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pg. 1 Editors
Editorial

pg. 3 Oleksiy Radynski
The Case Against the Russian Federation

pg. 7 Franco “Bifo” Berardi
War and (Senile) Dementia

pg. 12 Yuk Hui and Brian Kuan Wood
A Conversation on Art and Cosmotechnics, Part 2

pg. 19 Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa
Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 2

pg. 30 Erin Manning
Out of the Clear

pg. 40 Yazan Khalili, Lara Khaldi, and Marwa Arsanios
What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 2

pg. 48 Liaisons
We Are Not As Gods: Terrestrial Horizons

pg. 60 Tyler Coburn
The Petrified, Part 1

pg. 69
Anselm Berrigan, Three Books and a Poem

pg. 71
David Buuck, Three Books and a Poem

pg. 73
Laura Henriksen, Three Books and a Poem

pg. 75
Maryam Parhizkar, Three Books and a Poem

pg. 78
Danny Snelson, Three Books and a Poem

pg. 80
Rachael Guynn Wilson, Three Books and a Poem

Editorial

As a child I really wanted to be Ukrainian. Or so I told my parents. When they asked why, I told them it's because Ukrainians are happy people who sing and dance, while Jews and Russians are sad. I'm not totally sure where I got this idea. We did spend a lot of time in Ukraine, in a city called Dnipro, where my mother is from and where a part of my family still lives. My father's family lived in an impoverished small town near Moscow that they fled to from Lithuania during World War I. The part of the family that stayed in Lithuania was later massacred during World War II. Sadly, my mother's family in Ukraine did not fare well during World War II either— their small house in Dnipro was destroyed by the Nazis in 1941. Only recently, my mother received a small and symbolic reparation of a few hundred euros from the German government, about seventy years later.

A couple weeks ago, the world turned upside down again. Dnipro has been bombed again, but not by the Nazis. It's like a bad dream one can't wake up from: while thousands of people are being killed in Ukraine and millions are being displaced by the Russian army, nobody really seems to understand the reason or goal of such violence. While Ukraine is being bombed and destroyed, the social fabric of Russia and its economy are disintegrating under sanctions and martial law, and what is rapidly emerging is an isolated, impoverished, fascist state propelled by a death drive. Putin seems to have decided to drop all pretenses—no more soft power, economic concerns, international relations, civic society, public sphere, independent judiciary, constitutionality, rights, and so forth. All that remains is the police, the secret services, the army, and repeated threats of using nuclear weapons.

Ukraine can only prevail in such a situation. The Ukrainian popular resistance has already become the kind of movement that cannot be defeated or subjugated for long, if at all. Almost everyone in the world stands with Ukraine, while Putin's Russia has no friends. One hopes that a resounding military defeat will reveal the emptiness of the Putin regime and its greedy, kleptocratic nihilism with no social ideas or proposals beyond amassing power and wealth for its own sake through lies and violence. This regime will surely collapse, or Putin's entourage—a group not known for love or loyalty—will get rid of him themselves. One hopes that what will emerge in its place will not simply replace one strongman with another, but comprehensively reconstruct the country's economic and political establishments so that the despicable actors who have enabled corruption, the persecution of opposition to the regime, and this very war on Ukraine are forced to answer for their deeds.

The regime's utter bankruptcy makes the prospect of a post-Putin reconstruction for the region something that is possible to imagine. In one scenario, oligarchic art foundations will be replaced by artist-run and independent spaces. Russia's own Ministry of Culture and state museums will immediately fire unqualified bureaucrats

and political appointees, replacing them with qualified and knowledgeable professionals: art historians, curators, artists, and administrators. With their experience and care for art, its producers, and its publics, the salaries of cultural producers will be fair, and free labor will no longer be exploited. Myriad new cultural publications will resurrect art criticism, and art education will be free and available to all. Art-market speculation and schemes like NFTs will be frowned upon and eventually abandoned. In a sovereign and independent Ukraine, a Kazimir Malevich Museum will be built in Kyiv, not only as a mausoleum to his paintings or a tourist attraction, but as a living laboratory for a new society's radical art. And in a liberated, post-Lukashenko Belarus, Minsk will become a permanent European Cultural Capital with an advanced center for digital arts.

End Russia's war on Ukraine now, immediately!

—Anton Vidokle, on behalf of the *e-flux journal* editors

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Oleksiy Radynski

The Case Against the Russian Federation

In the morning hours of February 24, 2022, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation launched an invasion of Ukraine. It started with an aerial bombing of Kyiv and simultaneous troop movements across the Ukrainian border (including its border with Belarus, where Russian military units had been placed to allegedly conduct a military drill). In its first days, the plan for a Russian blitzkrieg on Ukraine definitely failed, with the occupying force only managing relatively minor advances.

I'm writing this on the fifth day of war from a suburb of Kyiv, a city now preparing for a full-scale assault by the Russian army. By the time you read these words, many things may have already changed—and not just on the ground in Ukraine, given Putin's recent announcement that he had put the Russian nuclear arsenal on alert in response to "hostile declarations" from the West regarding the invasion. Literally anything is possible now, including the seemingly outlandish scenario of Putin's regime being toppled by the growing antiwar movement in Russia, supported even by a couple ultrarich oligarchs from Putin's own circle. It seems like an especially bad moment to write an essay, when unfolding events could render it completely irrelevant in a matter of hours. Still, there's an irresistible urgency for a case to be made against the Russian Federation.

Becoming Ukrainian

I can perfectly remember the moment when I first felt a sense of belonging to the Ukrainian people. It was in spring 2000 when I was spending my school vacation with relatives in Moscow, as I always did. Full disclosure: I was born in Kyiv to a Russian mother and a Jewish Ukrainian father. I attended Russian-language school and didn't even speak Ukrainian until I was in my teens.

The moment when I started becoming Ukrainian looked like this. Not far from the Kremlin, we were walking down a street full of bookstalls devoted to conspiracy theories, Orthodox Christianity, anti-Semitism, and Russian neofascist ideologies of all stripes. I'm sure anyone familiar with street life in large post-Soviet cities has seen these kinds of stalls. What stayed in my memory was one bookseller who promoted his merchandise with a loud tirade of slurs against a quite long list of targets: Jews, Germans, Westerners, Bolsheviks, liberals, punks, foreigners, homosexuals, and—to my complete surprise back then—Ukrainians.

I remember being quite impressed that Ukrainians were included in this fascist type's list of the most despicable things—especially because the rest of the list was mostly made up of things I thought were fun, curious, or progressive. Being Ukrainian had never seemed fun or curious at all to me before. Growing up in the 1990s in Ukraine, I associated the place more with things like poverty, grimness, and radiation. But suddenly Ukrainians

Maria Primachenko, Our Army, Our Protectors, 1978.

were among all these other nice things that this scumbag happened to hate so much. That made me feel proud to come from Ukraine, for the first time in my life.

Twenty-something years later, I was reminded of that moment as I read the transcript of a lengthy historical lecture by Vladimir Putin, which turned out to be a declaration of war against my country. Only this time, the kind of nonsense I remembered from the random fascist lunatic on a Moscow street was coming from the president of the Russian Federation. At the center of his argument was a deep ethnic and political hatred towards Ukrainians. And it was easy to discern the fascist lunatic's list of nice things being implied in Putin's speech as well, but under the generic empty signifier of "the West." The ideology of your racist uncle has not only gone mainstream, but has become a pretext for declaring war. The "Eurasianist" pseudo-philosopher Aleksandr Dugin's books have been prominent on the aforementioned bookstalls, and he has had an immense influence on Putin's trajectory.

I fully understand that it's senseless to engage with Putin's ignorant, imperialist mythologizing, just as there's no sense in arguing with a petty fascist bookseller on a street in Moscow. But it is tempting to turn some of those myths against themselves to show the inconvenient truths they distort and discredit, and to see how this mythology can be subverted and possibly even redirected towards progressive ends.

What If Ukraine Is a Radically Different Russia?

At the core of Putin's argument is a conviction that is shared, implicitly or explicitly, by a great number of Russians (and other people across the globe who never cared to study the history of Eastern Europe): that Russians and Ukrainians are actually part of the same nation. Ukrainian identity, the argument goes, was constructed artificially by the Austro-Hungarians (or Poles, or Jews, or Prussians) in order to disorient a core part of the Russian Empire's population. An obvious response to this argument is that every modern national identity is an artificial construct to some degree, including the Russian one.

Still, for an autocratic Russian mind that has persuaded itself that Ukraine *is* Russia, the mere existence of a Ukrainian state separate from Russia poses an existential threat. If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can they be allowed to rebel against their authoritarian governments, toppling them twice in the last seventeen years? If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can they be allowed to have elections without predetermined results? If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can their state not persecute "homosexual propaganda"? If all these things are possible in Ukraine, for an autocratic Russian mind this automatically means they're possible in Russia, which means they must be prevented at any cost.

The truth is that all of these Ukrainian things are actually possible in Russia because, after centuries of shared colonial history, Russians have become a little bit Ukrainian. What Putin calls the "historical unity" of both nations refers to centuries of imperial domination by Russia, which did actually also make millions of Ukrainians a little bit Russian. Most Ukrainians know Russian, in addition to our own language. We share with Russians a history of serfdom (a form of de facto slavery in the Russian Empire), worker movements, revolution, industrialization, and war. Generations of our families have mixed with each other. But any relationship between metropole and colony—like any master-slave relationship—is dialectical and reciprocal.

By absorbing the colony politically and culturally, the metropole subjects itself to a creeping takeover from within by the very alien forces it incorporated. By colonizing Ukraine, the Russian metropole had unwittingly swallowed a political culture based on horizontal forms of democracy—even if they seem brutal, like the Cossacks' councils, the anarchist armies of Nestor Makhno, or the Maidan uprisings. And this alien presence will disintegrate the metropole from within. In a way, the Putinist fear of a "Russian Maidan" uprising in Moscow is totally justified—but not because, as Russian propaganda suggests, it will be organized by NATO-trained Ukrainian terrorists. The fear is justified because, if Russians are a little bit Ukrainian, they might also be able to topple an authoritarian government. Like Ukrainians, Russians might also have an election without predetermined results. It is this "historical unity" that today's autocratic Russia is trying by all means to exorcize from within itself by turning Russia into a police state and preempting the popular uprising. But this effort is now turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy reminiscent of the fate of Laius, the father of Oedipus.

Russian engagement with Ukraine during Vladimir Putin's rule has been a long series of stubborn, utterly hopeless failures. In 2004, the Kremlin made a political bet on a presidential candidate who was a twice-convicted gangster, yet they thought he could be put in power by massive intimidation and election fraud. This led directly to the Orange Revolution that cancelled their plans. In 2014, after the occupation of Crimea, the Kremlin tried to launch an irredentist movement in Eastern Ukraine, convincing itself that millions of Ukrainian Russian-speakers would automatically support secession to Russia. But then the movement turned out to be so marginal that Russia had to bolster it by sending undercover operatives, and later its army. Finally, in 2022, the Kremlin convinced itself that the Ukrainian army would not resist a military invasion, and the occupying forces would be met as liberators. You probably know what happened next.

For some time now, I've been wondering why every Russian political project in Ukraine has been so fundamentally flawed. At least until a certain moment, Putin's regime seemed efficient at manipulating politics in Russia, the West, and pretty much everywhere except Ukraine. But suddenly, the simple reason for these failures became clear to me: in Ukraine, the Russians operate as if they are dealing with Russia itself. Whatever works in Russia, they think, must work in Ukraine. Because, you know, it's one and the same. Today, there's no need to even bother arguing against this. Russia's protracted failures in Ukraine say it all.

Kyiv's Historical Responsibility

My claim that Russians are in fact a little bit Ukrainian is not a vengeful joke, nor is it dictated by resentment. It stems from the founding myth of modern Russia itself. As the myth goes, the brotherly Eastern Slavic peoples cofounded a powerful medieval state called Kievan Rus towards the end of the first millennium AD, with Kiev as its capital. (This entity in fact originated as a Scandinavian colony, and the word "Rus" itself initially translated to something like "the men who row," referring to the way its rulers reached the area from the north via Europe's eastern rivers.) The fact that the medieval city of Kiev (now Kyiv) was a capital of this semi-mythical entity is a cornerstone of Russian imperialist discourse. In Russian colonial jargon, Kyiv is referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," because this city, founded roughly half a millennium before Moscow, was the starting point of an eastward expansion of Slavic tribes, resulting in what is now known as the Russian state.

But this expansion needs to be scrutinized. In popular history, it is imagined in a way similar to the "discovery of the New World" by Columbus before the advent of postcolonialism. The Slavs, it's been claimed, somehow discovered the plentiful lands in the East, where they founded Moscow and other cities and settled there. In reality, these lands had already been populated by numerous peoples, mostly Ugro-Finnic, who were then brutally conquered and at times exterminated. In short, the eastward expansion of Slavs from Kiev was an early case of settler colonialism, with all the usual attributes: the genocide of indigenous populations, the extraction of

resources, and the emergence of autocratic governance.

What we now know as the Russian state is an outcome of this tragic process that can be seen as parallel to the westward expansion of white Europeans into their own colonies. Maybe it's high time to account for all of that. As Western European nations gradually take responsibility for their own settler colonialism, in Eastern Europe this is still a blank slate. Which is a shame, given that some Eastern European nations, conquered in that same eastward expansion, still suffer under the yoke of the Russian colonial government. In the popular, inherently racist self-image of the Russian Federation, the "non-Russian peoples" populate its far north, Siberia, and Caucasus, while the so-called "European" part of Russia (west of the Ural Mountains) historically belongs to the Slavs. This is simply not true. Ugro-Finnic peoples like Mordvins, Karelians, Udmurts, Mari, and Komi are indigenous in areas that are just a stone's throw from Moscow or Saint Petersburg, while Tatars, Chuvashs, Bashkirs, and many other Turkic peoples populate the regions that make up large swaths of the allegedly "European," "Slavic," "white" part of Russia. The decolonial discourse that has been only nascent in the Russian Federation now has every opportunity to gain ground at an unprecedented pace—if successfully coupled with the antiwar movement.

By trying to occupy, with brutal military force, its imagined imperial heartland, the Russian Federation initiated a destructive process that may lead to the gradual loss of many more regions and peoples still subjected to its colonial rule. Of course, Ukrainians will fight against Russian imperialist frenzy by any means whatsoever. But merely fighting back is not enough. The growing anti-colonial struggle of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation should become the focus of the global antiwar movement. To start with, I suggest that Kyiv accept its thousand-year-old historical responsibility towards the colonized nations oppressed in today's Russian Federation by belatedly acknowledging itself as the unfortunate origin of a despotic, colonialist Russian state—a state that oppresses every people with the misfortune of being within its territory, including the Russian people. For the sake of all these peoples—and the rest of humankind—the Russian state in its current form should cease to exist.

This, in short, is my case against the Russian Federation.

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Oleksiy Radynski is a filmmaker and writer based in Kyiv. His films have been screened at International Film Festival Rotterdam, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Docudays IFF, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London), S A V V Y Contemporary (Berlin), and e-flux (New York) among other places, and have received a number of festival awards.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

War and (Senile) Dementia

Annihilate

An é antir (Annihilate), the most recent book by Houellbecq, is seven hundred pages long—half that length would have been enough.[1] It isn’t the best of his books, but it does succeed in sketching a simultaneously submissive and irate representation of the decline of world domination by the white race.

Deep in France, a family gathers around their eighty-year-old father who has suffered a stroke. The patriarch, who had worked for the secret service, has now fallen into an interminable coma. Meanwhile, his son Paul, who also works for the secret service as well as the Ministry of Finance, discovers he has terminal cancer. Aurélien, Paul’s brother, kills himself, incapable of continuing a life in which he has always been considered a loser. Lastly, there is the daughter Cécile, a Catholic fundamentalist married to a fascist notary who has lost his job but has found another in the right-wing circle of the Lepenists, still on the rise.

The central theme of this mediocre novel is terminal illness. In other words, it is about the agony of Western civilization.

It is not a pretty sight, because the white mind does not resign itself to the inescapable. Tragic are the reactions of agonizing, old, white men.

Here, this scene unfolds in contemporary France—a place that has been culturally devasted over the last forty years of neoliberal development. It is a ghost of a country in which political struggle now takes place in the corrupt stages of ultranationalism, racism, Islamophobia, and economic fundamentalism.

But this scene does not only unfold in France; it is the condition of the post-global world that is now threatened by the senile delirium of the dominant culture as it falls—that of the white, Christian, imperialist empire.

War, Agony, Suicide

At the Eastern borders of Europe, two old white men play a game in which neither of them can retreat.

The old white American is on the heels of a humiliating and tragic defeat. Worse than Saigon, Kabul is fresh in the global imaginary as a sign of the cognitive breakdown of the long-dominant, imperialist power.

The old white Russian knows that the base of his power is a nationalist promise: to avenge the honor of “Holy Mother Russia.”

The one who retreats first will lose everything.

Istubalz, Chess Game, 2022.

The fact that Putin is a Nazi was already clear at the conclusion of the second war in Chechnya. But at the time, he was still lauded by the American president, who looked him in the eyes and praised his sincerity. The Russian also enjoyed the favor of British banks, as they were filled to the brim with rubles robbed by Putin and his friends through the dismantling of public infrastructures after the fall of the Soviet Union. Geriatric Russians and Anglo-Americans were brothers in arms when it came to destroying the social spheres produced by past labor and communist movements all over the world.

But friendship and camaraderie don't last among assassins. In fact, what use would NATO be if peace was actually brokered? And how would a successful peace have affected the bottom lines of the multinational companies producing weapons of mass destruction and death—today making endless profits.

The expansion of NATO only serves to reignite a hostility that capitalism could not let die, to keep the profitable conflict alive.

There is no rational explanation for the war in Ukraine, especially because it is the climactic movement in a psychotic crisis of the white brain. What rationality is there in the expansion of NATO, which arms Polish, Baltic, and, yes, Ukrainian Nazis against Russian Nazism? In exchange, Biden gets the result most feared by American war strategists: forcing Russia and China into an embrace that fifty years ago Nixon had succeeded in weakening.

Given that the war is inexplicable in strategic terms, to understand the war we don't need to think geopolitically, but rather psycho-pathologically. Perhaps we need a geopolitics of psychotic outbursts.

At stake here is the political, economic, demographic, and finally psychic defeat of white, Western, (post)colonial civilization, which cannot accept the prospect of exhaustion, which prefers destruction or suicide to the slow extinction of white dominance.

West, Future, Decline

With the war in Ukraine, a hysterical arms race begins, borders are consolidated (along racialized lines), and violence increases exponentially—all demonstrations of the senile marasmus into which the West has fallen.

On February 23, 2022, when Russian troops were already in the Donbass, Trump praised Putin as a peacekeeping "genius,"[2] and suggested that the US follow his lead on the Mexican border.

Let's see if we can figure out what Trump's obscenities mean. Is there a kernel of truth in his delusions? At issue is the very concept of the West.

But first, what is the West?

If by "West" we refer to a geographical definition, then Russia is of course excluded. But if we think about the anthropological and historical meanings of that word, then Russia is more Western than any other West.

In short, the West can be defined as the land of decline and of obsession with the future. Those two traits are in fact one, given that for organisms subject to the second law of thermodynamics—as are individual and social bodies—the future can only mean eventual decline.

We—both the "we" of the West and the Westerners of the boundless Russian lands—are therefore united in futurism and decline, that is, in the delirium of omnipotence and in the desperation of impotence.

Trump gets credit for telling it like it is, claiming that our enemies are not Russians, but migrants from the Global South; China, which we have humiliated; Africa, which we have plundered. Those are our enemies, not the very white Russia, which is part of the "Great West."

This Trumpist logic is based on a white supremacy that sees Russianness as the most extreme form of acceptable whiteness.

Biden's logic is instead based on the defense of the "free world": a world born from genocide, from the forced deportation of millions of slaves, and organized around foundational systemic racism. Biden chooses to break the "Great West" apart in favor of a smaller West without Russia, which is in any case destined to tear itself apart and to involve the whole planet in its suicide.

So, let's define the West as a sphere of racist dominance obsessed with the future. Time stretches out in an expansive pulse: economic growth, accumulation, capitalism. It is exactly this obsession with the future that feeds the machine of dominance: a concrete present (of pleasure, of muscular relaxation) is invested into and exchanged for abstract future value.

Perhaps we could reformulate the classical Marxist analysis of value to say that exchange value is precisely this accumulation of the present (the concrete) in abstract forms (like money) that can be exchanged for something else tomorrow.

The fixation on and fetishization of the future are by no means a natural cognitive modality of the human. Most human cultures have been organized around a cyclical understanding of time, or on the insuperable dilation of the present.

Futurism is a transition to complete self-consciousness (also in aesthetic terms) of cultures of expansion. But there are many futurisms.

The obsession with the future has different implications in the theological-utopian sphere that is central to Russian culture and the techno-economic sphere of Euro-American culture. Federov's cosmism and Mayakovsky's futurisms both share an eschatological breath that is lacked by the technocratic fanaticisms of Marinetti and Musk. Maybe that's why it is Russia's destiny to end history—and here we are.

Nazism Is Everywhere

The new horizon is war that pits one Nazism against another. In his writings from the 1960s, Gunter Anders predicted that the nihilistic charge of Nazism would not die with the defeat of Hitler.[3] He presaged that it would return onto the world stage when technical power developed to such a degree that it provoked the humiliation of the human.

Nazism is reemerging as a psycho-political form of the demented body of the white race, which ragefully reacts to its own unstoppable decline. Viral chaos has created the conditions for the formation of a global, biopolitical infrastructure, but it has also accentuated the widely experienced perception of matter's ungovernability as it loses order, disintegrates, and dies.

The West has forsaken death because that concept is not compatible with its obsession with the future. It has rejected senility because it is not compatible with expansion and growth. But now, the (demographic, cultural, and economic) aging of the dominant cultures of the Global North are presented as a specter that white culture cannot even contemplate, let alone accept.

This is where the white brain (that of both Biden and Putin) enters a furious crisis of senile dementia. Then the white brain most lost to senility—that of Donald Trump—utters a truth that no one can stand to hear: Putin is our best friend. Sure, he's a racist murderer, but we are no less so.

On the other hand, Biden represents the impotent anger that old people express and feel when they notice the decline of their strength, psychic energy, and cognitive efficiency. Now that exhaustion is in its advanced stage, extinction is the only reassuring prospect.

Can humanity save itself from the murderous violence of the demented and agonized Western, Russian, and European brains?

The invasion of Ukraine will continue, whether it becomes a stable occupation (unlikely) or concludes with the withdrawal of Russian troops after the destruction of the military apparatus donated to Kyiv by the West (more likely). Regardless, the conflict will not be resolved by the defeat of either of two patriarchs. Neither one can accept retreat. Therefore, this invasion signals the beginning of a phase of continuous war that will be global (and that may express itself in nuclear terms). The final war against humanity has begun.

In the suicidal war that one West wages against the Other West, the first victims are those who have suffered from the deliriums of both spheres of influence and power—those who want no war but are made miserable by its effects.

The only thing we can do is to desert, to abandon, to collectively transform fear into thought, to resign ourselves to the inevitable. Only in this way can we produce the unpredictable: peace, pleasure, life.

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Franco Berardi, aka "Bifo," founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Italian Autonomia movement, is a writer, media theorist, and social activist.

1
Michel Houellebecq, *Anéantir* (Editions Flammarion, 2022).

2
See https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/23/trump-putin-genius-russia-ukraine-crisis.

3
See Gunter Anders, *The Obsolescence of Humankind* (1956–80), from which only select essays have been translated into English. Some are available here https://libcom.org/library/obsolescence-man-volume-i-part-two-%E2%80%9C-world-phantom-matrix-philosophical-considerations-r.—Trans.

Yuk Hui and Brian Kuan Wood

A Conversation on Art and Cosmotechnics, Part 2

Continued from "A Conversation on **Art and Cosmotechnics** *, Part 1"*

Brian Kuan Wood: *Art and Cosmotechnics* has only three chapters, plus an extensive introduction. But each chapter is substantial enough to be its own book! In chapter 1, there is a wonderful passage about "the Open" which I wonder about as a possible object for the search for what you've called "another beginning" of modern technology:

> Heidegger aligns the un-concealment of Being with what Rilke calls "the Open." When human *Dasein* looks at the world in a narrow and closed way, like a subject scrutinizing an object, the earth withdraws itself. The Open is not a scientific object, but rather another name for Being. To think together with the Open is to take into account that which resists closure and objectification. In this process, the re-grounding of truth, the truth of Being, becomes possible. Re-grounding here means rationalizing the non-rational as the incalculable last god.

How does "the Open" reflect the logic of Heidegger's "enframing" in relation to technology? And how is another path revealed in your exploration of Heidegger's interest in Klee and Cezanne's painting as instances where world and earth, or figure and ground, can be said to create openings to the unseen?

Yuk Hui: In order to answer your question, we must first address the meaning of the un-concealment of Being. But explaining Being and the un-concealment of Being in such limited space is an extremely difficult task, also because "*un*-concealment" cannot be said positively, so my answer to your question may have to do some kind of violence to these concepts. In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I consider that there are two key interpretations besides my continuous work on recursivity: the first is the interpretation of the question of Being in Heidegger and the second is the interpretation of Daoist thinking in terms of recursivity. Heidegger's work is for me a *detour* in order to move forward. Daoist literature often discusses dialectics, but how is Daoist dialectics different from Hegelian dialectics? Can one really call it dialectics at all? There is also much speculation on the influence of Daoist thought on Heidegger, largely based on the story that he once wanted to translate the *Dao De Jing* into German together with a sinologist. The way I approach this subject is rather different.

Let's start with the question of the un-concealment of Being, because, without an entry point to that, we can't address the question of the Open and the meaning of the passage you quoted. The Greeks used the same word *technē* for both "technology" and "art." For Heidegger,

Ma Lin (c. 1185–1260), Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds, Poem by Wang Wei (1225–75), Cleveland Museum of Art.

what the Greeks understood by *technē* allows us to experience what he called the un-concealment of Being. But here lies the most difficult question—one that haunts everyone and may also make life feel really worthless, especially if you spend your life working on the question of Being, and only realize much later that there is actually no such question of Being! I think that happened to the American philosopher Thomas Sheehan, who taught at Stanford and worked on Heidegger for half a century. A few years ago, he claimed that Heidegger's obsession with Being misses the point.[1] I wouldn't say that Being is an illusion just because no one can say what exactly it is, like an object in front of us; this is the case precisely because Being belongs to a category I call the Unknown, or that we can also call, following Heidegger, the nonrational. The nonrational is obviously not rational, but neither is it irrational. It's nonrational because it always remains as the Unknown (*Unbekannte*). For example, if God were irrational, then the world (including human beings) created by God could not be rational at all. If God were rational, then we would comprehend God through rationality. If we can't do this, it would be because we are an imperfect being. Paradoxically, either human rationality is limited or God is beyond rationality. In either case, if I ask you to demonstrate the existence of God, you'll never be able to, regardless of your belief. In this sense, God remains nonrational and unknown—which could also be the highest rationality.

For example, Descartes's famous demonstration of the existence of God in Part IV of the *Discourse on Method* (as well as in the third Meditation of *Meditations on First Philosophy*) is based on a negation of the human itself, because God's existence is negatively inferred by the imperfection of the human intellect. The first cause is a capacity beyond human rationality that we can call God.

Kant is more tactical in considering God, like freedom and the immortal soul, as a postulate. This is how we can say that Being belongs to the category of the nonrational, the category of the unknown. However, when we look out to the world, we see only beings, a chair, a table, a flower, a dog, a human being. Like what Novalis says at the opening of his *Pollen*: "We look for the unthinged [*Unbedingte*, also translated as "the unconditioned," or "the Absolute"] everywhere and only ever find things." There is a difference between Being and beings—which we find in Heidegger's early work—that is known as the ontological difference. When Heidegger says something is *happening* (*sich abspielt*) in what the Greeks understood as *technē*, he calls it the un-concealment of Being. Being doesn't appear as an object to be predicated or analytically ordered and decomposed, but rather as a place to be opened and cleared to reveal the world in a different way. It is in this decisive moment that the human being may find its place in the cosmos, or situate itself in the flux of time as historical *Dasein*.

I wrote that Heidegger aligns un-concealment of being with what Rainer Maria Rilke called "the Open" because "the Open" is precisely what cannot be reduced to either rational or irrational. Let's recall what Rilke says in the eighth Duino Elegy:

> With all its eyes the natural world looks out
> into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned
> backward, and surround plant, animal, child
> like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.
> We know what is really out there only from
> the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
> child and force it around, so that it sees
> objects—not the Open, which is so

> deep in animals' faces.[2]

You can see how "the Open" can be interpreted as a non-objectified way of looking at the world, and also what allows us to situate a work of art. At the same time, "the Open" is what a work of art—through its *being at work*, its *energein*, because *energeia* is that which actualizes—allows us to access, to enter into a relation with. The work of art is always *being at work*, but towards what? It is working towards the Open. The work of art opens what has been closed or what is in the process of closing. This is why I related Heidegger's un-concealment of Being to what Rilke called "the Open."

For Heidegger, the un-concealment of Being in the Greek concept of *technē* is still possible in modern technology. This doesn't mean that modern technology becoming, in essence, *Gestell* rather than *poiesis* means we can no longer talk about the un-concealment of Being. Heidegger claims that it's still possible, yet modern technology's mode of un-concealment is no longer *poiesis*, but what he called *herausfordern,* meaning to "challenge," "provoke," or "dare." Now, for example, if we build a dam to generate electricity, we challenge and order the river. We challenge the land, we challenge the villages that have dwelled there for a thousand years, especially when the villages need to be destroyed to make way for the dam. In the era of modern technology, the un-concealment of Being is still possible through this challenging. However, this form of challenging also means catastrophe, when something overwhelming like a massive engineering project becomes catastrophic, as with Fukushima, Chernobyl, and so forth. The coronavirus pandemic can also be said to be such an event.

If the un-concealment of Being is still possible in modern technology, such a possibility is also a danger. How do we confront such a danger that is also a possibility? My major question is: Is it still possible, while keeping this danger in mind, to transform technology by developing a new understanding, a new imagination, a new concept of invention, and a new relation (Heidegger would say a free relation) to technology? This is why I want to ask, as I said in my answer to your previous question, how art can transform technology. The engagement with Benjamin that we discussed earlier wasn't a criticism, but rather a review of a historical agenda. Why does it become necessary for art and philosophy to relate technology to the Open? Precisely because it is the Unknown, the Open is also open to interpretation, and it is in this sense more general than Being. Can we, for instance, direct technology towards the Open without pushing it to catastrophe and self-destruction? Catastrophes may allow us to resituate ourselves, as when an alcoholic has a horrible traffic accident or a fatal disease and only then gives up drinking. We moderns are all such alcoholics, but self-destruction cannot be the only way to discover meaning. The question then becomes: Can we transform technology before we hit bottom? Even the coronavirus pandemic seems not yet fatal enough to deter us from wanting to resume "normal" life.

In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I went back to Heidegger's essay "On the Origin of the Work of Art" and his encounter with Klee and Cézanne, because I think it's precisely in the thinking of Klee and Cézanne that Heidegger identifies a way to overcome what he himself calls "the ontological difference." Heidegger made this clear in a postcard he circulated during Christmas, where—after a short poem—he wrote:

> What Cézanne called " *la réalisation*" [the realization] is the appearance of what is present [*des Anwesenden*] in the clearing of presence [*des Anwesens*] in such a way indeed that the duality [or twofold, *Zwiefalt*] of the two is overcome in the oneness [*Einfalt*] of the pure radiance of his paintings. For thinking, this is the question of overcoming the ontological difference between being and beings.[3]

In the first chapter titled "World and Earth," I discuss how overcoming such an "ontological difference between being and beings" shows the necessity but also the possibility of reinterpreting and resituating technology. But, as I said earlier, maybe "the Open" provides a more general way to pose the question than Heidegger's Being. Even if Heidegger was able to talk about the un-concealment of Being, how could non-Europeans relate to this Being when, as we said before, the question of Being was not a central one in, say, Eastern philosophy, if we follow what Kitarō Nishida, founder of the Kyoto School, said? Nishida claimed that if the central question of Western philosophy is Being, for the East the central question is nothing. Of course, one can contest such a clear and neat division. At least in the case of China, one may say that the central question is *dao*—not only in Daoism, but also at the core of neo-Confucianism since the eleventh century. This is why, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, I go back to the classical categories in Chinese thought, *dao* and *qi*, to elaborate the concept of technics in China. *Qi* means "utensil," which has to be distinguished from another term with the same pronunciation more familiar to non-Chinese speakers, namely "breath," like in Qigong.

BKW: Let's move forward to the second chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics*, which begins by identifying how the logic of self-reflexivity within modern art actually forms a tautological, recursive loop. As you write:

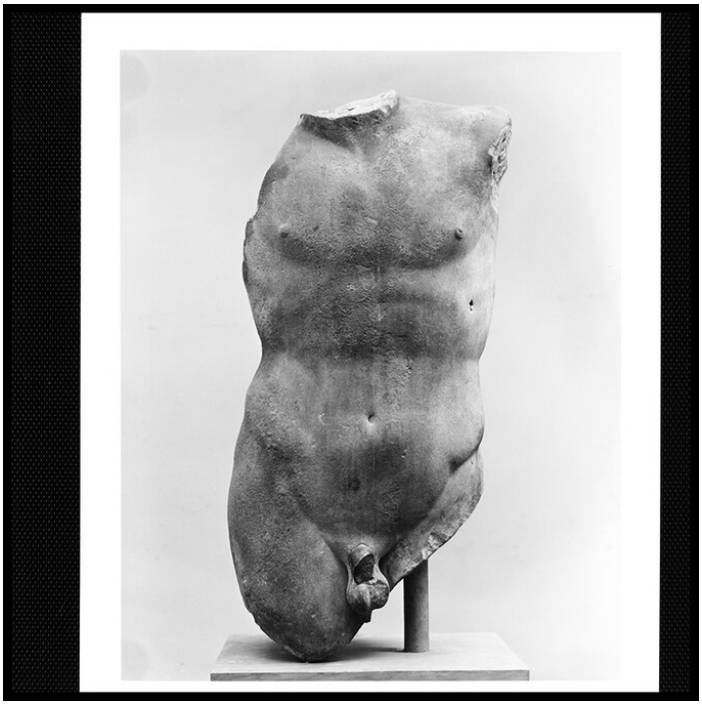
> Modernism is characterized by a reflexivity that often

takes the form of self-critique. Its language is necessarily tautological. Through a negative detour, a logical contradiction, it reinforces what it negates. This gesture is fundamentally tragist because its initial negation or refusal is indeed a preparation for affirmation.[4]

You continue by offering Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* as an iconic example of this recursive refusal-affirmation. I think we can be clear that this tautology is not self-negating (on the contrary), nor necessarily dishonest—in fact, you clearly identify it as a "tragist" logic, following Greek tragedy. But we might say that it does sacrifice questions concerning Being for more immediate—maybe more urgent—questions concerning industrialization, specifically technologies of mass reproduction we know from Benjamin to Duchamp to Warhol and onward, perhaps up to today's contemporary art. From this perspective, we might also suspect that modern and contemporary art have habitually confused industrialization with Being! But that would make it all the more necessary to contrast the "tragist" logic of this loop of refusal-affirmation with what you call "Daoist logic," which you find in the centuries-long tradition of Chinese *shanshui* painting. This second chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics* is probably the most demanding of the book, because it synthesizes centuries of scholarship and commentary on Daoist thought to identify how recursive or even paradoxical logics produce meaning, either in the visual field or more generally in what can and cannot be sensed or apprehended. *Shanshui* painting can be considered an ultimate expression of the dynamics of this logic, but I wouldn't even know where to mark an entry into such an encompassing chapter of the book! But perhaps the centrality of *xuan* (玄) in this system would be a place to start?

YH: This is a key question. The passage you cited is from my commentary on what Clement Greenberg wrote about Duchamp and claimed about modernism. Greenberg claimed that Duchamp was not destroying art, but rather enlarging the concept of art through the negation of art. That's why I called it "tragist." But we haven't gone into the difference between tragist logic and *shanshui* logic yet, which is at the core of the book. I don't think that I can do this in a satisfactory way here, but maybe I can start with an interlude from 2016 when I was at a conference in London with the sinologist François Jullien.

During a public discussion I had with François, a friend, the American art critic and poet Barry Schwabsky, raised a question: Did tragedy, in the Greek sense, ever exist in China? And if not, why? François answered immediately



Marble torso of the so-called Apollo Lykeios, AD 130–161, The Met Fifth Avenue. Rainer Maria Rilke has a poem entitled "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908) that ends with this command: "You must change your life."

that the Chinese had developed a thinking to avoid tragedy. I was amazed by this answer, but I was even more amazed by the complexity of the original question, because I don't think the Chinese could avoid tragedy when they didn't know what tragedy was. If you want to avoid something, you have to know what it is first. Otherwise, even if you encounter it sooner or later, you will not recognize it. And if you can recognize something, you must already know it. This is similar to one of the most famous aporia in Western thought from Plato's *Meno*, when Meno challenges Socrates that if he knows what virtue is, he doesn't have to look for it, but if he doesn't know what it is, he wouldn't recognize it even if he encountered it. So I tend to think the Chinese didn't know the Greek meaning of tragedy—a term that doesn't mean "sad," of course, as we use the term "tragic" in the modern sense. That's why I made a distinction between "tragist," on the one hand, and "tragic" on the other, because I don't want to confuse tragist, as a logic, with "tragic" as a colloquial term.

The logic of Greek tragedy always starts with a contradiction—an irreconcilable contradiction. We can take an example from Sophocles where Antigone, by the law of the family, has to bury her brother who died at war, yet the brother, for having been at war against the polis, cannot legally be buried as an enemy of the city. What can Antigone do? She must choose between the law of the family and the law of the polis, since the two are not reconcilable. This is the basic structure of Greek tragedy,

and why I try to understand Greek tragedy as a logic. Years ago I was struck by the first sentence of Péter Szondi's *Versuch über das Tragische* (1961), which says that "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic." In poetics and philosophy, there is a sharp distinction between what is traditionally known as aesthetics and logic. In Aristotle, there's a discourse about emotion, about *catharsis*, about purification of the soul through tragedy. But only in Schelling do we find a *logic* of tragedy—a basic structure of the tragedy starting with these irreconcilable contradictions. What I call "tragist" thought attempts to reconcile what is not reconcilable. Daoist logic also starts with oppositions, but the way the oppositions are formulated and how they are resolved are rather different from the tragist logic. The opposition we find in Daoist thinking is continuous, for example, having vs. not having, movement vs. tranquility, yang and yin are all opposed to each other, but also continuous. Daoist logic departs from these oppositions in order for thinking to proceed. It seeks a movement that can reconcile these oppositions, as the Greeks do with tragedy. The secret of this reconciliation, or this unification, and how it operates is the task of elaborating *dao*.

But *dao* is like Being in the sense that it is something we cannot really demonstrate. I said earlier that Being belongs to this category of the nonrational, the unknown, and the same goes for *dao*. When you open *Art and Cosmotechnics*, the first sentences you read in the epigraph are the opening of the *Dao De Jing*:

> The *dao* that can be said is not the eternal *dao*.
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> *Wu* (nothing): the origin of heaven and earth.
> *You* (being): the mother of ten thousand things.
> Empty of desire, one perceives mystery.
> Filled with desire, one perceives manifestations.
> The two spring from the same source but differ in name;
> Both are designated as *xuan*.
> *Xuan* and again *xuan*,
> gate to all mysteries.

So the *dao* that can be said is not *dao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name, because it cannot be named. It cannot be said. *Wu*, which means "nothing" or "not having," is the origin of heaven and earth, and *you*, which means "having," or "being"—the mother of ten thousand things—are already opposed. One is the origin of heaven and earth and the other is the mother of ten thousand beings. The way to resolve this is *xuan* and again *xuan* (*xuan zhi you xuan*), which I see as the beginning of a recursive thinking. There are different versions of the *Dao De Jing*, and in one of the versions it's written as *xuan zhi you xuan zhi*, which makes *xuan* a verb. *Xuan* has many meanings—"dark" in terms of color, as well as "mysterious." You can see how a loop serves to resolve the opposition, but then a curious question arises: What is the difference between this recursiveness and the recursiveness of Greek tragedy, and furthermore the recursiveness we are familiar with in cybernetics? This is the question *Art and Cosmotechnics* attempts to open. It is only through understanding this recursive logic that we can articulate the Open in a more concrete way. That would be my brief response to your complex question!

BKW: And we saw that, among other similar translations, Stephen Mitchell had it as "darkness within darkness," which is profound. For my final question, let's look to the final chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics*, which identifies a path forward. Put simply, this path forward means, as you discussed before, reversing the question of how technology determines art to ask how art can determine technology, specifically by returning technology to the primordial question of Being. You point out that science and technology have a low tolerance for the unknown, or a poor understanding of the significance of the unknown beyond posing a threat to control. So as a simple question, I'd like to ask how—either in this final chapter or more generally in your thinking since you wrote it—one might delineate a cosmotechnical approach to creating art today. Have you encountered any artistic strategies that could renew a relation to Being or to the unknown, over and above the determinism of technological enframing or capture?

YH: In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I compared several English translations of the *Dao De Jing*, yet you can see that it is impossible to translate it word for word, since it is fundamentally a logic. For your question concerning artistic strategies, I'm neither an artist nor an art historian, nor an art critic. I became interested in art because I see an openness in art, which might be an experimental field for all of us. On the terrain of thinking, art is still in a position to deterritorialize and reterritorialize thinking. Secondly, on the institutional level, art institutions might still have the flexibility and possibility to experiment. Like it or not, we have to deal with the question of institutions because we have to think about education for future generations. How are we going to think of the role of universities in the twenty-first century? The role of a humanities education, but also engineering and science educations? At the same time, I've also become very skeptical about the potential of institutions, as you'll read towards the end of the book:

> This new "institutionalization" of art has yet to come, and it has to go beyond an art designed to serve "man's spiritual needs." But it is hard to say whether this institutionalization of art will come to pass, since conventional and conservative practices in the arts and humanities, combined with institutional lack of vision, may be even more efficient than engineering

> and scientific disciplines in refusing imagination and becoming reactionary. Nevertheless, we still have to prepare for its arrival by providing a "ground" to think the relation between art, philosophy, and technology today.[5]

You can see that I'm not an optimist, yet I'm still hopeful. I'm also not a pessimist, and definitely not a cynic—cynicism is an enemy we all have to fight against today. I'm suggesting that we should all prepare for a possibility to come. That's why I still see in art—particularly in its relation to technology—a potential at different levels to deal with these questions.

Maybe we can go back to the beginning of this conversation. The question I put forward in the book is: How can we relate technology to the unknown at all? For example, if we could "integrate" the unknown into technology, then it would no longer be modern technology—we would no longer be modern. Modern technology would disappear and Heidegger's discourse on modern technology would come to its end. Can art be a *place* for that? If you ask how to do that concretely, like adding a parameter or function to an algorithm, I wouldn't be able to give you an answer—not only because it would be impossible, but also because, if it were possible, it would paradoxically close thinking. At the same time, for me at least, this should be the way to think about overcoming modernity, because in the last century, overcoming modernity was basically done through wars, which was paradoxically only a continuation of modernity: economic and military expansion via technological means. The Second World War was also a project for overcoming modernity, with National Socialism promising to marry Romanticism and industrialism into a holism (and we know that Heidegger also became a Nazi), or with the Kyoto School in Japan wanting to restore an organic thinking, which I discuss towards the end of *Art and Cosmotechnics* during my analysis of Miki Kiyoshi.

But maybe there are other ways of overcoming modernity that remain important for us today. War is not the most desirable thing, though it is always a possibility as long as the sovereign state remains the only reality of international politics, since sovereignty presupposes the possibility of war. Though realpolitik has its importance, in *Art and Cosmotechnics* I try to explore some different paths, *obscure* paths that are not straightforward and probably not brightly lit by the sun. They are obscure like *xuan*, in the sense that one will have to take many detours—moving backward before being able to move forward, for example, or having to turn around many times. That's also why I said at the very beginning of our conversation that this is a strange book.

In the very last paragraph of my previous book, *Recursivity and Contingency*, I called for a post-European philosophy, which was partly to echo Heidegger—for whom Western philosophy ended with cybernetics, making a post-European philosophy the only way for philosophy to continue at all—but also to propose an agenda for an individuation of thinking. *Art and Cosmotechnics* can be considered a response to that call, but one that is still at the very beginning of its development. However, this call is for a collective project, which means we will have to work together, as thinkers, artists, scientists, and engineers. And I hope there will be occasions for these kinds of dialogues to continue and flourish.

X

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Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

1
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3
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5
Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, 286.

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa

Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 2

Part 2: Shouts, Moans, Musics

> Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"[1]

5.

From the vantage of more than forty years since *Camera Lucida*'s publication, of what use is Barthes's punctum given the studium these days? The punctum, as **the first part of this essay** shows, serves Barthes's willfully ahistorical appropriation of photographs to expressly private ends driven by the vagaries of affect and the penetrating force of grief. This will, this possessive grief, leads him to a profoundly asocial stance on photography writ large. Moreover, his despairing solipsism is premised upon a deeply racialized, gendered, and classed form of white normativity operating throughout the seams of his theory.

Given the belated emergence of the second, temporally inflected conception of the punctum in the book, and given its intensifying orbit around the maternal figure in Barthes's Winter Garden Photograph, perhaps the critical question to ask of *Camera Lucida* needs to shift. Maybe the question is less "why withhold The Winter Garden Photograph?" or "what does The Winter Garden Photograph mean?" than it is: How does its retention instruct us as to the perils of Barthes's method in this moment of acute, global violence mobilized in the preservation and legitimation of white supremacy?

Could Barthes's punctum *ward off* the insurgent irruption of that Real which is buttressed by normative forms of racial, gendered, and classed violence within his text? Could it be that in disavowing any critical engagement with material social history, in working ahistorically from sentiment and affect, Barthes can attempt to uncouple his poetic production of meaning from any recognition of the differently subjected matter upon which it depends? To what extent are Barthes's hierarchical and expropriative elucidations of the punctum not exemplary of a white

"ruling episteme," and of its "dynamics of naming and valuation … grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity," as Spillers writes?

Camera Lucida begins its treatment of photography in intensely material, corporeal terms. In his search for the specific ontology of the photograph, Barthes finds that "the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see," implying an explicitly physical relationship between Photography (as *corpus*) and the Photograph (as the *body* I see).[2] His theorization of photography is riven through with corporeity. The photograph " *points* a finger," and

> always *carries* its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are *glued together*, *limb by limb*, like *the condemned man* and *the corpse* in certain *tortures* … as though united in eternal *coitus*. (5–6, emphasis mine)

Given this corporeal figuration of both the photograph and photography, Barthes's dismissal of those studium photographs that "shout" (41), and of those studium images "surrounded by a noise" which will make meaning "less acute" (36) seems not only strange, but conceptually contradictory and arbitrary. So too his unilateral declaration that

> the photograph must be silent (there are blustering photographs, and I don't like them): this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute

> subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah. (53–55)

As Barthes elaborates on the punctum, he declares that "the photograph can 'shout,' not wound." Since photographs possessed of a punctum are those of a higher value, this establishes a rigid hierarchy not only of value, and of attention and interest, but most crucially of meaning for photography as a whole. Barthes's rejection of the very corporeity he ascribes to photography legitimates a mode of attention that valorizes an *absence* of disturbance in favor of an abundance of propriety, an absence of noise in favor of an abundance of discretion. His schema privileges those photographs that, in their silence, in their "withdrawal from their usual blah-blah," touch him in his efforts to attain an "absolute[ist?] subjectivity."

In this contradictory rejection we find Barthes's ocular-centrism, his reification of a mode of disembodied looking that seeks to "neutralize the phonic substance of the photograph," as Fred Moten has written, and that proceeds from some notional point outside of materiality (and thus of history) and "exterior to the field of vision," as Kaja Silverman critiques.[3] What might happen were we to not only forsake this method and to reject its premise, but to instead look—and to listen—precisely where Barthes himself refuses to? Plainly, despite his prescriptive insistence that the photograph not shout, and despite his multiple gestures of aversion in relation to those images that do, the photograph itself will not keep quiet.

Tina Campt's practice gives exemplary proof of what might be gained in inverting Barthes's hierarchical model of punctum and studium, and in refusing his ocular-centric approach by beginning not only to look, but to *listen*—by moving from and through the historicity of matter. In her essay "The Lyric of the Archive," Campt engages an archive of studio portrait photographs depicting diasporic black British citizens. **These portraits**, produced by Ernest Dyche Sr. in Birmingham, England in the 1950s, were rescued from imminent demolition in 1990. Campt recounts her participation in the assessment of this archive, as she "gathered box after box of images and brought them upstairs to the office."[4] She writes that

> from the moment I first laid eyes on them, I have struggled to understand what exactly these images were saying, and what it was they told us about photography and the making of community in diaspora. But I also came to realize that what was so captivating about them is not only what I was seeing, but what I was hearing as I looked at them—a playful yet insistent *hum* that I found difficult and, frankly, a mistake to ignore.[5]

In response to this insistent aural sensation, Campt sets out to "think the constitutive supplementarity of the visual and the sonic as a larger whole."[6] She attends not only to the materiality of the objects but to that referent which adheres to them, and that constitutes the corpus and the body (the archive and the photograph) to which she will respond. This form of response understands and embraces the fact that looking at and listening to photographs constitutes "a synesthetic encounter that, I would contend, certain photographs involuntarily require."[7] In stark contrast to Barthes, Campt argues that images' effects and intelligibility emerge from a wider synaesthetic field, and thus the "complex musics of the photograph are … a sound that is not contained within the image, but one that precedes the image as its constitutive and enunciating force."[8] Thus, sound is a *constitutive element* in these photographs' production of meaning, in their capacity to utter and articulate themselves. To reject noise, to reject materiality is thus to reject or disavow meaning. She writes:

> I would like to suggest that thinking about images through music deepens our understanding of the affective registers of family photography and helps us understand how such images are mobilized by black families as a practice that articulates linkage, relation, and distinction in diaspora.[9]

Campt's critical approach values the role of affect in photography's generation of meaning, but as *a* vital element in a social and diasporic practice. Barthes's resolution to make "what Nietzsche called 'the ego's ancient sovereignty' into a heuristic principle" (8) stands in diametric opposition to Campt's investment in the sociohistorical basis of photographic meaning, since black social practices that extend over time are premised on shared rather than solipsistic feeling. She decides to treat the Dyche photographs as an archive, in series, and to "read the images like music," remaining attentive to the patterns of their soundings, to their specificity within their homogenous and generic context. Such a mode of reading "means using musical structure as a heuristic lens through which to engage the photographic practices of black communities in diaspora, and as a framework through which the photograph registers meaning."[10] Campt's rigorous attention to these studio portraits requires that she embrace their generic form. By emphasizing their serial nature—over and above the individuated aesthetic distinctions of one or another image—she valorizes the studium as against the punctum, and departs from the hierarchical model Barthes outlines.

She notes that Dyche's "extremely formulaic images," which are "staged," "predictable," and "posed," "show smartly dressed individuals—black folks putting their best foot forward."[11] While they are littered with odd anachronistic details ("the wilted chrysanthemums on the table," or "an unlit cigarette held demonstratively"), Campt argues that "Such 'points' and details are a function of the formulaic nature of their photographic genre. They do not rise to the level of *punctum*; rather, they dissolve again into the background." According to the phenomenological model outlined by Barthes, Campt writes, "the attributes I find so compelling relegate the repetition of these details of form and genre instead to the less interesting category of *studium*, rather than constituting the more invigorating forms of *punctum* prized by so many theorists of visual culture."[12]

But having determined to set aside that hierarchy, and "take *studium* seriously and not dismiss it so quickly," Campt demonstrates that a "reconceptualization and revaluation" of "the seriality of studio portraiture" can enable a substantive recognition of "the image-making practices of black diasporic communities in particular, as a significant and revealing form of expressive cultural practice."[13] She thus assesses the archive as a collective utterance, and not a loose concatenation of individual images interpretable on the basis of their singular aesthetic or circumstantial distinctions. The repetitions of furniture that populate the frames, the subtle alternations of flower vases, the recurrence of pose—these generic features are read in a generative rhythm of transnational communication that at once recapitulates and alters its own codes. The photographs constitute complex sites for performative action occurring in the present of their making, as subjects acquire the distinction in image that they materially seek in life, and again in their reception, as family members and friends receive a record of that instant as a remnant of ongoing actions in worlds far removed. They are also rehearsals of an ongoing refusal to conform to whatever racist trope of the black or Asian immigrant that imperial Britain might otherwise seek out, in order to fix these people "in their proper place."

The subtle inflections and modulations in the normative codes of an immigrant subculture, the small conventional acts of enunciation that mark "the extension of a field" (25) turn out to be the lifeblood of diasporic bonds that are always under pressure from the strictures of white supremacy. These bonds make matter, they hum, they shout, they repeat and reverberate among peoples and across time. In our attention to Campt's serial portraits, and their fashioning of specificity and generality, of individuality and collectivity, we are imbricated in the "ongoing production of a performance" in which the relationship of the individual to the collective is reconfigured *through* the portrait photograph.[14] We are subsumed within the series into an ensemble comprised of a difference that does not insist on radical or violent differentiation.

In both Campt's and Fred Moten's theorization of sound and music, they develop notions of an ongoing performance—the contours of a subtle and perceptible grammar through which a social practice happens or matters. In Campt's work, an archive of family photographs constitutes a record of choices and intentions which can be attended to via the recursive rhythms of multiple black bodies entering a photographic studio to produce—serially, in subtly variegated extension—a record of aspirations toward a futurity not stably attainable in their immigrant present. In this sense, each print, each face, each pose strikes a note, accumulates into a rhythm, generates a discernibly choral hum.

Within Campt's model, ostensibly aberrant images that veer far from the conservative mean of Dyche's family photographs—pictures that evince, for example, a "proud and voluptuous sexuality" in the bikini-clad figure of a smiling black woman—give voice to "a suppressed melody of licentiousness." This shifts into something harmonically "*in time*" with the "*ensemble* performance" when read through the prism of Caribbean culture's celebration of "sexuality and sexual potency … for women."[15] When read within the lineaments of black social practice, that which seems disjunct as a punctual aberration proves to be "*playing off tempo, but in time*."[16]

In keeping with such sublations and articulations of difference within the choral whole, Moten writes:

> Mingus thinks that in the absence of a law of movement to break, calypso falls into the random constraint of a death spiral. However, Dudley shows how the maintenance of the circle's integrity requires the legal procedure of *an articulated ensemble*, what Olly Wilson calls a "fixed rhythmic group" whose "rhythmic feel is not produced by a single pattern … but is a composite generated by several instruments that play repeated interlocking parts." No hegemonic single pattern means no sole instrument or player responsible for that pattern's upkeep. There is, rather, a shared responsibility that makes possible the shared possibilities of irresponsibility.[17]

Within the shared sociohistorical field of black cultural practice, within the neglected realms of the studium, homogeneity and heterogeneity are instead bound up in shifting but complementary relation. In this model, repetition and differentiation are not antagonistically opposed. Difference is not exclusionary, and similitude is not unprepossessing. As Campt shows of the image, and Moten here shows of music, these are black social practices in which "me" blends into "we," rather than "I" standing apart from "you." By way of her focus on the studium, Campt is able to "plot seriality as more than

simple repetition," more than an aesthetic dullness that prompts no immediate affect, but rather as an "integral part of complex patterns of cultural enunciation."[18] These are pictures that make sounds, pictures that cumulatively shout, musics that moan.

We can at least say, therefore, that Barthes's rejection of sound, if taken as a rule, and certainly within the parameters of *Camera Lucida*, suppresses the sociality of photography by doing away with its materiality, along with the gendered and classed and racial history of that materiality, in order to fashion from its utopic eradication his own "Absolute subjectivity." Moten argues, in "Black Mo'nin'," that "the necessary repression—rather than some naturalized absence—of phonic substance in a general semiotics applies to the semiotics of photography as well." Thus in Barthes the yearning to "try to formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography" (9), succumbs to "the semiotic desire for universality, which excludes the difference of accent by excluding sound in the search for a universal language and a universal science of language."[19] Those things which Barthes seeks to disqualify and relegate—noise, shouts, sounds—constitute deviations from the unilateral order he seeks to impose on photography. They are deviations in which, or through which, sociohistorical meanings enunciate themselves. As Moten writes, this universalizing desire

> is manifest in Barthes as the exclusion of the sound/shout of the photograph; and ... in the fundamental methodological move of what-has-been-called-enlightenment, we see the invocation of a silenced difference, a silent black *mater* iality, in order to justify a suppression of difference in the name of (a false) universality.[20]

Let us say that the relationship between the matched edges of the lost slave-master photograph and the Nadar portrait of de Brazza shown in *Camera Lucida* makes a palindrome—that they form the two sides of an edgeless mirror. Moten's essay uncovers yet another palindromic figure in the relationship between Barthes's retention of a photograph of his dead mother, and Mamie Till Bradley's insistent exhibition of a photograph of her dead son, Emmett Till. As Moten writes, Till's "casket was opened, his face shown, is seen—now in the photograph—and allowed to open a revelation that first is manifest in the shudder the shutter continues to produce, the trembling, a general disruption of the ways in which we gaze at the face and at the dead."[21]

In the image of young, dead, lynched Emmett Till, affect and corporeity abound but are irreducible to "the ego's ancient sovereignty"—irreducible to property. Bradley's exhibition of her murdered child constitutes both a surrender and a claim, a release and a carrying, a gesture of showing that reckons directly with the violently differentiated racial histories of seeing and being-seen, that generates shouts and echoes and moans in which we might hear *and* look upon "the oppressive ethics and coercive law of reckless eyeballing."[22] Mamie Till Bradley understands that her insistent exhibition of the photograph of her dead beloved makes possible a kind of community formed in what Moten, by way of Nathaniel Mackey, calls "wounded kinship," and thus that "that leaving open is a performance. It is the disappearance of the disappearance of Emmett Till."[23] In indefatigable refusal of sheriff H. C. Strider's attempts to prematurely entomb Emmett Till's lynched and broken body in Mississippi,[24] Mamie Till Bradley's ongoing photographic performance ensures that

> Emmett Till's face is seen, was shown, shone. His face was destroyed (by way of, among other things, its being shown: the memory of his face is thwarted, made a distant before-as-after effect of its destruction, what we would never have otherwise seen). It was turned inside out, ruptured, exploded, but deeper than that it was opened. As if his face were truth's condition of possibility, it was opened and revealed. As if revealing his face would open the revelation of a fundamental truth, his casket was opened, as if revealing the destroyed face would in turn reveal, and therefore cut, the active deferral or ongoing death or unapproachable futurity of justice.[25]

Consequent upon that showing in grief, that showing of the beloved body as grief—as wound—Till's photograph "carries its referent with itself" (5). For Moten, Till's photograph

> bears the trace of a particular moment of panic when, "under the knell of the Supreme Court's *all deliberate speed*," there was massive reaction to the movement against segregation ... So that the movement against segregation is seen as a movement for miscegenation and, at that point, whistling or the "crippled speech" of Till's "Bye, Baby" cannot go unheard.[26]

The cacophonous utterances made present to us through this photograph are indivisible from the history out of which it emerges, and, as Moten writes, this "means we'll have to listen to it along with various other sounds that will prove to be unneutralizable and irreducible."[27]

Both Campt and Moten model a relationship to affect, and to the photographic image, that refuses the proprietary

Mamie Till is held by her future husband, Gene Mobley, as she sees her son's brutalized body. She insisted on her son's casket being open so that the world "could see what they did to my baby." Photo: David Jackson. Courtesy of Getty Images.

and exclusionary claiming of history. If in the latter stages of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes recognizes that "the time when my mother was alive *before me* is ... History," and that "no anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time starting from myself" (65), he nevertheless refuses continually to begin in commonality with others, in a history that is irreducible to proprietary claims. For Barthes, in his solipsistic isolation, photography is valuable in the extent to which it can give him "a sentiment as certain as remembrance" (70), but that remembrance, and thus photography's foundational relationship to memory, is essentially private, subjective, and resistant to sociality. Thus, for Barthes the cherished image must be guarded in the secrecy of willful retention, as opposed to Mamie Till

Bradley's insistent exhibition. For Moten, "memory—bound to the way the photograph holds up what it proposes, stops, keeps—is given pause, because what we thought we could look at for the last time and hold holds us, captures us, and doesn't let go.[28]

Against Barthes's serial refusals of the traces of others, and of their *matter* ing through photographs that might enact and expand memory, Kaja Silverman argues:

> If to remember is to provide the disembodied "wound" with a psychic residence, then to remember other people's memories is to be wounded by their wounds. More precisely, it is to let their struggles, their passions, their pasts, resonate within one's own past and present, and destabilize them.[29]

Silverman shows incisively that in such open commonality with the memories of others, "borrowed memory" "inevitably shifts the meaning" of our own memories, so that our commitment to an openness to the memories of others enables us "to enter into a profoundly dialectical relation to the other."[30] This is crucial not just in its ethical value, but because, as Silverman notes, "to remember other people's memories is to inhabit time"—more specifically, it is to inhabit a time that is not reducible to "the endless perpetuation of the 'same.'"[31]

In *Camera Lucida*, history serves only to fortify the white individual self, not merely to the exclusion of others, but through their expurgation from the scenes in which they appear, so that the husked-out shells of images might better accommodate Barthes's imperious needs, likes, and dislikes. But the radical potency of the photograph flows from the ways in which its surface is charged, suffused by the silted traces of its *and* our multiple itineraries. The photograph's carnality connects us to the attenuated presence of others, who appear to us now—in this ineffably lapsed present-ness—in a temporality that always exceeds the moment of our encounter, and the parameters of our individual lives.

6.

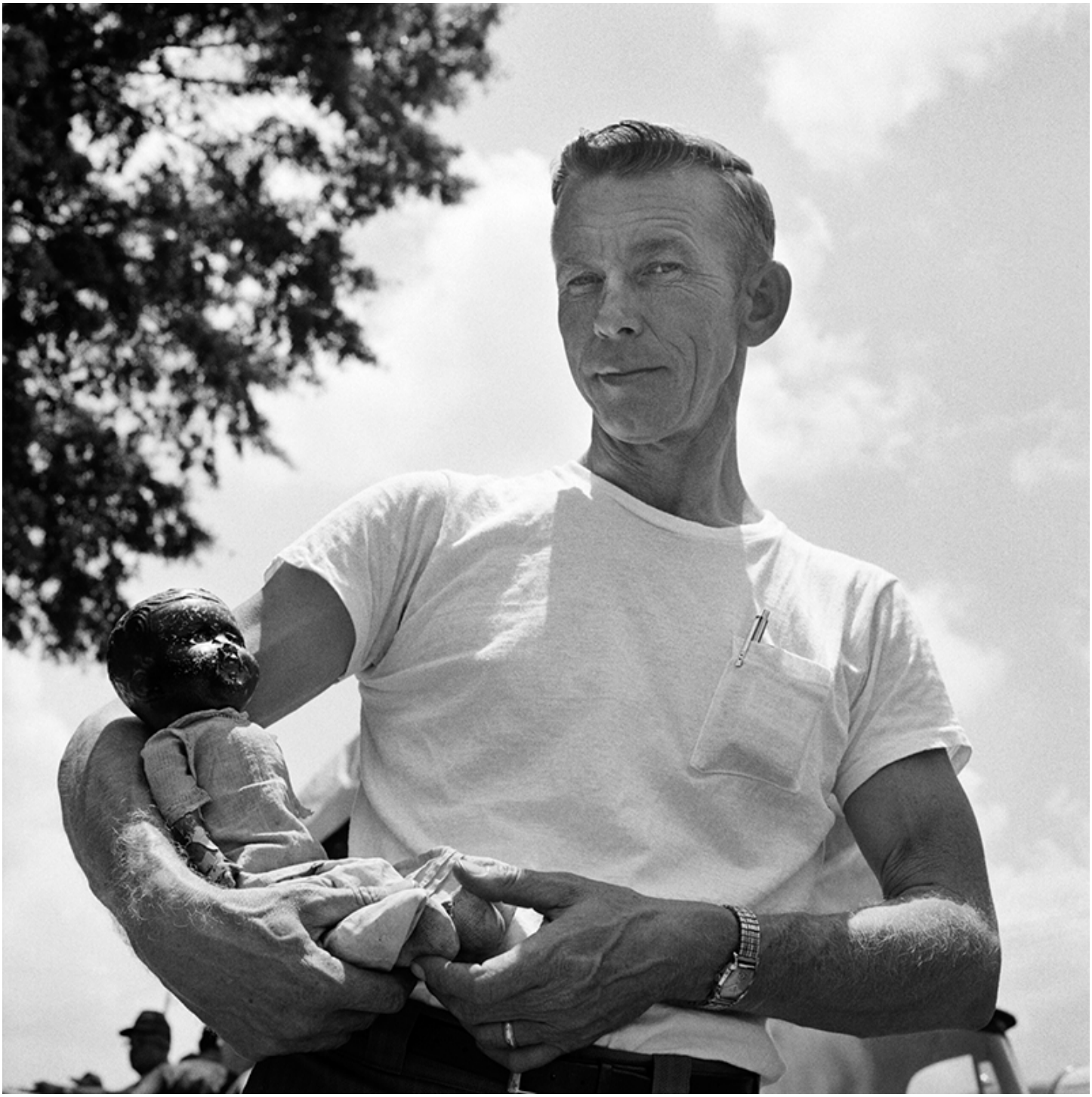
In closing, like Barthes we might return, by way of his memories, to his treatment of that James Van der Zee portrait from 1926. In it, he (mis)identifies the necklace worn by a "solacing Mammy" as "a slender ribbon of braided gold" (53). He writes that "it was this same necklace ... which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of jewelry," the property of "this sister of my father" who "never married, lived with her mother as an old maid," of whom Barthes writes "I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life" (53).

As Margaret Olin has shown, the "reason that Barthes could only have recognized this *punctum* when he wasn't looking at it, is that the detail he picks out, the slender ribbon of braided gold, is not there. The lady wears a string of pearls, as does her seated relative."[32] It transpires that the three African Americans in Van der Zee's studio portrait are "in fact ... the maternal aunts and uncle of their photographer—Mattie, Estelle, and David Osterhout."[33] Barthes dubs Estelle Osterhout the "solacing Mammy," and his misidentification of this "mistaken detail," to follow Olin, leads "Barthes to the center of pain in the photograph," which is to say back to a family photograph of *his own* in which his paternal Aunt Alice is stood in the precise position Estelle Osterhout occupies in Van der Zee's picture.[34]

Olin argues that in his delayed response to Osterhout, in his discovery there of her "whole life external to the portrait" (57), Barthes in fact "covers up the dreary life of a woman who, in her utter respectability, is utterly pitiable," displacing Osterhout as a specific being in order to transpose into her stead his sad Aunt Alice.[35] Olin continues that a "chain of photographs leads Barthes, searching from image to image, to the unexpected discovery of himself," and that "he was Aunt Alice as well." She asks: "How different was this woman, who never married but lived alone near her mother all her life, from Barthes himself, who, as he does not fail to tell us later in the book, lived alone with his mother until her death, two years before his own?"[36]

Here, Barthes effects successive transpositions of subjectivity which, step by step, eradicate blackness and femininity, in order that such erasure—catalyzed by the incubatory given-ness of black femininity—might "raise a white brood," as Shawn Michelle Smith has it.[37] This is that "phenomenon of marking and branding," of which Spillers wrote, which finds "its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings," the rehearsal of which prepare black flesh (as distinct from the white "body") as the ground for further visceral woundings and physical acts of erasure.[38] This symbolic and rhetorical license normalizes the exercise of anti-black and ungendering violence in the elaboration and naturalization of white subjectivity, and it is given voice in Barthes's imperious declaration, immediately following the aversion of his gaze from Lewis Hine's photograph of "idiot children in an institution," that "I am a primitive, a child—or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own" (51).

Estelle Osterhout's comportment, her strapped pumps, her low-slung belt, her pearl necklace, her instantiation in the group portrait of the resiliency of familial bonds between African Americans entrapped in what Saidiya Hartman has aptly termed "the afterlife of slavery,"[39] registers for Barthes only as an occasion for an act of



Rosalind Fox Solomon, Scottsboro, Alabama, 1975 from the book Liberty Theater (MACK, 2018). Copyright: Rosalind Fox Solomon. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Rosalind Fox Solomon.

expropriation exclusively concerned with his "Absolute subjectivity." He thus dismisses the fact, central to Campt's powerful revaluation of black family photography, that such portraits also mark quotidian practices of "reassemblage in dispossession," in which acts of black "self-fashioning" that occur under the constraints of white supremacy effect "everyday micro-shifts in the social order of racialization that temporarily reconfigure the status of the dispossessed."[40] As Campt writes of the audible hum that surfaces in the Dyche archive of family portraits, the

> quotidian practice of refusal I am describing is defined

> less by opposition or "resistance," and more by a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy. Like the concept of fugitivity, *practicing* refusal highlights the tense relations between *acts* of flight and escape, and creative *practices of refusal*—nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant.[41]

In the Dyche archive, Campt discerns the itinerary of a practice of refusal that instantiates black feminist futurity, which insists on living now " *that which will have had to happen*."[42] Barthes's rejection of black *refusal*—his incapacity to think photography's important role within the constrained conditions of black sociality—is consonant with the grammar of enslavement, in which, as Spillers wrote, the "captivating party does not only 'earn' the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and 'name' it," and to do so within that "grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person."[43] Thus, when Barthes returns, a third and final time, to Estelle Osterhout, in the final pages of the book, *she still serves him*, not as the black incubator for white familial regeneration, but in this final instance as a pretext for the expiation of his (white) guilt, figured as pity descending from above.

> I then realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love … Is one not in love with certain photographs? … Yet it was not quite that. It was a broader current than a lover's sentiment. In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name oddly fashioned: Pity. I collected in a last thought the images which had "pricked" me (since this is the action of the *punctum*), like that of the black woman with the gold necklace and the strapped pumps. In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3rd, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake. (116–17)

What (re)sounds for Barthes is not the unknowable but irrepressible presence of another person, but the music of his pity—a resonance of his own affective (and here parental) relationship to the dead, to what is going to die: that which he "takes up into" his arms as he goes mad for pity's sake. The photograph of the Osterhouts, which, like all photographs is "at once evidential and exclamative," for Barthes "bears the effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being" (113). For Barthes here, others live in images only to the extent that his affect resurrects them, and never on their own terms but along the lines and within the limits of his feeling. In the end, pity names the force and the hierarchical direction of Estelle Osterhout's resurrection in *Camera Lucida*, and it finds no terms for the ongoing *acts of living* in which her portrait participates.

If, at the close, Barthes has been imploring photography to yield up a picture in which "someone in the photographs were looking at me!" with photography's distinctive power "of looking me *straight in the eye*," he declares himself nevertheless invested in discovering an encounter in which he cannot be certain that in that looking, the person "was *seeing* me." He is after a photograph infused with an "an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target," the appearance in a photograph of "an *intelligent air* without thinking about anything intelligent." (111–13) Barthes is in search of, and can only valorize, a photographic encounter in which his thought *alone* is certain and active, in which *his* "love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire" acts as the sole and unilateral "guarantee of Being." His absolutist subjectivity still violently requires and seeks to possess its corresponding objects, and they must be silent, in order that the musics of his pity might more clearly be heard.[44]

As Moten writes:

> The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses.[45]

Blackness refuses Barthes's silencing of difference, and I would argue that that refusal suffuses and "anarranges" his desire at *Camera Lucida's* close. It can be registered in that noise, that distortion with which his plea for the attention of others gives way to a need that that attention seem mindless; it can be heard in what Moten dubs the "silencing invocation"[46] of the photograph's soundlessness as that imperative gives way only to the music of Barthes's own pity; it is audible in Barthes's incapacity to reckon with a form of being that organizes its

activity (we might say its flesh) within the visible world so as to look " *without appearing to see*" (111)—to look without reckless eyeballing, to appear to have "no impulse of power" (108): to look *oppositionally* from the standpoint of an abjected object.[47] Blackness, under the subjections of white supremacy, occupies precisely these diametric extremes, and its social practices suspend and even collapse their polar divisions.

It has been the station, lot, and gift of black life—within the United States and beyond it—to see without seeming to look, to look without appearing to know, to think without the appearance of intelligence, to hide radical thought in plain sight. This is Frederick Douglass's account of the "wild songs" of the old woods on the plantation, in which the prophetic sounds of liberation and lament were composed in stride, through "thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound," "consulting neither time nor tune."[48] This is the genius of the cakewalk, whose insouciant, insubordinate, and satirical mimicry of plantation pomp "remade the culture that caged us."[49] This is the resistant opacity of capoeira, which veiled martial discipline under the masquerade of degenerate dance. These polyvocal, syncretic, and collaborative black social practices emerge from precisely the improbable antinomies that Barthes fails to reconcile at the close, except through the ontology of the photograph (115). His unrequited desire for a look without looking, a thought without thinking, an attention without perception describes both the skill and sufferance of precisely the black life that he utterly fails to see in the various photographs he shares.

In *Camera Lucida*, blackness, and its objects, exert a force that suffuses and distorts the claims that Barthes's subjecthood depends upon, so that in his grief-stricken and egotistical attempt to refashion himself from his photographic objects, the inescapably racialized and fundamentally unethical grounds of visibility irrupt continuously and destructively into the ahistorical vacuum in which he endeavors to work. The book is utterly unthinkable in the absence of global histories of enslavement, and of hegemonic white normativity and embodiment, and yet it is unable to think either the " *that-has-been*" or the " *there-she-is!*" (113) of these phenomena in their indivisible entanglement with the images Barthes claims. If I could adapt a formulation from Jonathan Beller's incisive work, wherein he quotes Regis Debray, I would say that *Camera Lucida*, and its ongoing canonical stature, is emblematic of the dangers that arise from the unacknowledged organizing force of *whiteness* "operating in the silence of *theory*."[50]

Barthes leaves Estelle Osterhout cradled in his pitying arms in grief at his own mortality. She is alive *as* pitiable, which is to say she is dead already: both socially dead, and incapable in his eyes of meaningful acts of living. She is left without speech, or, in French, " *sans parole.*" We encounter her in Barthes's texts, following Spillers's haunting formulation, beneath "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession" that there is no easy way for her "to come clean."[51]

" *P arole*" is an old military term connoting a watchword, or a password to intelligibility and recognizability on the field of battle. To be without it is to risk one's life: it is to traverse a field organized by violence without the capacity to identify oneself verbally as being *on the right side*. Those possessed of " *la parole*" have executive capacity, the power to make performative and constative statements: the power to act *in* and *on* reality through their mere speech alone. In contemporary English usage, "parole" marks a conditional release from captivity or incarceration—it signals a qualified freedom policed by state power, one premised upon "good behavior" and subject to arbitrary inspection or unilateral withdrawal. There, as elsewhere in its contemporary peregrinations, "parole" is one's word of honor, one's oath, a necessary and sufficient certificate of one's capacity to participate in the ethical agreements that undergird civil society.[52]

Here at the close, we find Osterhout cradled in silence. She is "unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting [her] verb," as Spillers has written of black women, and I would submit that it is precisely here, within the terrain and invention of black feminist theory, that our reparative work should begin, because Barthes's pity leaves me speechless.[53]

Continued from " **Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 1** *"*

X

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1
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2
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, 1981), 4. All subsequent page references to this source are given inline. All emphasis in original unless otherwise noted.

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Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* , ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press, 2003), 66. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (Routledge, 1996), 164.

4
Tina Campt, "The Lyric of the Archive," in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke University Press, 2012), 130.

5
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 134.

6
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 134.

7
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 135.

8
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 135.

9
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 135–36.

10
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 136.

11
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 136.

12
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 136.

13
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 139.

14
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 59.

15
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 172, 173, 174. Emphasis in original.

16
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 174. Emphasis in original.

17
Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017), 106. Emphasis mine. See also Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," in *Incerteza Viva: 32nd Bienal de São Paulo* (Fundaçao Bienal de São Paulo, 2016).

18
Campt, "Lyric of the Archive," 139.

19
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 68.

20
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 68. Emphasis in original.

21
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 64.

22
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 64.

23
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 64.

24
See Jacqueline Goldsby, "The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1996).

25
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 63–64.

26
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 61.

27
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 61.

28
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 64.

29
Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* , 189.

30
Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* , 189.

31
Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* , 189.

32
Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's* Camera Lucida," ed. Geoffrey Batchen (MIT Press, 2009, 2011), 79.

33
Shawn Michelle Smith, "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*," in *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and The Unseen* (Duke University Press, 2013), 27.

34
Olin, "Touching Photographs," 79.

35
Olin, "Touching Photographs," 80.

36
Olin, "Touching Photographs," 83.

37
Smith, "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*," 34.

38
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67. Emphasis in original.

39
Hartman writes: "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery." Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007), 7.

40
Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017), 60.

41
Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32. E mphasis in original.

42
Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17. E mphasis in original.

43
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 69.

44
We should recall here Barthes's fanciful claim about his mother, that "during the whole of our life together, she never made a single 'observation'" (69). His claims, throughout *Camera Lucida*, and the possessive and declarative force of the punctum as a device for naming and valuing, are all consonant with this proprietary, exclusionary, and exclusive impulse. Together, these common factors in the book model a (white) perceptual subject who comes fruitfully into themselves through acts of dispossession. See Elisa Marder *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (Fordham University Press, 2012).

45
Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

46
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 67.

47
See bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Routledge, 2015).

48
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 25.

49
Hafizah Geter, "Black Phenomena: On Afropessimism & Camp," *BOMB*, no. 157 (Fall 2021) https://bombmagazine.org/articles/black-phenomena-on-afropessimism-camp/ .

50
The original text reads "... in the silence of technologies." Jonathan Beller, "Camera Obscura After All: The Racist Writing with Light," chap. 6 in *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (Pluto Press, 2018), 99.

51
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65.

52
Oxford English Dictionary , online ed., 2019.

53
Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* , ed. Carole S. Vance (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 74.

Erin Manning

Out of the Clear

Prelude

"When there is nothing to govern, nothing to secure, there is blackness."[1]

Scene 1

Barkskins, a novel by Annie Proulx, is a literary account of the violence of clearing that was endemic to settler colonialism in Canada and the northern US at the time of early colonization by the French, and later the English. Starting with the early arrival in the 1600s and continuing to the multigenerational raping of the land by the steady influx of colonizers, the book relentlessly marks the passage from plenitude to desecration, the forests denuded at the cost of upheaval and the death of the people who had never sought to clear them. This story is ultimately not about the trees, of course, but about the violence of cultural clearing and the genocide it leaves behind. And yet it is also about the trees, about those enormous pines, the forests unimaginable, the pristine "before" when lands were rich and people lived out of the clear.

As these accounts do, the story begins with a French man, Trépigny, and though First Nations characters make their way into the story and even become main characters, the reader never forgets that it is the colonizer who enters first, and who makes the first cut.

The scene is as we expect it: black flies, mud, rain, "dark vast forest, inimical wilderness."[2] "How big is the forest?" one of the early colonizers asks. "It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning. No one has seen its farthest dimension."[3] The first tree—made into a great old single board pine table—serves as a motif for all that has been violently stolen, for all that has been falsely claimed into ownership, for all that has been condoned in the cementing of the notion that nature is owed and owned. The table, which will eventually be bequeathed to the half-breed daughter by the white colonizer father, will be fought over, claimed by his sons. They will argue that the Indian cannot see its value, that she has no use for it, and that it is rightfully theirs. She will appease them, agreeing that she does not see its value. "She rapped her knuckles on the pine. She said she did not know why Outger was so passionate about it. He asked after it in every letter and would undoubtedly be angry when she told him it was gone."[4]

She will not lay claim to it, will refuse to see the value it has in the white man's eyes, but she will also refuse to give it back. Because the table, she understands, represents the experiment that she has become. "I can see now … that all

New classroom building of Kamloops Indian Residential School, Kamloops, British Columbia, c. 1950. License: CC BY 2.0.

his pedagogy was an experiment. The books and instruction had been his attempt to make her into something like a learned whiteman, like himself."[5] Unclaimed, the table will have done its work, teaching her with all the demoralizing splendor that comes with colonization that she can neither inhabit the world of the white man nor, ultimately, become Indian enough, no matter how much she tries. "'But,' she said sadly, 'I could not become an Indian.' 'Of course not,' said Dr. Mukhtar. 'There is a whole world of signs, symbols and spirits which all must be absorbed from birth. You could not hope to grasp the meanings except by living the entire life.'"[6] The table stays as the scar of a life stolen. Eventually, it will fall into oblivion, like the rest of the "largest white pines that ever grew in the world," but the memory of its infinitude, of all the potential violated, will continue to haunt the clearing.[7]

Scene 2

We already know how the story ends. On May 29, 2021, the headline reads: "Canada mourns as remains of 215 children found at indigenous school."[8] It wasn't an indigenous school, of course. It was a residential school, a Canadian school, in the clearing. The picture says it all: sparse trees growing in the background, empty yard, an architecture completely at odds with the environment, cleared of life, of all that immanently interconnects. The violence of logistics is inscribed in the ghost trees of its whitened surround.

How we organize bodies, we who sidle whiteness, how we excise (from clear sight) the ravages of an earth desecrated, of a people brutally murdered—these are the workings of logistics. Logistics mediate existence by keeping it at arm's length, soothing us into believing that we are not responsible. The deaths are newsworthy, and we're sorry, but we must move on. It's not really about us and in any case, there's nothing we can do about it. Let's get a mediator and sort this out!

At arms length, we see these workings—the cleared forest, the dying planet, the dead children—as somehow disconnected. We do not acknowledge the felling of the trees as the wanton destruction of all that transversally

connects. And yet logistics, in its power of mediation, is all about the forests. It's all about the cotton planted in their wake.

The ghostly outline of Proulx's pine table haunts the residential school, its absence equal to the absence of education. Because what the residential school really does is unteach. Taking the place of pedagogy, what is practiced here is theft. Theft of thought, of imagination. This theft is a rape. A physical rape, a sexual aggression, but also a conceptual rape, a clearing—"to snatch, to grab, to carry off by force"—of all that lives in the abyss of what has been left behind.[9] Rape, relation severed, cuts the fragile interwoven threads of existence, wresting life from life-living, from the more-than that gives it its spirited and spiritual contour. If body is land, if bodying is only ever worlding, what residential school does, in this most recent form of clearing, is sever this imbrication, leaving the body lifeless.

All that remains is the clearing. And a mess. But this can be handled. This is how mediation does its work, in the name of and as logistics. From here on in, things will be managed. Managers will be appointed to organize, to administer, the now-reduced environment. This science of loss—"which is to say the science of whiteness, or logistics"—is predicated on the end of sharing, on the destruction of the excessive share, the annihilation of that which exceeds the one-two form whose dramaturgy relies of the intervention of the mediator.[10] The mediator will take the form of the "yellow eyebrows" in Proulx's account, but it also need not take a simple human form. Repetition of the same is the form it takes in a dramaturgy of extinction.

Scene 3

Clearing produces property. Property produces dispossession. "All property is loss because all property is the loss of sharing."[11] The accursed share of all that exceeds interpersonality, mediation, whiteness, logistics, all that cannot be accounted for, sickens the field. And sometimes rejuvenates it. The force of the transindividual, of all that exceeds and precedes the individual, does rewild. But its vitality is weakened, and as perception is honed to single out the individual over the field, the human increasingly becomes the focal point, becoming synonymous with life. This is how the logistics of genocide—the genocide of relation—does its work.

The genocide of relation can never be traced back, quite. Relation cannot be propertied. What is lost cannot be parsed. The yellow eyebrows have a role to play, of course, and we could call on the archbishop for that missing apology, but the truth is, it was never just one. He was never just the one. He is a logistical pattern, a commitment to the dramaturgy of (white) man as self-centered orchestrator of existence cleared.

Scene 4

Logistics: the slave ship, but also the body-as-individual. "The first odious vessel produced by and for logistics is not the slave ship, but the body—flesh conceptualized—which bears the individual-in-subjection."[12]

In the clearing, man is revealed as the loss of relation. Humanism is born here, in the empty space of the stolen land, in the vast expanse of the 1+1, the infinite regress of nothing-in-between.

How to fill the emptiness? How to create an account for all that is lost and yet claimed?

Mediation offers to fill the shape of the between. Mediation as the figure of what comes between, of what fills that "empty" space. The adjuster, the divorce lawyer, the priest, the government agent.

A quick intervention to make sense of all that has become unclear, to fill in the lines, to provide context.

And perhaps this does make things clearer, perhaps we understand each other a bit better now that we've mediated all we couldn't make sense of in the vast emptiness of our difference. But the problem is: mediation never goes away. It sits there, inert but active, facilitating the ongoing impoverishment relation by adhering to all that takes the shape of the 1+1 of body-as-individual, of interpersonality. Because in advance of the gesture of inserting the mediating influence, he is already there. Long before the divorce, he hovers, betweener, judging, parsing, condoning, condemning. His take doesn't really matter. What matters is that he remains in the offing, holding things apart.

Mediation is the father of the control society. It is the way surveillance takes on a personality from the outside in. Whether formally or informally, mediation sets the tone for an interpersonality that, by definition, can only be lived at a distance. Playing at impartiality, mediation haunts the surround, reducing it to what is already known, what is already valued, what is already within the scope of the expressible. 2+1, always less than 3, mediation is passive aggressor, poised for judgment, always in the know (while it listens carefully). Because its role is to keep existence in its track, on its logistical path. It doesn't really matter who is right. It matters that it needs mediation.

Mediation knows best, trampling on any detail of middling, sewing interactivity into a twoness without excess. Hardening the between of interpersonality into the amplification of the self-same, mediation lodges at the interstice, cutting it into a hyphen, setting up its colony on the bridge. Settler, it speaks from a place it has never had to truly encounter because its role is only to order things apart.

Harney and Moten might speak of mediation with the same disdain as they do of logistics, which they call the "science of whiteness."[13] Mediation is the logistic category par excellence of whiteness. It has no content, is not in itself an agent of transformation, does nothing but cannibalize the life it parses. Its intervention happens in the beat of enter and retreat, leaving the uneasy twoness of existence to sort itself out. In the name of property and propriety, mediation solves all uncertainties of zoning. That it never actually leaves is its dirty secret.

But the logistics of mediation can only fail. The interface is shaky—we know this both from the endemic code 404, page not found, and from the impossibility of truly domesticating our surrounds. Ultimately, the squirrels, the black flies, the birds, the worms, the fungi, the weeds, the viruses, the hackers cannot be kept in their place. The disarray is handled, of course, with more mediation, with more logistics.

The interface claims a distance, a secure between-two that repeats the refrain of nature colonized, of culture denatured. It promises a security of inhabitation, a zone that can be controlled, a slip through which we can safely enter, we who claim the place. Here, in the logistics of passage that beats at the cadence of the one-two, me-you, the outcome is always the same. Police to subjugate. Code to organize. Clear to colonize.

> Logistics aims to straighten us out, untangle us, and open us to its usufruct, its improving use; such access to us, in its turn, improves the flow line, the straight line. And what logistics takes to be the shortest distance between us requires emplotting us as bodies in space where interiority can be imposed even as the capacity for interiority can be denied, in the constant measure and regulation of flesh and earth.[14]

Scene 5

Deleuze and Guattari speak of man as the white wall of the black hole of existence.[15] Think landscape painting, especially the kind that excises that very life that breathed it into existence. If you're not familiar, search for "Canadian art." And if you don't know the history of the mansplaining of the Canadian landscape, search for the Group of Seven, the early twentieth-century Canadian landscape painters, and notice not only the ubiquity of the vast open, uninhabited space, notice the clearing. Very little has changed over the last hundred years. We still see Canada through the clear, in the emptiness of nature cultured.

The denuded land, the empty north, is how we art ourselves still today, we who property the land. The Group of Seven, those painters of the land pristine, of the great white north, the painters of the land of the (single) pine and of the distant ridges, they are still with us, still managing the imagination, orchestrating the field, playing the dramaturgy of extinction. Logistics are also aesthetic (if not artful).

The white man is a specter. That is to say, the white man is without content, without shape. He is the shift in form that allows all takings-place to be propertied inhabitations, which is to say, sites already claimed. This is whiteness: the pretense that the lines that demarcate the boundary between me and you protect you, protect me, from the wilderness of all that cannot be contained (and must be kept at bay). The truth is, the wilderness was cleared, but never quite colonized. And that is why whiteness is alive and well. To police a job half-done.

Scene 6

Mediation makes many promises. It promises clarity: think, drop-down menu. It promises fairness: think, divorce court. It promises health: think, therapy. The gesture is cast as innocuous. A simple third, a neutral agent. A little bit of reason. A moment of distance. An interlude so that things can be tied up again and smooth functioning can resume. A representation of the useful.[16]

But what is it to insert distance into a field of relation if not violence of the highest degree? Whose distance? At what cost? To what ends?

Guattari fights against this at every turn, refusing mediation either in politics or in psychiatry. Schizoanalysis is the proposition, a call for a transversal operation that breaks the pretense of neutrality in the encounter. A therapeutics of transversality. No more triangle. No more transference. Schizoanalysis is the event of the encounter itself, the practice of encountering. To be in the relation is to have been changed by it. What this looked like: a years-long institutional arrangement housed at a clinic called La Borde in the north of France whereby to be in the therapeutic encounter was to live with the effects of encounters in the everyday and to learn from them how to continue to live. Nothing very complicated, really. But infinitely complex in its transversality. Because to live in the encounter, to allow ourselves to be changed by it, is to be continuously undone, and to be sensitive to all that comes alive in that undoing.

Who we are is a question that can only really be asked (and answered) by the mediator. The mediator, after all, looks in from outside to tell us how our actions are affecting the world. Without the mediator there is no steady external gaze, no calm interface for the mirroring. That's why "who we are" is always a white question, a question of whiteness, of colonization.

Tom Thomson, The Jack Pine, 1916–17. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Blackness, write Harney and Moten, is not a thing, or a state (of being). It is the way the doing expresses. It is not a subject, not a person, not a property. It is a field. It is the excess on itself of a body claimed, blackened by hate. Blackness is the celebration of refusing to claim, to be claimed. "Meanwhile, Michael Brown is like another fall and rise through man—come and gone, as irruption and rupture, to remind us not that black lives matter but that black life matters; that the absolute and undeniable blackness of life matters; that this is not a judgment of value but a description of a field of activity that obliterates the worldly distinction between the organic and the inorganic."[17] Blackness is not the simple descriptor of what has been enfleshed. Blackness cannot be mediated into a form imposed (exposed). Blackness is the force of living that exceeds colonization, its accursed share. And in that sense, the wildness of the surround, it too is black. As is the earth.

This is what Guattari means when he entreats us to move from schizoanalysis as a therapeutic-political dispositif, an agencement more than an apparatus, a moving-forth of encounterings afield, toward the transversality of what he calls the "three ecologies."[18] These three ecologies, the

mental/conceptual, the environmental, and the social, are the overlap, as I see it, of a commitment to a blackening of the earth, out of the clear.

> (Necessarily European) man, in and as the exception, imposes speciation upon himself, in an operation that extracts and excepts himself from the earth in order to confirm his supposed dominion over it. And just as the earth must be forcefully speciated to be possessed, man must forcefully speciate himself in order to enact this kind of possession. This is to say that racialization is present in the very idea of dominion over the earth; in the very idea and enactment of the exception; in the very nuts and bolts of possession-by-improvement. The world is posed as the way to live on the earth as the individual is posed as the way to live in the world. To live in the world as an individual is therefore to be logistic, and to be logistic is to settle into a rhythm that kills, to beat out that rhythm over the undercommon track that keeps (giving away) its own measure.[19]

Scene 7

Guattari wrote *The Three Ecologies* in what have come to be known as his winter years. The winter years came after a sustained attempt at working with the Green Party in the aftermath of the terrible letdown of post-1968 politics in France. This attempt to connect to state politics left Guattari with a sour taste. He knew better, of course, than to trust state politics to be a site of transformation. Schizoanalysis had been the wager that there were other ways—that to work "in common," "toward the common" is, ultimately, always to commit to the logic of mediation. In *The Three Ecologies,* he makes a plea to invent new ways of being committed to and involved in the urgent call to transversalize experience, ways that move beyond how the state lays claim to existence:

> In the domain of social ecology there will be times of struggle in which everyone will feel impelled to decide on common objectives and to act "like little soldiers," by which I mean like good activists. But there will simultaneously be periods of resingularisation in which individual and collective subjectivities will take their marbles and go home without a thought for collective goals, and in which creative expression as such will take precedence. This new ecosophical logic—and I want to emphasize this point—resembles the manner in which an artist may be led to alter his work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, an event-incident that suddenly makes his initial project bifurcate, making it drift [dériver] far from its previous path, however certain it had once appeared to be.[20]

There is an echo in this ecosophic call to Moten and Harney:

> Rather than dissipate our preoccupation with how we live and breathe, we need to defend our ways in our persistent practice of them. It's not about taking the streets; it's about how, and about what, we take to the streets. What would it be and what would it mean for us jurisgeneratively to take to the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?[21]

Ecosophic logic is a refusal of the clearing, of the ways in which we seek to inhabit the space already colonized. It recognizes the lure, and understands the commitment to change that the gesture of taking the streets embodies. But ecosophic logic asks a different question: What if instead we practiced living by creating new conditions that didn't center us, that didn't inadvertently redeem that central and self-centering figure of man and its mediating logistics? What if we painted into the dérive of artfulness's angle on experience? What if we moved at the pace of that accidental detail tangled with the weeds we have been wasting so much time clearing?

Ecosophic logic is an urgent call to refuse the ongoing clearing that denies, decries, and violates the force of blackness in the ongoing genocide of all that resists the count. To refuse does not mean to face and challenge. Frontality, the neurotypical activity par excellence, only cements into place what is already there, what is already claiming the ground of existence. To refuse means to move into the accursed share of life-living twisting in the troubled interstice, to move with that anarchic share of existence that keeps giving life.

For life-living to thrive, life has to be activated at those interstices that exceed man. Life's expression as tangle has to be attuned to from the edges in. Conditions have to be crafted to honor what is not about us. This is what the First Nations in *Barkskins* of course already knew. And for this they were cleared. To see, to feel, what was always already there, to pulse with a force of life-living that cannot be claimed—owed or owned—this was always the crime.

Scene 8

The many years Guattari spent practicing schizoanalysis, which is to say, living at La Borde and encountering, daily, the shape of an existence unmediated, an existence committed, always, to a refusal of normopathy—these are what he takes into the project of the three ecologies. And it is specifically the orientation of La Borde toward neurodiversity, I believe, that makes it necessary to

underscore what he calls the mental, or conceptual, ecology as the inflecting force that must, and will, change the contours of the environmental and the social. La Borde taught him this: to skirt the question of the subject leaves the black hole wide open, filled to the brim with neurotypicality, whiteness.

In the sickness that has befallen the earth—the ongoing genocide of all that eludes the count—subjectivity, too, has fallen ill. Replaced by the face of man, given the guise of whiteness in all its logistical powers of mediation, subjectivity has been swallowed, engulfed by the subject. "The main feature of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious is the reduction of subjectivity to its subject's experience."[22] But subjectivity, as Guattari understands it, is nothing other than its ongoing production. It is not the subject. It is the transversal, the emergent unmediated middle, the collectivity that must never be reduced to the one. This is why, for a renewed project of the earth, or as Moten and Harney would have it, for the blackening of the earth—"we are the moving, blackened, blackening earth"[23]—"it will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being' [*l'être-en-groupe*], not only through 'communicational' interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity."[24]

To construct modalities for group-being is a call for an aesthetics of sociality which exceeds the 1+1 of interpersonality. Group-being, or what Guattari refers to as the "group subject," is not countable. The group subject is never the sum of its parts. As solitary as it is multiplicitous, the group subject makes felt how subjectivity is produced in the excess on itself of coming into relation. The group subject is how the more-than of the relational field finds expression. It is the emergent collectivity of an expression of life-living shared (in its accursed excess), expression irreducible to the one, always beyond consensus. Without mediation, the group subject is activated in the renunciation of summing up. To produce the modalities for this excess of existence requires a mutation on existence itself, a mutation that in every sense rethinks subjectivity as a position.

The group subject reminds us that what we produce is never solely ours. We are not simply our-selves. We are fieldings of complex imbrication. Any other account of experience is subjected to mediation, organized by logistics. Anarchival to the core, the production of subjectivity is not an account of a life contained. It is not condensable to something like identity. It is not reducible to the form of the human. It is always more-than, always in movement, a motor or conduit of a worlding.

The production of subjectivity bodies in the same gesture that it refuses to be *a* body, an "individual-in-subjection."[25] That is to say: in the production of subjectivity the bodying is always a being of relation. Always in movement, it does its living in the unlimited exposure that exceeds any body-world separation. Subjectivity is not inside. It is not in me. It is out of me.

> Rather than speak of the "subject," we should perhaps speak of components of subjectification, each working more or less on its own. This would lead us, necessarily, to re-examine the relation between concepts of the individual and subjectivity, and, above all, to make a clear distinction between the two. Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a "terminal" for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc. Therefore, interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict.[26]

"That abolition starts with the self."[27]

In the drift, subjectivity's dérive is irreducible to the human. Active in the interval of worlds making themselves, subjectivity is never reducible to a subject. The production of subjectivity is the activity of the interstice: vector, not form. Schizoanalysis works at this uneasy juncture. The task of schizoanalysis is not to get between body and world, between-two. Its task is to make way for all that already populates the between, and to agitate, from within the field of relation, orientations already in germ. Fostering the germination, tending the field, schizoanalysis vectors the inflection.

The vectoring requires a subtraction from the open field of all that is still in potentia. Schizoanalysis culls from potential a shape, a way. This excision from process is a subtraction from infinitude to the finite. From the side of infinitude, in the field of immanence, Whitehead calls this activity that sparks a standing out of experience "importance." From the side of finitude, in the field of activity, Whitehead calls it "expression":

> Expression is founded on the finite occasion. It is the activity of finitude impressing itself on its environment. Thus it has its origin in the finite; and it represents the immanence of the finite in the multitude of its fellows beyond itself. The two together, namely importance and expression, are witnesses both to the monistic aspect of the universe and to its pluralistic character. Importance passes from the world as one to the world as many; whereas, expression is the gift from the world as many to the world as one.[28]

Importance and expression function as intensifiers of experience, bringing into activity the singularity of a life

that nonetheless continues to carry its anarchic share. In this account, the human is not singled out. There is no externalizing voice, no mediator. Arrows of experience are their own force, importance not a question of what matters to me, but of what actually (but always also in potentia) *makes a difference*.

Importance makes way for precision in experience. That is to say, importance is what fosters a certain specific angle of existence, allowing certain qualities of experience to take precedence over others. We have come to believe that mediation is necessary to parse experience. But as Whitehead emphasizes, the world is always in its own pursuit of amplification. Incessant clearing, colonialism without end, in the afterlife of slavery, results in systems out of kilter. Ecological destruction has finally begun to register, centuries too late. The question of how to bring things into a metastability that is conducive to life-living must involve a reckoning with the deadening force of mediation. We don't need another apology. We need to get out of the way. The blackening of the earth requires the production of something entirely other than me, or you.

Scene 9

The infraface[29] of the three ecologies—"the world as one to the world as many … the world as many to the world as one"—is *immediating*.[30] Immediation is not the opposite of mediation. Rather, it is the force of a thirdness irreducible to a between-two. Immediation is the more-than, the n+1 that is by necessity n-1, one as many, many as one, the qualitative force of an uncountability that diagonalizes to give rise to what else moves in the relation.

The production of subjectivity is immediating to the degree that it is not produced by something outside itself. Immediating, always at once body and world, its own perspective. That is to say, its angle on existence is not ours, cannot be reduced to us. The production of subjectivity is a making-conceptual of existence. It is an attuning to the deadly violence of the body-world split produced in the wake of the clearing.[31]

There are not three ecologies. There is one ecology multiply intertwined. To get to the potential of what the three ecologies in their transversality offer, the production of subjectivity must be attended to. We have failed each other at the juncture of the production of subjectivity in particular, and nothing will be possible without that shift. In the words of *The Invisible Committee*,

> the exhaustion of natural resources is probably much less advanced than the exhaustion of subjective resources, of vital resources, that is afflicting our contemporaries. If so much satisfaction is derived from surveying the devastation of the environment it's largely because this veils the frightening ruin of subjectivities. Every oil spill, every sterile plain, every species extinction is an image of our souls in rags, a reflection of our lack of world, of our intimate impotence to inhabit it.[32]

To become in excess of a person, to activate the conditions for a life-living that worlds in the bodying, is a social and environmental act. The emergent sociality of becoming-environmental never happens through the clearing. In happens in the midst, black flies and all. The production of subjectivity in the transversality of the three ecologies is the way the more-than of nature naturing crafts a sociality ecosophically. A sociality, as Harney and Moten might say, *all incomplete.*

Guattari calls the ecology he associates with the production of subjectivity "mental." I prefer conceptual, to produce a stronger sense of how the world itself is alive with the movement of thought. A turn to Whitehead brings the two together. For Whitehead, the conceptual share is that excess of experience that tunes the occasion to its potential. All activity in the world has a conceptual share, but it is true to say that some aspects of existence make use of it more emphatically. Whitehead calls this "mentality." Mentality, as in Guattari, is not reducible to the mind. Mentality is the force of existence. It is the world's capacity to exceed itself. All incomplete, the world continuously renews itself.

Scene 10

We don't need to look to some far off lands: it's already here. Isn't that what Tommy Orange means when he says, "Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere"?[33] The work has already begun.

The accursed share of life-living is too unwieldy, too uncountable, to be mediated. It cannot be governed. This is its potency, but also its fallacy. The work is not where we've been taught it is. And the tools we need are not the ones we own.

a nascent subjectivity a constantly mutating socius an environment in the process of being reinvented[34]

The three ecologies are a proposition. They are not a place. To follow the artist-architects Arakawa and Madeline Gins, we might call them an architectural procedure.[35] An architectural procedure is not an architecture. It is a fielding of potential that brings into constellation enabling constraints for the construction of a world. Procedurality is key. An architectural procedure must produce itself propositionally. This means that what emerges will never be a thing, a site. It will undercommon itself into existence, perhaps—as Arakawa and Gins once

said—"only making an appearance indirectly."[36] Because to see-feel it is to have created the conditions for feeling, conditions that were never reducible to a subject as given in advance. The event of the three ecologies is here, in the productive looping of a field of experience that is at once constitutive of its expression and constituted by it. Because when importance and expression meet, it is never at our bidding.

X

Erin Manning studies in the interstices of philosophy, aesthetics, and politics. 3e is the direction her current research takes—an exploration of the transversality of the three ecologies, the social, the environmental, and the conceptual. An iteration of 3e is a land-based project north of Montreal. Her most recent book is *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*(Duke University Press, 2020).

1
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Yazan Khalili, Lara Khaldi, and Marwa Arsanios

What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 2

Continued from "What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 1"

Marwa Arsanios: I would like to pick up our conversation from where we left it in the first part, with the question of "crisis."

Yazan Khalili: In Janet Roitman's book *Anti-Crisis* the term "crisis" is criticized as an overused term, and yet somehow it has no basis or clear meaning anymore; one can say that everything is a crisis all the time. Like, what is not a crisis these days? In the cultural sector we operate as if we are always functioning under crisis, or trying to avoid a crisis. A hovering crisis.

And where is the crisis? How do we catch it? How do we understand it? How do we put our hands on it to be able to really analyze it?

MA: The way I think about the so-called crisis of the arts or of culture is that it is related to certain mechanisms that are side effects of a political and economic situation, which limit the parameters of what culture can be. For example, we talked in our previous conversation about the "NGO-ification" of culture and its depoliticization. But maybe we could ask: What is the state of noncrisis for the cultural institution?

YK: Exactly. What is a noncrisis?

MA: The state of noncrisis is claimed by the Western, publicly funded institution that is producing what it is expected to produce.

Lara Khaldi: Yes, a stable institution in a place where the politics are fairly stable. Where the public funding is steady. Or with an image that is stable, because public funding is often cut in Europe when there's a change of government or a political crisis as well.

MA: Exactly, and it is an institution that is constantly and regularly producing and reproducing itself at the same rhythm. Without having to re-question its meaning in depth. But we should not forget that there is always a looming threat that public funding will be cut—right-wing governments try to take it away as soon as they are elected, or it is cut for other political reasons when an institution is "canceled" because of its program or a political position it has taken.

YK: Yes, state funding for arts and culture also becomes a tool of political struggle when there are shifts in the power structure, which also makes institutions totally dependent on state funding and vulnerable without any alternatives.

Of course, we are not here to say that the state should withdraw funding from art and culture, but that the state isn't a steady structure that we should always take for granted.

In a way, crisis then becomes a kind of essential reason to question existing structures. If noncrisis is being steady and certain, then crisis is about uncertainty. Crisis produces the moment when the institution has to face itself and to decide to make a radical and extreme decision about its structures, its vision and mission, and its programs.

LK: But the presence of this imminent crisis is very steady for institutions in our region, which are always in that state. It's usually connected to funding, either the threat of losing funding or not knowing where funding will come from in a year or a few months. So instead of thinking of other ways to fund culture, for example, the crisis continues, and looking for funding in the same ways continues. The institution reproduces itself through the crisis.

YK: This is a very important point: the invisible violence of funding, not only the current funding that the institution has, but the future funding that it doesn't have yet, with no guarantees that it *will* get. Many of our cultural institutions, and I would say most of the cultural economy in our region, are based on international funding, which responds to a certain kind of crisis, while some depend on private funding by philanthropists. They usually end up spending their budgets on huge buildings and falling into the same financial crisis again. The institution always has to be in crisis to be able to overcome the crisis. It's an infrastructural crisis that the cultural institution is based on.

I'll tell you a story. A friend once told me she was in a meeting with a group of different institutions and a donor. She said to the donor: "We are tired of this, we don't want your funding anymore." And then one of the directors of another institution told the donor: "See, if you don't give us funding, look how people will feel."

The crisis becomes a wheel that allows certain funding to come in, to either reduce tensions or reduce the possibility of change. Crisis plays a double role; it opens the possibility of change and closes it at the same time. It makes us understand that there is something wrong in the structure, but it also puts us in an existential dilemma, a real fear of witnessing the collapse of the institution and the jobs it provides. It is essential to think about how institutions, governments, and power structures use crisis to pass more regulations and more cuts and changes to existing structures—we need to think of crisis as an opportunity that can be used by many sides, and the question is who is ready to seize the moment.

MA: And of course crisis is a state of being on different governmental levels. It's rooted in the economy and it trickles down to cultural institutions. It is often considered a problem of management or governance rather than a serious structural and infrastructural issue.

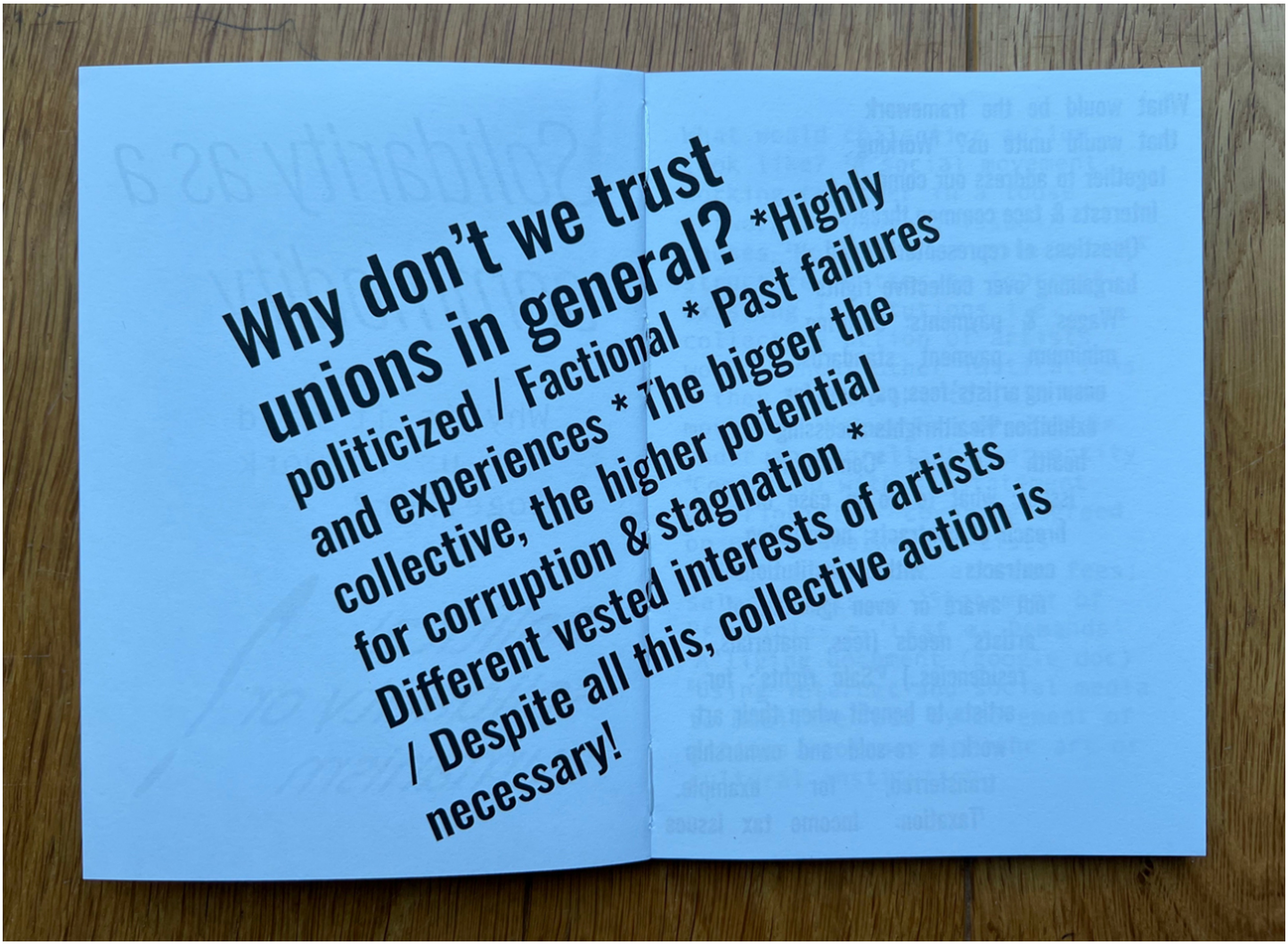
LK: It's double for these institutions, because you have the bigger crisis outside of the institution and the inner crisis of the institution. A few years ago, I was in a donor meeting with different cultural institutions from Palestine and an international donor. This international donor was thinking about increasing the funds for the Palestinian cultural sector. We were invited to this meeting to provide arguments to the donor to convince their government to increase the fund. And one of the employees of a mainstream Palestinian cultural institution argued that if they didn't increase budgets, then young people would become more extremist: more religious, and also more violent. As if culture were a space that is neutral and would save these young people from their cultural surroundings. Of course he was also actually just reinstating what international funding is for in Palestine: to depoliticize.

YK: How then do we break away from this vicious circle of crisis? What does understanding a crisis offer us, in terms of practicing something beyond survival mode? When we understand that the crisis is not an exceptional event that comes from outside of the capitalist structures we are living in—that it's already part of the movement and development of these structures? We need to start to think of the crisis in the present, not as a future event.

I think Marwa or Lara said that institutions try to claim there is a crisis to be able to get funding. I don't think the funding itself is the crisis.

MA: I follow what you mean, about how to get out of this closed, vicious circle of the crisis economy, where one needs to be in a continuous state of crisis in order to get funding. Of course, the funding economy is not the source of the problem. I think a crisis is not only an economic mechanism, but also a discursive one. These are completely intertwined, but maybe we can try to separate the two for a second. There's a crisis in and of language, and when we talk about the institution, we reproduce its language. This is why I was asking: What is a noncrisis? Is it possible to imagine it as a linguistic breakthrough? This could lead us to inventing new infrastructures outside the existing one. Perhaps this is what many artists already do.

YK: It is for sure discursive. Actually, in Arabic we use the word "crisis" to speak about traffic jams ( ) and heart attacks ( ). In Arabic it's the word () that is used to say that a whole structure is jammed or isn't able to produce or move anymore. But at the same time, we know that crisis is something that is in motion all the time, and it allows radical change and imagination.



Spread from the booklet How to Work Together? Part of Debt collective exhibition meetings.

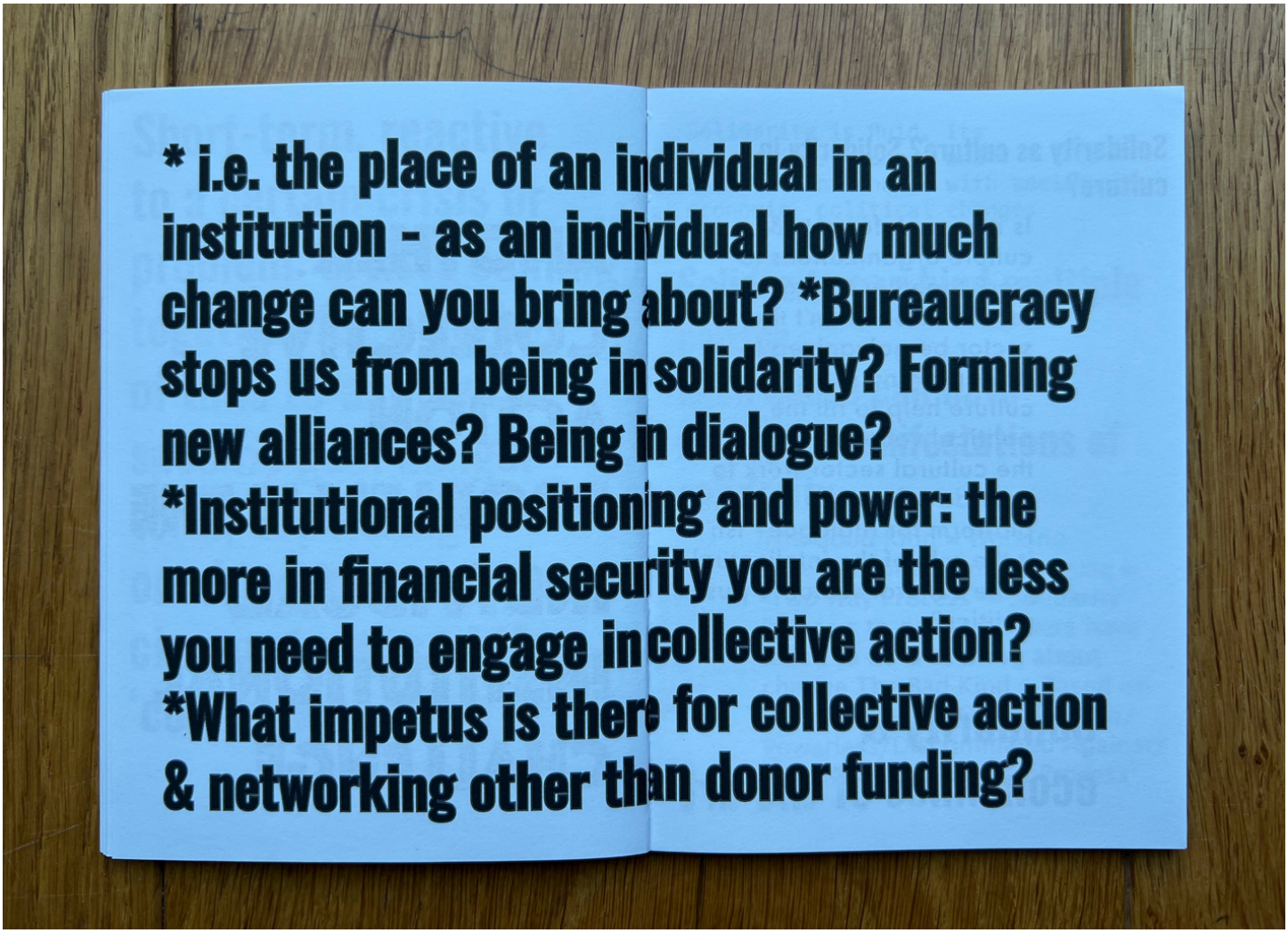
To bring in an example: At Sakakini, in 2015, we said, okay, this is a crisis. For six or seven months, we were working against the feeling that the center was going to close and we would have to go find funding immediately. We needed money. We needed to go back to the structure that we had before: to find a small fund to pay for a good writer to write a proposal, apply to a donor with a project, get money from the donor, spend the money, and then get more money. As if our crisis was that we didn't manage to write a good proposal. It took us some time to be able to say, let's think beyond the crisis. We have to think slowly. Let's move to another situation that is not defined through the crisis itself.

Crisis puts you in a situation where you can only think in these binaries of crisis and noncrisis, not rethinking the whole structure.

LK: I remember that time at Sakakini. We accepted that the crisis should not stay in the background, that we should bring it to the forefront. What Marwa was saying is really important—it's an ideological or discursive problem. It's about how you see and frame the crisis. And I think that the issue is that the crisis is always pushed to the backstage. It's rendered invisible inside the institution. It's like what Yazan was saying, that this maintains a safe structure. But then to bring it to the forefront, where it becomes the project of the institution itself, is something that doesn't happen so often. Usually it remains an administrative question rather than a cultural or artistic question, which is strange.

So, what followed at Sakakini was an attempt to change structurally, right? And that included artistic and cultural work.

MA: I think you made a really important point, Lara. Crisis is often thought about as an administrative or managerial issue, a crisis of management. We just need to change how we manage the institution rather than radically rethink what culture is. Often people want to go back to what was there before the crisis (the NGO economy),



Spread from the booklet How to Work Together? Part of Debt collective exhibition meetings.

which seems like the safest place. But first of all, this is not possible. Second, these new material conditions created by the crisis have the power to push an institution to think about what kind of new artistic forms or structures are produced. A radical understanding of culture.

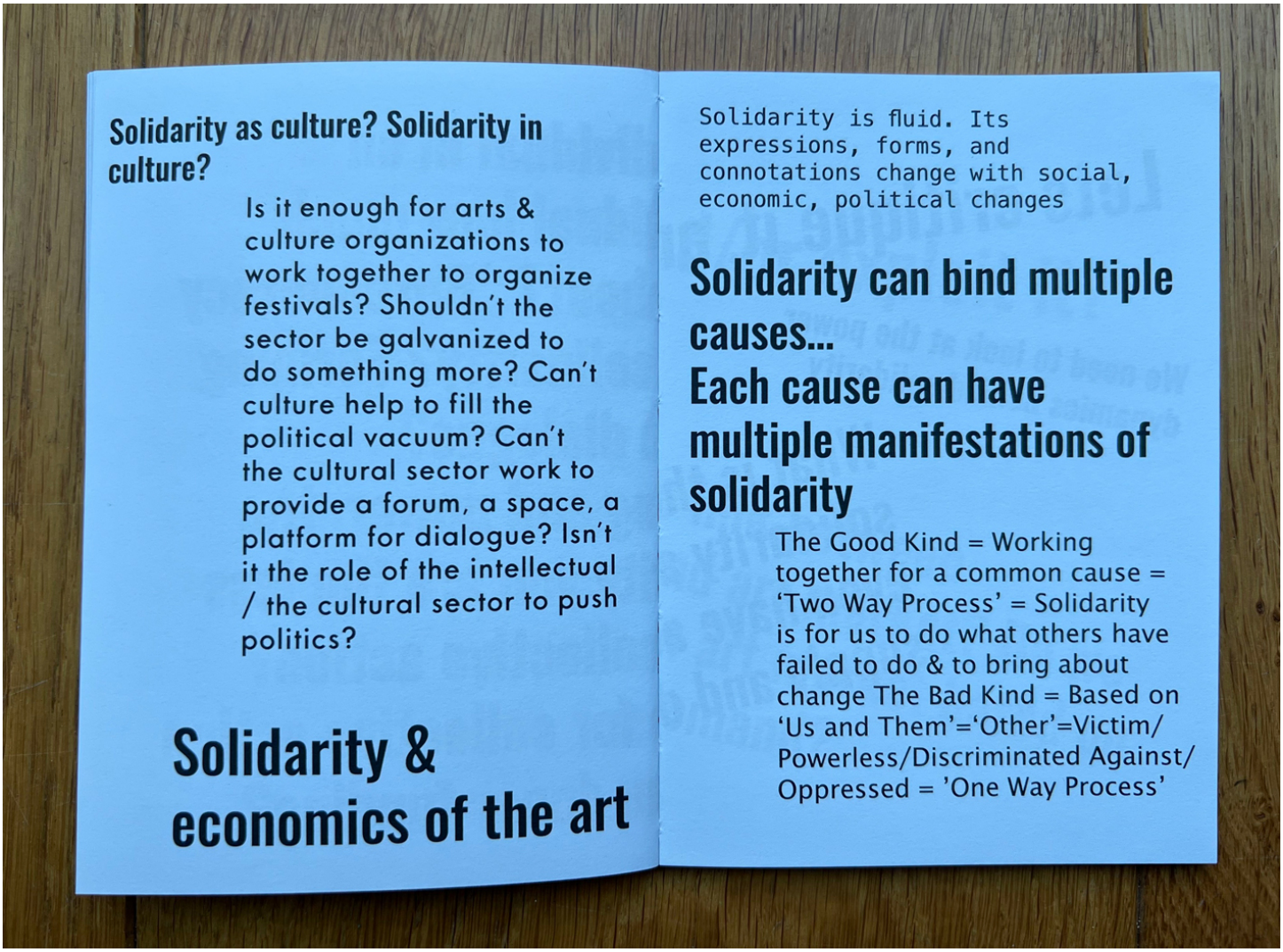
YK: The moment we claim that something is a crisis, some openings happen in the structure, in the order of things. These openings can be small or big, can exist for a long time or a short time. But certainly gaps happen. And then there are situations that allow people or agents to infiltrate these gaps. Or what Naomi Klein speaks about in *The Shock Doctrine*, where a crisis happens and then companies infiltrate society and the government imposes new rules or cuts. It's sometimes more possible in the art sector to see individuals, groups, and collectives using these moments to infiltrate the structure that is in crisis or that claims the crisis.

But of course this is also a very materialistic moment, because who's available then, and who has access? Who has time, who has the energy? Who is in Lebanon or in Palestine or in Egypt at that moment? It's not abstract. Sometimes things do happen and many other times the gap just opens and closes without anyone being able to seize the chance.

LK: Maybe we're overusing the word "crisis." What I'm speaking about in specific is the economic structure of the institution. Everyone knows there's an issue that's not being addressed. There is a fear of changing how institutions work and what they represent, and there are managerial issues with these institutions. You only hear it through gossip usually, right? The maltreatment of the team, of the practitioners. The artist fees. Now you see more and more organization around this. But usually it works through gossip, because that's the place where the weak class in the cultural sector can speak. We have very small art and cultural scenes where the gates can close if you speak loudly. These issues are dealt with in secret. Other models of managing the cultural institution more openly require tackling it right through artistic practice. So here an artist-run institution would come in, right? Artist-run institutions are quite different from other

structures because of this continuous questioning.

the exploitation of intellectual workers inside the gig economy. On the other hand we have these individuals



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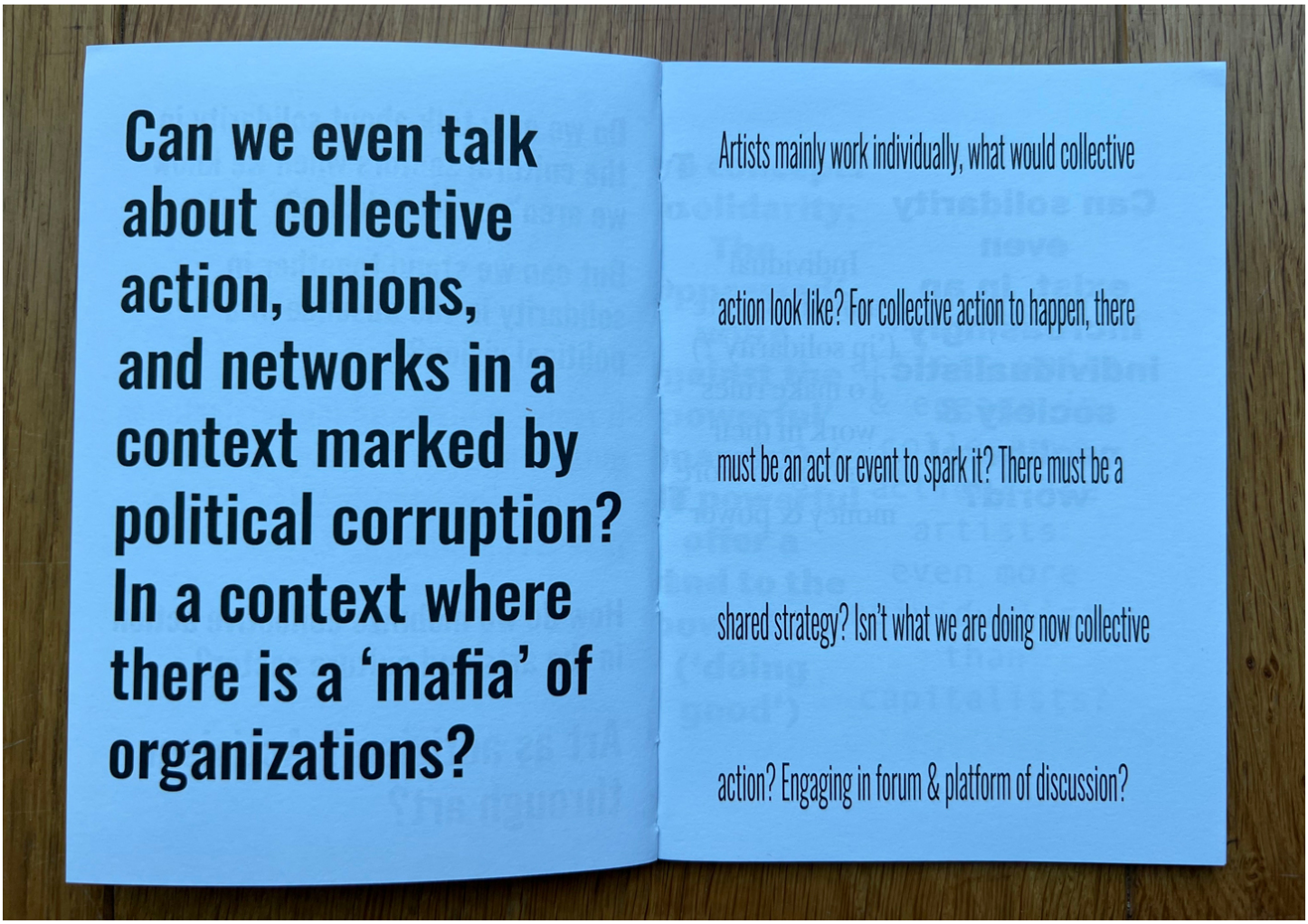
MA: So are we talking about more liquid structures?

YK: I think the question of the individual's relations to institutions is very important. It's a very big question about the economy of art institutions and the economy of art practice, requiring a kind of fluidity. You are always expected to be moving and changing. And this shift towards a more liquid institution or liquid structures, where the director stays for a few years and then rotates—I think it's important that power does not remain as it is inside these institutions. But we should also rethink how this power moves. It's not enough to change directors. It's more about how these structures as a whole include individuals, and also challenge the individuals within them. We need to ask how much power people get within these institutions, and how many institutions also get power because of these people. On one hand, we have who work in one institution for twenty or twenty-five years, who are super protected and secure on many levels. And securing their salary becomes our mission, the mission of the freelancers, because through us they can continue being able to get funding, etc., because of the work we do. What would these individuals do if they left their jobs? How would they secure their lives and income in a society with limited job opportunities and no social security? How do we create security not only for the few but for everyone? When we speak of fluidity, it shouldn't mean insecurity and the gig economy.

MA: Liquidity is, as you said, something that should be worked against in many situations. And I guess this really depends on what kind of situations we're talking about. Who gets the secure job and who stays as a freelance? I'm

thinking that when these more liquid or horizontal or precarious models of institutions appear, they actually challenge the other model. A new form happens. But the problem is when these forms become fixed.

and the NGO is a model that kind of worked at a certain time. The problem is that it became the only model that is reproducible; that's the paradox. So, it's important to have something that is reproducible to get yourself out of the monoculture model of an institution. But then I agree that



Spread from the booklet How to Work Together? Part of Debt collective exhibition meetings.

Liquidity—not in the sense of the neoliberal way of working, but more in the sense of fluid structures—is an important feature. It entails an energy for self-critique and an ability to change. As Lara was saying, this happens in artist collectives and artist-run spaces because they are so precarious. They have to adapt to every material condition around them. This can be very exhausting and very exploitative, in the sense of self-exploitation. So it's not ideal, and not to be fetishized, but maybe a structure can be in a constant process of questioning and never become a rigid model. You always need something that is fixed and something that is moving, right? You need both of these dynamics.

LK: If an NGO's structure works more organically, it could allow for change. I think on one hand you do need models, a structure needs to keep changing so that it doesn't get stuck, because every structure has its issues.

So how does it keep moving? I think if we're talking about a more organic institution, a cultural institution, then the change would be organic to the institution, because it depends on the community and what the community needs. It depends on different generations participating.

YK: Yes, I agree with Lara that it's ironic. Marwa, you use the word "model"—maybe it's a model on the conceptual level and not only on the procedural level, like a manual. It's not that to move away from the crisis you do one, two, three, four, five, six, and you're done. It's more like, how do we begin the process of thinking?

There are many models and they move with the individuals who are part of these moments of change. These issues of scaling, of moving, of learning, of teaching, of taking the experience from one place to another, are very crucial in the lives of social movements. They are very fragile, very based on individuals putting in time and effort. They happen in a very limited time in the life of a person. When it comes to language, how do you speak about these kinds of possibilities and practices, and how do you bring them into the imagination of what's possible? It is also important to think of how the donor economy manages to force a mono-structural type of institution, where all institutions have the same model—general assembly, board, and managerial team. When this happens, all institutions fall into the same crisis when there is a change in the economic or political situation. It is important to think of multi-structures, different models that can engage with the crisis in different ways. Like in environmental agriculture, multi-crop agriculture can survive a disease better than monoculture.

LK: In terms of museums in Palestine, I look at the way the Palestinian Museum responds or works with the community and helps it maintain a relation to the status quo. Museums are building this kind of narrative of being community builders—but why start an institution and then build a community around it? It's a very simple question. Thinking more about that, I'm curious how the community changes the museum. Museums will be changed, because cultural institutions belong to the people. But change is about the moment when people take them over.

A great example is this small museum on the campus of Al Quds University. It's called the Abu Jihad Museum, also known as the "prisoners' museum." It's a museum dedicated to Palestinian political prisoners and detainees. And a big part of it is a classical museum, where you have information about the prisoners, a historical perspective, stories from prison, and objects made by prisoners. This is for the student audience. But students don't go there because students usually have a family member or a friend who's actually detained, or they have been detained themselves. So they have first-hand experience. But what is quite interesting in this museum is that the community of the former political prisoners took an interest in it. And the lawyers of former political prisoners started using the museum for its archive of official documents and letters of former prisoners. So the archive has become extremely useful for the community. In a sense the community has changed the institution and has given it a completely different reason for being. It's necessary that this institution remains, and not because of the four visitors who come to see the exhibitions, but because it's being used by the community itself. The archive is a politically active archive.

YK: How do you change the audience? I think that's what we tried to do at Sakakini, shifting it from a spectator audience to a producer audience. The goal is not to change the audience as such, but to change the institution's understanding of the audience. The audience is made up of those people who utilize the institution. This is the community. It's not the people who come to attend events or do workshops; it's the people who put on the workshops, who use the facilities, the legal structure, the administrative structure, the equipment, the spaces. In five years at Sakakini, we tried to make a shift in the way that we understood our relation to the community. The community utilizes and produces the center itself. This is close to what Lara was saying about the Abu Jihad Museum.

MA: I think these are two great examples, which also link back to what we were saying before in terms of the model and its reproducibility. What both of you were saying about the audience and community relates to the context and raison d'être of the institution. And again, coming back to this question of language, the idea of the model is a modernist idea, but maybe it is quite useful in some aspects. For instance, modernists created architectural housing units that traveled around the world and became universal living spaces—which, of course, has its own problems. But it's interesting to think about these models as traveling models that could actually infect the imagination, adapt and change in every context, be refused, destroyed, vandalized, etc. The hegemonic model is almost erased in such a process.

LK: The issue with the model is that it standardizes and removes context. But it's the context that actually produces the model—the cultural and historical context, which is specific. Once it travels, the context disappears. There is a really great essay by Edward Said, "Traveling Theory Reconsidered," where he writes about what happens when theory travels. When theory travels, especially theory that's rooted in practice, or that's produced by practice, its context disappears, and then it's diluted. It's no longer as radical as where it started from. Where it was necessary.

But Said wrote another text a few years later where he reconsiders this, positing the opposite: in its appropriation by another context, theory might actually bring back something revolutionary to the context of origin. I think this is extremely important. I mean, as you say Marwa, the problem with the model is that it standardizes. So it's really important that no model becomes the first or only model, that there is no monoculture of models. There needs to be an understanding that a certain context produced this model and reproducing it is impossible. It will be reproduced differently in each context.

YK: When we speak about these models it's important to speak about contexts. There is a connection between the locality of cultural practices and the globality of their effects. We need to be aware of these moves. You brought up modernity and the problem of working out a model without a context. This kind of practice doesn't try to take

itself away from the conditions that allowed it to happen. I keep saying that Sakakini happened by coincidence. It didn't happen out of too much planning. There were material conditions and a material coincidence that allowed a group of people to take over this mainstream elitist institution and shift it. If it had been an open call for a job to bring in a new director, some of us would have been able to secure the job, but we could not have said, "Oh, we have this model that we want to share with you."

MA: Maybe we could think more about the particularity of these institutions and experiences and experiments, while thinking about their universality or potential universality. Lara, in Edward Said's second interpretation or reconsideration of the way theory travels, there is a kind of consideration of the resonance of what happens when something travels and comes back. The boomerang effect can produce something even more radical … and maybe this is an important aspect of the history of knowledge. I guess we're speaking on two different levels: critiquing the modernist idea of the model, which is this kind of hegemonic and colonial universal form that doesn't need any particularity. And at the same time refusing to stay solely in the particular locality. It would be interesting to think of how this contradiction has generated so many amazing so-called alternative models.

LK: Or experiences.

MA: Yes. Experiences, experiments …

YK: I think this is opening a big new …

MA: Chapter ?

YK: Chapter, which we can do in our third …

MA: Part.

YK: Third part.

MA: Part three.

YK: Part three of this discussion.

X

This conversation is part of the *e-flux journal* series "Speak to the Mic Please," guest-edited by Marwa Arsanios. It was first aired on a radio program organized by the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden. We would like to thank Sam Trotman and Jenny Salmean for their invitation to do the pre-recorded conversation.

Yazan Khalili lives and works in and out of Palestine. He is an artist and cultural producer. His works have been shown in several major exhibitions, including "New Photography," MoMA (2018) and the 11th Shanghai Biennial (2016–17), among others. He was the director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center between 2015 and 2019. Currently, he is the cochair of the photography department in the MFA program at Bard College, NY, and a PhD candidate at ASCA, University of Amsterdam.

Lara Khaldi is a cultural worker whose projects address colonial issues, the dystopian present, and the impossibilities inherent in language and communication.

Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher who reconsiders the politics of the mid-twentieth century from a contemporary perspective, with a particular focus on gender relations, urbanism, and industrialization. She approaches research collaboratively and seeks to work across disciplines. She is cofounder of 98weeks Research Project, and is currently a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Kunst in Vienna.

Liaisons

We Are Not As Gods: Terrestrial Horizons

Liaisons *is an international editorial collective that gathers experiences from struggles around the world. For our second book,* Horizons *, forthcoming from Autonomedia, we asked comrades what they thought about the prospect of revolutionary horizons today.*[1]

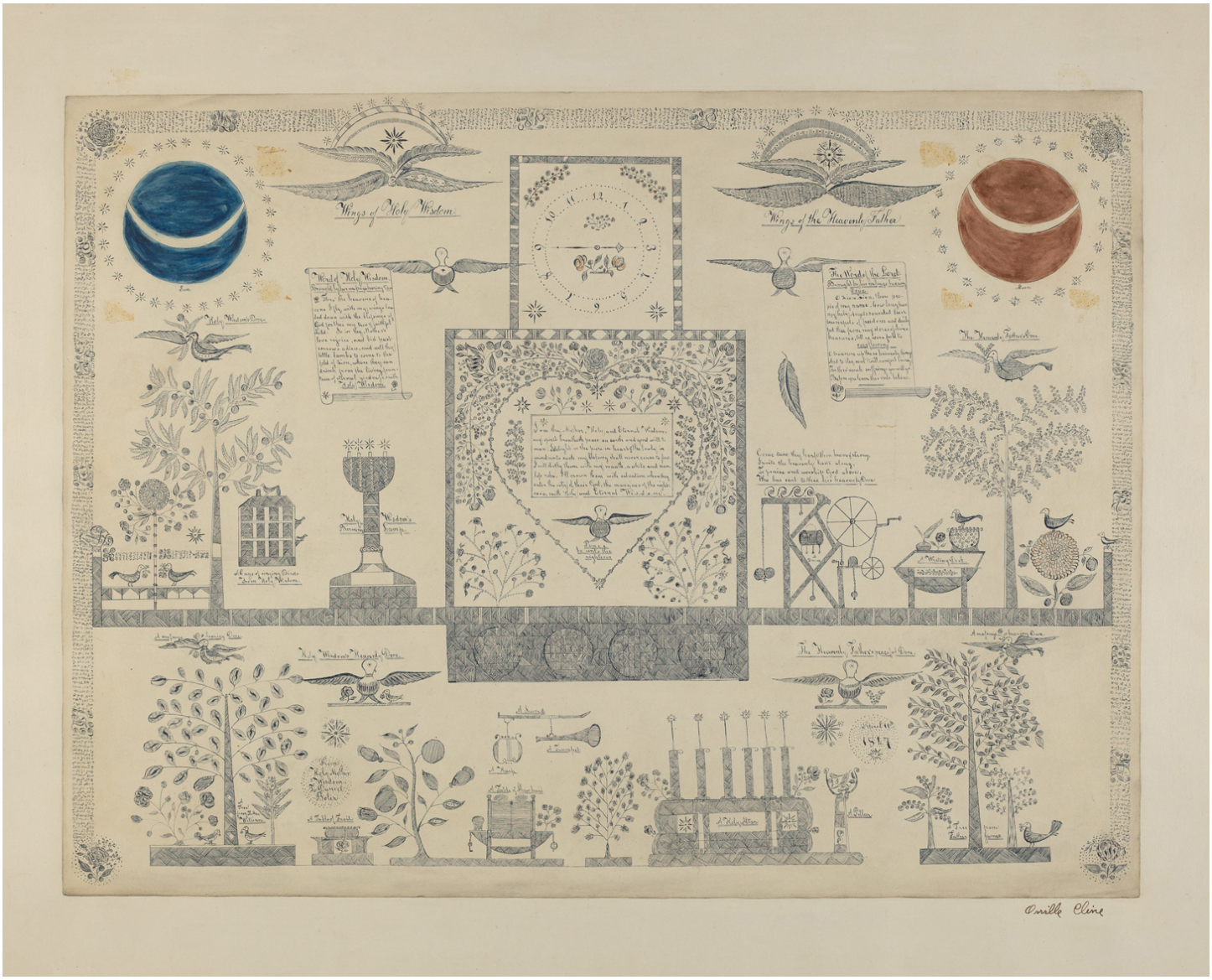
With texts from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Sudan, and the US, Horizons *is a planetary attempt to rethink and renew the revolutionary tradition in the twenty-first century.*

In the following excerpt, some inhabitants of Upstate New York write about their experiences moving from the city to the countryside. Examining traces of previous waves of communal experimentation in their area, they interrogate the relevance of utopian and countercultural traditions in an era of planetary upheaval and mass extinction. Advocating neither social perfection nor rural refuge, they present the rebirth of the commune as critical to today's revolutionary horizon—an earthbound power capable of shattering the capitalist globe and ushering in new worlds.

Two Movements

Day breaks and the mountain is in motion. Those in the fields are already sweating. Those tending to the animals spread feed and prepare for milking. Some brew the morning coffee, others begin a long commute to those islands of economic development away from the mountain. Journey down the road and you'll pass an older neighbor doing their part to remove algae from the pond. Hailing from the generation that tuned-in, turned-on and dropped-out, their story—a revolutionary withdrawal—is one of many which animate this place. Across the dirt road, stone walls worn by the century mark the remnant of a forgotten utopia. Near the pond, a single gravestone: "Shakers." Here, surrounded by depopulated small towns and struggling small agriculture, we reside in a strange eden. Our story will be one of love affairs, toil, ritual, conflicts, and feasts built on the shared dreams of a new revolutionary era.

We stand in the Taconic Mountains, part of the ancient Appalachians stretching unbroken for thousands of miles, crossing borders, cultures, and histories. These mountains form a modest ridge, separating the Hudson Valley to our west from the Berkshires to our east. This terrain was once glacier, then forest traversed by the Mohicans (Taconic, from Taghkanic, meaning "woods"), then clear-cut farmland of European settlers. Today it is northern hardwood forest once more, returning amid patchwork farms and small towns. To live in these mountains is to be the beneficiaries of eons, of the immense movements of the continents, of glaciers, of rivers and springs, of fires wild and controlled, of centuries of cultivation, of generations who walked before.



Orville Cline, Shaker Visionary Image, 1935/1942.

We are beneficiaries not only of these natural and social phenomena, but of the multitudes concealed by the monolithic name *America*. Across this vast geography, there has never been a unitary order. Spirits traverse the land, animating it with radical incongruence. The spirits might tell one story: that this place has always been home to a peaceful, communal way of life. Or they might tell us the story of war between the Mohican and Mohawk, challenging the last vestige of Rousseauian illusions and revealing an ethical wedge that will always split the land. This continent has always been a tangled wellspring of exodus, ethical polarities, and turbulent communions. This was why Europe was compelled to release its grip and also why the Founding Fathers would construct race as a legal category, hoping to stave off the unruly spirits they found. America is the subject of a dissonance that lays bare the limits of every nation's fictitious identity.

As we inherit the complicated legacy of this nation, so too do we inherit the legacies of social dissent embedded within the mountains we call home. We reside on this land in the shadow of two radical experiments, part of a tradition both adjacent to and distinct from the American lineage of revolutionary upheaval. The first emerged alongside the turbulent history of the early United States, while the second erupted amidst the transformations of the postwar era. Each were profound experiences of collective rebellion at the level of daily life.

The Shakers—religious separatists preaching equality of the sexes and abolitionism—sought perfection amid a Millennium they believed had already dawned. Living on a former Shaker settlement, their material legacy—fields and forests, stone walls and sturdy buildings—make up our everyday environment. Inhabiting their traces prompts us to consider their beliefs and collective practices,

challenging us to imagine a movement which lasts beyond our own lifetimes.

The back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s represented a vast countercultural secession from modern society, aiming to peacefully transform "consciousness" and, through doing so, the world itself. Its presence manifests in the disposition of many locals—neighbors, friends, elders—who participated in that experimental exodus and whose experiences brought them to this mountainside. Carrying with them skills, stories, and values of that era, they have helped us form a living, tangible link with a prior movement of tremendous scale and creativity.

From a historical perspective, these two movements are exemplary of the irrepressible communal impulse traversing America, a seed of communism at home on this continent as much as anywhere else. The Shakers are the country's most enduring communitarian society, a 250-year-old religious order which developed both within and apart from the American project. The back-to-the-land movement was America's biggest communal wave, totaling some one million youth who joined the communes in a single decade. Together, they amount to two of the longest-lived and the largest experiments in the history of American revolt, collective attempts to break from the dominant society and construct a new art of living.

The path we follow takes us through these movements. Without understanding their insights and missteps, it would be difficult to confront the unprecedented demands of the present, the necessity to seize the means of existence. While we seek to make a break, to cast off the dead weight of the past, we must also face the history written into the territory we inhabit. These austere millenarians and wild freaks are missing from the pages of official revolutionary history, but in their desire to remake the world they find their place among our forebears. If we do not raise the expected criticisms, this is because we want to recover another image of these movements, one lost under the standard narratives.

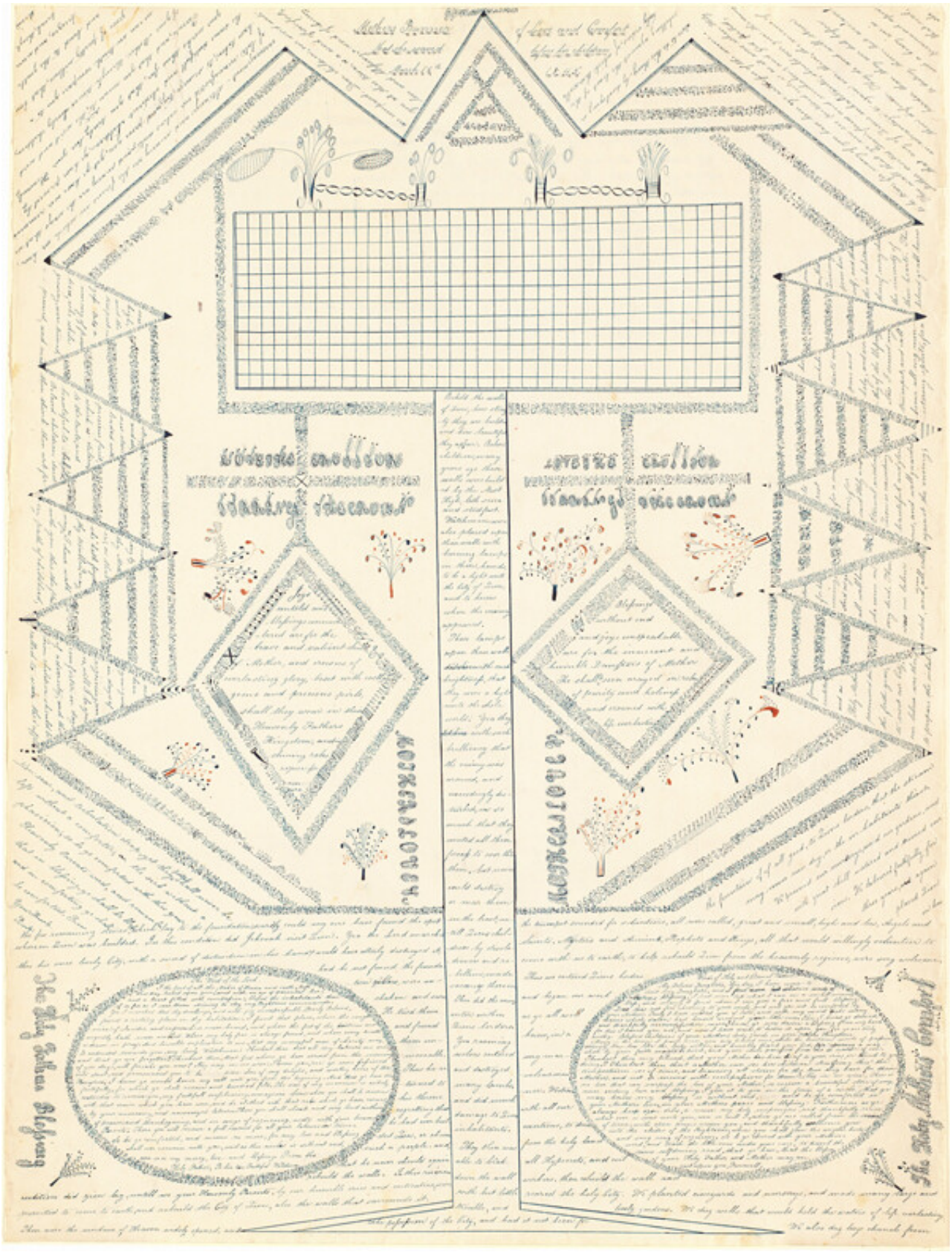
Both of these collective experiments partook of an optimism which is unimaginable now. Utopian enthusiasm suffused the Republic during the Shaker's heyday, a widespread faith in social progress only later snuffed out by the Civil War. The back-to-the-land movement lived on the verge of imminent global transformation, at least until the upsurge of the revolutionary sixties crashed into the reaction of the seventies. A future brighter than the past, a core belief animating each prior movement, is a hope unceremoniously put to rest by our troubled era. Today every vision of the future rings hollow which does not include its dystopian truth. The violence of capital is written into geologic strata, the atmosphere, and our psyches. At the threshold of economic expansion and technological acceleration, the earth quakes. With every storm and rising tide, the climate asserts its reign. Here lies a radical schism and the questions our time imposes. Whatever legacies these two movements have left us will have to be rethought in the blinding light of the epoch.

Life in Common

There have always been dissident communities on the fringes of the American nation, those who rejected the vaunted "liberty" of the individual and instead sought freedom through life with others. From the famous utopian communities of the mid-nineteenth century to the counterculture of the mid-twentieth, we find again and again the powerful refrain of *common land, common labor, and common bonds*.

Emblematic of the religious exodus from Europe, the Shakers were a near-heretical sect led by the charismatic Mother Ann Lee. In the relative isolation of the American countryside, they enacted their communitarian beliefs: holding property in common, practicing cooperative agriculture, and living in collective arrangements of non-biological "families." At their peak in the 1840s, the Shakers had forged a network of eighteen prosperous communities, ranging from Maine to Kentucky, with around six thousand total members. Their successes even caught the eye of Friedrich Engels, who praised the Shakers' social arrangement in a survey of existing "communist colonies."[2] Communism, after all, was a Biblical mandate, as Shaker theologians pointed out. According to *Acts*, the first Christians "had all things common." Over decades and then centuries, the celibate Shakers developed forms of work, worship, and living in which the communal principle prevailed—sometimes at the expense of individuality. While the Shakers held themselves apart from politics, their spiritual commitment to egalitarianism led their communities to plant extra crops for the hungry to take from their fields and even to help former slaves escape to freedom as part of the Underground Railroad.

Like the communal wave which swept America a century before, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s was a widespread, sudden phenomena. Against a backdrop of student unrest, war in Vietnam, "race riots," and the atomic bomb, disaffected youth rejected mainstream society and instead sought the liberation of an "authentic" self. The communal element of the counterculture largely had its origin in cities—with loose networks of crashpads and free stores—before the back-to-the-land communes took off. In this mass disaffiliation, upwards of one million "free spirits" headed to the countryside. They founded *thousands* of communes, spreading across the Pacific Northwest, the Southwest, New England, and everywhere in between. Fleeing their middle-class upbringings, young communards adopted an ad hoc communalism, sharing land and houses, work and tools, clothes and drugs, languages and desires. At the movement's creative height,



Rebecca Landon, Mother's Banner of Love and Comfort, 1845. Accession number: 1971.83.29. In the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Public domain.

there was a vast, cross-continental network, composed of dropouts and draft resisters, artists and spiritual seekers, runaway teens and fugitives in the revolutionary underground. Unfortunately, the serial failure of many of these vibrant, if short-lived, communities has painted the word "commune" with an often negative connotation.

What speaks to us about these movements is their ardent desire *to put life in common*—and the fact that they organized themselves to make it real. But it troubles us that both of these movements and the way of life they practiced were premised upon their ability to set themselves apart from the wider world. One of the central religious tenets of Shakerism, after all, was "separation from the world," realized through physical isolation of their villages and strict rules governing interactions with outsiders. Back-to-the-land communes also sought a degree of geographic remove, communards trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and "the system." Today, as capitalism has encapsulated the entire planet, we know there is no privileged site of separation to which we could flee in order to insulate ourselves from its designs. Simply moving to the countryside will not free us from the coercive forces to which we are exposed. The economy is everywhere. As are the apparatuses—technological, juridical—that manage it.

The conditions for carrying out a separation have been historically and technologically outmoded. There is no opening for an alternative outside the system, from which these prior movements premised their communal experiments. As it stands, what our lives have most in common is a kind of collective dependence on the systems we seek to overcome and the isolation they impose on us everyday. We have no choice but to live communism *in the midst of everything*: whether we are in cities or countrysides, no matter how much we currently rely on structures we despise, no matter how entangled we are with systems we reject. A revolutionary force will be built by immersing ourselves in the world, not separating ourselves from it.

However flawed they may have been, the fact remains that these two movements remind us of the communal undercurrent which flows through these lands and through this very mountain. Their histories reflect other histories unfolding concurrently, of workers' refusal, native resistance, and cultural exodus. Fragments of America were once held in common and they may be so again. Our starting points may be different from the old utopian and communal movements, but the necessary gestures remain the same. What made a life in common possible was the desire to live it and the decisions carried out to realize it. The viability of these prior forms of commons wasn't in their rural remove, but in the means shared, the techniques developed and deployed, the spirit that enlivened the land as common territory. Commons are both place and practice. They are sites and acts of contestation where the dominant order is decomposed, giving way to something new.

The commune flashes in and out of American history, a signal flare that *life could be otherwise*. In the twenty-first century we don't have the luxury of utopian moralism nor the modern communes' fantasy of escape. We are confronted with two visions of the future: one, the miserable promise of the end we already endure, the other, an interminable course where life breaches all fatalistic certainties. Either capitalism ends or we do. Living communism is a serious task. Faced with an apocalyptic horizon, we must break with a form of happiness equivalent to numbness—the contented oblivion of our time. Our happiness rests on our ability to mourn what we've lost, to defend what we love, and to live more free than the nihilists at the helm.

On our mountainside, where daily life can feel frustratingly small at times, we are beginning to ask ourselves these questions and to organize ourselves accordingly. How do we put our lives in common, with an entire world stacked against us? How can we build a shared life, without cannibalizing each other in the process? It is one thing to live together, to make collective decisions, to share the burden of work intrinsic to rural life—from firewood to childcare. It is another to build a commune that exceeds this mountain and open land and resources to collective use. To network between a new wave of communes is the only path we see towards a future where our experiments overcome an insularity which would be the same as slow defeat. A future which demands we rediscover how to live, as the very ground we stand on shifts and so much we take for granted falls away.

Self-Sufficiency

As a settler-colonial nation with fantasies of taming "the wilderness," the American imaginary has long been fascinated with self-sufficiency. This tradition passes from the early frontier to the Transcendentalists, through the generation of the Great Depression—for whom keeping a kitchen garden, canning, and raising animals were means of survival—and finally down to the modern communes and today's homesteads.

The early Shakers were remarkably self-sufficient in terms of material needs. They pursued an independence in matters of "temporal economy" as their religious separatism demanded. Famously inventive, the Shakers supplemented extensive agriculture with handicraft production, making everything from their own buildings and furniture to their tools and clothes. But in later years they turned more towards commodity production, relying less on subsistence and handicraft than by selling their goods to "the world's people" to raise needed revenue. In a sense, the Shakers' hard-won independence was eventually undercut by their own commercial success.

United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing ("Shakers"). Architectural elements from a Retiring Room in the North Family Dwelling American, New Lebanon, New York, ca. 1830–40. Installation, Gallery 734, The Met Fifth Avenue.

Their iconic boxes, brooms, and chairs—as well as seeds and medicinal herbs, their use based on Mohican knowledge—brought considerable profits as well as more extensive contact with American society. As the twentieth century approached, many turned away from the rigors of Shaker life, while dwindling communities scaled back their practical activities and became more specialized in what they produced.

While the back-to-the-land movement preached global interconnectedness, their everyday activity bent towards self-sufficiency. Among the first to grasp the catastrophic ecological implications of "the system," they sought to create viable alternatives to a mainstream they saw headed for collapse. The communes' response to industrial capitalism was to produce everything they needed directly from the land and by their own hands. Organic farming—which the movement helped popularize—was widespread on communes. Inspired by the ubiquitous *Whole Earth Catalog*, many communities adopted "alternative technologies" like solar energy to further reduce their dependencies and live more in keeping with the newly discovered "limits" of the biosphere. Yet a constant feature of accounts of the movement is a lack of appropriate skills, the hardships of winter, poor nutrition and frequent illness, and young communards being generally unprepared for the sheer difficulties of rural life. Almost without exception, communes fell short in their quest to truly meet their own needs. Beyond interpersonal strife, material obstacles figure heavily in the failures of communes and contributed to the rapid decline of the movement, with enthusiasm for the idea of self-sufficiency succumbing to the difficulties of achieving it.

Each movement's passionate drive towards self-sufficiency, however morally pure or materially well-organized, always seemed to crash against a still

deeper reliance on the economy. The lesson of these uneven experiences is not that the effort proved not to be worth it. We see it more as a measure of the difficulties before us and a call to rethink how we conceive the task to begin with. The Shakers and the back-to-the-land movement both grasped the essential logic of self-sufficiency—the power that comes from providing for ourselves, outside of a demoralizing system. Their failure was not tying their pursuits to the overcoming of that system.

For us, the concept of autonomy, as opposed to self-sufficiency, is a more useful framework. Autonomy is less the moral imperative to provide for all of our needs than the strategic severing of certain dependencies we have on the structures that govern us. Rather than trying to do *everything* ourselves, building autonomy requires assessing which dependencies, if fulfilled within our collectivities, would grant us the most freedom. Reducing our dependencies on decisions made elsewhere *increases* our interdependencies through creating bonds of material skills and mutual affinities. Autonomy repositions our gaze away from an economy that holds us hostage and centers agency on our collective capacities. In this gesture, every question of "how" becomes a negotiation of our strategy.

In the twenty-first century, we live under the global reign of an economy synonymous with catastrophe, a planetary system that undermines the very conditions for *any* form of life to continue. The isolated ability to provide a good life for a limited few is not a viable course but a form of resignation. Whatever idyll experienced, whatever refuge carved out, will be confronted by a radically altered world along with the hardships it brings and the social pressures it unleashes. The cruel whims of an unpredictable climate may cancel out everything people may have achieved in chain reactions originating continents away. The American tradition of self-sufficiency is too narrow in scope, too premised upon locating a stable *outside* no longer there. To pursue self-sufficiency in our era appears to us significant only insofar as it augments the collective capacity to undo the blackmail of capitalism. We can no longer seek to become self-sufficient for our own sake, for the amelioration of our own lives, but to build the autonomous capacities that could end, once and for all, the impoverishment and destruction called economy.

How we meet our needs is always a political question, a vector along which power travels. We already feel the tremors. We watch as forests disappear in flames or megaprojects, the air turns deadly, and waters turn to poison. Pipelines criss-cross our region. A nuclear plant sits just south of us along the Hudson River, not far from a faultline. Given the stress already placed on critical infrastructures, reducing our systemic dependencies becomes even more urgent and necessary. The epochal question is both simple and complex: how to live in a dying world? The ruling class is already predicting food shortages, resource wars, and vast uninhabitable zones. While most of the world will contend with *how to keep living*, they plot *how to keep ruling*. To learn how to provide for ourselves is the challenge before everyone—as is how to turn that capacity against those who seek to rule us. Reappropriating our collective capacities of reproduction will be a matter of resistance as much as survival.

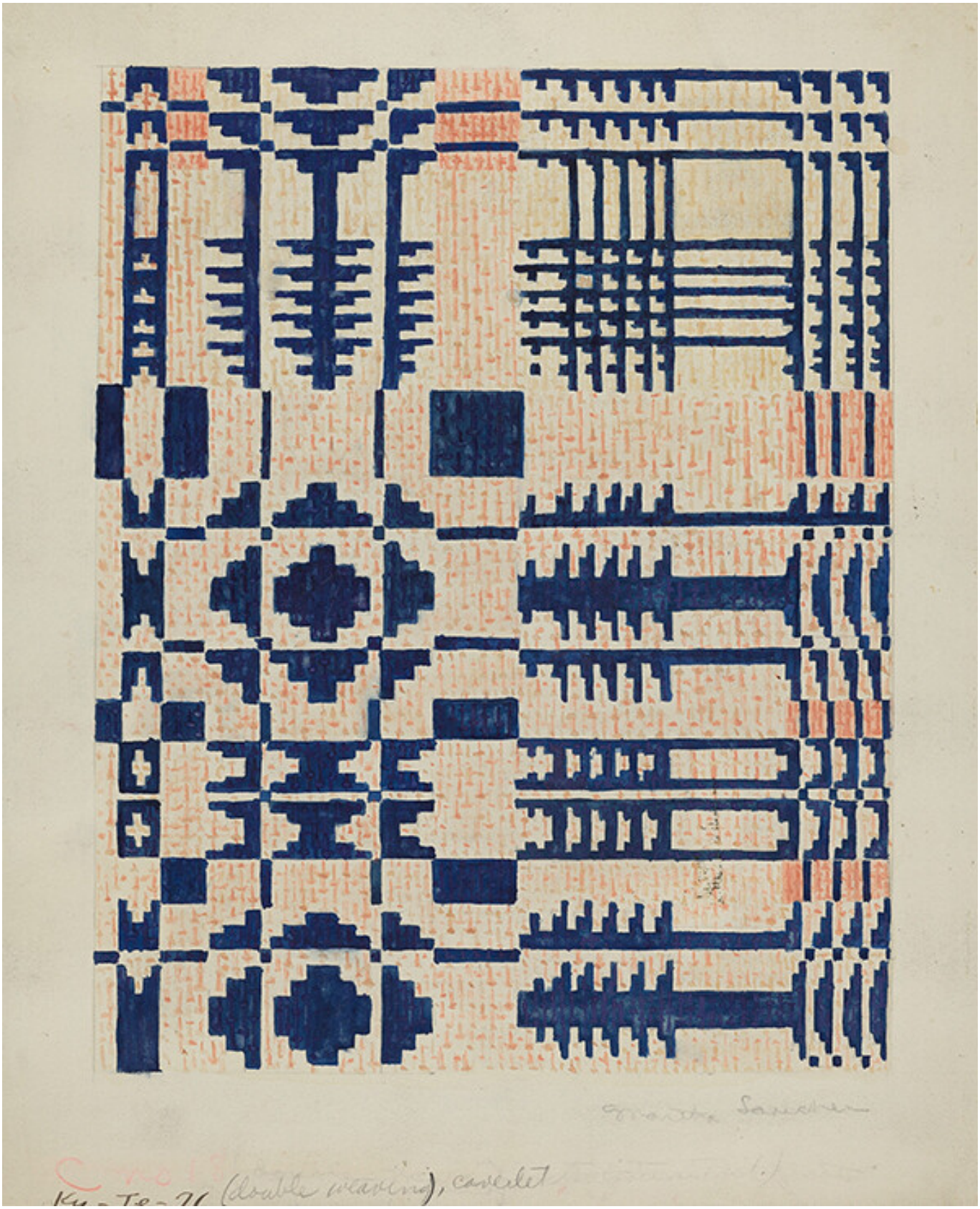
Living here now—on the same lands where these movements tried to fashion a collective existence—has helped us understand the necessity of building autonomy and the political horizon that gives it meaning. More importantly, being here has given us time and space to materially experiment with meeting our own needs—to discover how food tastes better pulled from the dirt and how to rejoice in laboring together. We know very well that to grow a portion of our food, to preserve it, to raise animals, to make herbal medicines, to fell trees and split the wood which heats our homes through cold winters, is arduous, unglamorous work. But the increased responsibility we have over our own reproduction—and especially the skills we've learned along the way—has been meaningful for us, in spite of its inadequacy.

If anything, these tentative steps have given us the first glimpse of the daunting scope of the material challenges ahead. We know we don't have the answers. But what we can say for certain: food, water, shelter, energy, care—each is a realm in which we will have to be organized on a massive scale, beyond any one group and beyond any one place. We will all have to ask what systems we must free ourselves from in order to live. What infrastructure we need now and what we can predict we might need in an uncertain future.

Are there problems we can solve here that might be useful to others elsewhere? Which of our material practices could be expanded, weaponized as part of wider struggles? How can communes interlink, form alliances, and share skills and resources at the necessary scale and speed? Amid deepening systems of control and cascading failures of infrastructure, can we help proliferate the ethics, tools, and techniques necessary to lead dignified lives? How can we learn again to live on the earth, as it is forever altered by systems which seem to lead inexorably to extinction?

Earthbound

The Protestant exodus from the Old World was animated by the search for "a new heaven and a new earth," as *Revelation* puts it, a quest for the Millennium many thought would be inaugurated in the newly discovered Americas. But Christian settlers didn't so much encounter the promised apocalypse as *bring it with them*. If modernity began with the cataclysmic violence of earthly



Martha Sancher, Shaker Coverlet, 1935/1942. Watercolor and graphite on paper. Index of American Design. Accession Number: 1943.8.13670. Public domain.

conquest and colonization, then perhaps it's fitting that it ends with the earth breaking back into history, bearing its own apocalypse.

Whatever the findings of modern astronomy, the Shakers believed that heaven still ruled over the earth, that man's destiny lay beyond this fallen world. "This earth was created for a temporary use," as one Shaker theologian explained their cosmology, "and was never intended to be the abiding place of man."[3] But even if their time here was to be short-lived, Shakers couldn't simply neglect the lands which nourished them. While their hearts may have been drawn upwards to God, their hands learned to work the earth. Abundant produce and herb gardens, bountiful orchards, and avid beekeeping testified to their practical acumen and even their delight in matters of the natural world. Living on these same hillsides decades after the last Shakers departed their village, however, raises complicated questions. Believing themselves stewards of creation didn't prevent Shakers from draining swamps or clear-cutting forests to establish pasture and extract resources. Their earthly legacy is a mixed one, posing to us in concrete fashion the question of how we live upon the land and how we will leave it for future generations.

The back-to-the-land communes were among the first popular manifestations of the nascent environmental movement, just beginning to warn of the dangers of plastic, pollution, and industrialization at a global scale. Borrowing the language of cybernetics, communards spoke of a "whole earth"—the unity of our blue planet, interwoven, at equilibrium—just as the immense threats to that wholeness were becoming clear. The era-defining first images of earth as seen from space—released after a campaign originating within the counterculture—were akin to cosmic epiphany for many communards. It was a near-mystical realization of the interconnection between all things and proof of life's delicate balance, even of the existence of Gaia. "We are the first of the planetary people," wrote one inspired communard at the time.[4] Communes across the country aspired to become catalysts of this burgeoning "global consciousness," experiments in the shared desire to live with the land rather than against it. As this moment profoundly shaped our conception of the planet and helped diffuse ecological principles throughout society, today we still carry an image of the earth as envisioned by the communes.

Each movement had to grapple with *the question of the earth*: how to live upon it, how to care for it, how to relate to it, how to understand its ultimate significance. The Shakers, as we know, subordinated life on earth to an eternal spiritual existence, trusting in the comforting guarantees of the divine. The back-to-the-land movement, on the other hand, grasped the extent to which life was dangerously earthly, our existence precarious insofar as modern technology endangered the entire planet. On this point we can say they were right: *life will be earthly or not at all*. That the earth and capitalism are incompatible—a key insight intuited by the movement—is even more undeniable today given the specter of climate change. While the communes feared the final catastrophe would be set in motion by nuclear warfare, now we anticipate an end which doesn't even need a detonation. It is simply the everyday continuation of capitalism that will suffice to bring about the apocalypse.

Yet even in their affirmations of the earth, their conceptions of it have proved false. The Shakers espoused the familiar Christian belief that the earth was man's dominion, that we were lord and master of creation. By now, we have seen what man's mastery entails: a creation drowning in plastic. Man—not the God of *Revelation*—is the agent of calamity responsible for mass extinction. Like the wider field of ecology at the time, the back-to-the-land movement mistakenly envisioned a naturally harmonious, balanced world. The communes did see man as the culprit behind environmental disturbances, but their belief that the earth might be somehow restored to its intended state has now been put to rest. Instead we are entering a period of planetary conditions unprecedented in terms of human habitation. The arts of existence collectively developed over thousands of years will be thoroughly upended, given that the climatic patterns which underlay their wisdom can no longer be taken for granted. It may turn out that "Western civilization" was only a myth of the Holocene.

The paradox in which we are caught is as follows. Modern science, with its unchallenged claims into the nature of reality, has rendered the old cosmologies inaccessible to us. There is no meaning-giving beyond, no vault of heaven, no promise of salvation such as the Shakers experienced. Nor is the seventies fantasy of a benevolent, wise Gaia a credible metaphysical recourse. Situated on the brink of catastrophe, it may only be in the exit from the modern age that we might rediscover the meaning of the earth. The cosmological significance of the earth is not just its position relative to the universe, but our position with respect to it. Our lives and our fates are bound to this planet, our only home, in a bond that modernity sought to break at the peril of its own demise. To deny this link is to welcome the abyss, of escapism into space or into screens, into a closed-off human interior mirrored by a science for which nothing is real unless it can be measured, to invite nothing but cosmic indifference and the threatening solitude of extinction.

We must now ask what it means to be human in a world that is dying, at the very moment we realized the earth was vital. How to dwell in a world where we are not alone but entangled with all beings who comprise the vibrant plane of existence. How to live on lands that we cannot "return" to so much as recognize as already inhabited by countless histories and forces beyond ourselves. We know that no self can be sufficient unto itself—we live only in relation to others. Any real pursuit of autonomy begins with recognition of this deeper heteronomy: our dependence on those around us and those who came

before, all the nonhuman forms of life in the great pantheon of being, the plants who breathe life into the world and the sun which animates them. We are not as gods. We are of the same matter and singular life which compose the flora and fauna layered across the earth. This is what we have in common and this is why we yearn for communism.

To move to these mountains was not an answer but the opening of a question, one that history has posed to the living with the clarity of destiny. What does it mean to live in our epoch, as we walk the thin line between revolution and catastrophe? In our fledgling attempts to live closer to the earth, the stakes of our time have become more clear, the challenges more defined. In the city, the apocalypse can feel like a foregone conclusion. In the countryside—surrounded by the profusion of life, bodies more attuned to the rhythm of the seasons—the end of the world is harder to believe in, but all the more painful.

How can we overcome the spiritual brokenness of our time, the planetary nihilism we inherit? How can we be rooted in a place, when everywhere is without foundation? To know the history of the land and the names of plants, to keep bees and to plant trees, to forage, to involve ourselves in the fate of the woods and the waters, to learn the constellations—all this might seem anachronistic or absurd. But to close ourselves off from the question of the earth, to deny our inseparable ties to it, can only mean extending the wake of destruction left by the preceding centuries. What's needed more than ever is an affirmation of what's vital. The belief in a terrestrial horizon, however fragmentary the *terra* has become.

Exodus

In spite of its individualist mythology, the desire for life in common burdens American history as a refrain of desertion, refusal, and rebellion. These communal forms of the past set the precedent for the revolutionary ethic of our time. What does it mean to stand on the same ground, hold ourselves to the same truths, when all possible horizons of our forebears have melted away like ice from the sea? Our time affords no utopias, neither the Kingdom of Heaven realized by life rightly led, nor the planetary wholeness dreamt of beyond the crest of progress. The communal urge, the subterranean rhythm of this great continent, can no longer be imagined as an end in itself.

This mountain, its springs and soils, gives rise to its own way of life. We start from here, our point of departure: the earth from which the mountain will feed a vast network of partisans, the animals which will pass on their wisdom to teach us to move freely, stalk prey, and avoid detection. The waters which will heal our wounds and nurture our young in a world at war with our bodies. Where we will sit with friends in late summer, gazing over fields of goldenrod, and swear to never let them take this from us. Where we begin to betray the sick vision of America inherited from our ancestors.

Exodus was the historical movement which remade America and which will come to undo it. From its origins, exodus has always meant a collective movement towards freedom. To depart, but in doing so create the conditions for others to follow. As the last revolutionary gesture permitted by our times, we embark upon this path with the knowledge that we do not depart alone. We stand in one location, on one mountainside, but exodus must unfold everywhere. From each of our histories, from each of our territories, an exodus must be carried out coterminous with revolution.

The task of our era is to reunite the form of the commune with its revolutionary potential. A potential the Shakers never sought, despite their radical egalitarianism, and which the back-to-the-land movement turned away from in their break with the revolutionary movements of their era. In our time, communes are already erupting across the world, each according to their own histories and struggles, bound to the earth and to their own articulation of life in common. Through the circulation of vibrant encounters, sympathetic affinities, and material linkages, exodus coalesces from a thousand points, oriented towards a common horizon. We set our sights on a *terrestrial* horizon, not only because we are bound to this earth, but because revolution in the twenty-first century must be planetary in scope.

To grapple with land and its histories is to rediscover life as a weapon. Only a weapon so total is powerful enough to combat the combined spiritual and ecological devastation of our time. We must learn to wield it with urgency. Let our expanding networks of communards, elders and children alike, nourish and shelter one another against those who would deny us a future, who claim that this is the end. Let our subsistence dictate the battlegrounds, where our familiarity with the land will give us the upper hand against those who wish to remove it from our power. Let our deepening connections with this earth, which grants us the means and willingness to fight, remind us daily what the stakes are—not only the worlds we build together, but the conditions for any world to come.

X

Excerpted from Liaisons, *Horizons* (Autonomedia, 2022).

Liaisons is a collective writing project and network of planetary friendship that circulates articles and letters from struggles around the world.

1
See https://autonomedia.org/product/horizons-by-liaisons/%C2%A0 . You can read shorter writings from around the world published on our *Lines of Revolt* blog here: https://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/letters-and-other-writing-from-the-front-lines-of-planetary-struggle/ .

2
Friedrich Engels, "Description of Recently Founded Communist Colonies Still in Existence" (1845). Based on travel accounts he read, Engels lauded the Shakers not only for their material abundance but the fact that their communities had no police, no prisons, and no judges.

3
A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers , 2nd ed. (1848). Originally published by the Shakers in 1823, this book was among the first to systematically outline their beliefs, aiming to dispel the scandal surrounding some of their practices.

4
Ed Rosenfeld, "Planetary People," in *The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog* (1971). Typical of the countercultural foment, this short essay combines systems theory with gestalt psychology, psychedelic drugs with Sufism.

Tyler Coburn

The Petrified, Part 1

The Old Woman

July 22, 2009. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

She arrives in the late morning and takes a corner in the gallery—away from the café, from the windows, from the tourists passing through. There, she won't be disturbed as she attends to her affairs. She circles her chair, rummages through her coat, stares at a detail on the floor, and another on the wall. She's murmuring. The guard is used to it: another crazy old lady.

She sits, then quickly stands. She shrieks. She freezes. She falls silent.

Can someone have a stroke standing up, the guard wonders as he races towards her. She's buckled over, halfway to placing her hands on the back of the chair. Immobile, as if transfixed by terror. But that doesn't really describe it. That doesn't *nearly* explain why the tourists are also shrieking.

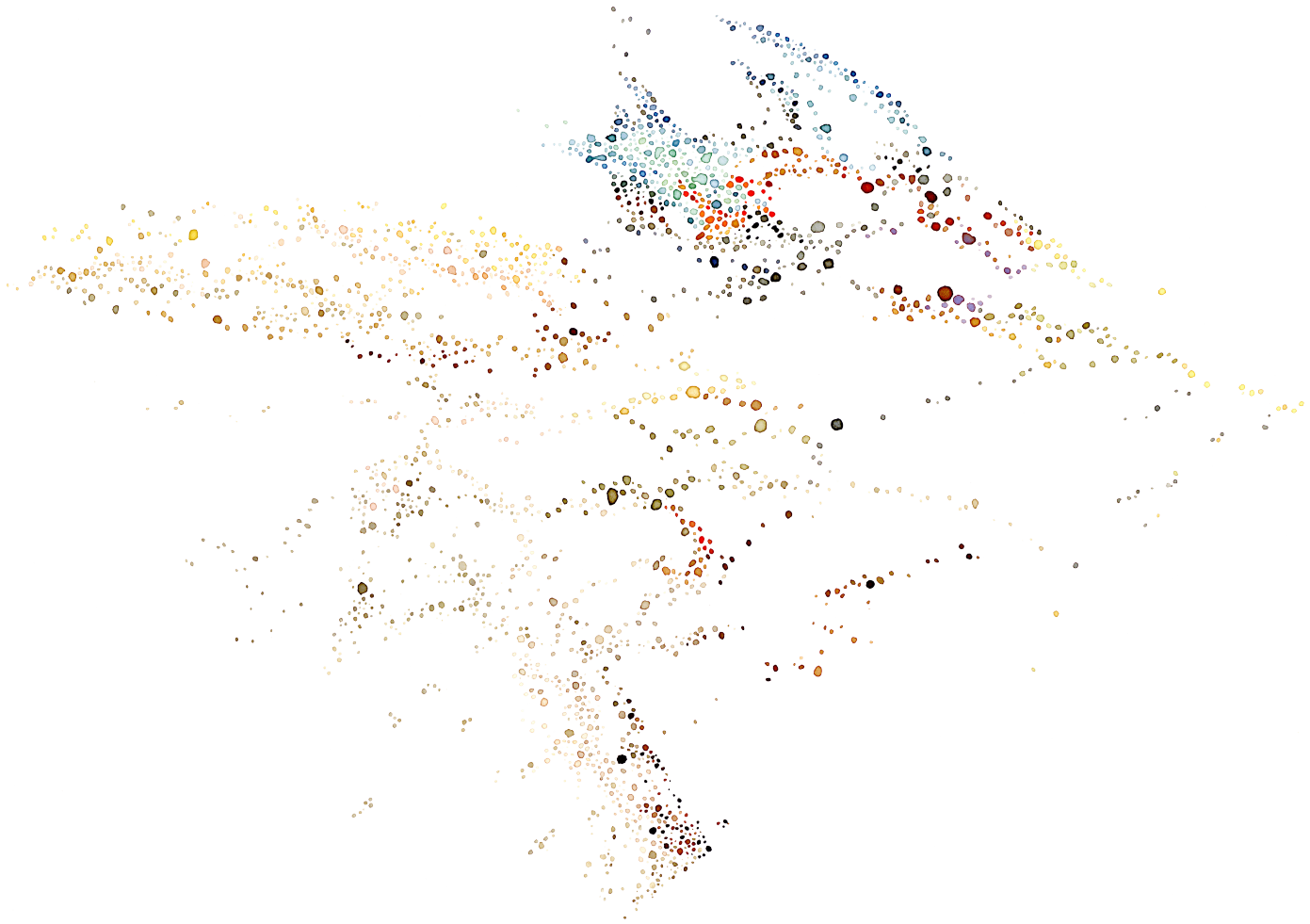
The gallery is filled with spectacles that don't elicit the same response. Lucretia plunges a knife into her chest after Sextus Tarquinius rapes her. Count Ugolino, imprisoned with his sons and grandsons, must choose between starvation and cannibalism. Their pain, though rendered at human scale, is marble—remote. Hers is magnetic—her body, absorbing the colors around her: the red of the bricks, the grays of the stonework, the blackened and pearled hues of the sculptures. Though it might sound like camouflage, she's not disappearing. If anything, she's the only thing people can see.

*

A church in Chicago once acquired a small statue of the Virgin Mary, carved in linden wood. Two weeks after its arrival, the statue began to weep.

Thousands flocked to the statue, intent to see a miracle that would never be repeated. A man fired three shots in its direction, as if to dispel its hold on the masses.

Take away the assassination attempt, and this could describe the scene at The Met in the days following the event. The EMTs and conservators had come and gone, neither able to confirm the animacy of the petrified woman. If the museum had concerns about keeping her on view, then the public response must have calmed them. Visitors, at least initially, seem disinclined to draw the worst conclusions: that a person may have died in the museum, that the museum is a dangerous place where this could happen to you. No, they come in droves: most, to gawk at the world's latest bafflement—and a few, to extract something of the phenomenon for themselves. The guards do their best to ward off curious fingers. The woman is soon defended by stanchions.



Little can be learned about her. If she was carrying identification, then it petrified along with everything else. The photographs shared by media don't produce any leads. Nobody comes forward.

*

The timing is particularly good for The Met. The museum's endowment shrank by 28 percent between last summer and the first of the year, and it recently laid off seventy-four employees. A "painful but unavoidable consequence of the global financial crisis" is how chairman James R. Houghton put it. Certainly, the institution would discuss what to do with the woman; in the meantime, what's the harm with keeping her on view?

As attendance numbers continue to rise, each day breaking the record set by the last, the critics come out of the woodwork. Misery, according to some, caused the woman to petrify. Her pose tells a story of hardship and debility, of profound existential distress. She should be moved to a place equipped to compassionately care for her—not kept in an institution that profits off her pain. The trouble is that nobody can agree on what that place should be. As she was once human and might (eventually) return to that state, is it a care home or eldercare facility? She's become an object of significance in the city's history, so is it the Museum of the City of New York? The New York Historical Society?

Others believe the woman *chose* to transform in the museum. Guards had seen her there before; they knew she liked that corner of the gallery. Removing her might go against her wishes.

This position finds support from a prominent cultural critic, albeit for a somewhat different reason. We're missing the point, she writes, by attempting to rationalize this event or dwell in the details. The mystery of petrification is like the blindness that guides the hands of the greatest artists. The woman is artist *and* artwork. She belongs in the museum.

There's something powerfully democratic about this claim, which isn't lost upon the public. The museum is no longer a citadel of "high culture" that we visit for edification, but a

place where the average person can be respected as art.

There's also something threatening—at least to the gatekeepers. A random woman does a freak thing in a museum, and the media gets in a tizzy. How dull the other sculptures seem by comparison! How derivative, the mimetic arts! Here, instead, a woman who *isn't* a sign, an approximation, a sex worker done up as an ancient heroine. She is pure presence: just whom she appears to be.

The avant-garde went about it entirely wrong with their huffing and puffing. The museum not only stayed standing but entombed their work in the process. All it took was a random woman doing a freak thing to send tremors through the foundation. And she walked in. She just walked in.

*

A month after the petrification, public opinion is still split. There hasn't been an outcry, or not one large enough for The Met to feel pressure to remove her.

The woman is not mentioned on the museum's website, nor in the map of the galleries—decisions made to minimize the spectacle. The wall label placed nearby describes only the date and circumstance of her transformation.

A curator once told me that she refers to wall labels as "tombstones." The woman may eventually reanimate, but for all intents and purposes, the things that enter museums are categorically dead.

*

I went to see her a few weeks after she petrified—first thing on a Tuesday morning, when I thought the crowds might be thin. I had read the criticism, seen her image countless times. I was hoping to learn something myself.

What I can say is that I didn't see misery, despite how her body buckled. It felt like the story was told on the surface: the skin pulled taut at the sides of her mouth, her shoes splattered with the colors of the floor.

When Roger Caillois wrote about insects that mimic their environments, he called the phenomenon a " *temptation by space*." He observed something similar in people with depersonalization disorder. Alongside the "instinct of self-preservation," Caillois suggests, is another of renouncing, forgetting, flight: the desire to escape oneself—to disappear into the world.

When I looked at her, I imagined that she'd been tempted. She'd renounced part of herself, slowed her existence to a stop. She's become part of the museum in a way no object could.

The Museum Guard

A woman petrifies in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the world skips a beat. It seems like the stuff of myth: a way to explain why certain rocks bend and twist, a warning against vanity or lust. But to The Met, with its displays of human mummies, she is somewhat familiar.

The museum began collecting Egyptian culture in 1874, coming to amass about twenty-six thousand objects. Of the mummies, none is more striking than Kharushere, a doorkeeper of the House of Amun who lived in the Third Intermediate Period: 825 to 725 BC. For display purposes, Kharushere has been removed from his cartonnage and coffins, which stand upright beside him. His body, wrapped in a sheet and bandages, lies on a slab that traces his contour. The effect is peculiar and a bit difficult to describe … It's like the museum has cut him a shadow.

Down the hall are three mummies from a later era, whose wrappings are decorated and covered by masks. Kharushere received no such treatment. There are some tears in the sheet that covers his head, which resemble an eye socket and harelip, but to "see" him, one must look at the faces carved on his cartonnage and coffins. Each is presented in a manner that implies a relation to the rest—the outer coffin is open, the contents are arrayed in descending scale—but somehow, nothing connects. The human body lying there, wrapped yet exposed, whose preparations for the afterlife have been compromised on our behalf: this overwhelms the scene.

*

A few months after the woman petrified, a man begins to come to The Met. He sits on the bench in front of Kharushere. The gallery is a cul-de-sac, off the main hallway, which never attracts many visitors. When he was a guard, it was his favorite place in the museum, where he could have a minute to himself.

The Met took a hit in the Great Recession; he was one of the seventy-four who lost a job. This shouldn't be that tough for him, as he's only in his thirties. But it isn't the moment to be looking for work. The road doesn't rise to meet him. After weeks of applications and interviews that go nowhere, he finds himself returning to the museum. At first, he wanders the galleries, chatting with colleagues like he used to. Soon, he withdraws. The most the guards receive is a brief nod, at opening time, as he heads to Kharushere's gallery.

For him, it happens differently. He doesn't make a noise or dramatic gesture but sits completely still. Perhaps this is why the guards don't notice, or perhaps they leave him alone because they feel sorry for him. By closing time, when he's asked to get up, it's already too late. His petrification is underway.

*

A young girl stands in front of the petrified man. One hand is in her mother's; the other picks at the hem of her dress.

After what feels like an eternity, she says:

"Daddy?"

The scene is part of a *60 Minutes* episode that airs a few weeks after his petrification. By this point, the world has learned about his wife and daughter, who weren't aware of the layoff. On the days he spent looking for work, or sitting in the front of Kharushere, they assumed he was still guarding The Met. His friends see it as a matter of pride: the embarrassment of losing his job, the failure to provide. He would have told them the truth after finding something new. There's no way he *wanted* to petrify. He wasn't the type to run away from a difficult situation. He would never "abandon" his family.

The wife and daughter are the emotional throughline of the episode, but they alone don't account for its significance. Though *60 Minutes* isn't exactly "cutting-edge" in 2009, it gives the first thorough report of the petrifications.

In one segment, conservators sand sections of the man and woman's petrified garments. Analysis reveals that the samples are made entirely of calcium carbonate. Snails and shellfish secrete this material to fortify their soft bodies. If the man and woman have done something similar, then they may be alive and intact just beneath this hard outer layer.

What the sample analysis can't explain is the pigmentation of the calcium carbonate, speckled with the colors of their surroundings. Here, there's less recourse to science, which is still trying to determine how shells get their colors—what roles diet, heritability, and environment might play. There's one case that seems relevant: the cowries that live and feed on coral, their shells assuming its tints. A person who feeds on the museum becomes like the museum … like a statue … like a mummy …

In a later segment of the show, technicians take mobile X-rays of the petrified. The results are startling. In place of the usual blacks and grays—the air, muscle, fluids, and fat—there's only white. The bodies of the man and woman are flatly, graphically white. Calcium carbonate from top to toe.

Despite this finding, the "shell theory" persists, albeit in a metaphoric sense. The man and woman have withdrawn, a psychologist tells the reporter. Something affected them so intensely that an act of equal magnitude was needed.

*

For all the stories of petrification as a punishment for some misdeed, there are others of the intense feelings that can bring it about. Japanese Buddhism has the legend of Sayo Hime: As her husband's ship departs for battle with Korea, she follows on foot, climbing the Kagami Mountain, crossing the Matsuura River. When she reaches Kabeshima Island and can go no further, sadness turns her to stone.

In another version of the legend, it's her prayer and devotion that cause her to become, quite literally, "his rock."

In a third, more mundane version, a fisherwoman, awaiting the return of her husband from sea, gradually petrifies.

It's possible to visit the rocks that correspond to each version. If they were once truly human, then they've shown no sign of wanting to return to that state.

*

When feeling turns a person to stone, do they go on feeling? Did the father *feel* anything in the presence of his pleading daughter? The psychologist poses these questions, at the very end of the show, then turns to face the camera. Her final words are for the man himself:

"Return, when the shame lessens, to make amends. Delay but don't deny life. We'll all petrify in the end."

*

There are different ways to bring this chapter to a close, like the different versions of Sayo Hime's story. None feel satisfying on their own.

In one, the world is moved by the wife and daughter's plight. Donations, large and small, come pouring in. The family is spared financial ruin, the wife able to care for her daughter without having to take a full-time job. The father stays in the museum.

In another, the world is scandalized by his actions. While the elderly woman, in her anonymity, has become a sympathetic figure, he is a lightning rod: the picture of an absentee father who leaves when the going gets tough. Attempts are made to deface him—markers and spray cans confiscated—but the guards can only be so vigilant. The museum prepares to remove him.

The wife protests, and the world again skips a beat. Her daughter has started to visit after school, sketching on the bench beside him and talking through her day. The mummies no longer frighten her—in fact, she says hello to them when she arrives.

It's not normal, and it's far from ideal, but somehow, it's working. We're still trying to be a family.

The Would-Bes

One of my favorite photographs shows a pair of desert ironclad beetles, famous for feigning death. They lie on their backs, legs bent in telltale ways. The artist, Christopher Williams, makes pictures that reflect on the nature of the medium: on photography as a means of preservation and also a tool of mortification, bringing time to a grinding halt. The genius of this image is that the beetles play along, right through the shutter release, then get back to the matter of living.

In the months following the second petrification, The Met fills with people who seem to draw inspiration from these beetles. Everywhere one goes is someone sitting intently, or contorting, or swooning: playacting their way toward petrification.

The internet is delighted. Every day, more grist for the content mill.

Consider the interview with a man found hiding beneath a stairwell, which goes stupendously off the rails when the reporter asks some basic questions. Why the elongated pose? What inspired your choice to be naked?

Consider the lawsuit by an individual who bruised his tailbone in the American Wing. The complaint of institutional negligence—a wet floor without a caution sign—didn't square with eyewitness accounts of the plaintiff, who was seen mimicking the bronze of a falling gladiator without the slightest unsteadiness, growing distraught when nothing happened, then taking a more dramatic approach.

Consider the work gloves stuck to the side of a boulder in the Chinese Courtyard, and the conservation saga to remove them. It could have been worse: the culprit, who clung to the rock like an oversized barnacle—she hadn't coated *herself* with epoxy. Somewhere in the fog of her mind, she must have sensed that it would take more than glue to become one with the stone.

*

Louis Aragon once warned that "humanity will perish" from "statuomania," its cities choked by the likenesses of distinguished men. Between 1870 and 1911, six times as many public statues were installed in Paris than in the previous seventy years, seeming to bloom surreptitiously at night. This phenomenon, which emerged at the start of the Third Republic, served its liberal humanist agenda: there, on a plinth in most any square, was a great man of history—a model to follow. Aragon found it all to be an exercise in futility. The statues built today, he remarked in 1927, "might undergo the same fate as" the monument to Rimbaud in his hometown, which the Germans removed "for making shells" to demolish the very place it once occupied.

The proliferation of statues, writes Simon Baker, was like a form of "civic vandalism": the appropriation of public space for ideological ends, an assault on cultured taste. It would seem that Aragon's hostility came from the obligation to share the city with them. But the statues were no happier with the arrangement.

The title of Marcel Sauvage's 1932 book, *The End of Paris or the Revolt of the Statues*, speaks for itself: the statues of Paris come to life and lead a campaign to conquer the city. Photomontages included in the book show Marshal Ney, sword raised, making his way down the Champs-Elysées; Charlemagne flanked by knights on Rue Royale; and a column of statues marching from the Louvre. Sauvage, cast as the chronicler of these events, can't explain how the statues awoke—he wasn't present when it happened. But he learns that they have much to say. "Life has become inhuman in the capitals of the world," Charlemagne complains, because of the "the nervousness, the speed." Humans weren't "designed to play a miserable role in a chain of machines." The statues came alive when we ossified, cogs in a thing called "modernity." They took Paris to teach us a lesson; they'll return to their plinths once we learn it.

*

What's happening at The Met bears some resemblance to statuomania: two people have petrified, and now the galleries are packed with those wanting to do the same. One need not stretch the imagination very far to see what could happen next. More people succeed in transforming, and a new kind of statuary blooms, overshadowing the work in the collection. The war gods are roused to act: Mars, a fragment of a marble head; Chamunda, with her twelve missing arms; Oro, wrapped in layers of woven coconut fiber. Their revolt is coming, and when it arrives, the museum will be sealed from the inside. Every last human exiled from culture, wondering what lesson should be learned.

There are other aggrieved parties. Guards, already demoralized by the layoffs last summer, now find themselves policing the museum, sending stragglers, at closing time, on a forced march to the exit. Trustees are predicting that The Met will become a poorhouse, citing facts about the housing crisis that some of them were responsible for causing. The staff hate the optics, the lawsuit, the likelihood of more litigious idiots. Something must be done …

In March 2010, The Met announces an open call. Successful applicants—eight in a calendar year—are given three months to try to petrify. If someone makes an unsanctioned attempt, they'll be banned from the museum for five years.

Applicants must provide a "compelling reason" for petrification. This term seems drawn from the

psychologist on *60 Minutes*—her belief that emotional and psychological duress cause people to transform. And it creates a fairly perverse situation where a jury of curators function like shrinks, deciding whose story is the saddest. Who deserves to escape their awful life?

Successful applicants sign an agreement with the museum. A cosigner (usually a family member) becomes the primary contact if the applicant transforms. The terms of the agreement are fascinating to read, giving language to a phenomenon without legal precedent—form to an entity that is neither employee, contractor, nor artwork. The terms were written, of course, to cover the museum's ass.

"The applicant and cosigner waive all claims and recourse against the museum for damage incurred during display." (In other words: you're doing this at your own risk.)

"In the event of damage, the museum will not attempt conservation due to the limited understanding of the petrified, and of the treatment necessary for adequate repair." (We have no clue where to even begin.)

"The applicant affirms that their petrification will not cause injury to the financial, property, or other interests of family members; personal and professional contacts; employers; service providers; and banks." (Don't treat us like a poorhouse. And please, pay your debts.)

*

The Met wasn't the only museum dealing with this problem. Though the Louvre, the Getty, and the Capitoline Museums hadn't experienced petrifications, they were filling with people eager to transform. Almost as soon as The Met announced its open call, they announced their own.

I walked through The Met a few months after the program began. Gone were the throngs of people inclining toward stony stillness; the threat of the ban kept them away. In their place was a new type of visitor—so subtle, in how they moved through the galleries, that it took time to see their tells. The way they take the empty seat on a bench and linger: not looking at anything in particular, attuned to the person beside them. How, when someone stops—to check their phone, to inspect a vitrine—they reflexively do the same. They're searching for successful applicants.

Back in the days of Parisian statuomania, Robert Desnos wrote that if he were to make a statue in the memory of someone, it would have "no dedication, no name, no pedestal." This could describe the people attempting to petrify, whom The Met keeps anonymous—and it helps explain this new type of visitor, intent on figuring out whom they might be. In a museum devoted to cultures past, this visitor looks to the future, shifting focus from the walls and plinths to the people on display; drawing fine lines between sitting and *sitting*, stopping and *stopping*, standing and *standing*; reading the habits of spectatorship, like tea leaves, for signs of petrifications to come. They're seeking that decisive moment when, with the press of an invisible button, someone plays dead.

The Intern

She opens her diary and begins. *Fuck* her boss, who *somehow*—between running a department, planning exhibitions, and jurying the petrifications—has time to check if she's crossing her t's and dotting her i's … who always finds her mistakes.

Drowning is how she'd describe the start of her internship: a slow, drawn-out type of drowning. She's not the Type A personality that the Getty is used to hiring. And she can't keep apologizing for being an art student, who loves to make sculpture but doesn't do a particularly good job of researching it.

*

She begins a new entry with an apology, as too many days have passed. Work, the obvious excuse. The Bouchardon show for 2017. Cherubs, fauns—copies of copies of ancient sculptures. A game of telephone, poorly played: that's neoclassicism in a nutshell.

The one piece worth mentioning is a monument to Louis the Fifteenth, torn down during the French Revolution. Its afterlife interests her. The only surviving part, a fragment of the right hand, was given to a man made famous for serving long prison sentences—and for his many attempts to escape.

How quickly the tables can turn, she reflects. The hand of Louis signed his sentencing order; he came to own Louis's hand. And in a few years, it will be here, for all of LA to see.

*

She begins her entry on a positive note. The jury is coming up, so her boss has moved her from Bouchardon to the first round of application reviews. It's a poorly kept secret that this is how the process works: an intern, usually in the Sculpture & Decorative Arts department, slims a stack of sob stories down to a size that's manageable for the jury.

Her desk mate apologizes "on the Getty's behalf." This grueling, depressing task is made for a social worker, not people engaged in "serious cultural pursuits." There's no mistaking the air of elitism, which confirms what she suspected: the petrification program is the only interesting thing about this place.

*

She begins her entry with an applicant who caught her eye: an art historian, fresh from a postdoc, with an odd take. "To understand the art of sculpture," they write, "one must become like a sculpture. This approach, akin to method acting, is without precedent in the field."

A bit try-hard, if she's being honest. Perhaps something else is at play. Could petrification be preferable to getting on the academic market? Is the art historian wagering that, if they petrify and reanimate, their job prospects will improve?

Applicants can specify a place where they want to transform. The art historian has chosen a bench at the Getty Villa near a sculpture called *Poet as Orpheus with Two Sirens*. She likes the way they write about it, the power they believe it holds: the poet in the center, the Sirens perched in song. Unlike Odysseus, the art historian plans to sit with body unbound; unlike his crew, with open ears. They want to be lured.

*

She begins her entry at the end of a day of gallery hopping. There was a particular one in Boyle Heights that a friend wanted her to see. It's not a gallery in the conventional sense: nothing on view, nothing for sale, no exhibition schedule. Just a room in a warehouse and an invitation to pay what you can.

She read the piece of paper pinned to the wall—a list of terms and principles. *Anyone can petrify here. No one will be collected or labeled an artwork. People deserve access to spaces like this. Petrification is a human right.*

There were a handful of people in the room. She and her friend seemed to be the only "spectators"; everyone else was completely still but (as far as she could tell) in the realm of the living. A few sat on camping chairs, someone leaned on a folding stool. Mostly men in their twenties and thirties. They could be the art handlers hired to install work at a gallery like this, but when they arrived and found nothing to install, they installed themselves.

As with so much of what she encounters in the art world, there's a gap between theory and practice. A site designed for public use is filled with white art bros. An alternative space so obscure that it attracts only an inside crowd. For all the shortcomings of the Getty, The Met, and the other big-name museums, there's no denying that they have reach. Their applicants are diverse; she can find herself among them.

*

She begins her entry with a postscript. That space means well. It just needs to do some outreach. There are worse places in the world riding the petrification craze—preying on people who can't get into a museum program and are desperate enough to accept any terms. These "institutions" (if you could call them that) are built in rentable, person-sized plots. If you petrify, you still have to find a way to pay.

Her friend told her something, as they drove home. A logistics company is turning empty storage units and shipping containers into places where people can petrify. No rental costs, no hidden fees: it sounds too good to be true. The CEO is a Republican mega-donor, which gives pause. There's talk that this is his roundabout way of disenfranchising lib voters.

It sounds like a conspiracy. Her friend agreed. Petrification doesn't happen that easily: two people in five years—both at The Met. And even if it's true, there's no way it could work.

*

She begins her entry in disgust. During the final round of reviews, her boss threw a surprise application into the pot; a senior curator, on the verge of retirement, wants a chance to petrify. The art historian can't compete with this titan. He worked at the Getty for thirty years, and apparently, he can't live without it.

*

She half-begins her entry, winding up for a rant about art-world nepotism—then stopping short. Ungratefulness is *not* cute.

*

She begins her entry during her lunch break, tapping away on her phone in the doorway between two galleries. The retired curator sits nearby (as requested) before the Watteau painting he helped the Getty acquire. T. J. Clark used to spend his mornings here looking at two Poussins, which were perfect for contemplation. The Watteau is crass by comparison, its four comedians, at the end of their routine, staring at the viewer expectedly— *coins, please*. If this is where the curator petrifies, then the most he can hope for is a bit part in the canon: the comedian running late, who missed his chance to get painted in. She doesn't hate the idea.

*

She ends her entries with a story. On her last weekend in LA, she went back to that place in Boyle Heights. She brought a beach chair.

Some bros were in the room. Maybe they'd been there the last time; it wasn't easy to tell them apart. She opened the chair and sat down.

Once, at the Hamburger Bahnhof, she bumped into an

older woman strapped with shopping bags. She apologized to this person, who ended up being a sculpture by Duane Hanson.

If she petrifies on this beach chair, will other people make the same mistake?

She laughed at the thought of it, then waited for a *shush* that never came. The bros were focused on themselves.

She folded her chair and left.[1]

X

Thanks to Joanna Fiduccia, Elvia Wilk, and Siqi Zhu for feedback on drafts of this text. Part 2 appears in the April 2022 issue of *e-flux journal*.

Tyler Coburn is an artist, writer, and teacher based in New York.

1
This text includes content quoted or adapted from actual events, essays, and other sources. For "The Old Woman," see: Randy Kennedy, "Metropolitan Museum Completes Round of Layoffs," *New York Times* , June 22, 2009; and Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 16–32. For "The Would-Bes," see: Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* , trans. S. W. Taylor (1926; Exact Change, 1994); Simon Baker, "Surrealism in the Bronze Age: Statuephobia and the Efficacy of Metaphorical Iconoclasm," in *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms* , ed. Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay (Ashgate, 2007), 189–213; Marcel Sauvage, *La fin de Paris ou la révolte des statues* , trans. Tyler Coburn (1932; Editions Grasset, 1983); and Robert Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," trans. Simon Baker, *Papers of Surrealism* 7 (2007).

Anselm Berrigan, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.*

—Simone White

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Claire Meuschke— *Upend* (Noemi Press, 2020)
Akilah Oliver— *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 1999/2021)
Cliff Fyman— *Taxi Night* (Long News Books, 2021)

On "--oOo--" by Claire Meuschke

In her early twenties, poet Claire Meuschke and her brother discovered a transcription of an interrogation of their grandfather, conducted in 1912 at Angel Island off of San Francisco, a West Coast port of entry for immigrants to the United States. Meuschke kept a copy of the interview on her desk for a number of years, writing poems with it nearby and never intending to make a "project" out of them. She ended up with a body of work that goes together without trying to go together. The book changes forms, incorporates odd materials, and assembles itself through idiosyncrasy, developing an ethos out of finding a zone where elegance and mess combine to handle difficult histories, public and private. This poem is one of many titled "-- oOo --," which is a symbol from the transcript, some kind of 1912 typewritten piece of graphic. It includes the lines "circle around the head to bring out the / head-like qualities of the head / share air between here and the outer air." For me, that's enough to take the whole ride. But *Upend* also came out in the spring of 2020, and became my companion across the rest of that evil year. The book telegraphs nothing while working through layers of complex feeling and revelation. You have to read every word to get to know it.

***

-- oOo --

two bored and diligent angels crown a virgin
rolling her eyes

what's happening in your DNA
happened seven generations ago
and will happen seven generations after

in a bowl of water I watch
a dried mushroom enliven

circle around the head to bring out the
head-like qualities of the head
shared air between here and the outer air
like Buddha with an orb behind the head
in repose
personal paradise
I don't put anything on my head
planets don't follow me around when you look
happy to have a head

words are empty space
stars cut sight
words are the central figure
surrounded by space
stars cut sight

words represent themselves as well as
the cut around the circumference of their heads

in 1850 California
the state funded bullets for volunteer killers
the price for an Indian scalp
was at least 10 dollars

X

This poem excerpt appears by permission from *Upend* (Noemi Press, 2020), 46. Copyright © by Claire Meuschke.

Anselm Berrigan is a professional bum and/or vice-versa. His most recent book of poems is *Pregrets*, published in 2021 by Black Square Editions. It talks to you willingly but may not be easy to talk about.

David Buuck, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so. —Simone White*

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The Worker Writers School— *Coronavirus Haiku*, edited by Mark Nowak (Kenning Editions, 2021).

I taught excerpts at San Quentin's prison university program, still reeling with death and despair, and the "response" haiku students wrote were some of the most moving communiques of grief and anger I've ever read.

Tanya Lukin Linklater— *Slow Scrape* (DOCUMENTS 4, The Centre for Expanded Poetics and Anteism Books, 2020).

Closely attuned to the fraught histories of indigenous display in the colonial imagination, Linklater's cross-genre poems and "event scores" foreground the role of the audience/reader, eliciting modes of receptive listening beyond mere empathy.

Etel Adnan— *Time,* translated by Sarah Riggs (Nightboat Books, 2019)

On "No Sky" by Etel Adnan

I spent a lot of 2020–21 with the visual and literary work of Etel Adnan, who died in November at the age of 96, rereading everything of hers I could find in the process of completing a manuscript in correspondence with her exemplary practice. Living through the strange temporalities of 2020, from lockdown isolation to spontaneous collective unrest and riot, *Time* provided timely philosophical-poetical reflections on how "writing comes from a dialogue / with time." Her voice, her vision, her generosity; above all her ability to find wonderment in the world without ever turning a blind eye to injustice: she will be truly missed.

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From “No Sky”:

In the proximity of love,
dispersion,
refraction,
time no longer measures itself
against the body…
there is blood
on certain roads
and the perverse friendship of
death

There is noise in our
hearts
an imperfect breathing
attached to ligaments:
dull pain in the
wrists
and the folds

Describe the body
if you can
and you will see how unlikely
your soul is
matter being our
sole possession

Like the half-light where
the Pacific sleeps,
its solitude is made of gray
forms it looks for its metaphors
in electronics, it only lives
in the pallor of signs

She, in the rose-colored song
of a bedroom, a deserted
love, and the lost time
of trees…

X

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David Buuck lives in Oakland, California. He is the co-founder and editor of *Tripwire*, a journal of poetics, and founder of BARGE, the Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics. Publications include *The Riotous Outside* (Commune Editions, 2018), *Noise in the Face of* (Roof Books, 2016), *SITE CITE CITY* (Futurepoem, 2015) and *An Army of Lovers*, co-written with Juliana Spahr (City Lights, 2013). Buuck teaches composition at Mills College, where is he chief steward of the adjuncts union (SEIU Local 1021), and at San Quentin's Prison University Program.

Laura Henriksen, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.*

—Simone White

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Mei-mei Berssenbrugge— *A Treatise on Stars* (New Directions, 2020)
Imane Boukaila— *Truth OMG* (Unrestricted Interest, 2021)
Akilah Oliver— *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 1999/2021)

On "she said, don't give up" by Akilah Oliver

In Oliver's poem, the emotional accumulation of each line instills resolve while avoiding comfort. I feel destabilized, in the stark meeting of starvation and joy, snow on distant mountains, bad men at the door. Oliver's meditation on resistance is profoundly disinterested in forlorn hope, actively disavowing progress, mocking utopian happy futures. Against these false roads, she offers "the ability to live in faith," a practical metaphysics, a poetics of necessity alchemized in a kiss, dignified and erotic—traits of every Oliver poem. It reminds me of Simone Weil's lesson: "You could not be born at a better period than the present when we have lost everything." Lovingly reissued thanks to the work of Akilah's family and friends, Oliver sends a reminder of what matters, what death states forget, that words are more than talking, that she's planting collard greens.

***

she said, don't give up

pleasure to be here earthling in this time of seductive tears staining the ground of our planet. so much work to be done now. children demystifying broken homes. a new road travelled so many centuries before. lovely

the snow stuck to that mountain beyond the suburban roof. eat. the complexity is not so much that someone is starving at the instant we come into joy. but that we can come into joy while someone is starving. can my pleasure feed someone's emptied protruding belly. how did that mystic turn the water to wine. turn the words to bread. turn the bread to spirit. it is the revolutionary imperative of this age. to be alchemist. to play god in a script rewritten and divulged of unelected leaders. the bad men are knocking on the front door. we can't ignore them while we wait to collect on our historicized rape. palestinians are not getting all their land back. native american indians are not getting north america. colorado won't be new spain again. forget the 40 acres and a mule. paraphrase. jones turned baraka was right when as jones he said he is like any other sad man here. american. the queen is dead. the british royal family a tabloid anachronism. power won't yield to idealism. quests for beauty. we know that now.
we know their guns are bigger than ours. we have the same old dumb shit voodoo we've always had. faith sung in work lines. i believe in the dumbshit voodoo. i believe that faith will carry us through. i believe the earth loves to live. i believe that oprah will marry steadman and live happily ever after. i believe that the ability to live in faith is the backbone against repression. that resistance is worth more than collection on the debt owed. i believe that the forces of good will kiss evil on lips. it is simple moments like this that gives me the strength to stand in the unemployment line with dignity. bear the offhand bark of a chained pet. plot everyday subversive acts against the death state. to know that planting collard greens matters. that words are not frivolous. & freedom is more than just some people talking.

X

This poem appears by permission from *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 2021), 49. Copyright © 1999 by Akilah Oliver.

Laura Henriksen's first book, *Laura's Desires*, is forthcoming from Nightboat. She lives in Sunset Park, Lenapehoking and works at The Poetry Project.

Maryam Parhizkar, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so. —Simone White*

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Lara Mimosa Montes— *Thresholes* (Coffee House Press, 2020)
Lucia Estrada— *Katabasis*, translated by Olivia Lott (Eulalia Books, 2021)
Kevin Latimer— *Zoetrope* (Grieveland, 2020)

On Thresholes by Lara Mimosa Montes

In *Thresholes*, Lara Mimosa Montes writes: "Consciousness floated away. I could not catch up. / ○ / That's what makes it narrative." I am struck by this line, an articulation of what an account of the self can be after loss, losses, in a book that embodies a poetics of uncertainty. If the self has been punctured, seeking an impossible cohesion, what form can articulation take? One of studious gathering, punctuated, literally, by the gaps: accounts, citations, annotations on Bronx artists and their art, memories that cannot be fully written, observations of/from a changing body. Montes again: "Everything we need to live we carry inside; everything we need is already in us to write."

***

Today I spoke to S. not of the eagles, but of experience.

○

How can one speak of the present when one feels abandoned by it?

○

A paragraph is a time and place, not a syntactic unit.
(Lyn Hejinian)

○

I said what I needed was not love, but permission.

○

Carrot, cashew, turmeric;

○

In memory, it transforms.

○

We had arrived at the right street, wrong address.

○

Consciousness floated away. I could not catch up.

○

That's what makes it narrative.

○

It's not that I was breathed into. It was that *I lived*.

○

What we once were, I should never have devalued it.

○

○

○

When does one acquire a language?

○

Is it through repetition, bombardment, or experience?

○

Whether or not introduces a condition and its opposite.

○

When I think of the Bronx, I think of language coming apart, always before me, threshing;
Undone.

○

Insofar as I was aimless, "I" was
stranded between two sentences.

○

It was as if I had been scored somewhere below the surface

○

And subject to the order in which things reveal themselves;

○

Despite the style of their movements, their English a chorus.

○

"Let the energy do its work." I am trying to listen

○

To a particular kind of music to confirm that I am.

○

And then we exchanged particles. Electrons leapt.

○

Deconstructing the present is and is not an addiction.

○

Without enough sun, the leaves on the lime tree curl.

○

We don't have to come back. We don't have to know who we are.

○

We don't have to see ourselves reflected in the orb.

○

And if I cannot inhabit an idealess world?

○

I can absent myself from the weblike forms;

○

○

○

After I returned, I saw the plants had grown

○

[justify]When I say I had this sensation of S. welding the parts, I am trying to communicate that in me, and in us, something was becoming fused where it had once been torn. When heat was applied along the body's fault lines, plates that were broken began to realign and the beautiful blueness of the world broke through. And S. would remark, "We went somewhere we never went before."

○

In my arms, the amplification.

○

The fossil self. Its derivatives.

○

To have delivered to you in person that tiger balm.

○

Months had passed. I could think of nothing but love.

○

Months had passed. I could think of nothing but loss.

○

Everything we need to live we carry inside; everything we need is already in us to write.

○

So I saw my cruelty as if from the outside, and thought of the photographer Dora Maar.

○

But remember—whatever the technique, it must serve the form as a whole (Maya Deren)

○

○

○

This excerpt appears by permission from *Thresholes* (Coffee House Press, 2022), 67–72. Copyright © by Lara Mimosa Montes.

Maryam Ivette Parhizkar's most recent chapbook is *Somewhere Else the Sun is Falling into Someone's Eyes* (Belladonna*, 2019). She is a poet, scholar, graduate student worker, and member of the US Central American collective Tierra Narrative.

Danny Snelson, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write 100 words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.*

—Simone White

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Remedy Entertainment— *Control: Ultimate Edition* (505 Games, 2020)
Holly Melgard— *Fetal Position* (Roof Books, 2021)
Madison McCartha— *FREAKOPHONE WORLD* (Inside the Castle, 2021)

On "The Hiss" by Alan Wake

Over the past two years, I've heard no single poem with more frequency than "The Hiss." It's a cut-up earworm chant, an incantation written by the fictional character Alan Wake, himself a stand-in for Creative Director Sam Lake. The poem invades the Federal Bureau of Control in the AAA game *Control*. Pure pandemic media, the poem transmits via viral infection. "The Hiss" whispers and rants in sibilants from possessed workers, uncannily floating above their desks like zombified Richard Longo cosplayers. Stuck, stuttering, suspended in the air: they endlessly repeat its nonsense refrains over and over and over and ...

X

Danny Snelson is a writer, editor, and archivist working as an Assistant Professor in the Departments of English and Design Media Art at UCLA. His online editorial work can be found on *PennSound*, *Eclipse*, *UbuWeb*, *Jacket2,* and the *EPC*. His books include *Apocalypse Reliquary: 1984-2000*(Monoskop, 2018), *Radios* (Make Now, 2016), *EXE TXT* (Gauss PDF, 2015), *Epic Lyric Poem* (Troll Thread, 2014), and *Inventory Arousal* with James Hoff (Bedford Press/Architectural Association, 2011). With

Mashinka Firunts Hakopian and Avi Alpert, he performs as one-third of the academic performance group Research Service. See also: **http://dss-edit.com** .

Rachael Guynn Wilson, Three Books and a Poem

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define "poetry book" as broadly as possible. Define "stand out" not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it—a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal *has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.*

—Simone White

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Rosmarie Waldrop— *The Nick of Time* (New Directions, 2021)
Tomiko and Ryokuyo Matsumoto— *By the Shore of Lake Michigan*, edited Nancy Matsumoto, translated by Mariko Aratani and Kyoko Miyabe (UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, Summer 2022)
Ra'ad Abdulqadir— *Except for this Unseen Thread,* translated by Mona Kareem (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021)

On "Velocity But No Location" by Rosmarie Waldrop

What is most complete is the fragment. Pregnant of itself. A sentence should have a little surfeit, or sweetness, like the train that pulls in just past the station platform. Or, the sentence should stop short, arrive haltingly, in discrete bounds, the way Atalanta traverses the Dichotomy. For a poet to write a life, she must first write half a life, then half a half a life, and so on, ad infinitum. The modern solution to this ancient paradox is velocity. The poet has written poems containing more than seems possible. We may apprehend them in an instantaneous leap, but we will never reach their end

—Rachel Guynn Wilson

2

With transcendent assertiveness our concept of spirit poses, denying its tie to reference standards in the brain and its frailty. But where should we point to show the mind is in pain? Assertive mess. Can we compare

it to pushing the blanket down to our navel? a summer day? phenomenal cleavage? How ghostly the past, daring us to break its barrier. Yet insists that nothing we do is without connection to our embryonic development. Would a small vagina be a sign of refinement, like having no appetite? Or more like red pants seen across the expanse of the Rhine?

11

I may not be sure of the meaning of a word but I don't doubt it has one. The way I seem to see the ground with my feet, even the uneven ground in the garden, even when it's too dark to point a finger at the trees, every one of which will outlive me. The way I am sure of my body, but don't trust my feel for its edges enough to relieve myself like a man, standing, legs spread above the waterfall. Instead just fight against sleep, lack of stamina, the storm, such bitter cold, my fingers numb with. All the while trying to catch up with the words that outrun my understanding, let alone salt on their tail.

12

A thought is a tremendous excitement. Like a stone thrown into a pond it disturbs the whole of our double nature, bass, reed, breasted, boiler, *gänger*, entry folded over understudy doubling the cape of good dope. Even though each nerve fiber carries only one sort of signal and has to act together with others. The word *together*, however, and the little word *and* are nests of ambiguity. This is why you look for a device to measure how far we're out of each other's depth. Or bed. Intimate brace of nerve cells not all alike, immense number of words in infinite combinations.

13

for Denise Riley

There is pleasure in composition, in grasping the connection of the one and the many. The way we gradually discover how the dancer's movements are anchored in, and anchor, the axis she spins around, the way the backbone is held up by the muscles acting in concert; or our sense of self, by the mirror. Without it we are forced into constant activity to make up for the lacking image. Like the squid or dogfish, being heavier than water, must swim continually throughout their lives. Desperate activity, I say, and often fruitless, all brains incessantly active, down into our dreams, leaves off the fever tree, electric.

14

It's difficult to realize the groundlessness of our beliefs, but my style is fragmentary in any case, and my life as perplexed as my writing. Wrong connection, conniption, conclusion, shirt inside out, buttoned wrong, short breath. Rain comes, and mist clots about the trees. I shoulder the wrong assumptions, say "I know" the way we'd say "I am in pain" and don't question evidence or self. But then, clear conscious discrimination is an accident between the vapors of the mind and the opaque body, the cracking of knuckles, biting of fingernails. Still, I believe that all mammals, apart from the duckbilled platypus and the porcupine anteater, give birth to live young, and the females nurse them.

X

This excerpt appears by permission of Rosmarie Waldrop. From "Velocity But No Location" in *The Nick of Time* (New Directions, 2021), 23, 27–28. Copyright © by Rosmarie Waldrop.

Rachael Guynn Wilson's critical and poetic work has appeared in *apricota* (Secretary Press), *The Brooklyn Rail, Chicago Review, The Distance Plan, Hyperallergic, Jacket2, Kenyon Review, Matters of Feminist Practice* (Belladonna*), *Ritual and Capital* (Bard + Wendy's Subway), and elsewhere. She is a co-founder of the Organism for Poetic Research, a member of Belladonna* Collaborative, Managing Editor at Litmus Press, and teaches at the School of Visual Arts.