of taking Harvard and adding to it Berkeley, MIT, Caltech, Princeton, and Yale.

Anyway. Feldman’s job is to write algorithms for very large data sets. He works with what is called “Big Data.” Take any large dataset, filter it through a Feldman algorithm, and within seconds—as if by magic—all kinds of tendencies, clusters, and nodes begin to appear. These tendencies, clusters, and nodes help to formulate questions and answers. The questions and answers MutualArt was interested in are primarily about the art world. Lets take auctions for example: When is the best time to buy or sell a painting by Andy Warhol? Spring, summer, fall, or winter? If in spring, is it better to sell in March, April, or May? If in April, is it better to sell in the first half of the month or the second half? On a Monday or a Tuesday? At Sotheby’s in London or Christie’s in New York?

MutualArt has answered these questions, and the result is

an instrument, a financial product that MutualArt will soon be selling to institutional investors.

Then Moti also tells me about other questions that MutualArt wants to answer, such as: How many articles written by what writers, in what art magazines, using what art language will affect the performance of an artwork coming up at the next Christie's auction?

The last algorithm Moti tells me about, the one they are working on as Moti and I speak in 2009, is an algorithm about color.

That's right, color. More specifically, color in postwar European art. What percentage of blue? What percentage of red? What percentage of yellow? What percentage of black must a Picasso painting from 1946 contain in order to increase in value by 37 percent over the next sixty months?

As he's telling me this, I begin to see how the risk management techniques of Dan Galai are being combined with the text mining expertise of Ronen Feldman in order to put in place—not in five years, but today—complex, dynamic, and real-time prognostic models about anything having to do with the art world.

The more Moti talks to me about MutualArt, mathematical algorithms, risk management, semantic web, text analytics, and Image ID, the more I get lost in all the details. For some reason, I also start to feel nauseated and tired, and I decide that I need fresh air. I don't feel good all of a sudden. I decide that I need to end the meeting. I politely wind down our conversation and thank Moti for his generosity and his willingness to meet with me. I tell him that I need to go home and think about joining APT Dubai. (To this day, I have not joined). I stand up, shake his hand, walk out of his office, go down the stairs, and I find myself on Fifth Avenue before I realize that I forgot to ask him about the September 11 thing.

I forgot to ask him about why he tried to trademark the phrase "September 11, 2001." I found out about this a few days before the meeting with Moti. At first I thought it was a joke, so I did some research and found the court records. This is what they say: "USPTO (United States Patents and Trademark Office) records indicate that the application was transmitted electronically at 17:37 on September 11, 2001." At 5:37 p.m. on the afternoon of September 11, 2001.

Detail of sketch for Walid Raad's project "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," 2007-ongoing.

The towers went down at 9:59 and 10:38. Six hours later, Moti was already filing an application to trademark the phrase "September 11, 2001." Six hours after the towers went down I was still trying to get my emotions in check, but this man had the amazing presence of mind, the

masterful foresight to file a trademark application for "September 11, 2001." How do you train for this?

But I don't ask him about this because I am already a few blocks away, and I don't want to go back to his office. I am tired, and at the same time I realize that I am actually quite relaxed and relieved. When I secured the appointment with Moti, I thought that I was going to find all kinds of insidious links among collectors, artists, bankers, the military, Israeli intelligence, and financial wizards. I thought all these links would somehow be too much for me. They would upset and agitate me. But in fact, when I look at this today, when I look at all of this, what can I say? "Yes," I say to myself. "This is intelligent." I would even say "this is very very intelligent." But at the end of the day, it is also all too familiar. It is banal. It is expected. And I, for one, don't find any of it insidious. I don't even find it interesting. Certainly not interesting enough to deserve an artwork. After all, do we really need another artwork to show us (as if we don't already know) that the cultural, financial, and military spheres are intimately linked? No. No we don't. This may be intelligent but it is not insidious, and it is certainly undeserving of more of my words.



X

This text is (here and there) a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The text transcribes the walkthrough/presentation component of Walid Raad's exhibition *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, recently presented at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel.

Walid Raad is an artist and an Associate Professor of Art in The Cooper Union (New York, USA). Raad's works include *The Atlas Group*, a fifteen-year project between 1989 and 2004 about the contemporary history of Lebanon, and the ongoing projects *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* and *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)*. His books include *The Truth Will Be Known When The Last Witness Is Dead*, *My Neck Is Thinner Than A Hair*, *Let's Be Honest*, *The Weather Helped*, and *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*.

Walter Benjamin

The Making of Americans

I have no desire to disparage American art, which is a child, and therefore merits being loved and protected.
—Andre Villebeuf in *Gringorie*, Paris

Those who have been to the United States bring back nothing from visiting American museums but memories of Italian and French works found there.
—Lucie Mazauric in *Vendredi*, Paris

Critic Clement Greenberg tells the story of American avant-garde art in the years since World War II—a time when New York school painting and vital sculpture made Western Europe turn at last to the United States for inspiration.

—Subhead of the article “America Takes the Lead: 1945–1965” by Clement Greenberg, *Art in America*, August–September 1965

When the first comprehensive exhibition of American art abroad, titled “Trois Siecles d’Art aux Etats-Unis” and organized by the Museum of Modern Art, opened at the Musée de Jeu de Paume in 1939, many Parisians were surprised to find out that there was such a thing as “American art.” Similarly, many well-intentioned art critics at the time expressed sympathy for the youthful attempts of American painters to emulate their French colleagues. Only a quarter of a century later, a leading American art critic felt confident enough to declare that it was now time for Europeans to look to Americans for inspiration.

There are probably different ways to explain the dramatic rise of American art, which became apparent to Europeans a bit earlier than to Americans. While in 1958 the *New York Times* published the timid headline “New World Prepares to Show Its Cultural Achievements to Old World,” the *London Horizon*, fully aware of the change that was taking place, had a bolder take: “The New American Painting Captures Europe.”

One possible approach to telling this story would be to trace what could be called the “American interpretation of European modern art” through various exhibitions and collections organized by American curators and art lovers. The earliest and most influential collection was the one assembled by Gertrude and Leo Stein in Paris, exhibited on the walls of their salon in the beginning of the twentieth century.

This was perhaps the first time (around 1905) that paintings by Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso were exhibited together. Not only the Steins’s Parisian friends, but also many of their art-loving compatriots from America



London Horizon magazine, London, 1958.

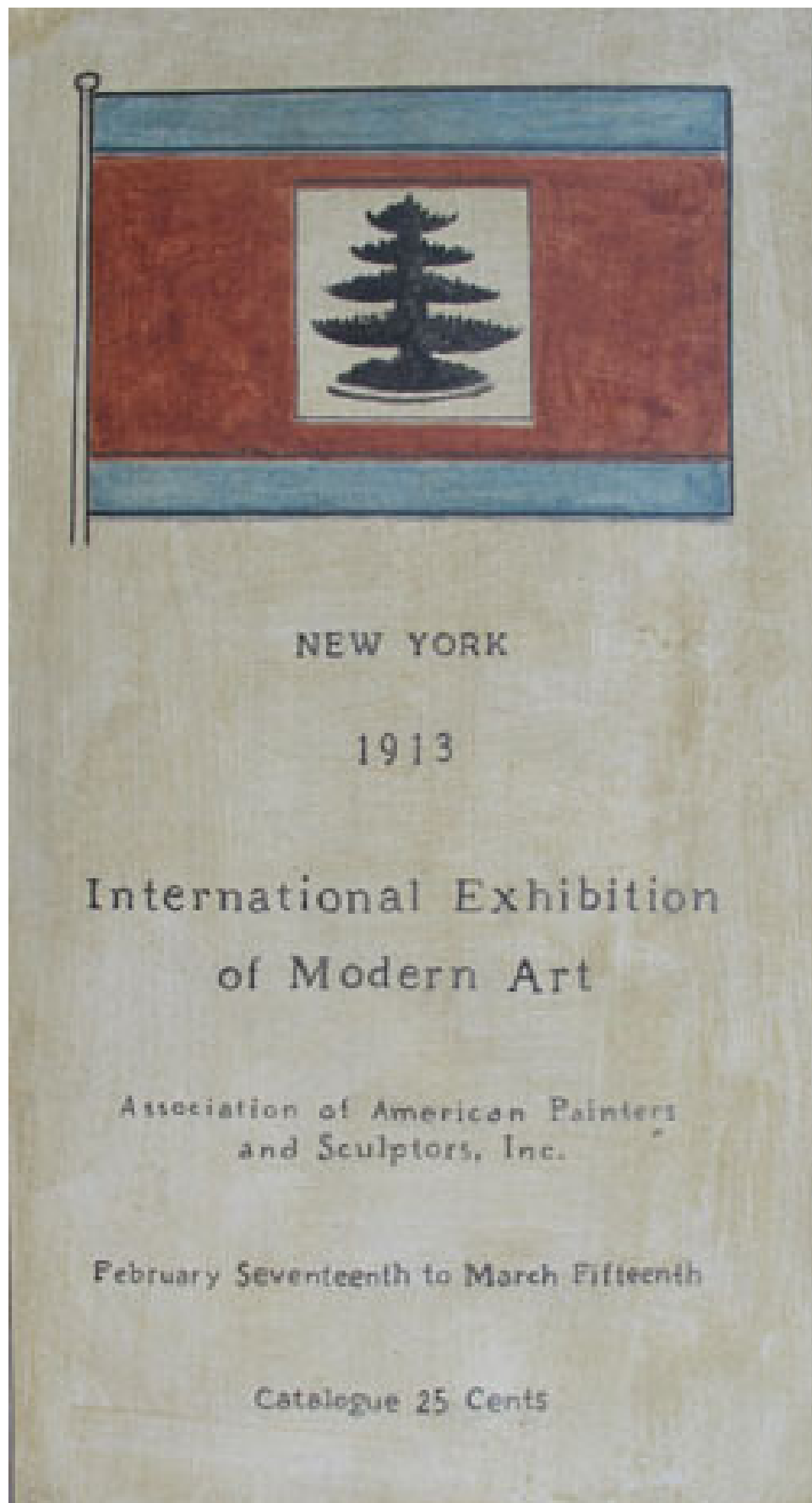
visited the salon, saw the collection, and spread the word about it back home. One of them, Alfred Stieglitz, was the first to exhibit the works of Cezanne and Matisse in New York, at his Gallery 291 in 1910. Then a couple of years later, the Steins lent their *Blue Nude* by Matisse to the Armory Show.

The Armory Show—officially titled the International Exhibition of Modern Art—represented another early encounter between Americans and European modern art. This was more spectacular than any previous encounter, since it was held on domestic soil and reached a broader audience. It was organized and curated by the members of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, whose intention was to “[give] the public here the opportunity to see for themselves the results of new influences at work in other countries in an art way.” They further stated that

The foreign paintings and sculptures here shown are regarded by the committee of the Association as expressive of the forces which have been at work abroad of late, forces which cannot be ignored because they have had results. The American artists responsible for bringing the works of foreigners to this country consider the exhibition as of equal importance for themselves as for the lay public. The less they find their work showing signs of the developments indicated in the Europeans, the more reason they will have to consider whether or not painters or sculptors here have fallen behind through escaping the incidence through distance and for other reasons of the forces that have manifested themselves on the other side of the Atlantic.



Gertrude Stein, Paris, c.1910



"Armory Show," exhibition catalog, New York 1913

Since the members of the Association clearly felt that Americans lagged behind recent developments in Europe, they wanted to shake up the domestic scene by bringing to New York the most avant-garde works available. The subtitle of the exhibition—"American & Foreign Art"—was displayed in the exhibition hall but did not appear on the cover of the catalogue. Furthermore, in the catalogue the artists were not listed according to their nationality, as was customary at the time, but only by their names. Thus, on two facing pages one found Braque, Kirchner, Kandinsky, Cezanne, Hartley, Duchamp, and Munch listed together. At the opening speech of the Armory Show, John Quinn, a member of the Association and a prominent collector of modern art, stated that "the Association felt that it was time the American people had an opportunity to see and judge for themselves concerning the work of Europeans who are creating a new art."

The impact of the Armory Show on the American art scene was huge. Its ripple effects would be felt for decades to come. Many European works on display at the show were acquired by local collectors and thus continued to have an impact on the American art scene after the show closed. One of the most important collections of modern art on either side of the Atlantic—that of Walter and Louise Arensberg—was initiated by the Armory Show. The Arensbergs's apartment became a gathering place for emerging New York "art internationale" artists, including Marcel Duchamp, whose *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* became the emblem of the avant-garde. It was Duchamp, together with Katherine Dreier, an artist and collector who also participated in the Armory Show, who "had the courage to incorporate this Museum of Modern Art as the Société Anonyme." A report issued by the Société regarding its exhibition schedule of 1920–21 emphasized that "The Société Anonyme, Inc., was also the only [American art venue] which was truly international, exhibiting during the winter the works of men representing ten different countries." In addition to the nationality of the artist, the following "Schools of Modern Art" were also listed in the report: Post-Impressionist, Pre-Cubist, Cubist, Expressionist, Simultaneist, Futurist, Dadaist, and "Those Belonging to No Schools, But Imbued with the New Spirit in Art."

Thirteen years after the Armory Show, the Société Anonyme assembled the second International Exhibition of Modern Art, this time at the Brooklyn Museum. In the exhibition catalogue, the artists were grouped by their nationality, representing twenty countries including the US. For some of the artists, it was perhaps their first time exhibiting in America: Arp, Max Ernst, Léger, Schwitters, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, de Chirico, Klee, Lissitzky, Miro, and Man Ray. (Malevich was shown in the Société Anonyme's "Modern Art" collection at the Sesqui-Centennial International Exhibition, held in Philadelphia in 1926). In a press release for the Brooklyn Museum show, the Société Anonyme was described as

an international organization for the promotion of the study of the experimental in art for students in America [that] renders aid to conserve the vigor and vitality of the new expression of beauty in the art of today ... When one considers that the gathering together of all these works has been done out of love, one realizes the vigor and vitality of the Modern art Movement.

This exhibition and the activities of the Société Anonyme represented one of the most important developments in the New York art scene of the 1920s, especially in introducing the latest European avant-garde art to American artists, art professionals, and the general public. The exhibition was perhaps the first museum of modern art, not only by name but by collection as well. The only thing missing was a story that would connect the various works of twentieth-century modern art in a coherent historical narrative. It took another decade and another modern museum for this to happen.



"International Exhibition of Modern Art," organized by Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, 1926.

Torpedo in Time

During the spring [of 1929] a small group of people got together and took a first step toward a museum of modern art in New York.

—Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

Besides Abby Rockefeller, in the nucleus of the group that established MoMA were Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan. All three were well-known collectors and art lovers. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., a twenty-seven-year-old Princeton and Harvard student of art history, was selected to be the first director. He had recently returned from a

long journey through Europe, including Moscow, where he stayed for two months and met some key protagonists of the Soviet avant-garde—Tatlin, Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Eisenstein. One August day in 1929 there appeared an untitled and undated public announcement:

The belief that New York needs a Museum of Modern Art scarcely requires apology. All over the world the rising tide of interest in the modern movement has found expression not only in private collections but also in the formation of great public galleries for the specific purpose of exhibiting permanent as well as temporary collections of modern art. That New York has no such gallery is an extraordinary anachronism ... The Luxembourg [museum] for instance exhibits most of the French national accumulation of modern art, a collection which is in continual transformation. Theoretically all works of art in the Luxembourg are *tentatively* exhibited. Ten years after the artists [*sic*] death they may go to the Louvre, they may be relegated to provincial galleries or they may be forgotten in storage ... In Berlin similarly the historical museums are supplemented by the *National Galerie* in the Kronprinzen Palast. Here Picasso, Derain, Matisse rub shoulders with Klee, Nolde, Dix, Feininger, and the best of the modern Germans ... Paradoxically New York, if fully awakened, would be able in a very few years to create a public collection of modern art which would place her as far ahead of Paris, Berlin, London as she is at present behind them. This museum of modern art would in no way conflict with the Metropolitan but would seek rather to establish a relationship to it like that of the Luxembourg to the Louvre.

Indeed, later that year, MoMA opened in a five-room rented space with an “historical” exhibition of (European) Post-Impressionist art, titled “The First Loan Exhibition: Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh.” This was followed by the more contemporary exhibitions “Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans” and “Painting in Paris, from American Collections.” For the next few years this young museum would be a museum in name only, since it didn’t have its own collection and operated more like a gallery, staging temporary exhibitions with artworks loaned from various private collectors. In some cases, visitors could even buy the works exhibited at the show. On top of all that, the name of the museum was an oxymoron, as Gertrude Stein once told Barr: “I do not understand how it can be both, museum *and* modern?”

The museum’s first collection came as a bequest from one of its “founding mothers,” Lillie P. Bliss, consisting almost entirely of European Post-Impressionist and modern artists. The bequest included numerous Cezannes (among them *The Bather*), a few Seurats, Gauguins, Matisses,

Derains, and Picassos. It featured only two works by Americans (Davies and Kuhn), anticipating the nature of the museum’s collection in its first two decades—predominantly “European-International,” with sprinkles of Americans.



Portraits of the nucleus group that established MoMA: Mary Quinn Sullivan, Abby Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss.

Meanwhile, the idea of “tentativeness” and of the “continual transformation of the collection” was articulated in a diagram called the “Torpedo in Time.” According to this diagram, the museum would be like a fifty-year-long tube that “travels through time.” As time passed, new works would enter the mouth of the tube, which represented the “now,” while works older than fifty years from “now” would exit the back of the tube. If the works passed the “test of time,” they would be transferred to the Met. In this sense, MoMA was like Purgatory and the Met was like Paradise. (No solution was offered for those works that didn’t pass the test.) Conceptually, a museum of this kind would, on the one hand, eliminate the need to accumulate artworks; on the other hand, it would be, in historical terms, an institution with a short-term memory. One perennial problem faced by museums that have a timeline open to the future is selection. Even within the short-term memory of a museum like MoMA, the institution can collect and display only a limited number of artifacts from the present, forcing it to decide today which aspects of the present will become the past, which will be preserved (remembered) for the future. How can anyone today know (or be able to decide) what of the present will be important to people fifty years from now?

But recollection always happens retroactively—not by anticipating the future, but by interpreting the past. And this is exactly what happened in 1936 at the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art,” perhaps the most important exhibition of the twentieth century. On the cover of the catalogue for the exhibition was Alfred Barr’s “genealogical tree,” which represented in graphical form the historicization of the four previous decades of European modern art.

According to Barr’s genealogical tree, the story of modern art began with Post-Impressionism (Cezanne) and

branched in two directions, one towards Fauvism (Matisse), Expressionism, and Non-Geometrical Abstract Art, and the other towards Cubism (Picasso), Suprematism, Constructivism, Neo-Plasticism, and Geometric Abstract Art. Organized chronologically and by “international movements,” Barr’s genealogical tree was a radical departure from the concept of “national schools” which dominated European art historiography and which was embodied in the most prestigious art event of the time, the Venice Biennale. In addition to painting and sculpture, “Cubism and Abstract Art” included categories such as construction, photography, architecture, industrial art, theatre, film, poster art, and typography, thus introducing an expanded notion of the “artwork” into a museum context. The Russian/Soviet avant-garde, one of the most important cultural developments in Europe, was extensively represented at the exhibition. It was historicized as an integral part of this new “international narrative” of modern art, at a time when its achievements had been removed from public view, both in the Soviet Union and the rest of Europe. It is thanks to this exhibition that the works of Malevich, Tatlin, Lissitzky, Stepanova, Popova, Rodchenko, and Goncharova are so well-known and respected today. Finally, as a footnote, it should be remembered that one of the emblems of modern art, *Les Femmes d’Alger* (O.J. 1905), was not only represented in a museum context for the first time at this exhibition (and not even as an original, but as a small reproduction). It was also this exhibition that placed *Les Femmes d’Alger* at the beginning of the story of modern art, where it has remained ever since.

Both the exhibition and the diagram provided the direction for the subsequent expansion of the MoMA collection. The concept of the “Torpedo in Time” was discretely abandoned, although it took almost two decades for this to be formally announced (“Important Change in Policy,” 1953 MoMA Bulletin). The museum was no longer a solid tube freely moving through time. Instead, it became an elastic tube that kept on stretching with time, having one end (the beginning) fixed in the 1900s, and the other in an ever-moving present. This concept of the museum—with one end fixed in a moment in the past and the other open toward the future—would resolve problems on the memory side, while it exacerbated problems on the accumulation and selection side, making the model unsustainable in the long run.

The exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art” was followed by “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” thus completing the historicization of all modern art movements until the mid-1930s. This historicization of European art by an American (Barr) was almost entirely based on artifacts brought from overseas and then assembled and interpreted by someone from another culture. At that moment in its history, MoMA could be thought of as not only an art museum, but as an ethnographic museum as well. In this MoMA narrative, avant-garde-centered modern art was almost entirely a European phenomenon,

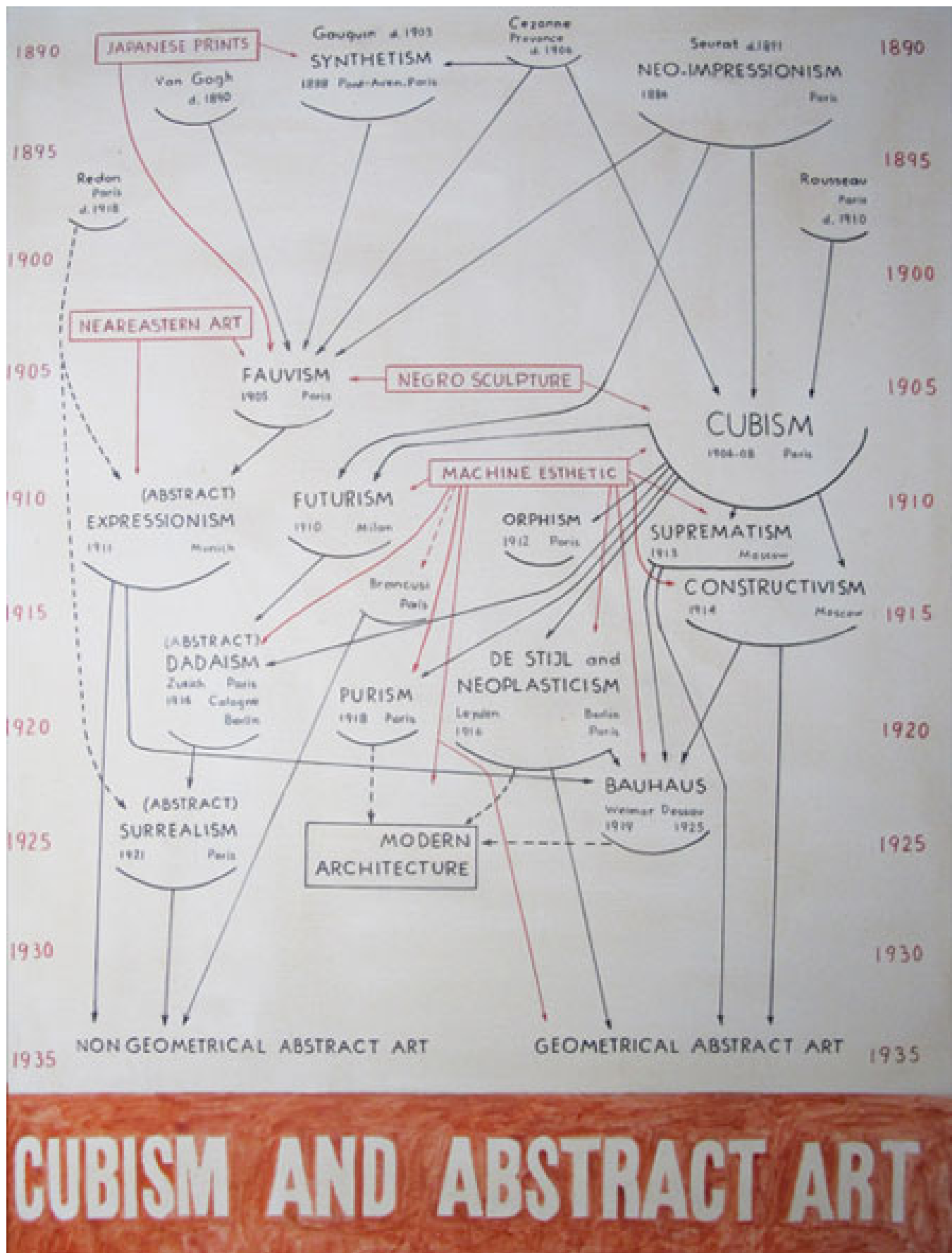
with Paris as its capital and Picasso as its most important practitioner.

All this took place at a time when modern art was disappearing throughout Europe. The cosmopolitanism of the avant-garde was the antithesis to the rising nationalism that swept through Europe in the 1930s, leading to war and carnage. Modern art was completely marginalized and removed from museums as “bourgeois and formalistic” in the Soviet Union, and “degenerate, Jewish, and Bolshevik” in Germany. In France meanwhile, modern art was ironically never included in museums in the first place. In the US, most of the public and the political establishment were not in love with modern art, but since art was not a government matter, MoMA, as a private corporation, could exhibit and promote its program freely, without state interference. This is why the American public could see European modern art at a time when there was no modern art in Europe. MoMA became a kind of Noah’s Ark of modern art.



Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller hanging the *Femmes d'Alger*, MoMA, 1950s.

While walking through MoMA, a majority of the American museumgoers there probably had no idea that what they were seeing was not Europe’s present, but its past. Although all the artworks were from Europe, hardly anyone was aware that the story told through the arrangement of the museum’s exhibits was not European; it was not a European interpretation of modern art. Instead, it was a story told by an American—namely, Alfred Barr. This story did not merely preserve the memory of European modern art, but in fact reinvented it by categorizing artists according to “international movements” instead of “national schools.” After the catastrophe of WWII, MoMA began to be perceived in Europe as the most important museum of modern art in the world. By admiring this American museum with the most comprehensive collection of European modern art



"Cubism and Abstract Art" exhibition catalog, MoMA 1936.

around, “natives” of the Old World were unaware that they adopted its story as well—its story about their own art and culture. Gradually, this story became the dominant, canonical narrative on both sides of the Atlantic, determining future developments in Western art for decades to come.

An early attempt to establish a postwar modern art narrative in Europe, with artists represented individually rather than by nations, was made in Paris in 1952 with an exhibition titled “Twentieth Century Masterpieces,” organized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The Congress was an “international association of intellectuals—writers, philosophers, painters, musicians, artists, and scientists—whose aim [was] to promote the freedom of creative man.” The exhibition took place at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris and at the Tate Gallery in London. The works that appeared in the show were selected by James Johnson Sweeney. With the exception of Alexander Calder, the exhibition did not include any American artists, but instead presented European artists such as Malevich, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Max Ernst, Delaunay, Kokoschka, Kirchner, and Miro. The works in the show were mostly borrowed from American museums and collections.

The only place that resisted this new narrative of modern art was a museum in the metropolis of modernism—Paris. The 1954 guide-catalogue of the Musée National d’Art Moderne includes a floor plan with thirty-eight rooms spread across three floors. Thirty-seven of these rooms were entirely devoted to Parisian art of the previous five decades. One tiny room (No. 31) was intended for *Écoles Étrangères* (Foreign Schools). Furthermore, among the artists listed in the museum collection, the following names were nowhere to be found: Mondrian, Malevich, Magritte, Duchamp, Man Ray, Tatlin, Lissitzky, Stepanova, Popova, Rodchenko, Schwitters, Marc, Kirchner, Nolde, Boccioni, Moholy-Nagy, van Doesburg, Archipenko, Feininger, Gabo ... What did the story of twentieth-century modern art look like at the Musée d’Art Moderne without these artists?

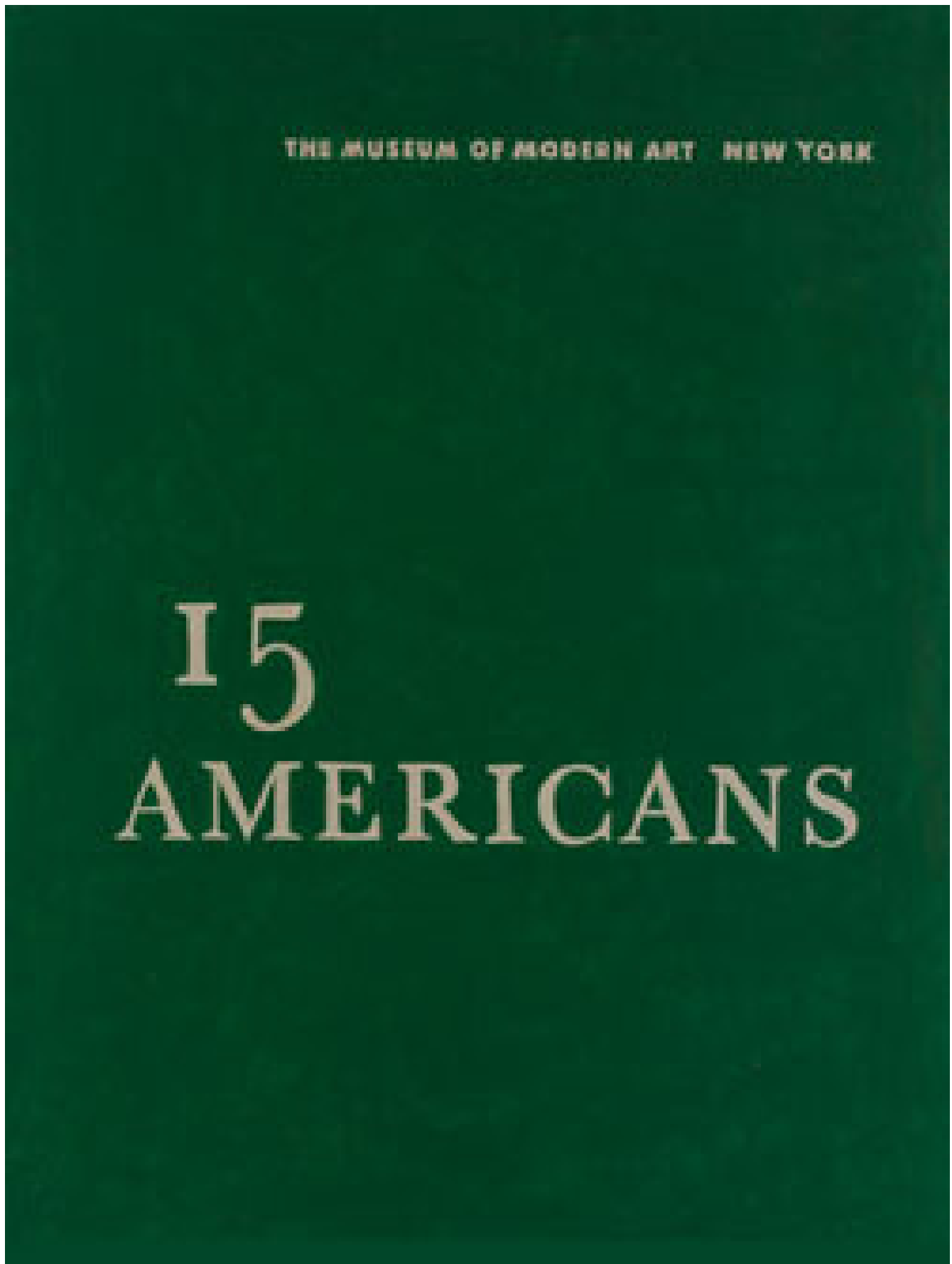
The Cosmopolitan Variety

Back in New York, American artists who visited MoMA must have been captivated by the achievements of the Old World. To walk through the galleries and see all of those masterpieces by Matisse, Picasso, Malevich, Mondrian, and Duchamp, while absorbing the story of modern art, must have been a fascinating experience. Perhaps some of these artists, with uneasiness and sadness, also became aware that there was no place for Americans in that story. Although MoMA’s second exhibition was titled “Nineteen Living Americans,” the museum was often criticized for ignoring domestic art. Thus, the introduction to the MoMA Bulletin of 1940, titled “American Art and the Museum,” states:

The Museum of Modern Art has always been deeply concerned with American art, but the Museum was founded upon the principle that art should have no boundaries, that paintings and motion pictures, furniture and sculpture from any country in the world should be shown in the Museum provided they were of superior quality as works of art. This principle is of course in diametric opposition to the hysterically intolerant nationalism which has swept over half of Europe destroying the freedom of art along with the freedom of speech and religion. Nevertheless the Museum has at times been criticized for concerning itself overmuch with the art of foreigners, particularly foreigners who have produced disturbingly new forms, new kinds of pictures or architecture. It is a purpose of this number of the Bulletin not so much to answer these occasional criticisms as to present to the members a report of the extent and variety of what the Museum has done in the field of American art.

However, the real change in MoMA’s relationship to American art began a few years later with the 1946 exhibition “Fourteen Americans,” which included work by Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Tobey. This was the first in a series of exhibitions focusing on American art that Dorothy C. Miller would curate for MoMA over the following few decades. The next in the series, the 1952 exhibition “Fifteen Americans,” brought together artists such as William Bazotes, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Bradley Walker Tomlin. Two years later, “Twelve Americans” introduced James Brooks, Sam Francis, Fritz Glarner, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, and Franz Kline, among others.

These are the same artists that formed the core of three traveling exhibitions organized by the MoMA International Program in the 1950s. These exhibitions introduced Europe to a brand of American modern art known as “Abstract Expressionism.” The first in the series, titled “Twelve Contemporary American Painters and Sculptors” (1953–54), was curated by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie and included a wide range of artists, from John Marin, Stuart Davis, Ben Shan, and Edward Hopper to Archile Gorky and Jackson Pollock. It traveled to Paris, Zurich, Düsseldorf, Stockholm, Helsinki, and Oslo. The next exhibition in the series, “Modern Art in the USA (From the Collection of MoMA)” (1955–56), showed fifty years of American modern art, including paintings, sculptures, prints, photography, and architecture. The painting section, curated by Dorothy C. Miller, covered a broad range of American art and was divided into five historical and stylistic sections: 1. Modern Painters—First Generation; 2. Realist Tradition; 3. Romantic Painters; 4. Contemporary Abstract Painting; 5. Modern Primitives. The exhibition traveled to Paris, Zurich, Barcelona, Frankfurt, London, The Hague, Vienna, and Belgrade. A critic for the *Spectator* began his review of the show by saying, “To



read the names in the catalogue of the modern American art exhibition at the Tate with their German, Scandinavian, Netherlandish, Mediterranean, Jewish alliances is to realize the first condition of American art—its cosmopolitan variety.”

The same multi-cultural character of Americans was noticed in Paris as well, but there it was used to question the very existence of such a thing as American art and Americans, since “those are all immigrants or sons of immigrants.” Nevertheless, it seems that of all the MoMA exhibitions, this one had the greatest impact on the general public and art professionals, especially its section “Contemporary Abstract Painting.” For the first time, Europeans had a chance to see paintings by Gorky, Guston, Hartigan, Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock, Rothko, Still, and Tomlin displayed together in the same exhibition. Those large, raw, gestural, seemingly unfinished canvases represented a radical departure from the European tradition and aesthetic of easel painting. It became clear that Americans were bringing something new— something unseen before in European museums. From the European perspective, it was with this exhibition that the Americans arrived. Since all these paintings were from the MoMA collection, some European museums even begun to consider including American art in their collections too.

The third and last exhibition in this series, “The New American Painting” curated by Dorothy C. Miller, brought together exclusively abstract artists, with an emphasis on the “Expressionists.” From April 1958 until March 1959, this spectacle of abstract art was on display in Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, and London. After it returned home, it was presented to the New York public at MoMA. This memorable exhibition confirmed to Europeans what was already apparent: the “new painting” coming from America could no longer be ignored.

The arrival of American painting would eventually be reinforced by Documenta 2 in 1959—but only after the inaugural Documenta, held in Kassel in 1955, ignored it entirely. Entitled “The Art of the Twentieth Century—International Exhibition,” Documenta 1 was primarily intended to reestablish in Europe’s memory the modern art lost in the previous decades, and to connect it to postwar abstract art. The exhibits were organized not by country (like at the Venice Biennale), but with each artist represented individually. For some reason, however, this international exhibition had no place for the Russian/Soviet avant-garde, or for recent American abstract art. In this version of modern art history, there was no Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, or Lissitzky, no Pollock, Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, or Rothko. Even Brancusi, Duchamp, and Moholy-Nagy were missing. While this narrative based on individualism and internationalism was an obvious improvement over the traditional nation-based narrative of modern art, it was still not Alfred Barr’s story, not yet.

Thus, at Documenta 2, under the auspices of the MoMA International Program, the entire roster from the “The New American Painting” exhibition appeared, enlarged with Helen Frankenthaler, Hans Hofmann, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Rauschenberg. The impact of these artists’ presence at the exhibition was so profound that Documenta 2 later became known as “American.” Americans thus became part of the dominant narrative of modern art, which was, thanks to Barr, rooted in the achievements of the European avant-garde. While the inclusion of American art in this narrative may have been unsurprising (since it was Barr himself who invented the narrative), it was perhaps more surprising that MoMA played a decisive role in preserving the memory of Russian/Soviet avant-garde, which otherwise would have been completely forgotten. New York did not steal the idea of modern art, as some claimed. New York in fact re-remembered and reinvented it.



New World prepares show of its cultural achievements to the Old World.
Image from the New York Times, 1958.

Clandestine Modernism

Much has been written about these MoMA exhibitions of American art in European museums, which took place during the long standoff between American-led Western Europe and the Soviet Union. It is widely accepted that these exhibitions were secretly financed by US government agencies, including the CIA, as a part of a cultural propaganda campaign aimed at promoting “freedom and democracy” and undermining the Soviet bloc. It is important and necessary to study those aspects of the traveling MoMA exhibitions that relate to the Cold War context, and to determine the nature of the US government’s involvement. First of all, if there was any secret government funding going to these exhibitions (including from the CIA), from whom was this support being hidden? The Soviet Union? As far as the Soviet



Cover of catalog "The New American Painting," Berlin, 1958.

Union was concerned, these MoMA exhibitions could only be US government propaganda, regardless of whether they were funded by the US government or not. From European allies then? Since it is customary in Europe for the entire domain of art (museums, galleries, art schools and academies, national exhibitions abroad) to be financed by the state, primarily through ministries of culture, these MoMA exhibitions were already perceived as government-sponsored representations of American art. For most Europeans, especially in those days, the idea that museums like the Met and MoMA were private institutions that organized privately funded national exhibitions abroad was completely unheard-of.

If, as far as the Soviets and West Europeans were concerned, it was unnecessary to conceal the fact that the US government funded these exhibitions, then from whom was this support hidden? The only logical answer is: from the US government. Since US taxpayer money cannot in principle be used to support controversial art, if one government agency—let's say the State Department—decided to facilitate art events abroad, it would most likely try to hide it from other branches of government—for example, from Congress. The case of the 1946 exhibition "Advancing American Art," organized by the State Department with the intention of sending it abroad to improve America's image, is very telling. Instead of borrowing the artworks from private collections, someone in the State Department calculated that it would be much cheaper to acquire the collection—using taxpayer money, naturally. When the collection was finally formed, it was stylistically very broad, but no Abstract Expressionist artists were included. Even this kind of collection was so controversial that Congress eventually organized hearings to investigate the possibility that the State Department was supporting leftist, even communist, artists. Soon after, the entire collection was sold as government surplus.

A few years later, in 1952, Alfred Barr published an article titled "Is Modern Art Communistic?" in which he sought to defend freedom of expression at the time of the Red Scare. In the article, Barr compared recent statements on modern art made by American presidents to similar statements made by Hitler and Stalin. It is within this political climate that MoMA launched, in 1952, its International Program, which was supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. This is the program that would organize the groundbreaking series of exhibitions of American art that toured Europe. The positive effect of these exhibitions in improving America's image abroad must have been noticed by the US government. The 1956 exhibition "Modern Art in the USA," which came to Belgrade—the only socialist capital to host a MoMA show during the Cold War—was initiated by the local office of the United States Information Service (USIS), a government agency whose mission was "to understand, inform and influence foreign publics in promotion of the national interest." Belgrade was not originally on the exhibition itinerary, which is probably why the USIS office,

rather than MoMA, organized the exhibition there. In addition to paying to transport the exhibition from Vienna, the USIS paid for insurance and for the exhibition catalogue, while the Yugoslav government paid all local expenses associated with organizing the exhibition at three sites in Belgrade. Finally, we should also remember that in 1959, at the height of the Cold War, the US government-sponsored "American National Exhibition" was held under Buckminster Fuller's dome in Moscow. Thousands of Soviet citizens had a chance to see paintings by Gorky, Guston, de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock, and Rothko, among other American artistic achievements.

Regardless of how these MoMA exhibitions came about, we must acknowledge, from the perspective of today, that they played a decisive role in establishing a postwar European cultural identity based on internationalism, individualism, and modernism. Without these values, it would be hard to imagine the emergence of today's Europe. The exhibitions also helped cement Alfred Barr's story of modern art, constructed around chronology and international movements instead of national identity. This story remains the canonical narrative of modern art to this day.

It seems, however, that even this story has exhausted its potential. It no longer feels vital or inspiring. Perhaps it's time to reconsider to what degree a story based on chronology and the uniqueness of its characters (both artists and artworks)—a story we might call "Art History"—is still relevant, especially if it becomes apparent that art as a category can only be defined within this story. Instead of being perceived as *the* story, Art History should become *a* story. Similarly, the work of art should be treated as an artifact, as a product of a certain kind of Western culture rooted in the Enlightenment and shaped by Romanticism. From this perspective, the art museum would become an ethnographic museum.

— *Walter Benjamin, New York City, 2011*

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Illustrations courtesy of the Salon de Fleurus, New York, and the Museum of American Art, Berlin. All image captions by *e-flux journal*

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Walter Benjamin was an influential philosopher and art theoretician, best known for his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Many years after his tragic death, Walter Benjamin reappeared again in public in 1986 with the lecture "Mondrian '63-'96" organized by the Marxist Center in Ljubljana. The next

year the lecture was broadcast in English on the Belgrade television ("TV Galerija"). In recent years Mr. Benjamin became an associate of the Museum of American Art in Berlin, giving interviews and publishing articles on art, originality, museums, art history, etc. After a long pause he appeared again in public 2011 with the lecture "The Unmaking of Art," first at the Times Museum in Guangzhou and then at the Arnolfini in Bristol. The same lecture was repeated in 2012 at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporaneo in Mexico City, Tranzit in Budapest, Institutions by Artists in Vancouver and recently at Le Plateau in Paris and Reproductions Museum in Bilbao (2013). Most of these lectures, interviews, and articles just have been published in the book "Recent Writings."

Rijin Sahakian

A Reply to Nato Thompson's "The Insurgents, Part I"

We are always happy when we receive responses to the essays we publish in e-flux journal that are as rigorous as Rijin Sahakian's excellent reply to Nato Thompson's "The Insurgents, Part 1: Community-Based Practice as Military Methodology." It should be pointed out that Sahakian refers here only to the first part of Thompson's essay, and the second part will be published in our November issue. It is also worth mentioning that neither the author nor e-flux advocate the activities of US military, while we do accept that they exist and that their methods are becoming frighteningly more relevant beyond military application alone.

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

This is a story about counterinsurgency as well as community organizing. It is a story about getting to know people as an occupying force, and getting to know people as neighbors. It is a story, ultimately, about the military entering the terrain of that thing called culture.

—Nato Thompson, "The Insurgents, Part 1: Community-Based Practice as Military Methodology," *e-flux journal* no. 47 (September 2013)

In his essay discussing US military methodology, its tactics on the ground in Iraq, and its effects on culture and community organizing, Nato Thompson weaves together a familiar "story." Rather than rigorously investigating the many complicated issues that have emerged from Iraq, Thompson chooses to sublimate Iraqi experience and intellectual production by privileging a military doctrine. The reshaping of events and omitting of facts throughout the piece serve as an example of the enormous success that the US military has had in ensuring that its narrative of the Iraq War is not only accepted, but is disseminated as widely as possible. This is particularly discouraging considering the essay's publication in *e-flux journal*, generally regarded as a critical site for an array of writing on arts, politics, and culture.

If the piece were simply naive, one might be able to write it off as a misguided attempt to raise the profile of community activism by putting the weight of the military's uses and acknowledgement of culture behind it. However, a much deeper set of problems quickly surfaces. Working from General David Petraeus's authorship of the updated *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (FM 3-24) and brief stint in Mosul, Thompson attempts to bring in comparisons to the actions of social movements worldwide. In doing so,

Thompson cobbles together at best a series of flimsy linkages, at worst a dangerous misappropriation of the experiences of the actual populations and communities he uses as evidence, from African Americans in Oakland to civilians in Baghdad.

Thompson's disingenuous claim—"If we can stomach it, we might examine the tools of social organization deployed by the largest military in history"—rests on his "story" about how these tools included effective reconstruction projects that provided a means to organize and mobilize populations. Attempting to draw a comparison between the US military and the Black Panther movement, Thompson goes so far as to say that the non-lethal use of shotguns by the Panthers at the California State Assembly in 1967 was a means to protect the population in the same vein as the US military's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. He then tries to use the extensive social development work of Hezbollah in Lebanon as another comparison to the US military's COIN strategies, concluding that "meeting the needs of the people is a key weapon in the war for hearts and minds." The glaring caveat here is that the US military neither completed development projects that might "meet the needs of the people" in Iraq nor did it protect the population (whether Iraqis or African Americans).

The vast sums spent on "reconstruction" in Iraq have been widely exposed as embezzling projects with almost no accountability and few actual results. The spending and misappropriation of billions of dollars ushered in unprecedented corruption and one of the most effective *de* construction campaigns of a modern nation state. By no means a healthy country in the sociopolitical sense prior to the invasion, since the occupation Iraq has gone from being a nation with one of the highest regional levels of education and healthcare to a country marked by plummeting literacy rates, daily electricity shortages, a water crisis, abysmal healthcare, extremely high rates of disease and birth defects, and one of the youngest populations in the Middle East due to the decade-long spike in death rates and exodus of those of adult age. It hardly bears mentioning that the sociopolitical climate saw no improvement.

The tools of social organization that have actually been used by the US military in the communities Thompson references have been employed to divide and destruct to the point where they can no longer function as cohesive social units or with any indigenous power, making it far from clear why Thompson would choose to compare the work of the foreign occupation of Iraq with these two indigenous movements.

Insisting that this "story" does not pretend any causal connection between the world of the military and that of nonviolent community organizing, Thompson claims that the US military, because of its sheer scale and massive budget, is simply "not a bad place to look for new ideas

and new methodologies concerning tactics for 'getting to know people.'" These "new ideas and methodologies" are taken largely from the superficial acceptance of *FM 3-24* /COIN as having been implemented benignly in Iraq through its "two strains of thought: protecting the people as much as possible, and learning and adapting faster than the enemy."

In a gross oversight of context, Thompson takes literally the words of the manual, rather than actual military practice in Iraq, stating that with these "new techniques ... the US military replaced knocking *in* doors with knocking *on* doors." These new techniques are widely attributed to *FM 3-24* author General Petraeus, who is mythologized in the essay as a torchbearer for new cultural and tactical shifts within the military and on the ground in Iraq during the occupation. In the essay's description of Mosul under Petraeus, he is described as having moved the city forward by reopening factories, holding elections, and building an "interpersonal connection between soldiers and residents of the city."

Thompson suggests that soldiers walking through Mosul, "like cops on the beat," as Petraeus puts it, evince this connection between soldiers and residents. In doing so, the author displays no understanding of what "cops on the beat" are like to citizens of occupied or marginalized communities. The incarceration rates of African American men in America or the NYPD's stop-and-frisk policy, not to mention the recent violent arrest of six students protesting the appointment of Petraeus as a professor at CUNY, should give some notion of how occupying soldiers as "cops on the beat" might not seem like a welcome shift for Iraqi civilians.

Instead of acknowledging the well-documented, illegal imprisonment and torture system built in Iraq under the leadership of Petraeus, Thompson takes the friendly neighborhood cop on the block fantasy a step further: citing Baudelaire, he waxes poetic about these soldiers who "drift through the ruins of a city, knocking on doors, getting to know people, and becoming faces with names." Indeed, the idea that Petraeus was responsible for a shift to "knocking *on* doors rather than *in* doors" would be laughable were it not such a gruesome attempt to twist facts.

The reference to knocking in doors refers to the terrifying nighttime raids of Iraqi civilian homes by armed US soldiers and their dogs in Iraqi cities, including Mosul, during the occupation. Petraeus's *FM 3-24* purposefully steered clear of any reference to searches of Iraqi civilian homes, and did not produce any change in these raids. Raids that resulted in the abduction of thousands of fathers, sons, and husbands from their homes, heads bagged, and imprisoned based on subjective evidence, if any at all, let alone transparent avenues for defense or release.

Thompson erroneously depicts *FM 3-24*'s shift from "straightforward killing to transforming popular perceptions" as one aimed towards the Iraqi populace, rather than to American public opinion. He writes that what makes the "manual so fascinating" is its references to the "great books on war," though any number of elementary political science papers might allude to *The Art of War* or *On War*. What Thompson seems to have missed in his enthusiasm for *FM 3-24*'s supposed cultural leanings, or what he is actually following quite closely, is the manual's section on popular perception and media: in an explicit nod to the importance of narrative building, the manual urges commanders to ensure that the military/counterinsurgency perspective is enforced by stressing a directive to "engage the media, create positive relationships, and help the media tell the story."

Petraeus cannily implemented this strategy to write *FM 3-24* and build support for positive media coverage of it. During its drafting stages, Petraeus brought in one hundred civilian journalists, scholars, and intellectuals to partake in the process. This no doubt helped to ensure that the US military line of positive action in Iraq was towed—journalists and scholars could busy themselves with words on a page, effectively becoming stakeholders in the manual, instead of looking at the actual tactics being implemented on the ground in a bloody and illegal war rapidly eradicating a population of Iraqis and their domestic infrastructures.

One of General Petraeus's pivotal roles in Iraq was to act as a savvy, camera-friendly figurehead serving the US military and media's campaign to provide a much-needed positive spin on its fledgling war. Thompson takes this spin a step further, with his glowing section describing Petraeus's tenure in Iraq, "Peaches: The Mayor of Mosul," accompanied by an image of a smiling Petraeus buying "local food" from a young Iraqi boy selling bread in Mosul. The public relations image is reminiscent of many put forth by the US military, as is Thompson's description of Petraeus as "an avid jogger, a survivor of a bullet wound to the chest and an accidental fall from a parachute ... as hardworking as he is ambitious ... With his lean, sinuous, muscular build, David Petraeus is a rugged peach." A rugged peach indeed, Petraeus was most likely brought in as a singular hope by a massive military machine not to shift the actual tactics of the war but perceptions of it.

The actual tactics of Petraeus under the US military warrant closer examination. Thompson attempts to make the case that

the stunt in Mosul worked ... Acting as the mayor of Mosul allowed Petraeus to organize civic life. In so doing, he temporarily provided the civic infrastructure that his very government had so cataclysmically disrupted. Yes, this is ironic. But such irony is more often the rule than the exception in modern warfare.

Yes, it is certainly ironic that Petraeus would be described as providing civic infrastructure to Iraqis. Perhaps more ironic still is that one of the countries that Thompson cites as an example of this new people-centered approach is El Salvador, where counterinsurgency tactics using death squads and torture were first honed by the US military under the direction of US Special Forces operative James Steele. Petraeus visited Steele in El Salvador in 1986 where he advocated his counterinsurgency methods, and in US-occupied Iraq these methods were implemented directly under their dual leadership.

Far from successfully building schools, hospitals, or providing security, the realities of the COIN and *FM 3-24* legacy maintain an outsourced policy of torture and death squads that continue to terrorize Iraqi civilians to this day, and which, at their height, left three thousand Iraqis dead on a daily basis. Shortly after Petraeus was put in charge of training Iraqi forces, the US military command issued FRAGO 242, which stipulated that "no investigation of detainee abuse by Iraqis was to be conducted unless directed by the headquarters of the command." This provided a clear path for absolving US command of guilt in training Iraqi forces to use torture on other Iraqis. Perhaps this is what Thompson refers to when he speaks of Petraeus as being busy "fighting the bad guys," who are, of course, Iraqis without specificity. Thompson perpetuates, rather than problematizes, a dangerous dichotomy that accepts the label of "bad guy" applied to any Iraqi resisting American occupation in any form.

Thompson stresses that the effort to "gain the hearts and minds of the people ... isn't just a public relations effort. More broadly, it is a massive pedagogical program—supported by guns." Petraeus's response to Iraqi torture victims being paraded about on reality television might offer illuminating evidence of this "pedagogical" campaign. *Terrorists in the Hands of Justice* was an Iraqi reality television show, broadcast on Al Iraqiya, a state-run network set up by the US occupation authority in 2003. The show raised the ire of the Iraqi public when it showed torture victims from Petraeus's Special Commando Unit detention centers. It was only then that Petraeus insisted not that torture practices be halted, but that the torture victims not be shown on television. If the innovative new counterinsurgency practices include "a massive pedagogical program" that omits torture, corruption and indiscriminate killing from the public list of practiced tactics employed to "gain hearts and minds," then it is one deployed by Thompson and Petraeus both to make their respective cases.

Finally, in light of the essay's placement in an arts journal, and its professed concern with US military strategy, there is strangely no mention of the massive cultural cleansing campaign that took place in Iraq during and after the occupation. Thompson avoids the most crystal-clear piece

of evidence pointing to the obvious importance the US places on cultural narratives in the sites it conquers. This could not be made more explicit than in Iraq, where under the US occupation, museums and galleries were looted and remain closed; public statues, libraries, and artworks were destroyed; and artists, professors, and intellectuals have been targeted, assassinated, and exiled. One of perhaps the oldest narratives shared by the world—Babylon and its ancient ruins—was irrevocably damaged when the US decided to use the site as a military base and parking lot for its massive tanks. Through erasure of contemporary and historical culture, this effort certainly demonstrates the importance of creating new narratives and infrastructures. If, as Thompson says at the end of his piece, “creating meaning in peoples lives also implies building a new world, whether one is an artist, activist, marketer, or soldier,” without criticality, it will most certainly be a world devoid of any heart or mind.

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Rijin Sahakian directs Sada (for contemporary Iraqi art), a not for profit project focused on emerging artists and practice in Baghdad through education initiatives, production support, and public programs.

Home Workspace Program Participants

Chapter Zero

This issue of e-flux journal is developed in parallel with Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program in Beirut, led this coming year by Jalal Toufic and Anton Vidokle as an experimental school open to all. The program's opening in September was postponed due to the anticipated US strike against Assad's forces in Syria and the deterioration of security in Lebanon that would have followed. However, the strike never materialized and a number of local and international students arrived in Beirut despite the postponement, starting their own program they call Chapter Zero. We invited them to contribute a letter to this issue the journal.

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

We are a group of people who have gathered in Beirut despite the postponement, due to the political situation in Lebanon, of the program in which we were supposed to participate. Some of us are based here, and some chose to come with no regard for the sudden changes in the school's schedule.

The activity we have conceived and are about to discuss—a self-proclaimed and self-organized “Chapter Zero” of Home Workspace Program 2013-14—is not only *for* those but also implemented *by* those who are willing to participate. It seems that we've already found ourselves in a utopia of education: the school is empty, the professors did not show up, but we did, and what we do next is up to us. And it seems that there's at least one more thing we have in common: an urge, a necessity, to do things with others. Where does this urge come from? (Oleksiy)

This is a crisis we are in. The latest events in the Arab world cannot but be establishing a sort of new era, one furrowed with horror never seen before. But how can we live today, knowing that this is happening? This is the feeling that each one of us seems to have—of being in an urgent situation requiring immediate action. Why art? Because art seems to be the only possible way of resisting death. Why an art school? Because it is a place of coexistence, of sharing, and of communion. To quote Plato, “The dialectical method is discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject, who wish to establish the truth of the matter guided by reasoned arguments.” Only here and now, there is no truth to be established. (Lynn)

I'd like to present a short intervention.

Before the first school, before the first academy, there was a sacred grove of olive trees under which Plato guided the first students of wisdom. The name of the place was

Hekademia. Later, after that, there were walls built around it, and it became an institution, if it wasn't already one. (Stefan)

Chapter One was cancelled, and we have Chapter Zero partly because “the peace in the Middle East has never been so fragile,” yet by being here we disperse the whole idea. Chapter Zero diffuses postponing Chapter One. Therefore just by being here, by being together, by anything we do—any common action, by taking advantage of the situation we show that we can both create and disperse something at the same time. (Natalia)

an idea of a zero as an empty system. When another culture was introduced to this idea of zero, it in a way rejected it. (Jessika)

There are a lot of thoughts that can come out of creating a universe that works without working. For instance, what does “without working” mean? What does the universe we are creating relate to? What is “work without working,” and what kind of work is it? How can this be achieved? The challenge to create an immortal universe in this concept leads to two options: first to produce this universe which has its own energy to keep on working but without really working on it and to let it renew itself all the way.



Participants of Chapter Zero of Home Workspace Program in Ashkal Alwan's space, Beirut.

In the context of Chapter Zero I am thinking of Arabic numerals, in which zero is marked with a dot, a period—the same period that usually punctuates the end of a sentence. In European numerals zero is written as a circle. For quite a long time the idea of ‘zero’ divided Western ideologies from Eastern ones. In the East, zero was accepted, while in the West zero did not exist. There’s

This movement will be like an endless circle. Number Zero usually signifies death, nothing, the beginning or the end, and this leads to the second option of creation. That is to create this universe; dysfunctional, dead, or fallen apart ... it is up to us to do. (Fadi) Is this the beginning of an end? The end of a beginning? Or are we in a never-ending loop?

(Raymond)

But, at the same time, there seems to be a kind of urgency to do something. Do. Something. Whatever it is. Take advantage of the situation. Certainly, things are possible: the school is open, we are in touch with each other, there is an interest to understand and acknowledge the situation. But, that does not have to be an imperative to do something. (Miguel)

We are living in an increasingly unequal environment, where the hierarchies present in the art world are just miniscule models of greater inequalities that exist outside. So any attempt at reclaiming equality, even if by sacrificing the idea of 'quality' and occupying the online pages of an art journal with the exchange of our humble opinions, is somehow politically important. But, in fact, what we see is the return of the repressed hierarchies that plague virtually all egalitarian projects. They all have a blind spot: equality is never total; it has a kind of lack inscribed into its structure, and we should try to work with this very lack rather than pretend that it's not there. (Oleksiy)

A main concern for any autonomous group without a predetermined agenda, is how to build a structure where the desire to make decisions together doesn't take away the participants' power to act. A space in which all are equally powerless is the tyranny of no one. Perhaps a way to avoid this could be to invent a form of meeting that takes shape as an inactive activity, where the people involved feel part of something dynamic while still allowing themselves to dwell on whichever topics might come up. (Philip)

—Nora Adwan, Rewa Baassiri, Stefan Bakmand, Miguel Fernandez de Castro, Raymond Gemayel, Natalia Gumenyuk, Fadi Hennawi, Jessika Khazrik, Lynn Kodeih, Philip Pilekjær, and Oleksiy Radynski on October 3, 2013 at Ashkal Alwan, Lebanese Association of Plastic Arts, Beirut

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Nora Adwan, Rewa Baassiri, Stefan Bakmand, Miguel Fernandez de Castro, Raymond Gemayel, Natalia Gumenyuk, Fadi Hennawi, Jessika Khazrik, Lynn Kodeih, Philip Pilekjær, and Oleksiy Radynski are participants in the Home Workspace Program, which will be led by resident professors (RPs) Jalal Toufic and Anton Vidokle under the title *Creating and Dispersing Universes that Work without Working*, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, 2013-14.