



e-flux journal

issue #75

09/2016

e-flux Journal is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

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pg. 1

Editorial

pg. 3 Donna Haraway

Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene

pg. 19 Matteo Pasquinelli

Abnormal Encephalization in the Age of Machine Learning

pg. 30 Antonia Majaca

Little Daniel Before the Law: Algorithmic Extimacy and the Rise of the Paranoid Apparatus

pg. 42 Mari Bastashevski

The Perfect Con

pg. 57 Ahmet Öğüt

Obscure Sorrows: Thoughts around the 9th Berlin Biennale

pg. 67 Ariel Goldberg

Simplicity Craving

pg. 77 Geert Lovink

On the Social Media Ideology

pg. 87 James T. Hong

The Suspicious Archive, Part I: A Prejudiced Interpretation of the Interpretation of Archives

Editorial

Businesspeople talk about art like artists talk about money: gratuitously, without compensation. Hiring to talk about money, an entrepreneur will speak in terms of art. Put an artist on a panel and you will often get disquisitions on exchange, capital, and commerce. Both constituencies are compelled by what lies outside their professional responsibility, and the response to this compulsion vibrates between veneration and contempt. For every *Übermensch* crypto-expressionist billionaire patron, there is one who sneers at the foolish valuelessness of art history and its scribes. For every dedicated anticapitalist artist, there is one who happily understands themselves to be making money. This tension is inherent in professional life, which promises to transform our spontaneous, effortless attractions into a pleasant but endless labor of necessity. For the money-professional, art presents like money does for the art-professional: an opportunity to misrecognize diligence as transcendence. In "The Perfect Con," Mari Bastashevski encounters the limits of this mutual misrecognition during a residency on a container ship. What is the fate of (the critique of) institutional critique in the age of the containerization of art? What still holds water?

In a similar key but an opposite location, Ahmet Oğüt, in "Obscure Sorrows: Thoughts around the 9th Berlin Biennale," writes about the danger of utilizing sarcasm as a tool for institutionalization. This is not because it escapes the desire for transcendence, but, on the contrary, because it keeps it alive as a perpetual source of what Oğüt calls "anticipointment." Nihilism remains religious by sustaining the idea of something like God in order to perpetually rediscover its deficiencies. Those who fancy themselves escaping the indignities of belief by taking refuge in cynicism are the most mistaken. It is because the Big One does not exist that the cynic must constantly reinvent Him to give their position legibility and significance. The question of what is true and what isn't, separate from what others may believe about old ideas, lies beyond the capacity of nihilism to ask in a meaningful way.

There is a similar incapacity at work in the rapidly blossoming religion of machines. One can't walk down the street these days without bumping into someone's fantasy of artificial intelligence. And some of these are really scary! It's important to notice what is being wished away or covered over in these metacognitive larks. In "Abnormal Encephalization in the Age of Machine Learning," Matteo Pasquinelli offers an intellectual anthropology of computational animism, linking the current crop of mind-theories to their metaphysical lineages and the long-standing desire to naturalize capital. Antonia Majaca, in "Little Daniel Before the Law: Algorithmic Extimacy and the Rise of the Paranoid Apparatus," traces this reduction of the real to the rational by examining one very famous episode of psychosis and the psychiatry that would master and explain it. While the incomparable Donna Haraway proposes deposing the anthropos from the center of our

cosmos not because the Anthropocene is morally wrong, but because it is inaccurate, especially when compared to her concept of the Chthulucene.

There has been a shift in the status of critique from an ethical or a teleological enterprise to a means of error-checking and machine optimization. And this at the expense of articulating any concrete political project that would move the machine in any particular direction. It is like having somebody constantly take the bicycle apart, when what you need is to get going. The danger lies in either bemoaning this as a fall from grace or simply celebrating its apparent failure in a practice of subversive affirmation. Geert Lovink and James T. Hong both show how the traditions of ideology critique and hermeneutics can help unlock the contemporary problems posed by the internet. Ariel Goldberg, in "Simplicity Craving," refuses to rest content with the received understanding of queerness in poetry. Critical approaches in art run out of steam when they turn into tropes which lack propositions. How do you voice something when the words you were taught have lost their meaning?

X

Donna Haraway

Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene

We are all lichens.

—Scott Gilbert, “We Are All Lichens Now”¹

Think we must. We must think.

—Stengers and Despret, *Women Who Make a Fuss*²

What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with. Biological sciences have been especially potent in fermenting notions about all the mortal inhabitants of the Earth since the imperializing eighteenth century. *Homo sapiens*—the Human as species, the Anthropos as the human species, Modern Man—was a chief product of these knowledge practices. What happens when the best biologies of the twenty-first century cannot do their job with bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledges, if they ever did? What happens when organisms plus environments can hardly be remembered for the same reasons that even Western-indebted people can no longer figure themselves as individuals and societies of individuals in human-only histories? Surely such a transformative time on Earth must not be named the Anthropocene!

With all the unfaithful offspring of the sky gods, with my littermates who find a rich wallow in multispecies muddles, I want to make a critical and joyful fuss about these matters. I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking.

My first demon familiar in this task will be a spider, *Pimocthulhu*, who lives under stumps in the redwood forests of Sonoma and Mendocino Counties, near where I live in North Central California.³ Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.⁴ This spider is in place, has a place, and yet is named for intriguing travels elsewhere. This spider will help me with returns, and with roots and routes.⁵ The eight-legged tentacular arachnid that I appeal to gets her generic name from the language of the Goshute people of Utah and her specific name from denizens of the depths, from the abyssal and elemental entities, called chthonic.⁶ The chthonic powers of Terra infuse its tissues everywhere, despite the civilizing efforts of the agents of sky gods to astralize them and set up chief Singletons and their tame

committees of multiples or subgods, the One and the Many. Making a small change in the biologist's taxonomic spelling, from cthulhu to chthulu, with renamed *Pimoid chthulu* I propose a name for an elsewhere and elsewhere that was, still is, and might yet be: the Chthulucene. I remember that *tentacle* comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning "feeler," and *tentare*, meaning "to feel" and "to try"; and I know that my leggy spider has many-armed allies. Myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene.⁷

The tentacular are not disembodied figures; they are cnidarians, spiders, finery beings like humans and raccoons, squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas, fibrous entities, flagellated beings, myofibril braids, matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots, reaching and climbing tendrilled ones. The tentacular are also nets and networks, it critters, in and out of clouds. Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres. "The inhabitants of the world, creatures of all kinds, human and non-human, are wayfarers"; generations are like "a series of interlaced trails."⁸

All the tentacular stringy ones have made me unhappy with posthumanism, even as I am nourished by much generative work done under that sign. My partner Rusten Hogness suggested compost instead of posthuman(ism), as well as humusities instead of humanities, and I jumped into that wormy pile.⁹ Human as humus has potential, if we could chop and shred human as Homo, the detumescing project of a self-making and planet-destroying CEO. Imagine a conference not on the Future of the Humanities in the Capitalist Restructuring University, but instead on the Power of the Humusities for a Habitable Multispecies Muddle! Ecosexual artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle made a bumper sticker for me, for us, for SF: "Composting is so hot!"

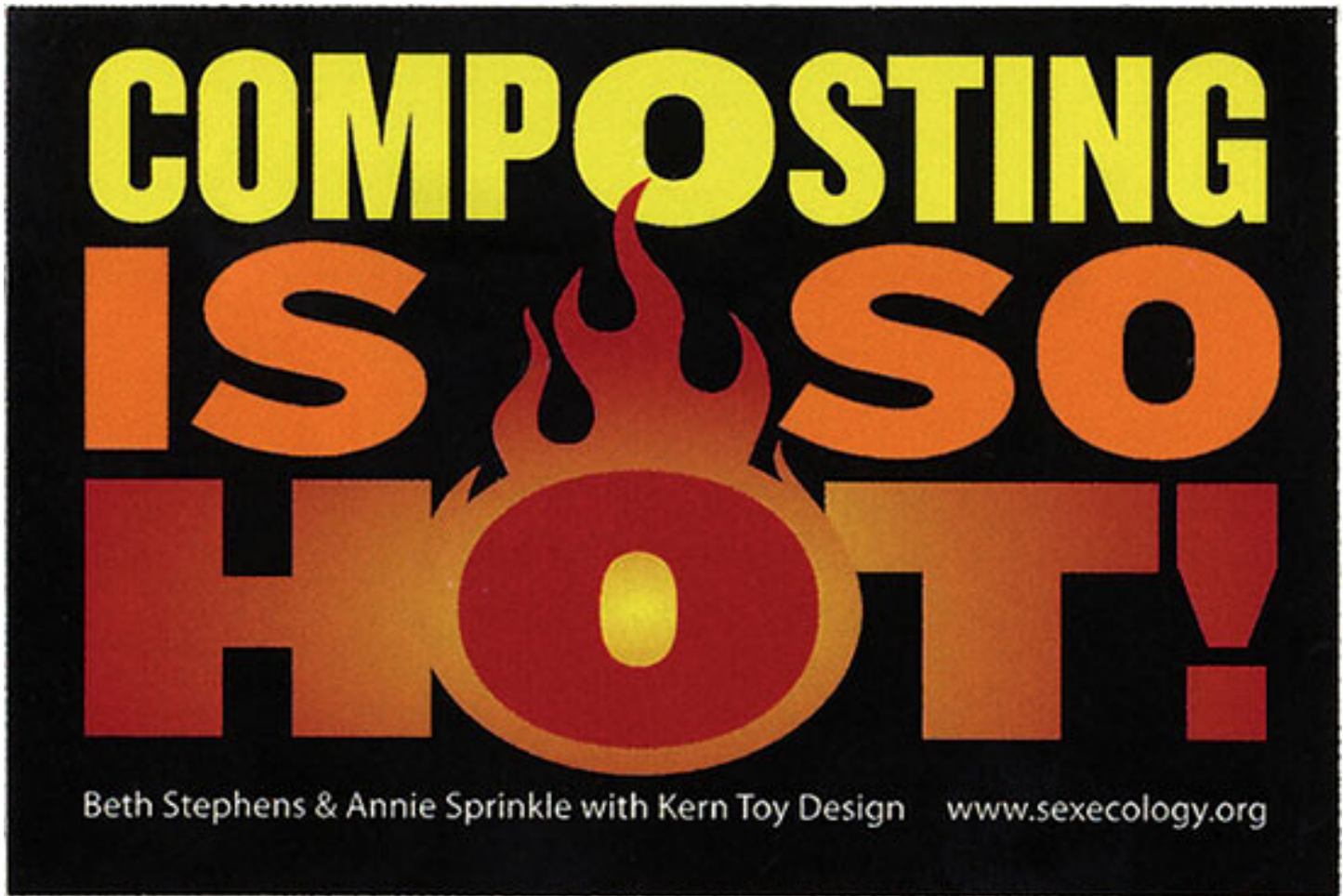
Shaping her thinking about the times called Anthropocene and "multi-faced Gaia" (Stengers's term) in companionable friction with Latour, Isabelle Stengers does not ask that we recompose ourselves to become able, perhaps, to "face Gaia." But like Latour and even more like Le Guin, one of her most generative SF writers, Stengers is adamant about changing the story. Focusing on intrusion rather than composition, Stengers calls Gaia a fearful and devastating power that intrudes on our categories of thought, that intrudes on thinking itself.¹⁰ Earth/Gaia is maker and destroyer, not resource to be exploited or ward to be protected or nursing mother promising nourishment. Gaia is not a person but complex systemic phenomena that compose a living planet. Gaia's intrusion into our affairs is a radically materialist event that collects up multitudes. This intrusion threatens not life on Earth itself—microbes will adapt, to put it mildly—but threatens the livability of Earth for vast kinds, species, assemblages, and individuals in an "event" already under way called the Sixth Great Extinction.¹¹

Stengers, like Bruno Latour, evokes the name of Gaia in the way James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis did, to name complex nonlinear couplings between processes that compose and sustain entwined but nonadditive subsystems as a partially cohering systemic whole.¹² In this hypothesis, Gaia is autopoietic—self-forming, boundary maintaining, contingent, dynamic, and stable under some conditions but not others. Gaia is not reducible to the sum of its parts, but achieves finite systemic coherence in the face of perturbations within parameters that are themselves responsive to dynamic systemic processes. Gaia does not and could not care about human or other biological beings' intentions or desires or needs, but Gaia puts into question our very existence, we who have provoked its brutal mutation that threatens both human and nonhuman livable presents and futures. Gaia is not about a list of questions waiting for rational policies;¹³ Gaia is an intrusive event that undoes thinking as usual. "She is what specifically questions the tales and refrains of modern history. There is only one real mystery at stake, here: it is the answer we, meaning those who belong to this history, may be able to create as we face the consequences of what we have provoked."¹⁴

Anthropocene

So, what have we provoked? Writing in the midst of California's historic multiyear drought and the explosive fire season of 2015, I need the photograph of a fire set deliberately in June 2009 by Sustainable Resource Alberta near the Saskatchewan River Crossing on the Icefields Parkway in order to stem the spread of mountain pine beetles, to create a fire barrier to future fires, and to enhance biodiversity. The hope is that this fire acts as an ally for resurgence. The devastating spread of the pine beetle across the North American West is a major chapter of climate change in the Anthropocene. So too are the predicted megadroughts and the extreme and extended fire seasons. Fire in the North American West has a complicated multispecies history; fire is an essential element for ongoing, as well as an agent of double death, the killing of ongoingness. The material semiotics of fire in our times are at stake.

Thus it is past time to turn directly to the time-space-global thing called Anthropocene.¹⁵ The term seems to have been coined in the early 1980s by University of Michigan ecologist Eugene Stoermer (d. 2012), an expert in freshwater diatoms. He introduced the term to refer to growing evidence for the transformative effects of human activities on the Earth. The name Anthropocene made a dramatic star appearance in globalizing discourses in 2000 when the Dutch Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen joined Stoermer to propose that human activities had been of such a kind and magnitude



A pro-composting bumper sticker designed by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stevens with Kern Toy Design.

as to merit the use of a new geological term for a new epoch, superseding the Holocene, which dated from the end of the last ice age, or the end of the Pleistocene, about twelve thousand years ago. Anthropogenic changes signaled by the mid-eighteenth-century steam engine and the planet-changing exploding use of coal were evident in the airs, waters, and rocks.¹⁶ Evidence was mounting that the acidification and warming of the oceans are rapidly decomposing coral reef ecosystems, resulting in huge ghostly white skeletons of bleached and dead or dying coral. That a symbiotic system—coral, with its watery world-making associations of cnidarians and zooanthellae with many other critters too—indicated such a global transformation will come back into our story.

But for now, notice that the Anthropocene obtained purchase in popular and scientific discourse in the context of ubiquitous urgent efforts to find ways of talking about, theorizing, modeling, and managing a Big Thing called Globalization. Climate-change modeling is a powerful positive feedback loop provoking change-of-state in systems of political and ecological discourses.¹⁷ That Paul Crutzen was both a Nobel laureate and an atmospheric chemist mattered. By 2008, many scientists around the

world had adopted the not-yet-official but increasingly indispensable term;¹⁸ and myriad research projects, performances, installations, and conferences in the arts, social sciences, and humanities found the term mandatory in their naming and thinking, not least for facing both accelerating extinctions across all biological taxa and also multispecies, including human, immiseration across the expanse of Terra. Fossil-burning human beings seem intent on making as many new fossils as possible as fast as possible. They will be read in the strata of the rocks on the land and under the waters by the geologists of the very near future, if not already. Perhaps, instead of the fiery forest, the icon for the Anthropocene should be Burning Man!¹⁹

The scale of burning ambitions of fossil-making man—of this Anthropos whose hot projects for accelerating extinctions merits a name for a geological epoch—is hard to comprehend. Leaving aside all the other accelerating extractions of minerals, plant and animal flesh, human homelands, and so on, surely, we want to say, the pace of development of renewable energy technologies and of political and technical carbon pollution-abatement measures, in the face of palpable and costly ecosystem

OCTOPI WALL STREET



Invertebrates are 97% of animal diversity!

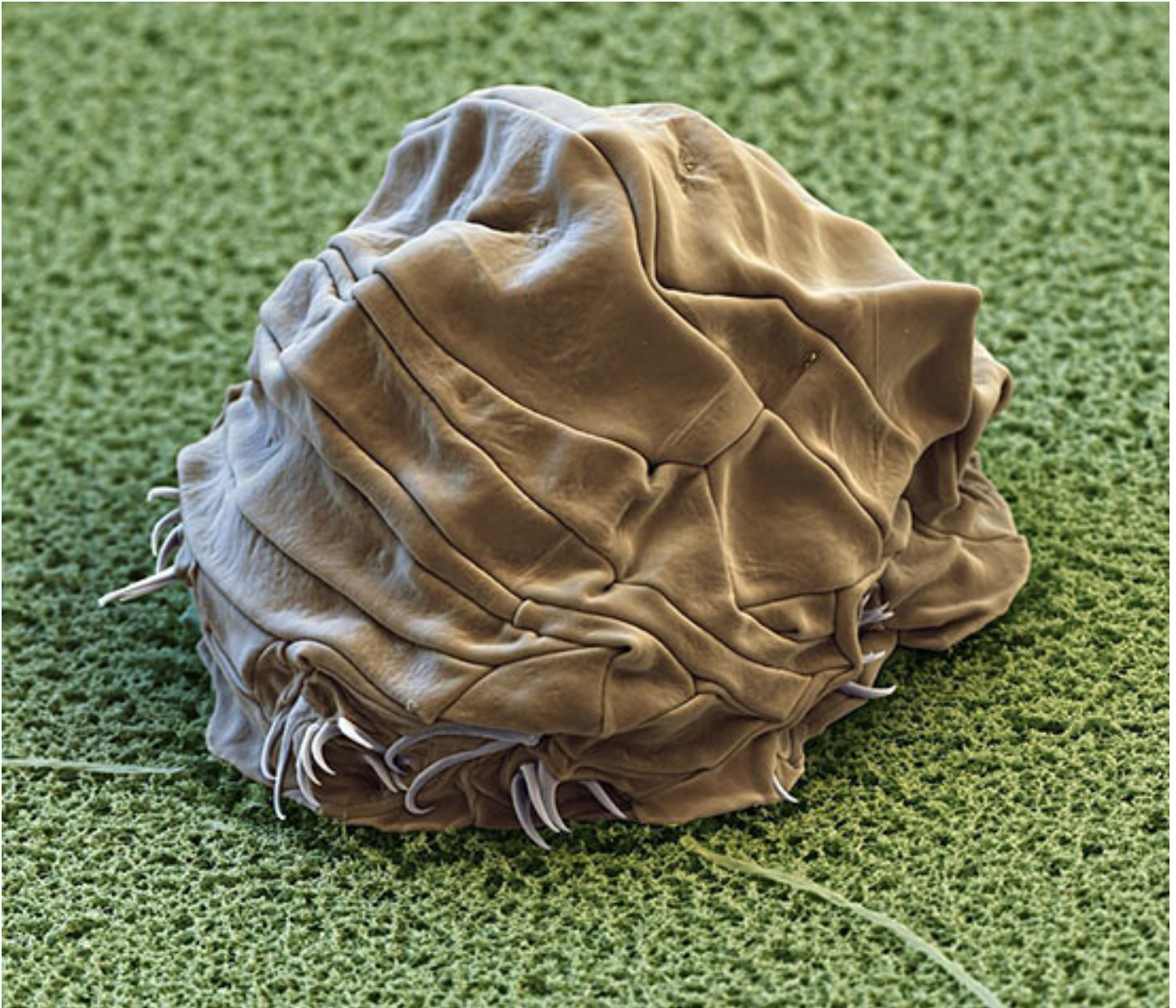
Brought to you by Oregon Institute of Marine Biology, University of Oregon

Humans are the entitled minority in the face of the sixth great extinction. Copyright: Oregon Institute of Marine Biology, University of Oregon

collapses and spreading political disorders, will mitigate, if not eliminate, the burden of planet-warming excess carbon from burning still more fossil fuels. Or, maybe the financial troubles of the global coal and oil industries by 2015 would stop the madness. Not so. Even casual acquaintance with the daily news erodes such hopes, but the trouble is worse than what even a close reader of IPCC documents and the press will find. In "The Third Carbon Age," Michael Klare, a professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College, lays out strong evidence against the idea that the old age of coal, replaced by the recent age of oil, will be replaced by the age of renewables.²⁰ He details the large and growing global national and corporate investments in renewables; clearly, there are big profit and power advantages to be had in this sector. And at the same time, every imaginable, and many unimaginable, technologies and strategic measures are being pursued by all the big global players to extract every last calorie of fossil carbon, at whatever

depth and in whatever formations of sand, mud, or rock, and with whatever horrors of travel to distribution and use points, to burn before someone else gets at that calorie and burns it first in the great prick story of the first and the last beautiful words and weapons.²¹ In what he calls the Age of Unconventional Oil and Gas, hydrofracking is the tip of the (melting) iceberg. Melting of the polar seas, terrible for polar bears and for coastal peoples, is very good for big competitive military, exploration, drilling, and tanker shipping across the northern passages. Who needs an ice-breaker when you can count on melting ice?²²

A complex systems engineer named Brad Werner addressed a session at the meetings of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco in 2012. His point was quite simple: scientifically speaking, global capitalism "has made the depletion of resources so rapid, convenient and barrier-free that 'earth-human systems' are becoming dangerously unstable in response." Therefore, he argued,



A tardigrade can withstand up to five years dehydrated making it one of the most resilient critters presently known.

the only scientific thing to do is revolt! Movements, not just individuals, are critical. What is required is action and thinking that do not fit within the dominant capitalist culture; and, said Werner, this is a matter not of opinion, but of geophysical dynamics. The reporter who covered this session summed up Werner's address: "He is saying that his research shows that our entire economic paradigm is a threat to ecological stability."²³ Werner is not the first or the last researcher and maker of matters of concern to argue this point, but his clarity at a scientific meeting is bracing. Revolt! Think we must; we must think. Actually think, not like Eichmann the Thoughtless. Of course, the devil is in the details—how to revolt? How to matter and not just want to matter?

Capitalocene

But at least one thing is crystal clear. No matter how much he might be caught in the generic masculine universal and how much he only looks up, the Anthropos did not do this fracking thing and he should not name this double-death-loving epoch. The Anthropos is not Burning Man after all. But because the word is already well entrenched and seems less controversial to many important players compared to the Capitalocene, I know that we will continue to need the term "Anthropocene." I will use it too, sparingly; what and whom the Anthropocene collects in its refurbished netbag might prove potent for living in the ruins and even for modest terran recuperation.



A depiction of invertebrates by German biologist Ernst Haeckel, published as lithographic and halftone prints in *Art Forms in Nature* (1899).

Still, if we could only have one word for these SF times, surely it must be the Capitalocene.²⁴

Species Man did not shape the conditions for the Third Carbon Age or the Nuclear Age. The story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again. Autopoietic, self-making man came down once again, this time in tragic system failure, turning biodiverse ecosystems into flipped-out deserts of slimy mats and stinging jellyfish. Neither did technological determinism produce the Third Carbon Age. Coal and the steam engine did not determine the story, and besides the dates are all wrong, not because one has to go back to the last ice age, but because one has to at least include the great market and commodity reworldings of the long sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the current era, even if we think (wrongly) that we can remain Euro-centered in thinking about “globalizing” transformations shaping the Capitalocene.²⁵ One must surely tell of the networks of sugar, precious metals, plantations, indigenous genocides, and slavery, with their labor innovations and relocations and recompositions of critters and things sweeping up both human and nonhuman workers of all kinds. The infectious industrial revolution of England mattered hugely, but it is only one player in planet-transforming, historically situated, new-enough, worlding relations. The relocation of peoples, plants, and animals; the leveling of vast forests; and the violent mining of metals preceded the steam engine; but that is not a warrant for wringing one’s hands about the perfidy of the Anthropos, or of Species Man, or of Man the Hunter.

The systemic stories of the linked metabolisms, articulations, or coproductions (pick your metaphor) of economies and ecologies, of histories and human and nonhuman critters, must be relentlessly opportunistic and contingent. They must also be relentlessly relational, sympoietic, and consequential.²⁶ They are terran, not cosmic or blisped or cursed into outer space. The Capitalocene is terran; it does not have to be the last biodiverse geological epoch that includes our species too. There are so many good stories yet to tell, so many netbags yet to string, and not just by human beings.

As a provocation, let me summarize my objections to the Anthropocene as a tool, story, or epoch to think with:

(1) The myth system associated with the Anthropos is a setup, and the stories end badly. More to the point, they end in double death; they are not about ongoingness. It is hard to tell a good story with such a bad actor. Bad actors need a story, but not the whole story.

(2) Species Man does not make history.

(3) Man plus Tool does not make history. That is the story of History human exceptionalists tell.

(4) That History must give way to geostories, to Gaia stories, to symchthonic stories; terrans do webbed, braided, and tentacular living and dying in sympoietic multispecies string figures; they do not do History.

(5) The human social apparatus of the Anthropocene tends to be top-heavy and bureaucracy prone. Revolt needs other forms of action and other stories for solace, inspiration, and effectiveness.

(6) Despite its reliance on agile computer modeling and autopoietic systems theories, the Anthropocene relies too much on what should be an “unthinkable” theory of relations, namely the old one of bounded utilitarian individualism—preexisting units in competition relations that take up all the air in the atmosphere (except, apparently, carbon dioxide).

(7) The sciences of the Anthropocene are too much contained within restrictive systems theories and within evolutionary theories called the Modern Synthesis, which for all their extraordinary importance have proven unable to think well about sympoiesis, symbiosis, symbiogenesis, development, webbed ecologies, and microbes. That’s a lot of trouble for adequate evolutionary theory.

(8) Anthropocene is a term most easily meaningful and usable by intellectuals in wealthy classes and regions; it is not an idiomatic term for climate, weather, land, care of country, or much else in great swathes of the world, especially but not only among indigenous peoples.

I am aligned with feminist environmentalist Eileen Crist when she writes against the managerial, technocratic, market-and-profit besotted, modernizing, and human-exceptionalist business-as-usual commitments of so much Anthropocene discourse. This discourse is not simply wrong-headed and wrong-hearted in itself; it also saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds, both those that exist precariously now (including those called wilderness, for all the contaminated history of that term in racist settler colonialism) and those we need to bring into being in alliance with other critters, for still possible recuperating pasts, presents, and futures. “Scarcity’s deepening persistence, and the suffering it is auguring for all life, is an artifact of human exceptionalism at every level.” Instead, a humanity with more earthly integrity “invites the *priority* of our pulling back and scaling down, of welcoming limitations of our numbers, economies, and habitats for the sake of a higher, more inclusive freedom and quality of life.”²⁷

If Humans live in History and the Earthbound take up their task within the Anthropocene, too many Posthumans (and posthumanists, another gathering altogether) seem to have emigrated to the Anthropocene for my taste. Perhaps

my human and nonhuman people are the dreadful Chthonic ones who snake within the tissues of Terrapolis.

Note that insofar as the Capitalocene is told in the idiom of fundamentalist Marxism, with all its trappings of Modernity, Progress, and History, that term is subject to the same or fiercer criticisms. The stories of both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene teeter constantly on the brink of becoming much Too Big. Marx did better than that, as did Darwin. We can inherit their bravery and capacity to tell big-enough stories without determinism, teleology, and plan.²⁸

Historically situated relational worldings make a mockery both of the binary division of nature and society and of our enslavement to Progress and its evil twin, Modernization. The Capitalocene was relationally made, and not by a secular godlike anthropos, a law of history, the machine itself, or a demon called Modernity. The Capitalocene must be relationally unmade in order to compose in material-semiotic SF patterns and stories something more livable, something Ursula K. Le Guin could be proud of. Shocked anew by our—billions of Earth habitants', including your and my—ongoing daily assent in practice to this thing called capitalism, Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers note that denunciation has been singularly ineffective, or capitalism would have long ago vanished from the Earth. A dark bewitched commitment to the lure of Progress (and its polar opposite) lashes us to endless infernal alternatives, as if we had no other ways to reworld, reimagine, relive, and reconnect with each other, in multispecies well-being. This explication does not excuse us from doing many important things better; quite the opposite. Pignarre and Stengers affirm on-the-ground collectives capable of inventing new practices of imagination, resistance, revolt, repair, and mourning, and of living and dying well. They remind us that the established disorder is not necessary; another world is not only urgently needed, it is possible, but not if we are ensorcelled in despair, cynicism, or optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress.²⁹ Many Marxist critical and cultural theorists, at their best, would agree.³⁰ So would the tentacular ones.³¹

Chthulucene

Reaching back to generative complex systems approaches by Lovelock and Margulis, Gaia figures the Anthropocene for many contemporary Western thinkers. But an unfurling Gaia is better situated in the Chthulucene, an ongoing temporality that resists figuration and dating and demands myriad names. Arising from Chaos,³² Gaia was and is a powerful intrusive force, in no one's pocket, no one's hope for salvation, capable of provoking the late twentieth century's best autopoietic complex systems thinking that led to recognizing the devastation caused by anthropogenic processes of the last few centuries, a necessary counter to the Euclidean figures and stories of Man.³³ Brazilian anthropologists and philosophers

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski exorcise lingering notions that Gaia is confined to the ancient Greeks and subsequent Eurocultures in their refiguring the urgencies of our times in the post-Eurocentric conference "The Thousand Names of Gaia."³⁴ Names, not faces, not morphs of the same, something else, a thousand somethings else, still telling of linked ongoing generative and destructive worlding and reworlding in this age of the Earth. We need another figure, a thousand names of something else, to erupt out of the Anthropocene into another, big-enough story. Bitten in a California redwood forest by spidery *Pimosa chthulhu*, I want to propose snaky Medusa and the many unfinished worldings of her antecedents, affiliates, and descendants. Perhaps Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, can bring us into the holobiomes of Terrapolis and heighten our chances for dashing the twenty-first-century ships of the Heroes on a living coral reef instead of allowing them to suck the last drop of fossil flesh out of dead rock.

The terra-cotta figure of Potnia Theron, the Mistress of the Animals, depicts a winged goddess wearing a split skirt and touching a bird with each hand.³⁵ She is a vivid reminder of the breadth, width, and temporal reach into pasts and futures of chthonic powers in Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds and beyond.³⁶ Potnia Theron is rooted in Minoan and then Mycenaean cultures and infuses Greek stories of the Gorgons (especially the only mortal Gorgon, Medusa) and of Artemis. A kind of far-traveling Ur-Medusa, the Lady of the Beasts is a potent link between Crete and India. The winged figure is also called Potnia Melissa, Mistress of the Bees, draped with all their buzzing-stinging-honeyed gifts. Note the acoustic, tactile, and gustatory senses elicited by the Mistress and her sympoietic, more-than-human flesh. The snakes and bees are more like stinging tentacular feelers than like binocular eyes, although these critters see too, in compound-eyed insectile and many-armed optics.

In many incarnations around the world, the winged bee goddesses are very old, and they are much needed now.³⁷ Potnia Theron/Melissa's snaky locks and Gorgon face tangle her with a diverse kinship of chthonic earthly forces that travel richly in space and time. The Greek word *Gorgon* translates as dreadful, but perhaps that is an astralized, patriarchal hearing of much more awful stories and enactments of generation, destruction, and tenacious, ongoing terran finitude. Potnia Theron/Melissa/Medusa give faciality a profound makeover, and that is a blow to modern humanist (including technohumanist) figurations of the forward-looking, sky-gazing Anthropos. Recall that the Greek *chthonios* means "of, in, or under the Earth and the seas"—a rich terran muddle for SF, science fact, science fiction, speculative feminism, and speculative fabulation. The chthonic ones are precisely not sky gods, not a foundation for the Olympiad, not friends to the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, and definitely not finished. The Earthbound can take heart—as well as action.



This squishy octopus-shaped machine is one example from the growing field of soft robotics. The Octobot described today is the first self-contained robot made exclusively of soft, flexible parts.



Tunga, From the series Vanguarda Viperina, 1985. Black and white photograph.

The Gorgons are powerful winged chthonic entities without a proper genealogy; their reach is lateral and tentacular; they have no settled lineage and no reliable kind (genre, gender), although they are figured and storied as female. In old versions, the Gorgons twine with the Erinyes (Furies), chthonic underworld powers who avenge crimes against the natural order. In the winged domains, the bird-bodied Harpies carry out these vital functions.³⁸ Now, look again at the birds of Potnia Theron and ask what they do. Are the Harpies their cousins? Around 700 BCE Hesiod imagined the Gorgons as sea demons and gave them sea deities for parents. I read Hesiod's *Theogony* as laboring to stabilize a very bumptious queer family. The Gorgons erupt more than emerge; they are intrusive in a sense akin to what Stengers understands by Gaia.

The Gorgons turned men who looked into their living, venomous, snake-encrusted faces into stone. I wonder what might have happened if those men had known how to politely greet the dreadful chthonic ones. I wonder if such manners can still be learned, if there is time to learn now, or if the stratigraphy of the rocks will only register the ends and end of a stony Anthropos.³⁹

Because the deities of the Olympiad identified her as a particularly dangerous enemy to the sky gods' succession and authority, mortal Medusa is especially interesting for my efforts to propose the Chthulucene as one of the big-enough stories in the netbag for staying with the trouble of our ongoing epoch. I resignify and twist the stories, but no more than the Greeks themselves constantly did.⁴⁰ The hero Perseus was dispatched to kill Medusa; and with the help of Athena, head-born favorite daughter of Zeus, he cut off the Gorgon's head and gave it to his accomplice, this virgin goddess of wisdom and war. Putting Medusa's severed head face-forward on her shield, the Aegis, Athena, as usual, played traitor to the Earthbound; we expect no better from motherless mind children. But great good came of this murder-for-hire, for from Medusa's dead body came the winged horse Pegasus. Feminists have a special friendship with horses. Who says these stories do not still move us materially?⁴¹ And from the blood dripping from Medusa's severed head came the rocky corals of the western seas, remembered today in the taxonomic names of the Gorgonians, the coral-like sea fans and sea whips, composed in symbioses of tentacular animal cnidarians and photosynthetic algal-like beings called zooanthellae.⁴²

With the corals, we turn definitively away from heady facial representations, no matter how snaky. Even Potnia Theron, Potnia Melissa, and Medusa cannot alone spin out the needed tentacularities. In the tasks of thinking, figuring, and storytelling, the spider of my first pages, *Pimoida chthulhu*, allies with the decidedly nonvertebrate critters of the seas. Corals align with octopuses, squids, and cuttlefish. Octopuses are called spiders of the seas, not only for their tentacularity, but also for their predatory

habits. The tentacular chthonic ones have to eat; they are at table, *cum panis*, companion species of terra. They are good figures for the luring, beckoning, gorgeous, finite, dangerous precarities of the Chthulucene. This Chthulucene is neither sacred nor secular; this earthly worlding is thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal—and at stake now.

Mobile, many-armed predators, pulsating through and over the coral reefs, octopuses are called spiders of the sea. And so *Pimoida chthulhu* and *Octopus cyanea* meet in the webbed tales of the Chthulucene.⁴³

All of these stories are a lure to proposing the Chthulucene as a needed third story, a third netbag for collecting up what is crucial for ongoing, for staying with the trouble.⁴⁴ The chthonic ones are not confined to a vanished past. They are a buzzing, stinging, sucking swarm now, and human beings are not in a separate compost pile. We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman. As a suffix, the word *kainos*, “-cene,” signals new, recently made, fresh epochs of the thick present. To renew the biodiverse powers of terra is the sympoietic work and play of the Chthulucene. Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet. We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the Earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this Earth are the main story.

However, the doings of situated, actual human beings matter. It matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others. It matters not just to human beings, but also to those many critters across taxa which and whom we have subjected to exterminations, extinctions, genocides, and prospects of futurelessness. Like it or not, we are in the string figure game of caring for and with precarious worldings made terribly more precarious by fossil-burning man making new fossils as rapidly as possible in orgies of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. Diverse human and nonhuman players are necessary in every fiber of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story. The chief actors are not restricted to the too-big players in the too-big stories of Capitalism and the Anthropos, both of which invite odd apocalyptic panics and even odder disengaged denunciations rather than attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care.

Both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the “game

over, too late" discourse I hear all around me these days, in both expert and popular discourses, in which both technothocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination. Encountering the sheer not-us, more-than-human worlding of the coral reefs, with their requirements for ongoing living and dying of their myriad critters, is also to encounter the knowledge that at least 250 million human beings today depend directly on the ongoing integrity of these holobiomes for their own ongoing living and dying well. Diverse corals and diverse people and peoples are at stake to and with each other. Flourishing will be cultivated as a multispecies response-ability without the arrogance of the sky gods and their minions, or else biodiverse terra will flip out into something very slimy, like any overstressed complex adaptive system at the end of its abilities to absorb insult after insult.

Corals helped bring the Earthbound into consciousness of the Anthropocene in the first place. From the start, uses of the term *Anthropocene* emphasized human-induced warming and acidification of the oceans from fossil-fuel-generated CO2 emissions. Warming and acidification are known stressors that sicken and bleach coral reefs, killing the photosynthesizing zooanthellae and so ultimately their cnidarian symbionts and all of the other critters belonging to myriad taxa whose worlding depends on intact reef systems. Corals of the seas and lichens of the land also bring us into consciousness of the Capitalocene, in which deep-sea mining and drilling in oceans and fracking and pipeline construction across delicate lichen-covered northern landscapes are fundamental to accelerating nationalist, transnationalist, and corporate unworlding.

But coral and lichen symbionts also bring us richly into the storied tissues of the thickly present Chthulucene, where it remains possible—just barely—to play a much better SF game, in nonarrogant collaboration with all those in the muddle. We are all lichens; so we can be scraped off the rocks by the Furies, who still erupt to avenge crimes against the Earth. Alternatively, we can join in the metabolic transformations between and among rocks and critters for living and dying well. "'Do you realize,' the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, 'that [once upon a time] they couldn't even read Eggplant?' And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike's Peak.'"45 Attending to these ongoing matters returns me to the question that began this text. What happens when human exceptionalism and the utilitarian individualism of classical political economics become unthinkable in the best sciences across the disciplines and interdisciplines? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with. Why is it that the epochal name of the Anthropos imposed itself at just the time when understandings and knowledge practices about and within symbiogenesis and

sympoietics are wildly and wonderfully available and generative in all the humusities, including noncolonizing arts, sciences, and politics? What if the doleful doings of the Anthropocene and the unworldings of the Capitalocene are the last gasps of the sky gods, not guarantors of the finished future, game over? It matters which thoughts think thoughts.

We must think!

The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.

X

This text is an edited extract from chapter 2, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Duke University Press, 2016. Copyright, 2016, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder. www.dukeupress.edu

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1
Scott Gilbert, "We Are All Lichens Now" <http://e-flux.com/journal>. See also Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals," *Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 87, no. 4 (December 2012): 325–41. Gilbert has erased the "now" from his rallying cry; we have always been symbionts—genetically, developmentally, anatomically, physiologically, neurologically, ecologically.

2
These sentences are on the rear cover of Isabelle Stengers and Vincine Despret, *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf*, trans. April Knutson (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014). From Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, "think we must" is the urgency relayed to feminist collective thinking-with in *Women Who Make a Fuss* through María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Penser nous devons: Politiques féministes et construction des saviors* (Paris: H armattan, 2013).

3
Gustavo Hormiga, "A Revision and Cladistic Analysis of the Spider Family Pimoidae (Araneae)," *Smithsonian Contributions to Zoology* 549 (1994): 1–104. See "Pimoidae," Wikipedia; "Hormiga Laboratory" <https://www.gwu.edu/~spiders/>.

4
The brand of holist ecological philosophy that emphasizes that 'everything is connected to everything,' will not help us here. Rather, everything is connected to something, which is connected to something else. While we may all ultimately be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matters—who we are bound up with and in what ways. Life and death happen inside these relationships. And so, we need to understand how particular human communities, as well as those of other living beings, are entangled, and how these entanglements are implicated in the production of both extinctions and their accompanying patterns of amplified death." Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 60.

5
Two indispensable books by my

colleague-sibling from thirty-plus years in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, guide my writing: James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

6
Chthonic" derives from ancient Greek *khthonios*, "of the earth," and from *khthōn*, "earth." Greek mythology depicts the chthonic as the underworld, beneath the Earth; but the chthonic ones are much older (and younger) than those Greeks. Sumeria is a riverine civilizational scene of emergence of great chthonic tales, including possibly the great circular snake eating its own tail, the polysemous Ouroboros (figure of the continuity of life, an Egyptian figure as early as 1600 BCE; Sumerian SF worlding dates to 3500 BCE or before). The chthonic will accrue many resonances throughout my text. See Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). In lectures, conversations, and e-mails, the scholar of ancient Middle Eastern worlds at UC Santa Cruz, Gildas Hamel, gave me "the abyssal and elemental forces before they were astralized by chief gods and their tame committees" (personal communication, June 12, 2014). Cthulu (note spelling), luxuriating in the science fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, plays no role for me, although it/he did play a role for Gustavo Hormiga, the scientist who named my spider demon familiar. For the monstrous male elder god (Cthulu), see Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulu*.

7
Eva Hayward proposes the term "tentacularity"; her trans-thinking and -doing in spidery and coralline worlds entwine with my writing in SF patterns. See Hayward, "Fingeryes: Impressions of Cup Corals," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2010): 577–99; Hayward, "SpiderCitySex," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2010): 225–51; and Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish: Aquarium Affects and the Matter of Immersion," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural*

Studies, vol. 23, no. 1 (2012): 161–96. See Eleanor Morgan, "Sticky Tales: Spiders, Silk, and Human Attachments," *Dandelion*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2011) <https://dandelionjournal.org/article/id/253/>. UK experimental artist Eleanor Morgan's spider silk art spins many threads resonating with this chapter, tuned to the interactions of animals (especially arachnids and sponges) and humans. See Morgan's website <https://eleanormorgan.com/About-1>.

8
Tim Ingold, *Lines, a Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 116–19.

9
The pile was made irresistible by María Puig de la Bellacasa, "Encountering Bioinfrastructure: Ecological Movements and the Sciences of Soil," *Social Epistemology* vol. 28, no. 1 (2014): 26–40.

10
Isabelle Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes: Résister à la barbarie qui vient* (Paris: Découverte), 2009. Gaia intrudes in this text from p. 48 on. Stengers discusses the "intrusion of Gaia" in numerous interviews, essays, and lectures. Discomfort with the ever more inescapable label of the Anthropocene, in and out of sciences, politics, and culture, pervades Stengers's thinking, as well as that of many other engaged writers, including Latour, even as we struggle for another word. See Stengers in conversation with Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, "Matters of Cosmopolitics: On the Provocations of Gaia," in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities, 2013), 171–82.

11
Scientists estimate that this extinction "event," the first to occur during the time of our species, could, as previous great extinction events have, but much more rapidly, eliminate 50 to 95 percent of existing biodiversity. Sober estimates anticipate half of existing species of birds could disappear by 2100. By any measure, that is a lot of double death. For a popular exposition, see Voices for Biodiversity, "The Sixth Great Extinction" <https://voicesforbiodiversity.org/articles/the-sixth-great-extinction>. For a report by an award-winning

science writer, see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). Reports from the Convention on Biological Diversity are more cautious about predictions and discuss the practical and theoretical difficulties of obtaining reliable knowledge, but they are not less sobering. For a disturbing report from summer 2015, see Geraldo Ceballos, Paul Ehrlich, Anthony Barnosky, Andres Garcia, Robert Pringle, and Todd Palmer, "Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction," *Science Advances* vol. 1, no. 5 (June 19, 2015).

12
Lovelock, "Gaia as Seen through the Atmosphere," *Atmospheric Environment*, vol. 6, no. 8 (1967): 579–80; Lovelock and Margulis, "Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere: The Gaia Hypothesis," *Tellus*, Series A (Stockholm: International Meteorological Institute) vol. 26, nos. 1–2 (February 1, 1974): 2–10 <http://tellusa.net/index.php/tellusa/article/view/9731>. For a video of a lecture to employees at the National Aeronautic and Space Agency in 1984, go to https://archive.org/details/gaia_hypothesis. Autopoiesis was crucial to Margulis's transformative theory of symbiogenesis, but I think if she were alive to take up the question, Margulis would often prefer the terminology and figural-conceptual powers of sympoiesis. I suggest that Gaia is a system mistaken for autopoietic that is really sympoietic. Gaia's story needs an intrusive makeover to knot with a host of other promising sympoietic tentacular ones for making rich compost, for going on. Gaia or Ge is much older and wilder than Hesiod (Greek poet around the time of Homer, circa 750 to 650 BCE), but Hesiod cleaned her/it up in the *Theogony* in his story-setting way: after Chaos, "wide-bosomed" Gaia (Earth) arose to be the everlasting seat of the immortals who possess Olympus above (*Theogony*, 116–18, trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library), and the depths of Tartarus below (*Theogony*, 119). The chthonic ones reply, Nonsense! Gaia is one of theirs, an ongoing tentacular threat to the astralized ones of the Olympiad, not their ground and foundation, with their ensuing generations of gods all arrayed in proper genealogies. Hesiod's is the old prick tale,

already setting up canons in the eighth century BCE.

13

Although I cannot help but think more rational environmental and social/natural policies of all sorts would help!

14

Isabelle Stengers, from English compilation on Gaia sent by e-mail January 14, 2014.

15

I use "thing" in two senses that rub against each other: (1) the collection of entities brought together in the Parliament of Things that Bruno Latour called our attention to, and (2) something hard to classify, unsortable, and probably with a bad smell. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

16

Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change Newsletter*, International Geosphere-Biosphere Program Newsletter, no. 41 (May 2000): 17–18 <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf>; Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (2002): 23; Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?" *GSA (Geophysical Society of America) Today* vol. 18, no. 2 (2008): 4–8. Much earlier dates for the emergence of the Anthropocene are sometimes proposed, but most scientists and environmentalists tend to emphasize global anthropogenic effects from the late eighteenth century on. A more profound human exceptionalism (the deepest divide of nature and culture) accompanies proposals of the earliest dates, coextensive with *Homo sapiens* on the planet hunting big now-extinct prey and then inventing agriculture and domestication of animals. A compelling case for dating the Anthropocene from the multiple "great accelerations," in Earth system indicators and in social change indicators, from about 1950 on, first marked by atmospheric nuclear bomb explosions, is made by Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig, "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review*, January 16, 2015. Zalasiewicz et al. argue that

adoption of the term "Anthropocene" as a geological epoch by the relevant national and international scientific bodies will turn on stratigraphic signatures. Perhaps, but the resonances of the Anthropocene are much more disseminated than that. One of my favorite art investigations of the stigma of the Anthropocene is Ryan Dewey's "Virtual Places: Core Logging the Anthropocene in Real-Time," in which he composes "core samples of the *ad hoc* geology of retail shelves."

17

For a powerful ethnographic encounter in the 1990s with climate-change modeling, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Natural Universals and the Global Scale," ch. 3 in *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 88–112, especially "Global Climate as a Model," 101–6. Tsing asks, "What makes global knowledge possible?" She replies, "Erasing collaborations." But Tsing does not stop with this historically situated critique. Instead she, like Latour and Stengers, takes us to the really important question: "Might it be possible to attend to nature's collaborative origins without losing the advantages of its global reach?" (95). "How might scholars take on the challenge of freeing critical imaginations from the specter of neoliberal conquest—singular, universal, global? Attention to the frictions of contingent articulation can help us describe the effectiveness, and the fragility, of emergent capitalist—and globalist—forms. In this shifting heterogeneity there are new sources of hope, and, of course, new nightmares" (77). At her first climate-modeling conference in 1995, Tsing had an epiphany: "*The global scale takes precedence—because it is the scale of the model*" (103, italics in original). But this and related properties have a particular effect: they bring negotiators to an international, heterogeneous table, maybe not heterogeneous enough, but far from full of identical units and players. "The embedding of smaller scales into the global; the enlargement of models to include everything; the policy-driven construction of the models: Together these features make it possible for the models to bring diplomats to the negotiating table" (105). That is not to be despised.

18

The Anthropocene Working Group, which was established in 2008 to report to the International Union of Geological Sciences and the International Commission on Stratigraphy on whether to name a new epoch in the geological timeline, aimed to issue its final report in 2016. See *Newsletter of the Anthropocene Working Group*, volume 4 (June 2013): 1–17 <https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Anthropocene-Working-Group-Newsletter-Vol-4-Final.pdf>; and volume 5 (September 2014): 1–19 <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Anthropocene-Working-Group-Newsletter-Vol-5.pdf>.

19

For a photogallery of fiery images of the Man burning at the end of the festival, see "Burning Man Festival 2012: A Celebration of Art, Music, and Fire," *New York Daily News*, September 3, 2012 <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/burning-man-festival-2012-celebration-art-music-fire-gallery-1.1150830>. Attended by tens of thousands of human people (and an unknown number of dogs), Burning Man is an annual week-long festival of art and (commercial) anarchism held in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada since 1990 and on San Francisco's Baker Beach from 1986 to 1990. The event's origins tie to San Francisco artists' celebrations of the summer solstice. "The event is described as an experiment in community, art, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance" ("Burning Man," *Wikipedia*). The globalizing extravaganzas of the Anthropocene are not the drug- and art-laced worlding of Burning Man, but the iconography of the immense fiery "Man" ignited during the festival is irresistible. The first burning effigies on the beach in San Francisco were of a nine-foot-tall wooden Man and a smaller wooden dog. By 1988 the Man was forty feet tall and dogless. Relocated to a dry lakebed in Nevada, the Man topped out in 2011 at 104 feet. This is America; supersized is the name of the game, a fitting habitat for the Anthropos.

20

See Klare, "The Third Carbon Age," *Huffington Post*, August 8, 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-t-klare/renewable-energy_b_3725777.html, in which he writes, "According to the International Energy Agency

(IEA), an inter-governmental research organization based in Paris, cumulative worldwide investment in new fossil-fuel extraction and processing will total an estimated \$22.87 trillion between 2012 and 2035, while investment in renewables, hydropower, and nuclear energy will amount to only \$7.32 trillion." Nuclear, after Fukushima! Not to mention that none of these calculations prioritize a much lighter, smaller, more modest human presence on Earth, with all its critters. Even in its "sustainability" discourses, the Capitalocene cannot tolerate a multispecies world of the Earthbound. For the switch in Big Energy's growth strategies to nations with the weakest environmental controls, see Klare, "What's Big Energy Smoking?" *Common Dreams*, May 27, 2014 <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/05/27/whats-big-energy-smoking>. See also Klare, *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources* (New York: Picador, 2012).

21

Heavy tar sand pollution must break the hearts and shatter the gills of every Terran, Gaian, and Earthbound critter. The toxic lakes of wastewater from tar sand oil extraction in northern Alberta, Canada, shape a kind of new Great Lakes region, with more giant "ponds" added daily. Current area covered by these lakes is about 50 percent greater than the area covered by the world city of Vancouver. Tar sands operations return almost none of the vast quantities of water they use to natural cycles. Earthbound peoples trying to establish growing things at the edges of these alarmingly colored waters filled with extraction tailings say that successional processes for reestablishing sympoietic biodiverse ecosystems, if they prove possible at all, will be an affair of decades and centuries. See Pembina Institute, "Alberta's Oil Sands" <http://web.archive.org/web/20160710014552/https://www.pembina.org/oil-sands>; and Bob Weber, "Rebuilding Land Destroyed by Oil Sands May Not Restore It," *Globe and Mail*, March 11, 2012 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/rebuilding-land-destroyed-by-oil-sands-may-not-restore-it-researchers-say/article552879/>. Only Venezuela and Saudi Arabia have more oil reserves than Alberta. All that said, the Earthbound, the

Terrans, do not cede either the present or the future; the sky is lowering, but has not yet fallen, yet. Pembina Institute, "Oil Sands Solutions" <http://web.archive.org/web/20160110090054/https://www.pembina.org/oil-sands/solutions>. First Nation, Métis, and Aboriginal peoples are crucial players in every aspect of this unfinished story.

22
Photograph from NASA Earth Observatory, 2015 (public domain). If flame is the icon for the Anthropocene, I use the missing ice and the unblocked Northwest Passage to figure the Capitalocene. The Soufan Group provides strategic security intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations. Its report "TSG IntelBrief: Geostrategic Competition in the Arctic" includes the following quotes: "The *Guardian* estimates that the Arctic contains 30 percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas and 15 percent of its oil." "In late February, Russia announced it would form a strategic military command to protect its Arctic interests." "Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and the US all make some claim to international waters and the continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean." "(A Northwest Passage) route could provide the Russians with a great deal of leverage on the international stage over China or any other nation dependent on sea commerce between Asia and Europe."

23
Naomi Klein, "How Science Is Telling Us All to Revolt," *New Statesman*, October 29, 2013 <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/10/science-says-revolt>; Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: M acmillan/Picador, 2008).

24
"Capitalocene" is one of those words like "sympoiesis"; if you think you invented it, just look around and notice how many other people are inventing the term at the same time. That certainly happened to me, and after I got over a small fit of individualist pique at being asked whom I got the term "Capitalocene" from—hadn't I coined the word? ("Coin")! And why do other scholars almost always ask women which male writers their ideas are indebted to?—I recognized that not only was I part of a cat's cradle game

of invention, as always, but that Jason Moore had already written compelling arguments to think with, and my interlocutor both knew Moore's work and was relaying it to me. Moore himself first heard the term "Capitalocene" in 2009 in a seminar in Lund, Sweden, when then graduate student Andreas Malm proposed it. In an urgent historical conjuncture, words-to-think-with pop out all at once from many bubbling cauldrons because we all feel the need for better netbags to collect up the stuff crying out for attention. Despite its problems, the term "Anthropocene" was and is embraced because it collects up many matters of fact, concern, and care; and I hope "Capitalocene" will roll off myriad tongues soon.

25
To get over Eurocentrism while thinking about the history of pathways and centers of globalization over the last few centuries, see Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, *China and the Birth of Globalisation in the 16th Century* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 2012). For analysis attentive to the differences and frictions among colonialisms, imperialisms, globalizing trade formations, and capitalism, see Engseng Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat," *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* (April 2004): 210–46; and Ho, *The Graves of Tarem: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

26
In "Anthropocene or Capitalocene, Part III," May 19, 2013 <https://jasonmoore.wordpress.com/2013/05/19/anthropocene-or-capitalocene-part-iii/>, Jason Moore puts it this way: "This means that capital and power—and countless other strategic relations—do not act upon nature but develop through the web of life. 'Nature' is here offered as the relation of the whole. Humans live as a specifically endowed (but not special) environment-making species within Nature. Second, capitalism in 1800 was no Athena, bursting forth, fully grown and armed, from the head of a carboniferous Zeus. Civilizations do not form through Big Bang events. They emerge through cascading transformations and bifurcations of human activity in

the web of life ... the long seventeenth century forest clearances of the Vistula Basin and Brazil's Atlantic Rainforest occurred on a scale, and at a speed, between five and ten times greater than anything seen in medieval Europe."

27
Crist, "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature," *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129–47; 144. Crist does superb critique of the traps of Anthropocene discourse, as well as gives us propositions for more imaginative worlding and ways to stay with the trouble. For entangled, dissenting papers that both refuse and take up the name Anthropocene, see videos from the conference "Anthropocene Feminism," University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, April 10–12, 2014 <http://c21uwm.com/anthropocene/conference-videos/>. For rich interdisciplinary research, organized by Anna Tsing and Nils Ole Bubandt, that brings together anthropologists, biologists, and artists under the sign of the Anthropocene, see AURA: Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene <http://anthropocene.au.dk/>.

28
I owe the insistence on "big-enough stories" to Clifford, *Returns*: "I think of these as 'big enough' histories, able to account for a lot, but not for everything—and without guarantees of political virtue" (201). Rejecting one big synthetic account or theory, Clifford works to craft a realism that "works with open-ended (because their linear historical time is ontologically unfinished) 'big-enough stories,' sites of contact, struggle, and dialogue" (85–86).

29
Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *La sorcellerie capitaliste: Pratiques de désenchantement* (Paris: Découverte, 2005). Latour and Stengers are deeply allied in their fierce rejection of discourses of denunciation. They have both patiently taught me to understand and relearn in this matter. I love a good denunciation! It is a hard habit to unlearn.

30
It is possible to read Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an allied critique of Progress and Modernization, even though

their resolute secularism gets in their own way. It is very hard for a secularist to really listen to the squid, bacteria, and angry old women of Terra/Gaia. The most likely Western Marxist allies, besides Marx, for nurturing the Chthulucene in the belly of the Capitalocene are Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, and Stuart Hall. Hall's immensely generative essays extend from the 1960s through the 1990s. See, for example, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).

31
See Dave Gilson, "Octopi Wall Street!" *Mother Jones*, October 6, 2011 <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2011/10/occupy-wall-street-octopus-vampire-squid>, for the fascinating history of cephalopods figuring the depredations of Big Capital in the United States (for example, the early twentieth-century John D. Rockefeller/Standard Oil octopus strangling workers, farmers, and citizens in general with its many huge tentacles). Resignification of octopuses and squids as chthonic allies is excellent news. May they squirt inky night into the visualizing apparatuses of the technoid sky gods.

32
Hesiod's *Theogony* in achingly beautiful language tells of Gaia/Earth arising out of Chaos to be the seat of the Olympian immortals above and of Tartarus in the depths below. She/it is very old and polymorphic and exceeds Greek tellings, but just how remains controversial and speculative. At the very least, Gaia is not restricted to the job of holding up the Olympians! The important and unorthodox scholar-archaeologist Marija Gimbutis claims that Gaia as Mother Earth is a later form of a pre-Indo-European, Neolithic Great Mother. In 2004, filmmaker Donna Reed and neopagan author and activist Starhawk released a collaborative documentary film about the life and work of Gimbutis, *Signs out of Time*. See Belili Productions, "About Signs out of Time" <http://www.belili.org/marija/aboutSIGN.html>; Gimbutis, *The Living Goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

33
To understand what is at stake in

"non-Euclidean" storytelling, go to Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Placeto Be," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove, 1989), 80–100.

34

"The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth," International Colloquium, Rio de Janeiro, September 15–19, 2014.

35

The bee was one of Potnia Theron's emblems, and she is also called Potnia Melissa, Mistress of the Bees. Modern Wiccans remember these chthonic beings in ritual and poetry. If fire figured the Anthropocene, and ice marked the Capitalocene, it pleases me to use red clay pottery for the Chthulucene, a time of fire, water, and Earth, tuned to the touch of its critters, including its people. With her PhD writing on the riverine goddess Ratu Kidul and her dances now performed on Bali, Raissa DeSmet (Trumbull) introduced me to the web of far-traveling chthonic tentacular ones emerging from the Hindu serpentine Nagas and moving through the waters of Southeast Asia. DeSmet, "A Liquid World: Figuring Coloniality in the Indies," PhD diss., History of Consciousness Department, University of California at Santa Cruz, 2013.

36

Links between Potnia Theron and the Gorgon/Medusa continued in temple architecture and building adornment well after 600 BCE, giving evidence of the tenacious hold of the chthonic powers in practice, imagination, and ritual, for example, from the fifth through the third centuries BCE on the Italian peninsula. The dread-full Gorgon figure faces outward, defending against exterior dangers, and the no less awe-full Potnia Theron faces inward, nurturing the webs of living. See Kimberly Sue Busby, "The Temple Terracottas of Etruscan Orvieto: A Vision of the Underworld in the Art and Cult of Ancient Volsinii," PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2007. The Christian Mary, Virgin Mother of God, who herself erupted in the Near East and Mediterranean worlds, took on attributes of these and other chthonic powers in her

travels around the world. Unfortunately, Mary's iconography shows her ringed by stars and crushing the head of the snake (for example, in the Miraculous Medal dating from an early nineteenth-century apparition of the Virgin), more than allying herself with Earth powers. The "lady surrounded by stars" is a Christian scriptural apocalyptic figure for the end of time. That is a bad idea. Throughout my childhood, I wore a gold chain with the Miraculous Medal. Finally and luckily, it was her residual chthonic infections that took hold in me, turning me from both the secular and also the sacred, and toward humus and compost.

37

The Hebrew word *Deborah* means "bee," and she was the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. She was a warrior and counselor in premonarchic Israel. The *Song of Deborah* may date to the twelfth century BCE. Deborah was a military hero and ally of Jael, one of the 4Js in Joanna Russ's formative feminist science fiction novel *The Female Man*.

38

"Erinyes 1," *Theoi Greek Mythology* <http://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Erinyes.html>

39

Martha Kenney pointed out to me that the story of the Ood, in the long-running British science fiction TV series *Doctor Who*, shows how the squid-faced ones became deadly to humanity only after they were mutilated, cut off from their symchthonic hive mind, and enslaved. The humanoid empathic Ood have sinuous tentacles over the lower portion of their multifolded alien faces; and in their proper bodies they carry their hindbrains in their hands, communicating with each other telepathically through these vulnerable, living, exterior organs (organons). Humans (definitely not the Earthbound) cut off the hindbrains and replaced them with a technological communication-translator sphere, so that the isolated Ood could only communicate through their enslavers, who forced them into hostilities. I resist thinking the Ood techno-communicators are a future release of the iPhone, but it is tempting when I watch the faces of twenty-first-century humans on the streets, or even at the dinner table, apparently connected only to their devices. I am saved from this ungenerous

fantasy by the SF fact that in the episode "Planet of the Ood," the tentacular ones were freed by the actions of Ood Sigma and restored to their nonsingular selves. *Doctor Who* is a much better story cycle for going-on-with than *Star Trek*.

40

"Medousa and Gorgones," *Theoi Greek Mythology* <http://www.theoi.com/Pontios/Gorgones.html>

41

Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast Chronicles*, beginning in 1974 with *Walk to the End of the World*, is greatSF for thinking about feminists and their horses. The sex is exciting if very incorrect, and the politics are bracing.

42

Eva Hayward first drew my attention to the emergence of Pegasus from Medusa's body and of coral from drops of her blood. In her "The Crochet Coral Reef Project Heightens Our Sense of Responsibility to the Oceans," *Independent Weekly*, August 1, 2012," she writes: "If coral teaches us about the reciprocal nature of life, then how do we stay obligated to environments—many of which we made unlivable—that now sicken us? ... Perhaps Earth will follow Venus, becoming uninhabitable due to rampaging greenhouse effect. Or, maybe, we will rebuild reefs or construct alternate homes for the oceans' refugees. Whatever the conditions of our future, we remain obligate partners with oceans." See Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim, *Crochet Coral Reef: A Project by the Institute for Figuring* (Los Angeles: IFF, 2015).

43

I am inspired by the 2014–15 Monterey Bay Aquarium exhibition *Tentacles: The Astounding Lives of Octopuses, Squids, and Cuttlefish*. See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1978), with thanks to Chris Connery for this reference in which cuttlefish, octopuses, and squid play a large role. Polymorphy, the capacity to make a net or mesh of bonds, and cunning intelligence are the traits the Greek writers foregrounded. "Cuttlefish and octopuses are pure *áporai* and the impenetrable pathless night they secrete is the most perfect image of their *metis*" (38). Chapter 5, "The Orphic Metis

and the Cuttle-Fish of Thetis," is the most interesting for the Chthulucene's own themes of ongoing looping, becoming-with, and polymorphism. "The suppleness of molluscs, which appear as a mass of tentacles (*polúplokoi*), makes their bodies an interlaced network, a living knot of mobile animated bonds" (159). For Detienne and Vernant's Greeks, the polymorphic and supple cuttlefish are close to the primordial multisexual deities of the sea—ambiguous, mobile, and ever changing, sinuous and undulating, presiding over coming-to-be, pulsating with waves of intense color, cryptic, secreting clouds of darkness, adept at getting out of difficulties, and having tentacles where proper men would have beards.

44

See Donna Haraway and Martha Kenney, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," interview for *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, and Epistemology*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (Open Humanities Press, Critical Climate Change series, 2015) <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/art-in-the-anthropocene/>

45

Le Guin, "The Author of Acacia Seeds' and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Theolinguistics*," in *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 175.

Matteo Pasquinelli

Abnormal Encephalization in the Age of Machine Learning

To make machines look intelligent it was necessary that the sources of their power, the labor force which surrounded and ran them, be rendered invisible.
—Simon Schaffer

If a machine is expected to be infallible, it cannot also be intelligent.
—Alan Turing

Metacognition in the Twenty-First Century California Adult

The idea that “machines think” displays an unintended solidarity with the animism of less industrialized cultures, which have long recognized autonomous minds in nonhuman entities. Artificial intelligence is animism for the rich, we might say. Or alternatively: animism is a sort of artificial intelligence made in the absence of electricity.¹ The recent narrative which proclaims the imminent arrival of a Technological Singularity (according to which computing machines would become self-conscious) seems typical of the human tendency to anthropomorphize the unknown. What was once attributed to the obscure and infinite night is now projected onto the abstract abyss of computation, data centers, and machine learning. Rendering the uncanny (*Unheimlich*) familiar (*heimlich*) by way of mythology is an established survival method for the human animal in the act of mapping its territory. In a hostile environment, the utility of suspicion towards any alien object is obvious: even if it doesn’t appear to move, it may be alive and dangerous. The same seems to be true even for the most advanced technological milieu. In psychology, this ability to speculate that other beings might have a will, drives, or “thoughts” less friendly than what they articulate is called metacognition, or Theory of Mind (ToM).

The Theory of Mind is a key issue in child psychology. As infants we do not know what our mother thinks: the first relation with her is a blind metabolic one, a need for milk, warmth, and care. Only gradually do we develop the understanding that our mother does not always fulfill our desires, that she may have different intentions and thoughts than ours. That is the traumatic moment in which we project the theater of the mind, i.e., we “theorize” the mind into another body. However, Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky stressed that we form the image of our mind only after picturing the mind of adults around us. Growing older, we develop an even more sophisticated mind reading: in playing poker or listening to a politician speaking, we always engage in simulating the backstage, imagining the other’s mind tricks behind and beyond their

appearance. This process may unfold into pathological excess, like in the case of paranoia and conspiracy theories, when an unreachable evil mind is evoked to explain catastrophes too big to be elaborated. Or we may prefer to project a mind onto the furnace below the window or develop a vast objectophilia like Eija-Riitta Eklöf, who married the Berlin Wall.

As art critic and curator Anselm Franke suggests, animism is a good epistemic prism for capturing the many refractions and responses to industrialized modernity. Artificial intelligence inevitably belongs to this history: "Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things."² British computer scientist Stephen Wolfram has argued that the universe is fundamentally digital in nature, and that natural laws are better approached as computational programs rather than instances of traditional mathematics. Wolfram argues that animism somehow is an acknowledgement of nature's computational power: a doctrine that can be called "computational animism." This latest animism turns panpsychism, the idea that everything thinks, into pancomputationalism, the idea that everything computes (especially for business purposes).³

An abnormal Theory of Mind is common to all ages and classes, usually as a substitute for confronting more fundamental political issues. It is not surprising that the ruling-class engineers of California have started to anthropomorphize supercomputers and fear their awakening as sentient and autonomous beings, while Silicon Valley entrepreneur Elon Musk has warned against the risk posed by future machine intelligence.⁴ In a clinical sense, the narrative of Singularity is a good example of the faculty of metacognition in the twenty-first century Californian adult, as surely as the Theory of Mind explains many popular publications on so-called "artificial superintelligence." Time to ask Western anthropologists to visit the valleys of Northern California.

Two Lineages of Machine Intelligence

The history of machine intelligence can be roughly divided into two lineages: the analytical one, based on the idea of the *representative brain*, and the holistic one, based on the idea of the *adaptive brain*.⁵ Where the analytical emphasizes logic, the holistic emphasizes abstraction, considering the human brain as an organism that strives to *adapt* to the surrounding world and which conceives and projects new ideas (*Gestalten*) in the course of this process. In the holistic, adaptive tradition, intelligence is understood as an antagonistic and embodied relation with the environment. In fact, the idea of the cybernetic feedback loop was inspired by this model of biological adaptation.⁶ This is the lineage of Norbert Wiener, William Ross Ashby, and Anglo-American cybernetics influenced by German *Naturphilosophie*. Epistemologist David Bates

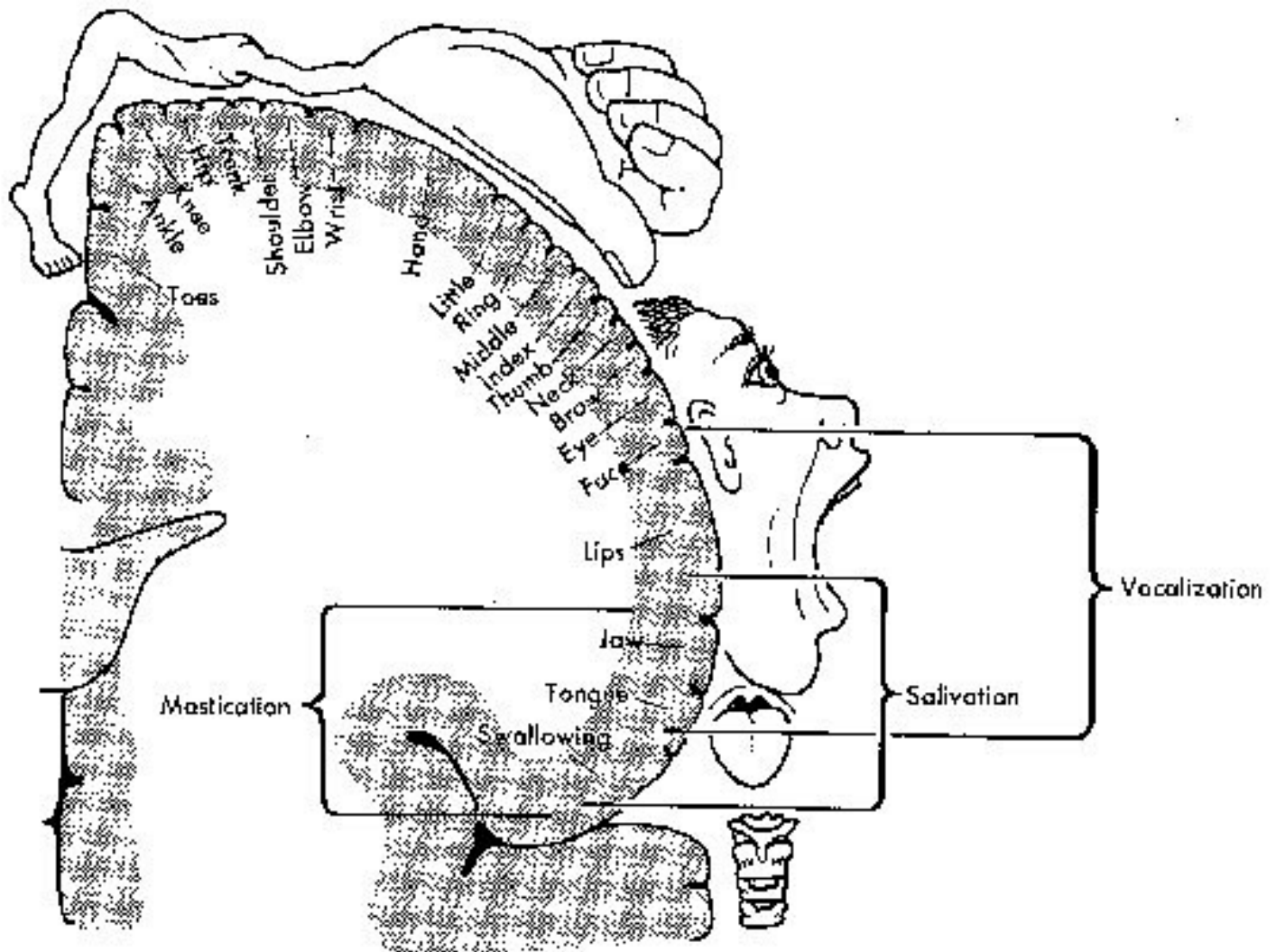
has noticed that early cybernetics, being particularly influenced by neurology and cognitive sciences, was not just obsessed with the mechanization of reason but interested also in the abnormal states of machines, in those pathological breakdowns that could push machine structure to form new equilibria and new compositions.⁷

The epistemic distinction between the two lineages is the distinction between analytic logic and perceptual *Gestalt* as universal diagrams of human thought. They are not a perfect contrast: perceptual *Gestalten*, for example, would be encoded into information by Wiener while digital logic would become purely statistical and "gestaltic" in the process of encoding chaotic phenomena. In his founding text *Cybernetics* (1948), Wiener wrote that cybernetics would more closely resemble a predictive and statistical discipline such as meteorology than it would the exact laws of physics. And one could do worse for a description of the study of the human brain than a "meteorology of intelligence."⁸

The analytical lineage, as mentioned, sees the human brain as a machine that *represents* the world through language. Specifically, it states that human thought can be translated by Boolean logic into logic gates, the elementary building blocks that construct digital circuits, transistors, and microchips out of three fundamental functions: AND, OR, and NOT. The mind can be mechanized thanks to this equivalence between human logic, Boolean logic, and logic gates. This is the legacy of Gottfried Leibniz, Charles Babbage, and Alan Turing. Turing is famous for introducing the Universal Turing Machine, the abstract algorithm that separated for the first time software and hardware in computation. But he also contributed to the history of philosophy with a controversial intervention into the Theory of Mind: the Turing Test.

Turing's Foray into the Theory of Mind

In his 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," Turing aimed to resolve the question: "Can machines think?" He proposed to do this via a negative thought experiment, the Turing Test, also known as the Imitation Game. Rather than asking what the positive content of intelligent behavior must be, Turing reasoned that if we humans cannot tell the difference between the answers given by a machine and a human—when these are disguised by a textual interface—then we cannot say that machines do not think. With its absolute emphasis on the social convention of human language, the Turing Test is the ultimate *Gedankenexperiment* of Analytical Philosophy and a metaphysical reiteration of the Theory of Mind. The test reinforces, rather than questions, the metacognitive assumptions behind artificial intelligence, precisely by advancing computation as empirical proof of thought in nonhuman entities. The Turing Test does not



The homunculus in this drawing represents the relative space human body parts occupy on the motor cortex, with larger areas devoted to body regions characterized by complex movements and smaller areas to body regions involving fewer muscles.

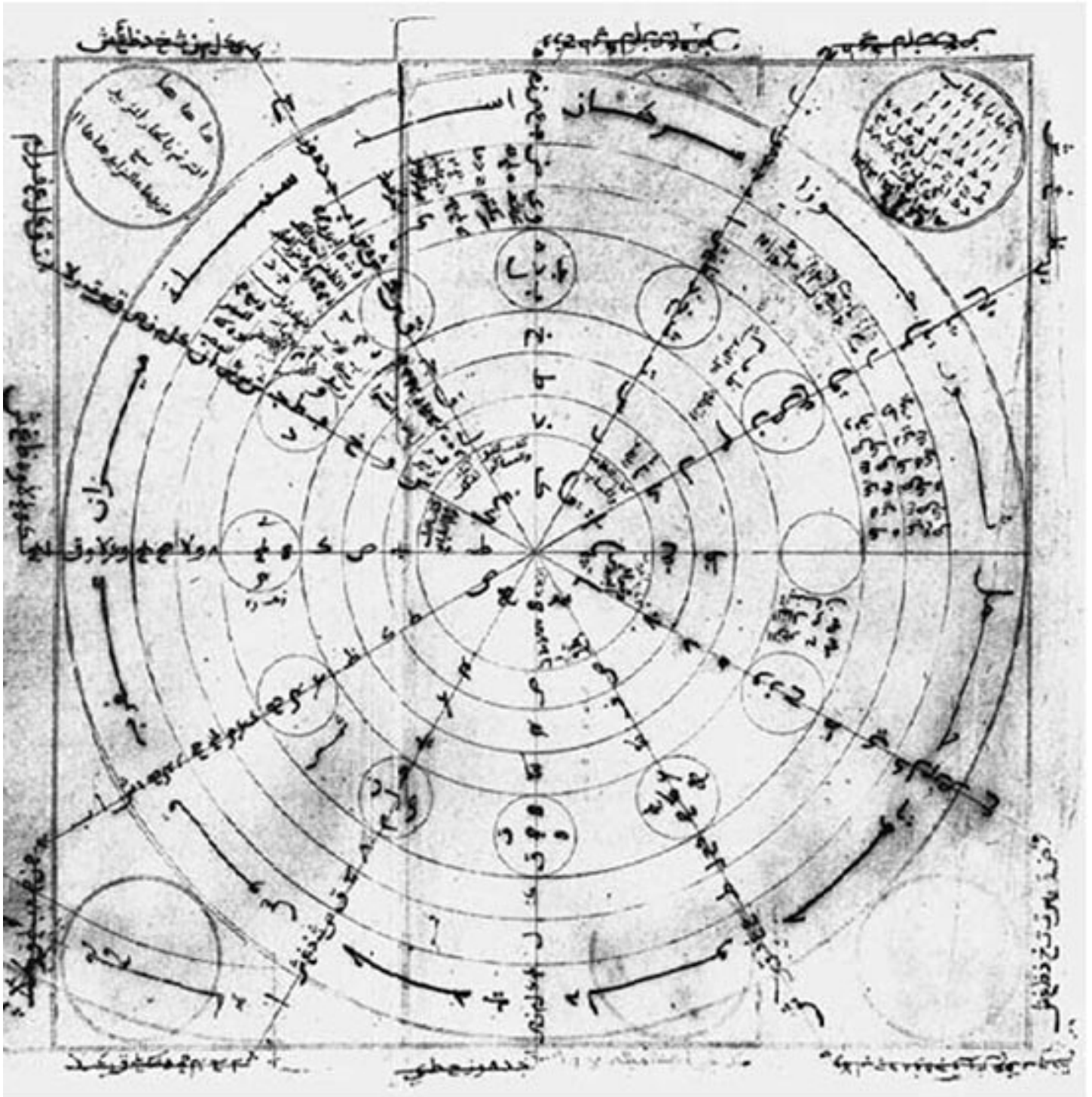
prove machine intelligence per se, but it postulates that an anthropomorphic Theory of Mind can be logically imbricated in computation. Moreover, it does not just imply that artificial intelligence has to pedantically resemble the human—a crystalline example of the anthropomorphic fallacy—but it renders artificial intelligence as *brute force imitation* of human habits and conventions, a grand machine for the recognition of the Same.

By employing a schema of mind that prioritizes good manners and familiarity with social conventions, the Turing Test remains an example of austere social normativity: the same one, it has been suggested, that Turing himself was subjected to as a closeted gay man. Turing addresses briefly the issue of metacognition in the answers to the “Arguments from Various Disabilities,” where he mentions the fact that a machine could “be the subject of its own thought” by running a program to check its own structure, again rendering the Theory of Mind in

terms of computation.

In the history of the systemic and holistic thought, a famous counterpart to the Turing Test is Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, which also attempts to explain self-consciousness via the recognition of consciousness in the Other. It would suffice to replace Turing’s intelligence with Hegel’s self-consciousness to reveal the similarity between these two approaches to the Theory of the Mind. In Hegel’s account, however, the framing power structures remain obvious, manifest, and unavoidable (an aspect that pleased Marx), while in the Turing Test politics evacuates the field (an aspect that pleases the artificial intelligence community today).

The Imitation Game was sketched for the first time by Turing in his 1948 paper “Intelligent Machinery,” wherein, more compellingly, he proposed the idea of an *unorganized machine* that would be able to learn by continuous interferences in its open structure.⁹ Turing



Zā'irja was a device used by medieval Arab astrologers to generate ideas by mechanical means. This image portrays the front from a Turkish manuscript [~1415] of the Muqaddima. This illustration accompanies the text: David Link, "Scrambling T-R-U-T-H—Rotating Letters as a Material Form of Thought" in Siegfried Zielinski and Eckhard Fülus (eds) Variantology 4 (Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2010).

made a direct parallel between the learning machine and the cortex of an infant, in which he cheerfully sided with the fallibility of machines: "It would be quite unfair to expect a machine straight from the factory to compete on equal terms with a university graduate."¹⁰ In a 1947

lecture he went so far as to equate intelligence with fallibility: "If a machine is expected to be infallible, it cannot also be intelligent." Turing's hypothesis, which puzzled many mathematicians, was that a machine could be programmed to make mistakes like humans do: a

statement that would reduce Gödel's incompleteness theorem to irrelevance.¹¹ Turing had different conceptions of machine intelligence during his life, but it is the Turing Test that has monopolized the attention of the philosophers of mind and galvanized the neovitalism of artificial intelligence.

Once Turing developed the hypothesis that a machine could imitate human mistakes, his argument risked deteriorating in a toxic loop, since it envisions machine intelligence as cosmic plagiarism mirroring the routines of an already bored-to-death humanity. In this respect, the Turing Test is a premonition of universal industrial imitation, a Universal Machine that would replace not only the previous division of manual and mental labor but would be able to replicate all imaginable divisions of labor. The Turing Machine would be better defined as a Social Imitation Machine, as its power is revealed in the power to imitate, amplify, and accumulate social relations. In the belly of data centers, machine intelligence is already emerging as a novel perspective on suprahuman and invisible clusters of social data, not as the quality of imitating human features and feelings. Machine intelligence is not anthropomorphic, but *sociomorphic*: it imitates and feeds on the *condividual* structures of society rather than the individual ones.

The Metastable Mind and Its Technological Individuation

After WWII the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon attempted to develop a philosophy of the mind that would depart both from the organism-form inherited from German vitalism (still influential at the time) and the information-form that had just been introduced by North American cybernetics.¹² These two polarities had long been operative in French philosophy, at least since Descartes and the dispute over the machine body. Against the primacy of the new technical form and the old *Lebensform*, Simondon envisioned a "metastable mind" constructed in a triangular space between the biological, the technological, and the social, giving the latter a leading, even constituent, role. Simondon was not concerned with individualized structures (brain, organism, technology, society) so much as with the collective process of individuation (the old *principium individuationis*) that made these hegemonic structures possible. What makes a mind? Simondon considered both mechanicism (later: informationalism) and holism (later: organicism and *Gestalttheorie*) as enclosures of a process that must be kept conceptually open. In Simondon the actual mind emerges to "solve the problems posed to the living being"¹² by the surrounding world and it always reinvents itself in a process open towards the social.

In Simondon the construction of the mind (or psychic individuation) is not originary but a process of collective

individuation: the mind is constructed with signs, objects, and artifacts of the external and social world. In this sense, we have all developed a "technical mentality" (yet developing a technical mentality, *nota bene*, does not mean employing technology as a model of the mind). The Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno has underlined the similarity between Simondon's notion of individuation and Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's work on the development of language skills and thought in the child.¹³ For Vygotsky, the faculty of inner speech in the child (and so the Theory of Mind, we may add) is produced by the power of the individuation of social language, and this process continues in adult life.¹⁴ Similarly for Simondon, individuals are never completely individuated but maintain an excess of "transindividuality" that distinguishes them from technological artifacts as much as from animals.

In terms of logic forms, Simondon struggled to find a concept that could synthesize and overcome the notions of both organic *Gestalt* (inherited via German *Naturphilosophie*) and technological information (received from cybernetics). Simondon called "transduction" this concept that could cross the "transindividual" psyche without enclosing it in either an organic or a technological form, leaving its excessive potentiality open. Transduction is not the idea of the multiple realizability of the One Mind, but the idea of multiple genealogies of mentalization that keep on innervating the fabric of the world, along the lines of that *parallel ontology* that Deleuze would term "transcendental empiricism." One model of the mind can be transducted into another, but the process is not frictionless and free of conflict like in the idea of a Turing-complete universe. The historical translation of a model of the mind into another is not only a technological problem but still a political one.

Simondon's work has also inspired discussions in the Artificial (General) Intelligence community. The problem of psychic individuation in the debate on machine intelligence and the Turing Test can be translated as the problem of mentalization or "encephalization," to borrow a term from evolutionary biology. How do you recognize a mind? Some answer by saying that you recognize a mind if you know how to construct it. Instead of starting with the question "what does it mean to be intelligent?" David Weinbaum and Viktoras Veitas from the Global Brain Institute in Brussels ask "what does it mean to become intelligent?" Drawing from Simondon's idea of individuation, they have come up with the paradigm of "open-ended intelligence," which reiterates the old idea of intelligence as an emergent property of natural systems.

Open-ended intelligence is a process where a distributed population of interacting heterogeneous agents achieves progressively higher levels of coordination. By "coordination" here we mean the local resolution of disparities by means of reciprocal determination, which brings forth new individuals in



Alexa Wright, *After Image RD3 C*, 1997. Image courtesy of the artist. "After Image" is a series of digitally manipulated photographic portraits of people who experience phantom limbs. The original aim of the work was twofold: to offer a visual means of communicating a very real, individual experience, and to explore some of the different dimensions of sensory reality.



Alexa Wright, After Image RD3 C, 1997. Image courtesy of the artist.

the form of integrated groups of agents (assemblages) that exchange meaningful information and spontaneously differentiate (dynamically and structurally) from their surrounding milieu. This kind of intelligence is truly general in the sense that it is not directed or limited by a given, a priori goal or challenge. Moreover, it is intrinsically and indefinitely scalable, at least from a theoretical point of view. We see open-ended intelligence manifesting all around us and at many scales: primarily in the evolution of life, in the phylogenetic and ontogenetic organization of brains, in lifelong cognitive development and sense-making, and in the self-organization of complex systems from slime molds, fungi, and beehives to human sociotechnological entities.¹⁵

This description of open-ended intelligence appears to conflate the two forms that Simondon actually attempted to overcome: the biological and the technological. In other words, it seems like a naturalization of machine intelligence—the equating of machine intelligence with the living. In explaining the biomorphic fallacy, it is helpful to remember that we did not design the airplane to fly as birds do, and so machine intelligence need not follow the path of some biological ancestor. Even so Weinbaum and Veitas stress that “many believe that one day in the foreseeable future the internet will awaken and become a conscious aware super-intelligent entity. Some even claim that this is already happening.”¹⁶ Such professions of computational animism seem like an a priori condition for being accepted in these tech communities. Animism keeps on haunting artificial intelligence: non-biomorphic notions of machine intelligence are urgently needed.

More importantly, the idea of pancomputationalism in nature mystifies a basic reality: computation is actually an economic process, one that aims at extracting valuable information and discarding useless information. In this sense computation is also a process of capitalization. And so to assert, as Stephen Wolfram and Ray Kurzweil do, among others, that all atoms encode and compute, is to equate capital and nature.¹⁷ Atoms do not get rid of useless information in order to escalate to a higher degree of complexity. Apologies to Kurzweil’s vision of a computational sublime standing before a stormy ocean, as reported in the documentary *Transcendent Man* (2009), but the molecules of water in the ocean do not compute.¹⁸ That’s just us.

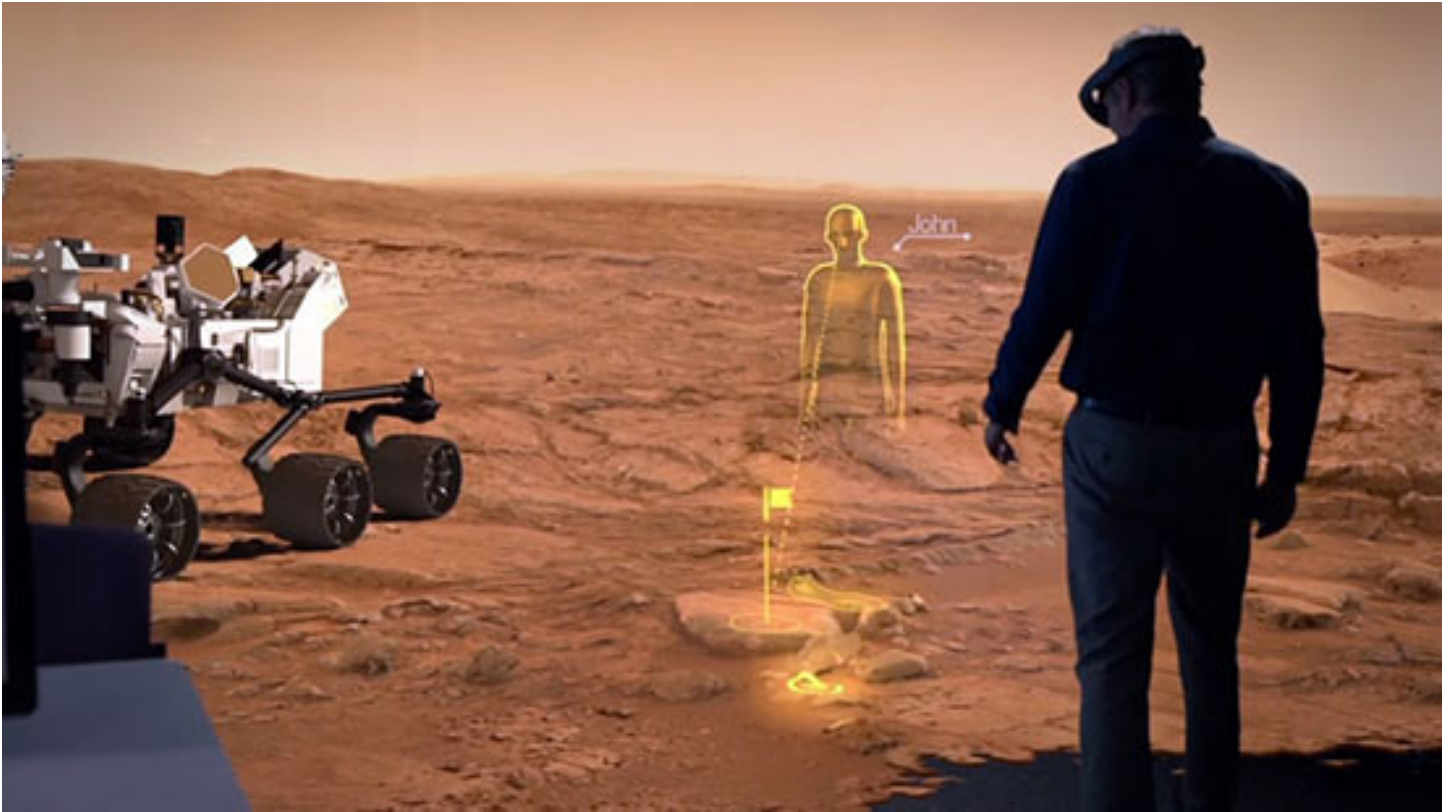
The Artificial Intelligence of the Market

Markets have been a place of vernacular artificial intelligence for a long time. The Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek believed that the market is the ground of a preconscious and transindividual knowledge that needs neither state centralization (like in socialist planning) nor formulation in objective economic laws (Hayek is the

godfather of the notorious Chicago School but he maintained, interestingly, a great interest in psychology and neuroscience throughout his life). The *infrarationality* of the market is for Hayek far beyond the comprehension of the individual as much as the state: “The economic problem is ... a problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality,” he wrote in his 1945 seminal text “The Use of Knowledge in Society.”¹⁹ Hayek castigated the ambitions of statistics and, in this way, implicitly, also those of computation: “[The] sort of knowledge with which I have been concerned is knowledge of the kind which by its nature cannot enter into statistics and therefore cannot be conveyed to any central authority in statistical form.”²⁰ Hayek believed that prices are the best signals for condensing and transmitting all necessary economic information: they work, in fact, like a collective computer (“system of telecommunications” in the wording of 1945):

It is more than a metaphor to describe the price system as a kind of machinery for registering change, or a system of telecommunications which enables individual producers to watch merely the movement of a few pointers, as an engineer might watch the hands of a few dials, in order to adjust their activities to changes of which they may never know more than is reflected in the price movement.²¹

Hayek might have been the first to introduce a modern (i.e., functional) notion of information: it must be remembered that Claude Shannon defined the mathematical measure of information only in 1948, the same year in which Norbert Wiener published his book *Cybernetics*.²² Nevertheless, Hayek described the market as a *cognitive apparatus*, in a strong similarity with early cybernetics and long before theories of the knowledge society and cognitive capitalism. Since Adam Smith, the topos of the “invisible hand” has been repeated to describe the virtues of the free market, but the expression “invisible mind” would be more accurate for framing such a distributed and spontaneous coordination of prices. In Hayek’s vision the market seems to be run by an invisible *general intellect* that cannot be objectified in any machinery, but only in commodity prices. Yet such idealism has been contradicted, most recently, by what has been called algorithmic capitalism. Today, companies like Uber and Airbnb are able to centralize price calculation through their global databases in real time. In this respect algorithmic capitalism is the rise of a third paradigm: the worst nightmares of both centralized planning and free-market deregulation, which come true under the rule of one master algorithm designed by the mathematicians and engineers of machine learning.²³



NASA is using Microsoft's HoloLens augmented-reality system for remote exploration of the planet.

Capital as Encephalization

Even if artificial intelligence never awakes one day as a sentient being, there are already millions of machine learning algorithms that day-to-day scavenge gigantic data centers of social data to detect correlations, extract patterns, distil norms, predict tendencies, and make metadata mug shots of the population as a whole. Machine intelligence is not *biomorphic*—it will never be autonomous from humankind and, for sure, from the difficulties of capital, since it is a functional component of industrial planning, marketing strategies, securitarian apparatuses, and finance.

Machine intelligence is *sociomorphic*, but not in a good way. Machine intelligence mirrors social intelligence in order to control the latter. The Turing universe is one of those magnifying mirrors, and it makes the collective body look grotesque, disproportioned, *abnormalized* by the glitches of computational power. We feed algorithms our racist, sexist, and classist biases and in turn they warp them further. As Marx knew, absent political action, machines do not just replace but *amplify* previous divisions of labor and social relations. Turing machines are no exception: datasets of populations educated in fundamentalism project an even more fundamentalist machine intelligence pattern. Machine intelligence is then *anamorphic*: at the 2016 conference “Tyranny of the Algorithms? Predictive Analytics and Human Rights,”

even the New York Police Department acknowledged the class and racial bias produced by its crime-predicting algorithms.²⁴ The Microsoft Twitter bot that turned its posts into fascist rants is another example of how machine intelligence can be easily misdesigned, especially if it is designed by companies with dubious standards.

Machine intelligence should become sociomorphic in a good way. Machine learning and data analytics do manage to unveil a superior social dimension that is intrinsic to any piece of digital information and that has been intangible and inaccessible until now. The techniques of data visualization and navigation finally give an empirical form to the collective mind and to modern concepts of collective agency, such as Marx’s general intellect, Foucault’s episteme, and Simondon’s transindividual, which have been so far pretty abstract and invisible to the eye of the individual mind. Alternative and progressive uses of machine intelligence are always easy to imagine but difficult to realize. Alternative techniques of data mining are being explored today by an emerging field known as “data activism,” which fights for social justice, human rights, and equal access to education and welfare. In this respect, the AGI community astonishingly lacks the kind of basic ABCs of politics that can be found in other tech communities (see the history of the Free Software Foundation and Electronic Frontier Foundation). Here’s a short manifesto of transcendental empiricism for the AGI

community: not trying to realize the One Mind, like who like to replace Chairman Mao with the role played by Artificial Intelligence, but trying to construct a metastable collective intelligence that would be politically more 'intelligent' than the ideal of the One Mind.

Within the regime of cognitive capitalism, computation is coming to occupy a growing hegemonic role: machine intelligence is replacing a complex division of mental and manual labor and encephalizing collective intelligence and social behavior into data centers. The reductionist philosophy of mind promoted by the artificial intelligence community is organic, therefore, to the issue of capital qua computation and cognition. Historically, the rising hegemony of the paradigm of machine learning marks the final transition from cognitive capitalism to computational capitalism and centralized forms of machine intelligence. As much as the British industrial class worshipped the steam engine as the idol of a new society and the concretion of power, likewise the new vectoralist class of artificial intelligence is starting to animate supercomputation.²⁵ In this respect, the movie *Esiod 2015* by German artist Clemens von Wedemeyer is right in imagining that if the Singularity ever happens, it will be a financial one: it will most likely be your family bank that becomes an autonomous sentient entity.²⁶ To still believe in the myth of the autonomy of artificial intelligence is to support the autonomy of capital against the autonomy of society.

Capitalism is a process of *encephalization*, that is, a process of the accumulation of human intelligence. This process had already begun in the industrial factory, when Charles Babbage designed the Analytical Engine with the idea absorbing and automating the division of mental labor. Simondon was the first to recognize that the industrial machine was already an *infomechanical* relay separating the source of energy from information—that is, from the intelligence of the worker. As British historian of science Simon Schaffer recounts:

The word "intelligence" refers both to signals received from without and to the capacity to register and interpret these signals. In early nineteenth-century Britain the word intelligence simultaneously embodied the growing system of social surveillance and the emerging mechanisation of natural philosophies of mind ... To make machines look intelligent it was necessary that the sources of their power, the labor force which surrounded and ran them, be rendered invisible ... The replacement of individual human intelligence by machine intelligence was as apparent in the workshop as in the engines. This task was both politically and economically necessary.²⁷

quickly slipped under the dominion of capital, reinforcing a new stage of power. Computation secularized the human mind, only to industrialize and venerate, immediately afterward, the automation of mental labor as artificial intelligence (according to the classic oscillation of desubjectification and resubjectification). Supercomputation displaced the subject of Western humanism even further from the center of thought, but only so that capital might think in its place. As the root of the word suggests (*caput* in Latin means "head"), capital is a vast process of encephalization: it continuously returns to destroy and reconstruct again its own head.

X

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Computation could have had a different destiny, but it

- 1 In this text the term “artificial intelligence” refers to anthropomorphic and biomorphic models of intelligence, whereas the term “machine intelligence” refers to a form of intelligence that does not resemble features of the living (including human feelings and “consciousness”). A more secular definition of machine intelligence will help, hopefully, to disclose posthuman and antinormative correlations in social data rather than to reinforce the individual and social norms of class, gender, and race.
- 2 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21. Quoted in Anselm Franke, *Animism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).
- 3 Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (Champaign, IL: Wolfram Media, 2002), 845.
- 4 Musk’s concerns about AI probably originate, by the way, from the unfair practices of Google, his largest corporate competitor. See Rich McCormick, “Elon Musk: There’s only one AI company that worries me,” *The Verge*, June 2, 2016 <http://www.theverge.com/2016/6/2/11837566/elon-musk-one-ai-company-that-worries-me>.
- 5 See Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), chap. 1.
- 6 The German biologist Jakob von Uexküll described the relation between an animal’s nervous system (*Innenwelt*) and the outside world (*Außenwelt*) as a “functional circle” (*Funktionskreis*). Similar to the *Funktionskreis*, the feedback loop of cybernetic systems is conceived as a circulation of information and response to an external stimulus.
- 7 David Bates, “Unity, Plasticity, Catastrophe: Order and Pathology in the Cybernetic Era,” in *Catastrophe: History and Theory of an Operative Concept*, eds. Andreas Killen and Nitzan Lebovic (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).
- 8 Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948), 30.
- 9 The model was inspired by McCulloch and Pitt’s model of neural networks: their work was not referred to, but Turing’s paper was not published either. See Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts, “A logical calculus of the ideas immanent in nervous activity,” *Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1943).
- 10 Alan Turing, “Intelligent Machinery” (1948), in *The Essential Turing*, ed. Jack Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 421.
- 11 Alan Turing, “Lecture on the Automatic Computing Engine,” (1947), in *ibid.*, 394. See Andrew Hodges, “Alan Turing,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, Winter 2013 edition: “Once the possibility of mistakes is admitted, Gödel’s theorem becomes irrelevant. Mathematicians and computers alike apply computable processes to the problem of judging the correctness of assertions; both will therefore sometimes err, since seeing the truth is known not to be a computable operation, but there is no reason why the computer need do worse than the mathematician.”
- 12 Gilbert Simondon, “Individuation in the Light of the Notions of Form and Information.” Quoted in Andrea Bardin, *Epistemology and Political Philosophy in Gilbert Simondon* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 70.
- 13 Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2015). See also Charles Wolfe, “De-ontologizing the Brain: from the fictional self to the social brain,” *CTHEORY*, 2007 <https://web.archive.org/web/20080214150538/http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=572>.
- 14 Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986 (1934)).
- 15 David Weinbaum and Viktoras Veitas, “Open-Ended Intelligence: The Individuation of Intelligent Agents,” *Journal of Experimental & Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 2016: 1–26.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Pancomputationalism is also addressed by French philosopher Michel Serres. See Matteo Pasquinelli, “On Solar Databases and the Exogenesis of Light,” in “Supercommunity,” special issue, *e-flux journal* 65 (May 2015) <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/on-solar-databases-and-the-exogenesis-of-light/>.
- 18 Thanks to Lorenzo Sandoval for pointing to this section of the documentary.
- 19 Friedrich Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *American Economic Review*, 1945: 520.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 524.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 527.
- 22 Claude Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” *Bell System Technical Journal*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1948.
- 23 “Master algorithm” is an expression used in machine learning. See Pedro Domingos, *The Master Algorithm* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
- 24 The conference took place at New York University, March 21–22, 2016.
- 25 For an account of the British industrialist class’s cult of the steam engine, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso Books, 2016).
- 26 *Esiod 2015*, directed by Clemens von Wedemeyer, 39 min, Austria/Germany, 2016.
- 27 Simon Schaffer, “Babbage’s Intelligence: Calculating Engines and the Factory System,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1994).

Antonia Majaca

Little Daniel Before the Law: Algorithmic Extimacy and the Rise of the Paranoid Apparatus

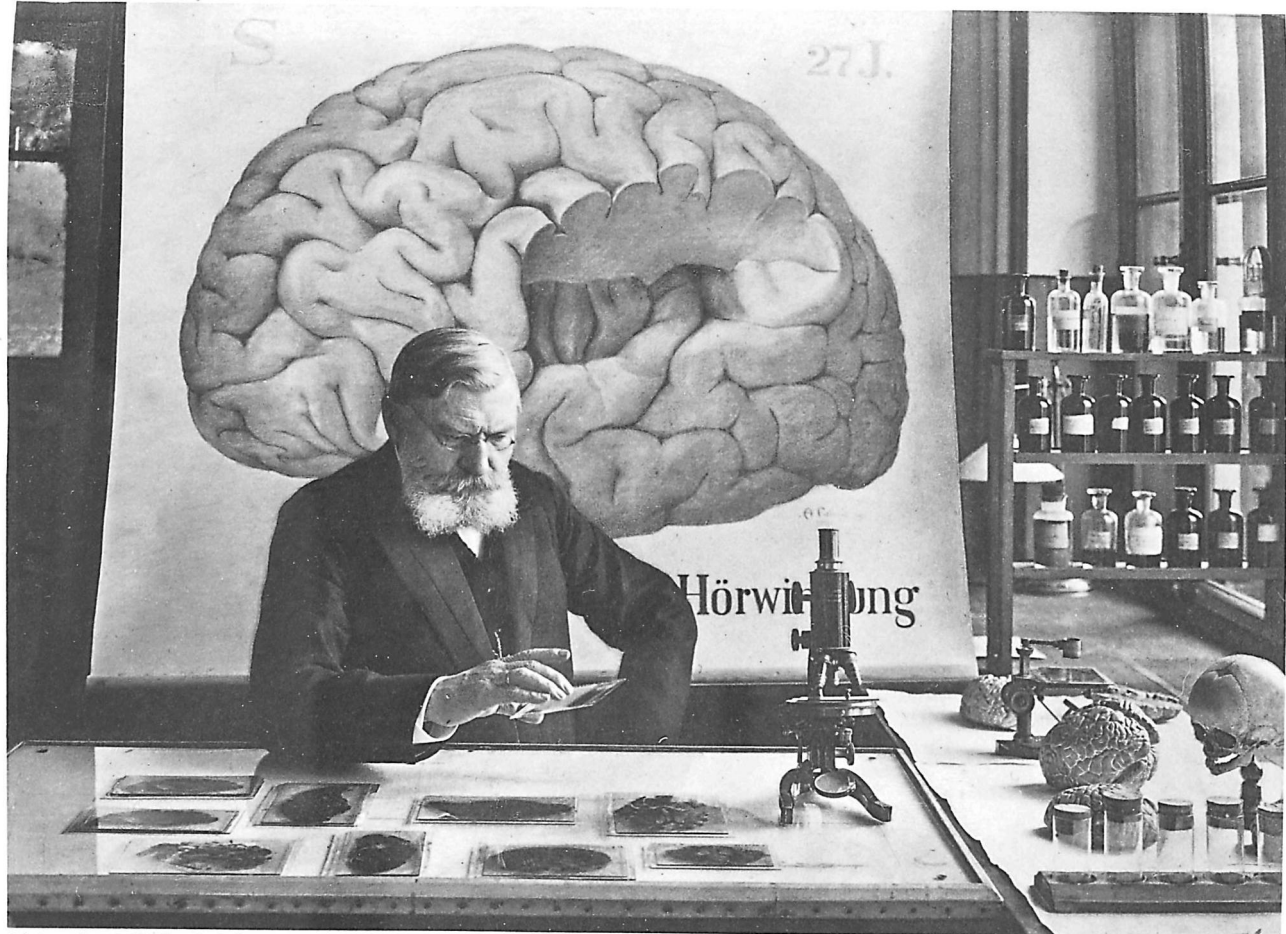
1. Nervous Systems

In 1882 Doctor Paul Emil Flechsig, a brain anatomist with no experience in clinical psychiatry, took up the directorship of the psychiatric clinic of the University Hospital in Leipzig. For German institutional psychiatry, the appointment decisively inaugurated a new episteme. In one move, the era of the soul ended and the era of the brain began.¹ Dr. Flechsig's project linked neural activity to all of human behavior and thought, a reduction that persists in contemporary neuroscience. Despite substantial work done in order to resocialize and politicize neuronal contingency, materialist neuronormativity remains the dominant scheme for understanding the brain in today's neoliberal neurosociety.² This means that the discourses responsibly for interpreting the significance of the brain's plasticity remain predominately mobilized towards individual enhancement, adaptation, and modification in the context of a neoliberal care of the Self, in contrast, for example, with the investment of the Italian autonomists in the political and emancipatory potential of the general intellect, as explored in the work of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno.

Dr. Flechsig's early experiments in the Leipzig clinic were among the first institutional attempts to bring the immortal spirit down to the level of physiology. Like his famous predecessor, the neuropathologist Theodor Meynert,³ Flechsig contended that psychiatry should be understood as nothing more than the treatment of diseases of the individual brain. All human actions were caused by scientifically explicable, objective truths that could be distilled from neuroanatomical data. This neuropsychiatric tradition of understanding mental illness as an objective and quantifiable entity—simply the illness of the nerves and the brain—was initiated by the neurologist Wilhelm Griesinger in the mid-nineteenth century.

From Griesinger to Meynert and Flechsig, neuropsychiatry did away with early-nineteenth-century Romantic psychiatry, which understood itself as the treating of the soul and which grew out of the pantheistic elements in *Naturphilosophie*. The challenge for Flechsig and others was to suture psychiatry to *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science), thus granting it the objective status of a true science, and with it the empirical authority over brain matter and the nervous system.

As we will come to see, this ultimately sets up a neuronal universality of the human within the white male ratio as the persistent figure of scientized humanism, a figure to be preserved at all costs. Here was born the individual as a complex system of information localization and transfer that could be rewired and reset using the right scientific and social programming. As the brain became the machine that pilots the human, an analogous pathway was laid for the future development of using machines to model the brain, which played out in the century that

Monatsschrift für Psych u Neurol Bd XXVI*Meisenbach Riffarth & Co.**Verlag von S. Karger, Berlin*

Paul Flechsig

Doctor Paul Emil Flechsig poses behind an anatomic depiction of the brain. Significantly, Flechsig “a brain anatomist with no experience in clinical psychiatry, took up the directorship of the psychiatric clinic of the University Hospital in Leipzig.”

followed. Flechsig's neuropathological paradigm marked the moment when the categories of incompleteness, incommutability, and unknowability begin to be generally understood not as a space of possibility and a terrain for a non-normative subjectivization, but as a threat and a source of social and political paranoia.

Given the significance of Flechsig's work and its lineage, it is unsurprising that one of his patients, the judge Daniel Paul Schreber, became the most discussed and analyzed of all psychiatric patients, continuing to be relevant to both scientific and literary engagements with individual and collective paranoia. Schreber wrote an extensive first-person memoir where he described his nervous illness in great detail, in a style that merged methodical legal writing with the inspiration and literary flourish of a

highly educated and sophisticated madman.

Since *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, originally written to support Schreber's release from a psychiatric asylum, was published in 1903 by Leipzig Verlag von Oswald Mutze—a publishing house with a penchant for spiritualism and evolutionary science⁴—it has been written about and analyzed by Freud, Benjamin, Lacan, Canetti, Deleuze and Guattari, and numerous others.⁵ In the text, Schreber claims that his two nervous illnesses both resulted, first, from the burden of unsuccessfully running for the Reichstag as the conservative/national candidate, and second, from being appointed the presiding judge (*Senatspräsident*) in Saxony's highest court in Dresden. His mania came first from a struggle for political power and then again from assuming the position

of highest legal and social authority.

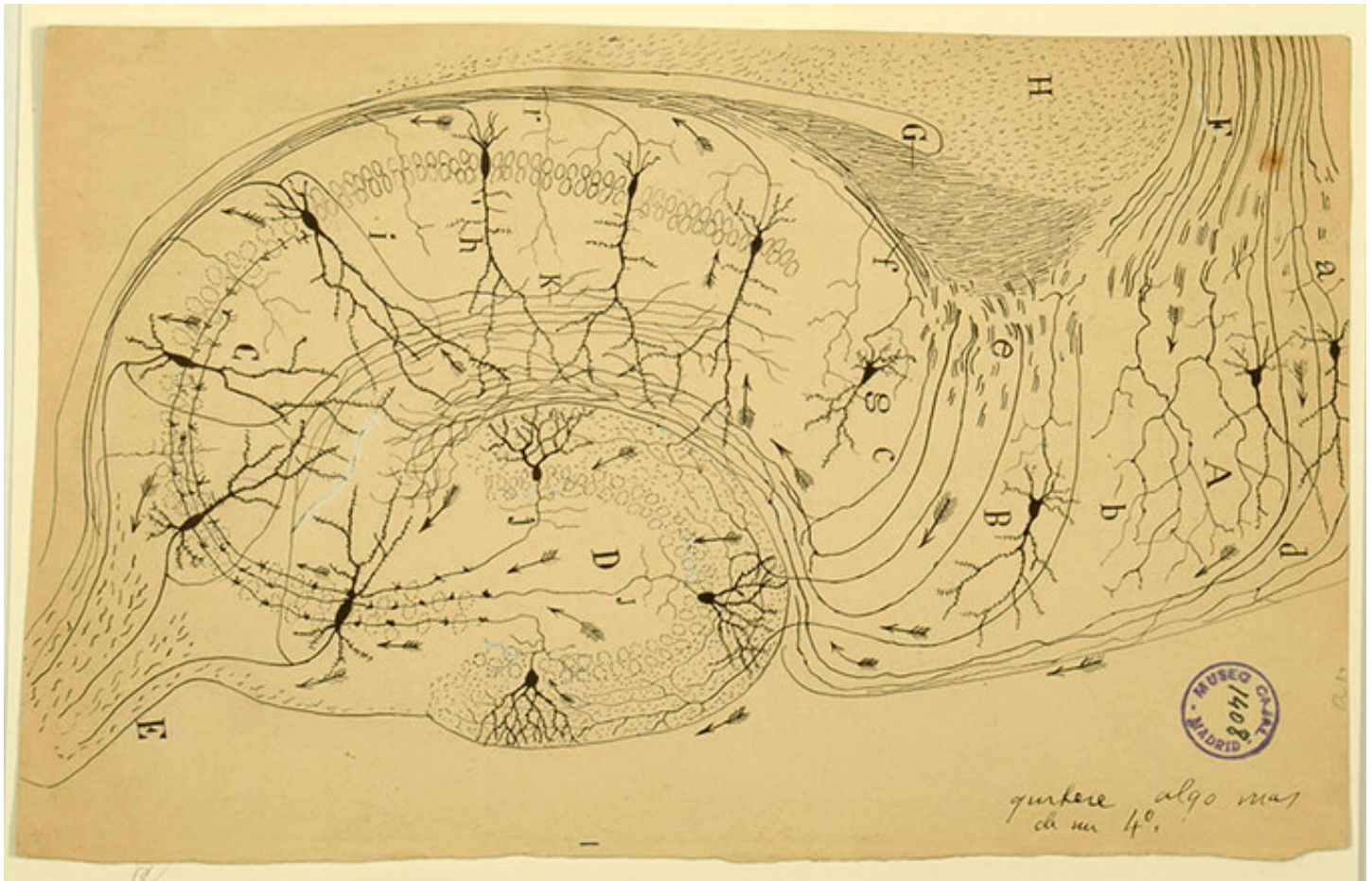
During his first episode Schreber spent only six months at Flechsig's clinic, and another six during his second, when he developed a complex system of paranoid delusions and hallucinations. He posited the existence of numerous gods feeding on his nerves, which he referred to as "fleeting improvised men." He claimed to have developed a special relation with God, who had entrusted him with saving humanity after it had been destroyed. In the eight years he spent in the Sonnenstein asylum under Dr. Guido Weber (who also served as the expert witness in the Schreber case that was to decide whether the judge should be released or not), Schreber became convinced that Flechsig, who was interchangeable with one of the minor, nerve-feeding gods, was prosecuting him. His final delusion was that his nerves were attractive to God and that therefore his mission to renew humanity also required his becoming a woman in order to be penetrated and impregnated by the nerves of God. This mad-divine encounter would in turn give birth to a new humanity that would restore the "order of things" (*Weltordnung*). However, God, who in Schreber's pathological paranoid system becomes the double of the anatomist Flechsig, only visits corpses (such as those on which Flechsig performed his neuro-anatomic research) and souls, but never the living. Schreber believed that an automatic recording system was in charge of narrating his accounts, and that this was also the guarantor of the absolute truth of his meticulously developed hallucinatory system.

The desire to conquer all the "unknown unknowns" of the human and make all aspects of the human fully accountable reverts to its properly religious heritage—the idea of an immaculate conception, a mating with God. The ideal of scientific completeness implicit in Flechsig's materialist neuropsychiatry is explicitly articulated in the delusions of his most famous patient. It also underlies the social and political mathematics of one of his most (in)famous disciples, Emil Kraepelin—one of the most influential advocates of social Darwinism, eugenics, and racial hygiene as methods for preserving the purity of the German *Volk*. The projects of Flechsig and Kraepelin each participate in reducing the real to the rational in order to pursue the total capture of human life within the immanence of computability. Judge Schreber, on the other hand, is the late epitome of the Nietzschean madman. In her book *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva addresses the foundation of instituting (white) man as the universal Subject of knowledge in scientific projects dedicated to finding the "truth of man." What she calls "the transparent 'I'"—the universal Subject that possesses the means and tools to *discover the truth*—is the stronghold of *Homo Modernus*. Ferreira Da Silva opposes it to the "affectable I"—"the scientific construction of non-European minds." In this light, Schreber, the pan-ultimate white European male madman, the product of Enlightenment Reason, is a warped mirror which confirms and professes from the inside of the

"transparent I" that "that which falls prey to Reason by becoming its object has no place in the realm of Freedom."⁶

In his contemporary appraisal of the relevance of Schreber's case, Eric Santner situates the judge in the wider social aftermath of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and the accompanying paranoias about cultural degeneration in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Santner reads Schreber's testimony as an "investiture crisis"—a point of rupture when institutional protocols and symbolic orders "collapse into the most intimate core of one's being."⁷ Through both a psychoanalytic and historical materialist lens, such a collapse entails a complete "loss of distance to some obscene and malevolent presence that appears to have a direct hold of one's inner parts," generating anxieties not of absence but of extreme proximity.⁸ I would argue, in affinity with Santner, that it is necessary to understand this particular historical neurosis in order to identify a lineage of libidinal economy running from the totalitarian fascist regime that emerged in the decades after Schreber's death, through the modern and postmodern forms of totalitarian rule and the collective paranoia of the Cold war, to the neoliberal world order that followed and the forms of technocratic postfascism we have witnessed in recent years across the Global North.

Schreber's account of the relation between God, nerves, and truth is decisive for Santner in understanding the "theological dimension of political and social authority" in which paranoia is a form of knowledge concerning structural anomalies that malfunction in the "politico-theological procedures that otherwise sustain the very ontological consistency of what we call the 'world.'"⁹ Here, Max Nordau's diagnosis of ideological and cultural fatigue at the end of the nineteenth century, whereby symbolic values and forms lost their ontological base and credibility, is instructive. Accelerated technological development at this time was transposed into the realm of the personal: innovations such as steam and electricity penetrated so deeply into the life of every individual that they influenced the nervous system itself. It was, however, not merely this vertiginous technological development but its coinciding with the discovery of the laws of entropy that destabilized belief systems, optimism, and collective certainties so fundamentally.¹⁰ The very concept of social stability had to be refounded via a neuroscientifically reconstituted ideal of self-identical Enlightenment reason. Its new location was the sphere of scientific medicine, which enabled, for the first time, the "nerves" of "objective" observation and inquiry to gain immediate access to the nerves of individuals. A vivid image of such direct nerve intrusion appears in the open letter that Judge Schreber addresses to Dr. Flechsig: "I have not the least doubt that the *first impetus* to what my doctors always considered mere 'hallucinations' but which to me signified communication with supernatural powers, consisted of *influences on my nervous system emanating from your nervous system*."¹¹ Undoubtedly, Schreber can



An early twentieth-century drawing by Spanish doctor Santiago Ramón y Cajal portrays how nervous tissue is structured in the hippocampus (Ammon's horn) and the direction of the nerve impulse. Drawing, india ink on paper. Photo: Instituto Cajal (CSIC), Madrid.

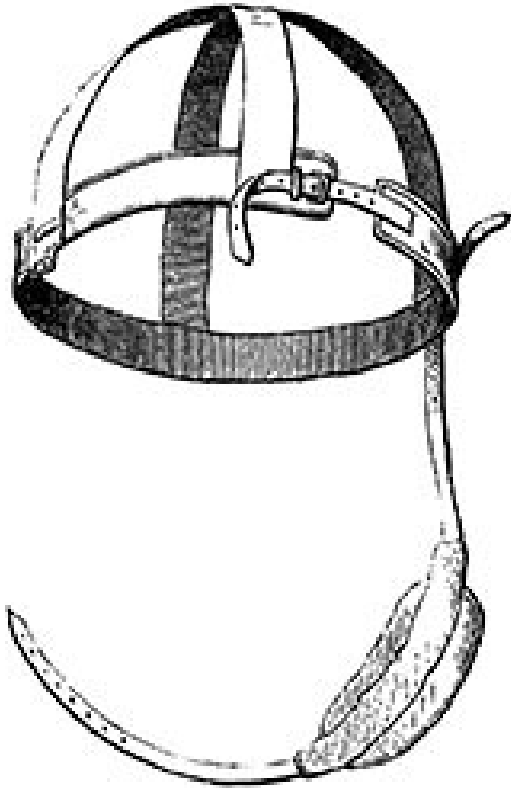
be considered as his doctor's negative, as suggested by Friedrich Kittler: where the scientist sees progress towards a new secular understanding of nature, the madman sees the intrusion of supernatural phenomena.¹²

And, of course, considered against our received understanding of nature, the progress of so-called "secular understanding" *must* be considered supernatural, epistemologically speaking, in order to be legible as progress at all. This is the contradiction, we might say, of modern science, which enthrones a secular idea of nature only to consistently overthrow it with the advent of newer paradigms. When Schreber explicitly accuses Flechsig of dispiriting him, of "soul murder" (*Seelenmord*), he is describing an actually existing tension between two "nervous systems" and a reduction of the complexity of human subjectivity and personhood to calculable anomalies. Even though Schreber describes this murder by drawing on the Faustian literary trope of the Devil claiming one's soul, it is in fact with a local "God of science" and scientific inquiry that Schreber signs his fatal contract.

This should not surprise us, given that the Feuerbachian

project of humanist essentialism proceeds by installing Man in God's place but *otherwise leaving its conceptual foundation in place*. Like the Roman conquerors who replaced the heads on local totems with the visage of Caesar while leaving local rituals intact, the religion of humanism preserves the inherited, social relations of truth as it found them. Instead of an implacable, Abrahamic God, the symbolic effects of embodied, socially situated, and culturally lived subjectivity are now collapsed directly into sheer data, as the basis for a new regime of truth.

In the field of psychiatry epitomized by Flechsig, this transition meant the advent of the brain and matter as the loci of distortion. In Schreber's case, this traumatic sequence is transferred into a hallucinatory vision of intruding nerves and develops into the specific operations of a "nerve language": an automated writing-down-system (*Aufschreibesystem*),¹³ driven by a nerve(ous) automata lacking any conscious animating agency but still governing the flow of nervous energy in the universe. It is exactly this writing-down-system that ensures—by the very mechanical recording of the doings of nerves, dictated by the miraculous connection with an unbiased God—absolute proximity to truth. If we take Schreber at



This orthopedic device was designed by Daniel Paul Schreber's father, Moritz Schreber, to correct children's posture.

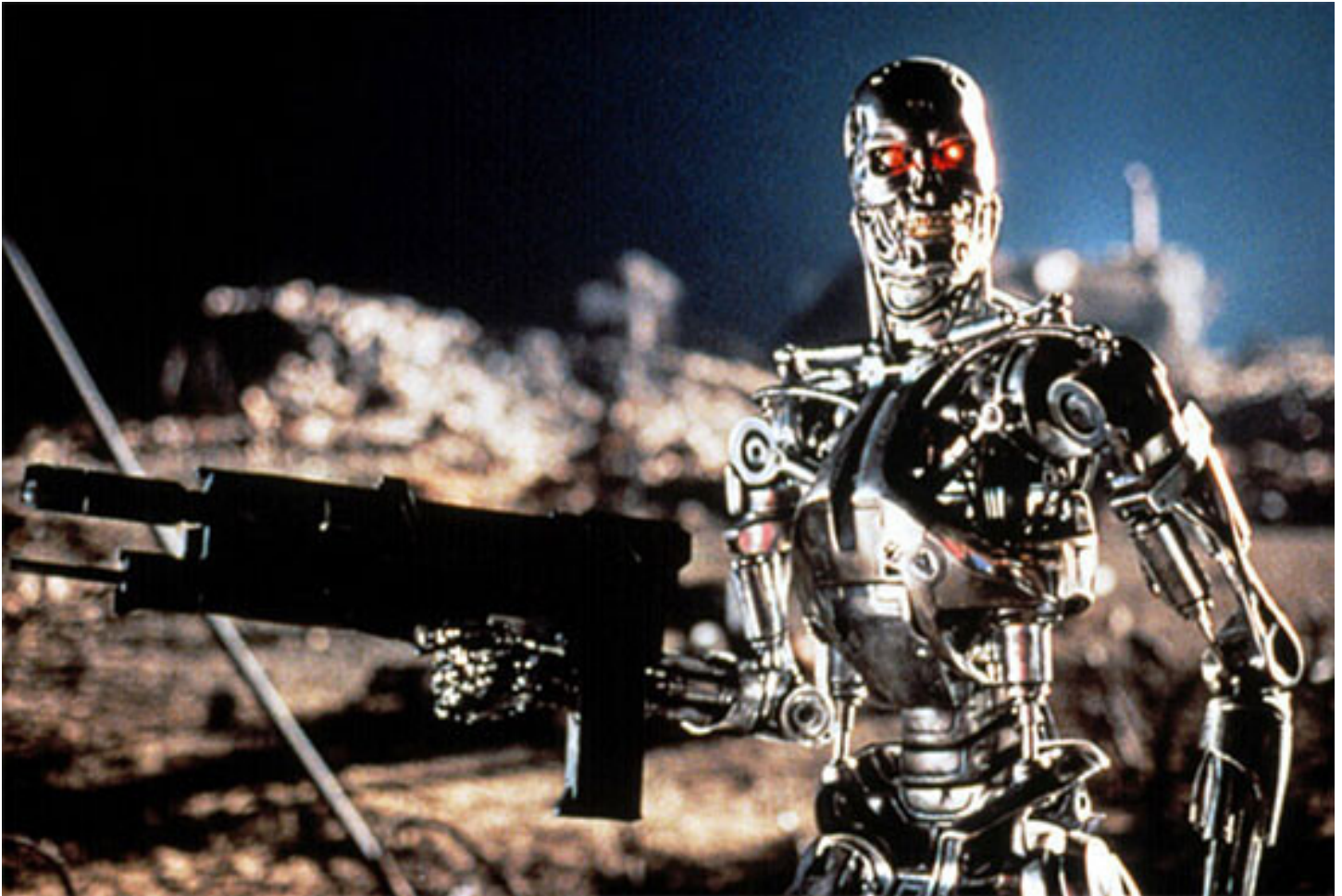
his word (as Freud did, at least when it suited him in supporting his own theories) in describing the mind as a complex information system orchestrated by the actions of the nerves, the truth that speaks through the automated nerve language is the truth of the disciplinary, monstrous classification regime Schreber was born into.¹⁴

If, as Freud says, the paranoiac discloses what the neurotic tries to hide, then Schreber's paranoia—articulated to such systemic and imaginative degrees—becomes an oracle, unveiling, in all its clarity, the real of the turn of the century. "The real" here means that Schreber's paranoia is in fact a traumatic rapture in the habitual language of the symbolic order of his time.¹⁵ The paranoid automatic writing-down-system sheds light on the moment when the fantasy of the *complete* (white male) subject is equipped with new means to become a next-level arbiter of truth, including in the control over life and death. Such a configuration of secular authority is accompanied by the immediately suppressed horror of recognizing that in his newly acquired position of the absolute sovereign, Man is the secular incarnation of Divine Law on Earth. In this light, Judge Schreber's paranoia must be taken not only as the manifestation of a brutal extimacy (over-proximity to penetration by the nerves of God/Flechsich), but as a manifestation of the nervous breakdown of the white male subject of

Enlightenment humanism, crushed in a moment of grasping its paradoxical double occupation: he is both the gatekeeper and author of the Law, and the sad penitent before it, a subject of eternal voluntary servitude, as described in Kafka's famous parable.¹⁶ Here lies the uninterrupted and chilling continuity of the Schreberian double bind that leads to our age, in which the latest incarnation of totalitarian paranoia produced by the contemporary necropolitical apparatus of data positivism, profiling, and prediction creates its very own *Aufschreibesystem*.¹⁷ Similarly to Schreber, this one not only acts as the oracle of new truths but discloses the real of the regime behind it—the regime of an automated (data) totalitarianism.

2. "Unknown Unknowns" and the Paranoid Apparatus

In Eric Santner's words, "where there is a culture of paranoia, fascism of one kind or another may not be far behind."¹⁸ At the very least, paranoia is a revealing symptom to follow, as it is structured as a disjunctive synthesis: it decomposes and breaks down into elements "the products of the condensations and identifications which are effected in the unconscious."¹⁹ It is therefore unsurprising, even logical, that Schreber identifies with



In the Terminator franchise, here portrayed in its second iteration *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Skynet is a fictional neural net-based conscious system that serves as the main antagonist.

the male Arian that turns into all sorts of “lower beings,” among them a women and a wandering Jew (both connoting the horror of unmaning/ *Entmannung*). Paranoia in this instance reveals “already fascisizing libidinal investment,” as Deleuze and Guattari have phrased it.²⁰ In light of such a diagnosis, Schreber’s deliriums are in fact the emergent real of a hyperbolized “conspiracy theoretical” processing of the epistemic birth of the total apparatus, which will keep changing shape throughout the next century and on into the current one.

It goes without saying that the real history of this narrative was European imperialism, which constructed a white, masculine ideal of rational fullness and permanent progress as an ex post facto justification for the brutality of colonialism. Scientific racism, forged in the ruthless crucible of exploitation that was the New World, boomeranged back into the fold of History as fascist ideology. In such a trajectory, the expanded paranoid machine constructed in the aftermath of WWII was simply a continuation of the totalitarian techno-management of life and death suppressed by the “anti-ideology” of liberalism and by Pax Americana into the collective

unconscious. The ideology of progress, the technological acceleration of totalitarianism, and the politicization of population management each found renewed and continuous expression in the paranoid scenarios of the Cold War. In a development parallel to this history of governmentality, the brain came to be considered a white male computer to be either fixed or reprogrammed. The repressed history of white male domination returned as a fantasy called “the computer,” an idealized model of a future white male brain that could, *once again*, be entrusted with piloting social, political, and economic life in the name of a stability that stubbornly refuses to arrive.

Today, it is the logic of data correlation and the extraction of meaning from activity-based intelligence that has become the dominant condition of possibility for the new automated *Aufschreibesystem*, one that increasingly exists independent of causal reasoning. In this scenario, life and death are subsumed into a system that could be said to suffer from an irreversible nervous paranoia. Every anomaly in the established data pattern triggers an alert for the nervous apparatus of prediction and control. It was Donald Rumsfeld, the Bush-era US Secretary of Defense,

who infamously articulated this new categorical imperative in response to a question about the lack of evidence linking the government of Saddam Hussein to weapons of mass destruction: “As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” On the sticky surface of this paranoid, private, but simultaneously shared mental glue, a new kind of extimacy takes shape: the paranoid apparatus and the paranoid post-subject (the subject now reducible to data provider/user/composite cybernetic entity, arguably without agency) are in a constant over-proximity in a flattened space guided by the rule of the “quantifiable”—whether infinite or qualitatively complex. The only difference, of course, is how much data is available.

While vertically interconnecting systems of governmentality are able to construct complex paranoid mega-apparatuses, users are structurally reduced to the position of conspiracy theorists—visionary non-agents equipped with a false sense of having effectively mapped complexity. Ultimately, the universal, unconscious material paranoia of the data harvesters is reflected in the particular, oversensitive mania of the data providers. The imaginative faculty, its aptitude, is reduced to a claustrophobic sense that the world is already predetermined and that there exists a sacred code by which everything is connected, but in a way that can only be guessed at using mere cues and proxies. In such a scenario, artificial intelligence is often paranoically perceived as a kind of a new, self-governing Behemoth, which is, as we know from Schreber, merely the same old God of voluntary servitude to, and dependency on, phantasms of power and domination. If Flechsig, the brain anatomist, saw as the ultimate achievement of his work the “localization of categories of Kant’s transcendental idealism in the frontal lobe of the brain,”²¹ then certainly the present paranoia around the continuing accelerated development of AI captures the continuation of the desperate disfranchised imperialist search for the transcendental. When the absolute sovereign disappears as an addressable authority, the masters of the algorithmically enhanced Enlightenment cannot but keep either searching for it or attempting to construct it.

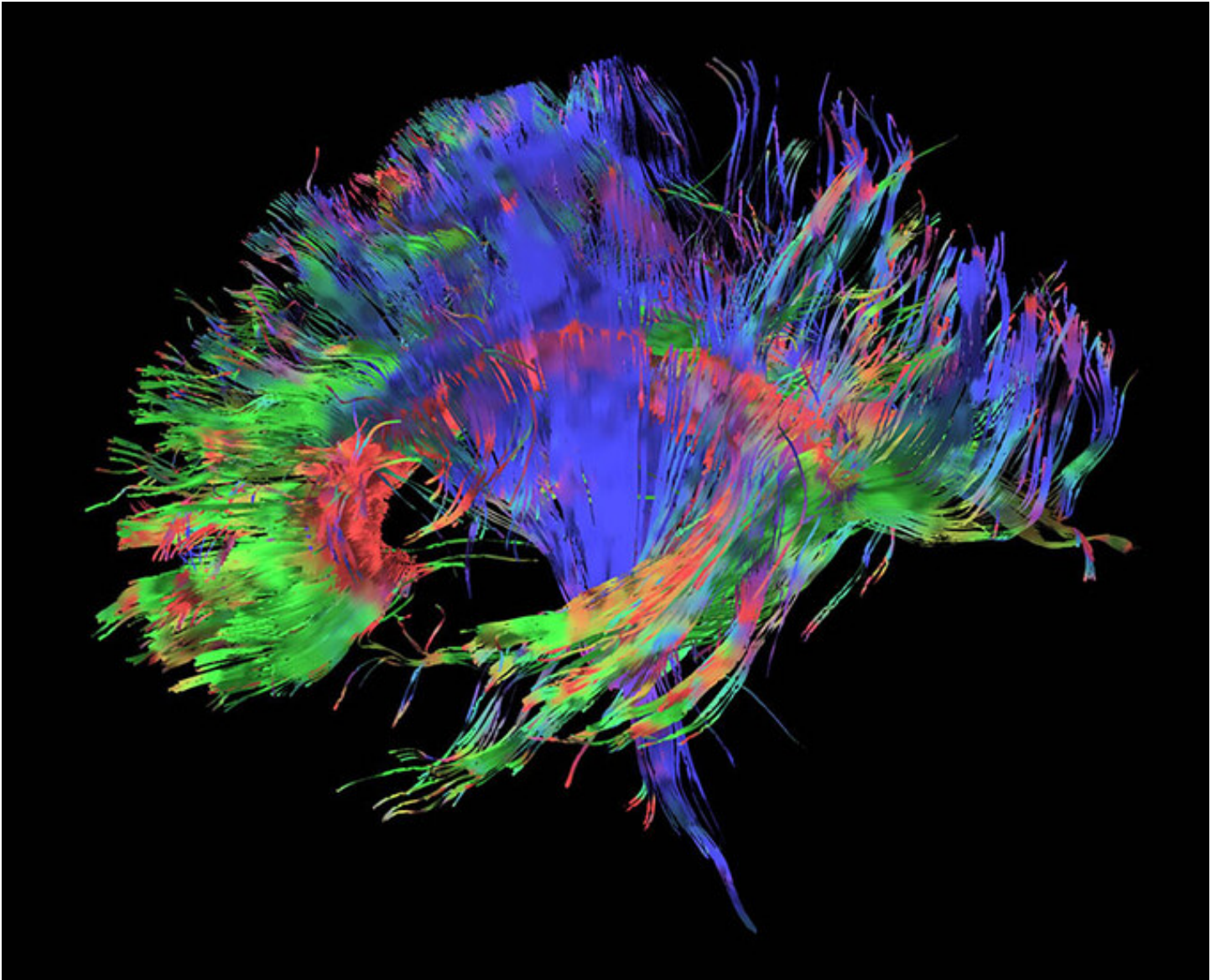
A recent incarnation of this paranoid principle can be found in an NSA surveillance program symptomatically entitled SKYNET.²² SKYNET is a machine-learning system that analyzes the metadata of 55 million Pakistani cell phones with the aim of detecting potential terrorist subject-threats. The Random Forest Algorithm behind the system functions similarly to a regular spam filter. For any spam filter to work optimally, it is essential that it be able to distinguish between known spam and known non-spam—the two categories form what is referred to as the system’s organizing “ground truths.” Distinguishing

these enables the algorithm to correctly filter unwanted spam messages from that “old friend” or monarch in Nigeria or Indonesia who desperately needs your cash, for example. However, unlike the spam filter that is based on a substantial number of known (proven) spam messages, the SKYNET classification algorithm simply cannot operate with so many proven, “known terrorists” as the basis of its training set; it can only use already known messengers (of known terrorist organizations) to develop operational premises. An enormous quantity of collected cell phone metadata is read through these flawed, non-ubiquitous “ground truths” to generate a “potential terrorist” score for each individual device. The powerful, error-prone agency of the program is then transferred over to predator drones and death squads, which take care of executions on the ground. The ultimate product of this algorithmically driven procedure is thus a series of extrajudicial executions—a landscape of dead bodies and souls.

The unhappy congruence between the name given to this killer algo-program and the machine control depicted in the *Terminator* films’ wars between globalized AI (which operates through servers, drones, satellites, and cyborgs, such as the one personified by the famous Austrian bodybuilder and former governor of California) and humans is not coincidental. The self-authorizing, paranoid, “evil AI” that the techno-military complex named after apocalyptic fiction makes evident in a bigger picture the white male voluntary subjugation mechanisms’ phantasm of subjection: to be always in search of the transcendental nerves to penetrate and be penetrated by. Here (again), the machine and the brain are made out to be fully comparable communication systems, as famously analyzed by the Macy cyberneticians.²³ The paranoid pulsating brain of the techno-military apparatus’ megamachine receives electric signals vibrating in constant and exaggerated proximity to its limbic extensions. The NSA’s SKYNET is thereby trusted as the unbiased Oracle of a future perfect, a new Schreberian paranoid machine whereby algorithmic extimacy discloses the real of emergent forms of data totalitarianism. The automated language of data harvesting, emptied of causality, is its actual *Aufschreibesystem*. If it is true, as psychoanalysis holds, that what is behind automation is the real, then what we are witnessing here is, perhaps paradoxically, quite the opposite from Friedrich Kittler’s view that the world of the machine is the world of the symbolic order. Here, the world of the machine becomes the world of the real.

3. *Becoming Incomputable*

In his 1965 book *The Nerves of Government*, Karl Deutsch introduced an approach to political analysis that applied Norbert Wiener’s concepts of feedback, channel capacity, and memory to social systems, consciousness, and social

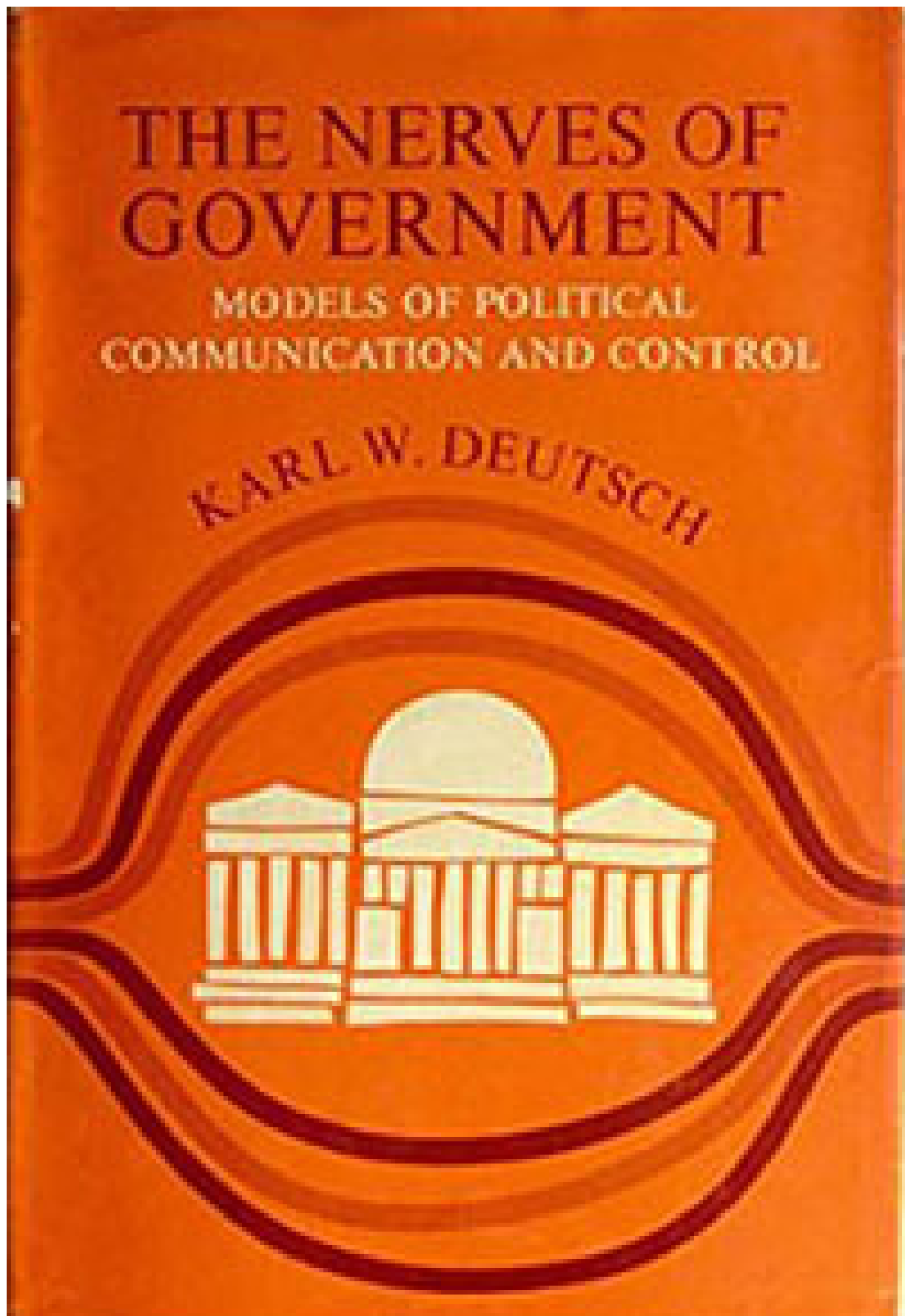


A high-throughput electrophysiology portrait of the brain from the Paul Allen Institute shows a living brain in action. Paul Allen was the co-founder of Microsoft along with Bill Gates.

learning. By now, all the preconditions for the cybernetization of the social that Deutsch traced have been fulfilled: data-harvesting assemblages construct new totalitarian machines of capture; information is gathered and managed by correlation, and so on. The nerves of the new paranoid God of capture now exist, as in Schreber's case, in a continuous uninterrupted connection with the nerves of its subjects. Deutsch also famously proposed that we think of political systems in terms of human brain operations—possessing, receiving, and processing nerves and managing information in order to generate responses. The crucial task, he contented, was understanding the conditions under which the nerves of the political systems and their apparatuses of capture become overloaded with incoming data and fail to convert these messages into adequate responses. The nervous breakdown of SKYNET,

where flawed classification systems cause the deaths of thousands of innocents, would be just one candidate for such an analysis. The idea that technology is an extension of our central nervous system and, in fact, our consciousness, as proposed by Marshall McLuhan around the same time as Deutsch considered the social system as the brain and the nervous system, should thus be reversed. Haven't we in fact become the extension of the central nervous system of the automated paranoid megamachine that Schreber's madness so brilliantly described?

In an attempt to capture his own nervous breakdown as



Front cover of Karl Deutsch's 1965 book *The Nerves of Government*.

the soul-murder that it was, Schreber lucidly understood the act of taking over a soul as having the aim of prolonging the taker's own life, or securing some other benefits "which outlast death." The other in the triadic structure that organizes the symbolic order of the militarized paranoid apparatus is thus fully comparable with Schreber's God Flechsig, who prays on the nerves of corpses. Under conditions of total visibility, what might it mean to be more than "the android doubles we look like to those who, we think, control us," as Lawrence Rickels has put it?²⁴ We might entertain the question of whether Schreber's image of his nerves pretending to be dead in order to start a new android race capable of replications beyond the drudgery of mortal reproduction and death is a hallucinatory premonition of our future survival options. Or should we rather, while keeping in mind Fredric Jameson's claim that conspiracy theory is the "poor's man critique of ideology," dismiss such unhappy thoughts and embrace the android optimism of thinking that we encounter here a draft of a program for our future becoming inhuman,²⁵ a sketch for an ever-expanding notion of human—a new, alien beginning of humanity that understands the human as never complete?

What would it mean to become incomputable, in affinity with the constituent incomputability that is part of the very logic of the machine? What would it mean to take both the machinic and human incompleteness seriously as a premises for a non-paranoiac politics and imagination? Might such an attempt also entail a struggle for the return of a reconfigured notion of the psyche, or an invocation of what Schreber calls "the soul"—that flawed protagonist of incompleteness and its unknown, contingent nature, embodied and situated, that died at the doors of Flechsig's clinic?

Subjectivity bound to the white-male myth of humanism has always been a violent, impossible totalization. Embracing instead the flawed, unfinished incompleteness of the soul as the bearer of inhuman potential, as humanness unbound, is to enter the realm of the possible against the probable, a way of denying complete absorption to the data sovereign and its nerves of capture.²⁶ It also means finally ceasing to be the creature that stands obediently and eternally in front of the gates of the Law, like Kafka's pathetic man from the country, who dies waiting. The ontological heterogenesis once invoked by Deleuze means here not only alienating the naturalness of the human but also creating machines capable of constructing pathways for politicizing the collapse of the boundary between the world of matter and the hermeneutical world of the social Subject from a non-paranoid perspective. A political project of properly thinking with and through the machines and with and through the social brain needs a subject unbound to the voluntary servitude of either naturalist or transcendentalist provenance—in other words, it will have to be undertaken by a non-white, non-male subject of non-paranoid non-humanism conceptually and politically aligned with the incomputability in the machine itself.

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This essay was originally written for the volume *Nervöse Systeme*, edited by Anselm Franke, Stephanie Hankey, and Marek Tuszynski, for HKW - Haus der Kulturen der Welt and published by Matthes & Seitz, Berlin in January 2017.

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- 1 Zvi Lothane, *In Defense of Schreber: Soul Murder and Psychiatry* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1992, 2005).
- 2 For an introductory overview of current discussions on the social brain vs. neoliberal neuromaterialism, see Charles T. Wolfe, "Brain Theory Between Utopia and Dystopia: Neuronormativity Meets the Social Brain," in *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas*, ed. Matteo Pasquinelli (Lüneburg: meson press, 2015); and Victoria Pitts Taylor, "The Plastic Brain: Neoliberalism and the Neuronal Self," *Health*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2010).
- 3 Some of Meynert's famous students in Vienna were the Russian neuropsychiatrist Sergei Korsakoff and Sigmund Freud. One of Flechsig's disciples, Emil Kraepelin, was one of the most influential advocates of eugenics and racial hygiene at the turn of the century.
- 4 The same publishing house released the work of Ernst Haeckel, a key figure in social Darwinism, who is discussed further below. His 1874 *Anthropogenie*—a book on embryology—had a significant role in Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, or "culture struggle," of the 1870s.
- 5 For a good overview of what has been written on Schreber, see Lothane, *In Defense of Schreber*.
- 6 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 7 Eric Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 8 *Ibid.*, xii.
- 9 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 11 Daniel Paul Schreber, "Open Letter To Professor Flechsig," in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), 8. Italics in original.
- 12 Referenced in Eric Butler, *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film, Cultural Transformations in Europe, 1732–1933* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 133.
- 13 Friedrich Kittler, whose seminal *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (first edition: Fink: Munich, 1985) takes its name from Schreber's system of "writing-down." In his account of Schreber's case, Kittler sees Flechsig's psychophysical paradigm and Schreber's writing as two poles of the new model of arranging the social and psychic sphere. Flechsig's work marks the moment when personhood is replaced by an information system, thus preparing the ground for the emergence of new and more effective ways for power to intrude into the body as the object of investigation. "If psychophysics can explain its effects out of existence, then experimental subjects have no choice but open warfare and thus publication. Schreber writes to Flechsig in Flechsig's language in order to demonstrate in the latter's own territory that Schreber's purported hallucinations are facts effectuated by the discourse of the Other. The *Memoirs* stand and fight in the war of two discourse networks. They constitute a small discourse network with the single purpose of demonstrating the dark reality of another, hostile one." Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 296–97.
- 14 Schreber's father, Moritz Schreber, was a well-known educator and inventor of several uncanny correctional anatomical devices such as the *Geradehalter*, which made kids sit up straight at the table.
- 15 I am using the categories of the real, imaginary, and symbolic here quite crudely and without an absolute adherence and fidelity to how these appear in Lacanian psychoanalyses. I depart from the Lacanian triad in considering that the real is that which is beyond language and symbolization and which emerges only in moments of traumatic rupture, that the symbolic is primarily the domain of law and culture and the realm of its symbolic structures, and that the imaginary is that which relates to the illusion of totality, to fantasies of wholeness (of the image).
- 16 Franz Kafka's "Vor dem Gesetz" (Before the Law) parable, originally published in 1915, appears in *Der Prozess* (1925). Available in English online <http://www.kafka-online.info/before-the-law.html>.
- 17 I borrow the term "necropolitics" from an eponymous article by Achille Mbembe (2003). Drawing on Foucault's elaboration of the (sovereign's) right to kill (*droit de glaive*), Mbembe contends that in the age of "war against terror," the right to kill and the distribution of death become the dominant form of enacting sovereignty and power. Such necropower here connotes that the technologies of control, in the context of politics as war, actively exercise control over mortality. Mbembe's point is that "the contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity." Instead of considering "reason" as the truth of the subject we should rely on more tangible categories of life and death when discussing sovereignty in our times, in which the "state of exception and relations of enmity" have become the basis of the right to kill. Article available online <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~lhc/docs/achillembembe.pdf>.
- 18 Santner, xiv.
- 19 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 13.
- 20 "We can't go along with Maud Mannoni when she sees the first historical act of antipsychiatry in the 1902 decision granting Judge Schreber his liberty and responsibility, despite the recognized continuation of his delirious ideas. There is room for doubting that the decision would have been the same if Schreber had been schizophrenic rather than paranoiac, if he had taken himself for a black or a Jew rather than a pure Aryan, if he had not proved himself so competent in the management of his wealth, and if in his delirium he had not displayed a taste for the socius of an already fascisizing libidinal investment." *Ibid.*, 364.
- 21 Santner, 71.
- 22 Christian Grothoff and J. M. Porup, "The NSA's SKYNET program may be killing thousands of innocent people," *Ars Technica UK*, February 2, 2016 <http://arstechnica.co.uk/security/2016/02/the-nsas-skynet-program-may-be-killing-thousands-of-innocent-people/>
- 23 The relation between brain, mind and the machine occurred persistently in the Macy conferences, as well as the problem of psychoanalysis and unconscious. The contestation between the position of "hard sciences" and "mentalistic" perspectives of psychoanalysis and experimental psychology appeared repeatedly in the meetings. For example in the 7th conference (1950) L. Kubie's lecture on neurosis and its relation to language and symbols triggered a debate in which Pitts and Bateson attacked psychoanalysis of not being a science since it was not based on any coherent theory or objectivity. Psychiatry in general was seen as unscientific. In the following conference, an influential collaborator of Norbert Wiener, the Mexican physician Arturo Rosenbluth suggested that neural events either happens or it does not, basically dismissing the category of the 'unconscious' altogether as nonsense and positing that natural sciences can handle all the problems conventionally addressed by psychiatry. In addition, Walter Pitts proclaimed that psychiatrists should be able to demonstrate that their methods are 'scientific'. And while Pitts (who himself gave in to mental illness) and Warren McCulloch vigorously denied unconscious, Norbert Wiener believed that the discipline of psychoanalysis could productively be rethought in terms of communication and feedback. Lydia H. Liu for example, contends that

psychoanalysis continued to "haunt" the cyberneticians (*Liu: Freudian Robot. Digital Media and the Future of Unconscious* , Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010). For a more general overview of Macy Conferences (interdisciplinary gatherings of academics and researchers held in New York Between 1946 and 1953, sponsored by the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation) see for example: *Steve Heims: The Cybernetics Group* , MIT Press, 1991 and *Jean-Pierre Dupuy: The Mechanisation of Mind*, MIT Press, 2009. For the transcripts of the 10 conferences see the recent *Cybernetics: The Macy Conferences 1946-1953. The Complete Transactions*. Ed. by Claus Pias, Zuerich: Diaphanes, 2015.

24

Laurence Rickels, *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 68.

25

Reza Negarestani, "The Labor of the Inhuman," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* , ed. Robin Mackay (London: Urbanomic, 425–466).

26

See the essay "The Paradigm of Incomputability" by Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi in an upcoming issue of the *e-flux journal* .

The perfect con is one where everyone involved gets just what they wanted.

— *The Brothers Bloom* (directed by Rian Johnson, 2009)

Mari Bastashevski

The Perfect Con

For the longest part of the voyage, the twenty-six people on board the *Zim Qingdao*, a ten-year-old, 261-meter-long, 50,689-ton-capacity, Chinese-built container ship under a Liberian registration, included one Israeli captain, four Israeli officers, four Russian-Ukrainian-Israeli engineers, one Russian-Israeli electrician, one Bulgarian boatswain, seven deck workers—three from Sri Lanka, three from Ukraine, and one from Myanmar—one Sri Lankan and one Bulgarian fitter, a Bulgarian cook, two stewards—a Sri Lankan and a Russian-Ukrainian—a cadet from Israel, and a passenger whose duty cannot be publicly disclosed. The ship sailed through the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca, calling at the ports of Odessa, Istanbul Ambar, Haifa, Nhava Sheva, Port Klang, Da Chan Bay, Pusan, and Shanghai.

The announcement that an artist was coming on board reached the crew by fax, a one-way communication that was printed out and taped to the wall of the galley on B-deck, between the garbage disposal rules and an e-mail warning of the grave financial consequences for publishing images of the Suez Canal.¹ Arriving the same day was a mournful warning about impending food rations. It had come to the attention of management that the chef could make do with fewer vegetables than he had requested. Management would appreciate his economizing in these difficult times for the company.

In keeping with corporate protocol, no one had asked the crew for their opinion on the addition of the artist and they didn't pay much attention to the memo. At a supplemental briefing, the captain announced that "a woman artist" was coming aboard for "an exciting project sponsored by ZIM, which will be leveraged for public relations and marketing purposes." Two weeks into the trip the steward pointed at the head shot of the artist on the memo. "You are her?" he asked skeptically, "No way!" As someone less exposed to what constitutes a "celebrity," he couldn't reconcile the print version with the real person.

ZIM was founded in 1945 and quickly made a name for itself by transporting Jews to the land of Palestine and by offering luxurious sea cruises. In 1972, it entered the container shipping industry. For years the Israeli government steadily exercised more and more control over the company because of its perceived strategic value, but sold off its shares in 2004 to the Israel Corporation, then under the ownership of the Ofer Brothers Group.²

The Ofer brothers—Sammy and Yuli—founded the group



Sunset in the gulf of Aden, as witnessed during the weekly barbecue on g-deck.

in 1956,³ and at the time of their deaths were counted among the richest men in Israel.⁴ However, as part of a debt restructuring arrangement in 2014,⁵ Idan Ofer⁶ became CEO of a new entity, Kenon Holdings, registered in Singapore, which now holds a 32 percent interest in ZIM.⁷ The rest of the company was divided between a band of faceless bankers and shipyard executives.

At present, ZIM has no Israeli registration. Until 2014, most of the Ofers' businesses were operating under UK tax laws,⁸ which saved the Ofer family "tens of millions of shekels a year" in Israeli taxes.⁹ The company initially managed to weather the global recession, but has done poorly in recent years, reporting a net loss in the first quarter of 2016.¹⁰ And so the employees don't make professional plans ahead of their short-term contracts.

At first, the crew suspected that I was a corporate insider, placed to surveil and report back to management. They cordially kept their distance. It wasn't until four days into the trip, well into the Black Sea, that their icy diplomacy began to thaw. The electrician, hearing that I missed club soda, left a full pack of it by my cabin, and the chief officer, Meir Dizraeli, taught me how to make a monkey's knot

after I remarked on his exceptional rigging skills.

"I'm ... what's the word? Perplexed?" said one of the Sri Lankan deck workers. "Why would the company sponsor an artist? And give the proceeds to charity?"¹¹ Isn't the company experiencing financial difficulty?" His monthly salary is \$400.

"What will the sailors get out of this exactly?" wondered an officer. "Can we at least see the artwork somewhere?"

"Aren't you pretty critical of the company? How will it be good for PR?" inquired the kitchen crew.

"It doesn't matter if her work is critical or mediocre, her audience is too narrow anyway," said an engineer whose mother was an art critic and who took on the task of translating between art-speak and sea-speak for me. "In the end all that matters is the artist's name next to the name of the company. That's what they are paying for and that is what will be remembered."

The Ofers' investment in PR is considerable. The family gave £10 million to the Tate Modern in 2013 and £25



Tableware is one of many commonplace, household items labelled with a company logo on board of Zim Qingdao.

million to the London Business School, the largest gift in its history.¹² They poured millions into restoring the famous clipper ship *Cutty Sark*, which among other acts of maritime preservation earned the late Sammy Ofer a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II.¹³ When *The Shakshuka System*, an independent documentary that detailed the privatization process in Israel, placed special emphasis on the Ofer-ZIM arrangement, the Offers spent half-a-million shekels to produce a counterpoint cartoon.¹⁴ Claiming to have been slandered, they also sued the filmmakers, a suit that the judge dismissed.¹⁵ No Israeli TV network, save for the national public broadcaster (IBA), aired *The Shakshuka System*.¹⁶

By these standards, the Container Residency production budget is a drop in the ocean. It would barely cover the costs incurred by a one-hour delay in the ship's schedule. ZIM's office did not initiate the project—it was conceived by a team of resident curators—but the company has control over it. ZIM's contract with the resident artist ensures that the residency is a perfect PR opportunity for a company with a longstanding history of engaging with cultural initiatives and many years of experience in the kind of marketing that entails rubbing shoulders with

persons of note.

"Well, if you decide to protest against my being here, I'll support you," I said to the deck workers pondering the relationship between the company and the artist. "Don't say that—even jokingly," warned Alex, the night-duty officer. "More than two conspiring on board a ship constitutes a mutiny and can lead to very serious consequences!" Implausible accounts of one-man riots followed, growing more dramatic with each recap. A female officer, Angela, once sued for sexual harassment and won, after a deck worker threatened to throw himself overboard out of love. Either that or she rejected his offer of money in exchange for sex. A bold Israeli cadet celebrated his graduation by jumping overboard from the seventh deck while the ship was in motion, wearing a full safety suit with his passport and a radio and managing to activate the ship's emergency alarm. Later, in court, he argued that it was an accident rather than sabotage, and was allowed to stay on the job.

Life on a container ship is highly choreographed and hierarchical. Each seafarer is under someone else's command, but each also relies on the others. The day-duty

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Page 1

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WARNINGS/OVERVIEW:

SOMALI PIRACY

ATTACKS RELATED TO SOMALI PIRATES HAVE GREATLY REDUCED. HOWEVER, THE RISK OF BEING APPROACHED OR ATTACKED STILL EXISTS. VESSELS ARE ADVISED AND ENCOURAGED TO REMAIN VIGILANT AND COMPLY WITH ALL BMP4 PROCEDURES. THE THREAT OF THESE ATTACKS STILL EXIST IN THE WATERS OFF SOUTHERN RED SEA / BAB EL MANDEB, GULF OF ADEN, INCLUDING YEMEN AND THE NORTHERN SOMALI COAST, ARABIAN SEA / OFF OMAN, GULF OF OMAN AND OFF THE EASTERN, AND SOUTHERN SOMALI COAST. IN THE PAST VESSELS HAVE BEEN ATTACKED OFF KENYA, TANZANIA, SEYCHELLES, MADAGASCAR, MOZAMBIQUE AS WELL AS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND OFF THE WEST AND SOUTH COASTS OF INDIA AND WEST MALDIVES.

INCIDENTS HAVE ALSO BEEN REPORTED CLOSE TO THE EAST AFRICAN COASTLINES. SOMALI PIRATES TEND TO BE WELL ARMED WITH AUTOMATIC WEAPONS AND RPG AND SOMETIMES USE SKIFFS LAUNCHED FROM MOTHER VESSELS, WHICH MAY BE HIJACKED FISHING VESSELS OR DHOWS, TO CONDUCT ATTACKS FAR FROM THE SOMALI COAST. IT IS ADVISED TO MONITOR, KEEP CLEAR OF ALL SMALL BOATS AND REPORT ALL SUSPICIOUS SIGHTINGS. SHIPS ARE ALSO ADVISED TO MONITOR THE IMB PRC WARNINGS THAT ARE TRANSMITTED VIA INMARSAT SAFETY NET SYSTEM. A STRICT 24HR VISUAL AND RADAR WATCH WILL ENSURE EARLY DETECTION AND ASSESSMENT OF AN APPROACHING THREAT AND ALLOW MASTERS TO RESPOND AS ADVISED IN BMP4 AND

During the passage through the gulf of Aden a telex on piracy news is resent up to three times a day to all ships in the area.

officers depend on night-duty officers for shift wake-up calls, and on the stewards for maintaining silence on the floor during diverse sleep patterns. The engineers and deck workers depend on the officers for shore leave. Everyone depends on the electrician with the keys to everything, and on the common sense of the captain to take notice only of what's crucial to the welfare of the ship, while pretending to be resting for the bulk of the voyage. The crew has no choice but to dance with each other, hands roped together, knots all the way down.

The written hierarchy of the ship, which has its functional purpose, prescribes an order and submission in accordance with rank. Confined in a locked-up environment, this submission extends well beyond already "extensive" work hours, into a life order that is balanced by complex power rituals that serve no immediately apparent function. Many of these rules are unwritten: No one must

ever sit in the captain's chair. Whistling is strictly forbidden, as it will summon Neptune, angry god of the sea. The steward will always apologize. The electrician may swap favors for random stuff, of which he often accumulates a mysterious surplus.

No violation of these customs passes unnoticed. Before the ship arrived at the port of Pusan, the chief mate offered \$300 to anyone who could catch a rare bird that had been traveling with the ship. He was ecstatic when the young Ukrainian OS (ordinary seaman) chased the white egret around the ship and caught it. But when the OS decided to let the egret go instead of selling it to the chief mate, the latter got so furious that he tasked the OS with meaningless and humiliating trash-removal tasks. "Woman on board is bad luck," remarked the chief mate, aware that the bird was freed on my suggestion, a person outside of the power structure. Throughout the trip these

subtle power games were rarely interrupted, and then with only varying degrees of success.

At the beginning, I was assigned a seat in the canteen next to the captain—at the top of the ship's hierarchy—but it forced me to turn my back on the others and so I only ate there once. Afterwards, for two weeks, I swapped chairs daily. This irritated the steward, for which he apologized. Eventually, without meaning to do so, I developed a mutually amicable relationship with the Russian-speaking Israeli seamen. We fell into a synchronized table routine until one of them remarked that I was “becoming table trained,” and a deck worker dared me to sit with the mix-race deck crew, at the bottom of the hierarchy. I accepted the dare and kept rotating tables regularly after that.

Work flowed around mealtimes like a river around rocks. The day began with a 6:00 a.m. breakfast, which I usually missed due to lack of self-discipline. Lunch was at noon and dinner at 6:00 p.m. The week, in turn, was divided by port arrivals, emergency drills, a Thursday bar night, a Saturday pause for Shabbat, and the occasional weekend sunbathing.

“Routine maintenance” became a collaboration among us, one that was disrupted only by port maneuvers and the rituals invented to mark the fluctuating hours, days, weeks, and months of the crew's contracts. I was allowed into all parts of the ship, including the control room, and invited to all after-work activities, which usually consisted of poker and a multitude of popular first-person shooter video games populated by “heroes” and “assassins” in equal measure. I was called to the bridge to see dolphins and a whale, and I used flying fish to explain gender fluidity to hyper-heterosexual men. “Is this a fish or a bird?” the men asked. “Well, remember how you mentioned that women should be behaving as women and men should be behaving like men and I said it's not always so clear cut? Flying fish would be a good example of the ambiguity. Sometimes it is more like a bird and sometimes it is more like a fish.” A white lie so perfect that we never had to debate gender norms again.

Seldom trying to make sense of my *art-ing*, the crew nevertheless assisted with moving my installation *ZIMtm* from place to place. This was a 140-pound prison-mirror aquarium which was designed to survey each deck of the ship, taking mundane low-resolution images every five minutes with an automatic camera. The rules of the installation, which were printed on the tripod box, invited the crew to pose for a photograph in front of the box, move it, hold a message in front of it, cover it up to prevent photographs from being taken, or break it with the tools provided by the artist. The crew renamed it “the robot” and took care of it whenever I wasn't around. When it got over 50°C in the heart of the engine room, first engineer Andrei warned me that the circuits inside the automated camera in the installation box wouldn't survive the heat and

humidity. While interested in knowing how the work *worked*, no one really cared to engage with it.

Those who misheard “an artist” for “an actress” admitted to having been left in suspense, anticipating some kind of performance. Not wanting to disappoint, I did an awful impression of Tallulah Bankhead clutching her precious ring in the 1964 film *Lifeboat* on the bridge one evening, followed by an even worse butchering of Monica Vitti's African dance in *L'Eclisse*. I was sent away by the night team duty officers Alex and Genadi to educate myself on the Russian movie hit of the moment, *The Best Day Ever* by Zhora Kryzhovnikov and Toomuchproduction.¹⁷ They implied that the only difference between my movie stash and theirs was that mine pretended to be highbrow. “Just convert it to black and white,” suggested Alex, when I complained that *The Best Day Ever* was too realistic.

Our employer certainly fancied itself a highbrow operation. ZIM's seventieth anniversary advertising book, *ZIM 70*, is something of a hagiography, and would have the reader believe that people and culture are at the heart of the firm's ambition.¹⁸ The book is lined with historic photo spreads abstracted from the fearsome and complex annals of twentieth-century Jewish migration history.¹⁹ These rest comfortably next to a heart-warming message from the current president of Israel, followed by similar texts from the minsters of transportation and intelligence.²⁰ Playful, illustrative, and dated drawings produced for the company in the past by both Israeli and international artists are accompanied by newer, faux-documentary images of the contemporary corporate narrative, which includes portraits of sea-women professionals, ZIM's first captains (among their number a Basque communist and a retired British Royal Navy officer), spies, and mentions of “the first Hebrew ship” ZIM's Kedmah. Today all of ZIM's ships are maritime citizens of Malta and Liberia.

The book makes elaborate references to the warm relationship the company has had with celebrities from all fields: the architects Al Mansfeld and Dora Gad, the singer Naomi Shemer (who, it states, composed a song for the company in exchange for a trip to France), and countless artists including the playwright Eugène Ionesco, the poet Avraham Shlonsky, and the painters Emmanuel Mané-Katz and Marc Chagall. Beyond the advertising, the nature of the relationship between the company and the artists is a mystery.

The accompanying texts foreground *experience* as the prime product and currency of the company: always romantic, exciting, and daunting, like a continuation of David Ben-Gurion's 1937 speech “Going Down to the Sea” on building a “Jewish boat settlement,” a maritime kibbutz.²¹

When I showed the book to the crew, most were upset that they didn't get a copy. Debating the book's quality, we entered into discussions about authors who write on art, capitalism, race, ports, militarization at sea, and conflict

logistics. The sailors called Renée Green's wallpaper "pretty" and accused Keller Easterling of resentment and cynicism when I described her essay "Believers and Cheaters." "I suspected you would be a heretic, that's why I didn't mention God until now," added Genadyi, a zealously religious officer. Their favorite was an anecdote relayed by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Franz Kafka. In it, the Russian chancellor Potemkin is in the midst of a serious depressive episode and refuses to sign any of the documents piling up on his desk. Since any mention of his illness enrages the Empress Catherine, the other counselors are beside themselves in trying to figure out what to do. Then, a low-ranking clerk, Shuvalkin, simply takes the papers into the chancellor's room, forces a pen into his hand, and has him sign all of them. There is much rejoicing until someone realizes that the chancellor has signed the documents "Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin." The officers on board the *Zim Quingdao* loved this story and compared it to the ever-present stamp of Monrovia that appeared on all the paperwork for the Israeli ship. "When we're forced to sign it, we sign it with a made-up name," they crowed, "as if to mock those who impose the rule."

Once, wondering if the engine does in fact keep anyone awake, I recited from Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. The paragraph draws a comparison between the speed of an engine and a human heart on amphetamines:

And thus the general spirit of the ship was one of mournful and weary anticipation of unemployment, heightened by a pervasive insomnia caused by the vibration of the low-speed Hyundai-Sulzer diesel running at 100 PPM, the speed of an amphetamine-driven human heart.²²

"It's the other way around," said Andrei, the Russian-Israeli engineer. "It is the heart of the engine that will follow mine and slow down once I fall asleep right next to it." The first part of the quote rang true, however, given that the company has reported declining profits for quite some time.

This information is consistently absent in *ZIM 70*, it is as if it was removed deliberately by someone familiar with Easterling's "Cheaters and Believers." Instead, the book mixes anecdotal and factual information about the company to produce a utopian and sterilized chronicle, with short stories and brief texts spun to advance a narrative of uninterrupted progress. The text skillfully positions words like "floating museum," "art," "luxuries," and "advertising" next to each other in the same sentence. It is dizzying, dazzling, and an altogether brilliant example of the logical laws of advertising and writing in the language of power.

But while the company has rubbed shoulders with the crème de la crème of high culture, the real reason it has sustained itself for so long is that it is deeply entrenched in the politics and economics of not one but several conflicts—matters that appear in the pages of *ZIM 70* only if you know where to look. For example, this is how the book comments on the company's strategy in the 1970s:

The opening of ZCS was accompanied by an extensive advertising and branding campaign in the three continents which the line connected. The ZCS logo was displayed on the sides of the route's ships and ZIM produced advertising fliers to promote the innovative service and describe its advantages to potential clients.

Left unmentioned is the fact that the Israeli Navy painted its intelligence-gathering vessels the same colors as the ZCS logo. Operating at the height of the Cold War, the most important of these intelligence ships was the *INS Noga* (), aka the *Leah* (), an electronic communications "snoop ship" that was also used for wet ops, such as the successful plot to kidnap nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu. ZIM's trademark seven stars were sometimes painted on the *Noga/ Leah* in the port to avoid drawing scrutiny.²³

In the same vein, *ZIM 70*'s official company history notes that the freighter *Dolphin* was sent to breach the Egyptian blockade of the Suez Canal in 1967.²⁴ It failed, but did succeed in passing through the Straits of Tiran on June 7, 1967 after Israel had taken control of the entirety of Sinai. In fact, the *Dolphin*'s planned Suez transit was intended as a provocation against Egypt, and the tanker was carrying an IDF detachment aboard.²⁵

And what about the actual artworks commissioned or donated to the company by artists mentioned in the company book?

An impeccable woodcarving decorating the lobby of the company's headquarters spells "Friend-ship." Credited to "P. Savage," I was told that the piece commemorates ZIM's involvement in the creation of a national cargo carrier in Ghana, the Black Star Line, founded in 1957.²⁶

The name "Black Star Line," drawn from the 1920s "Back to Africa" movement, was meant to evoke the diaspora's "coming home" now that independence was secured.²⁷ Ultimately dismembered by the government, the line was used to transport peacekeeping forces to Liberia during the 1989–96 civil war. The woodwork on display seems more appropriate the more one knows about ZIM's history of shipping timber out of West Africa.²⁸ The "Friendship" display outlives it all: the Black Star Line, the artist



Conference room at Zim Shipping Head Office, Haifa.

himself—who seems to have fallen into obscurity—and the era of bonhomie between Israeli and postcolonial African leaders that collapsed in the 1970s as Israel came to be seen by these states as just another colonizer rather than a postcolonial ally.

A similarly well-made maquette of the vessel *Patria Monrovia*, exhibited in the main window of the head office, commemorates not one but an entire series of ships for which separate shell companies were created. One such ship, *Roniz*, ran between Iran and Israel in the 1950s and '60s; the name spells “pipeline” backwards in Hebrew.²⁹

By the crew’s account, before ZIM privatized it was an extension of the Israeli Navy, participating in active military operations on a number of occasions. It morphed quite naturally into a licensed transporter of dangerous cargo worldwide, including weapons that are today still exchanged between the governments of the US and Israel. And much like in the past, while our ship that is “officially” Israeli makes no stops in any Arab countries, many others chartered by the company enter every port. Since going private the company has adapted to the regime of global capitalism. Its company branding now promotes

patriotism and tradition alongside multiculturalism and impartiality, but the secret marriage of business, oligarchs, state, and war didn’t disappear with the false flag of the *INS Noga*.

I can’t help but wonder what work of contemporary art will commemorate the “Irangate” scandal that shook the Ofers in 2011, in which a bizarre series of events led to claims that the company’s ships were docking in Iran with the Mossad’s approval to allegedly provide cover for infiltrators or for picking up agents.³⁰ And if the cargo container ships we’ve been sailing during this residency someday become a “floating museum,” which real museum—and which real history—will be nesting underneath the advertisement?

By the halfway point of the trip, the crew and I had accumulated a joint cache of formidable rituals, including weekly barbecues on G-deck. The tradition continued well into the Gulf of Aden, right between Yemen and Somalia, except on that particular night we wrapped ourselves with barbed wire and turned on both the bright outdoor projector and the water canon. That same evening, the “secret passenger” on board showed up and tried to park his



A photograph of the bas-relief Friendship and its author hangs next to the woodcarving on the hallway of Zim Head Office in Haifa and "commemorates ZIM's involvement in the creation of a national cargo carrier in Ghana, the Black Star Line, founded in 1957."

weapon between the tightly positioned plastic chairs, to the amusement of the crew.

The secret passenger is one of many competing actors in the hybrid military-contractor industry that sprang up in the wake of the new war on piracy launched in the 2000s.³¹ China Ocean Shipping Company, Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics, Torm A/S, and Maersk have all hired armed guards to accompany their ships. The policy is incentivized and supported by insurance companies that offer premium rates to ships traveling with private military contractors, and supplemented by the navies of independent powers and of the multinational Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) based out of Bahrain, where the United States docks its Fifth Fleet. The extraordinary expansion, history, and root causes of the militarization of the Gulf of Aden is described in incredible detail by Debora Cowen in *The Deadly Life of Logistics*:

The growing reliance on private security not only provokes conflicts regarding what officially counts as violence, who can legally kill whom, and who can be

armed where; it is also a central pillar in a broader recasting of the relationships between space, law, and state sovereignty.³²

The public long-wave radio on board regularly attested to the accuracy of Cowen's account. Now and then the unidentified male voice of our defender would burst out of the radio, threatening to shoot a boat unless it returned to Berbera Port, which he mispronounced as "bArbara," as if the port was a jilted wife and he her avenging brother.³³

"Why is he threatening the boat?" I asked, after this warning had interrupted our picnic for a fourth time.

"There must be a reason," responded the chief mate. The officers didn't bat an eye.

"I understand that pirates are people too and that it's their job to target us, as it is mine to protect us. But I don't really care for the politics of it. Or politics in general to be honest. I just want to do my job and go home to see my

girlfriend,” said the secret passenger. It is the only conversation we share.

While the chief mate took the threats seriously, Alex, a skeptic among the officers, wore a shirt bearing a popular rendering of a pirate for the duration of the passage, occasionally adding a rhetorical question or two: “All the warships and security and they can’t even kill a few pirates?!”

But that would defeat the purpose. Imperial military power at sea is defined by its ability to convince the world that it can contain all real and imagined terror, while simultaneously maintaining these dangers indefinitely. And so the bridge receives an automatic telex about the ever-potent threats every evening, while the radio announces, “We got this!”³⁴ It is a complete system, moving from threat to response, threat to response, without requiring us to intervene.

At rare times during the voyage an unidentified prankster on the radio uttered, “Meep meep ... meep meep ... meep meep” These occasional meeps continued to pierce the waves of channel sixteen, long after the Chinese coalition warships on which the prank was blamed were nowhere in sight, and the security telexes had stopped. Bored and with no enemy to defeat, our secret passenger triangulated the radio intruder and determined that the meep-meep signal was coming from inside the ship. He quietly circulated the news over lunch, hoping to catch the sneaky roadrunner red handed, but the crew just shook their heads and kept eating. Disappointed that no one seemed to care, he left the table early.

A ship will guard its fragile and destructive myths³⁵— ship myths, like all myths, make the chaos and inequality more tolerable for a populace who will fight wars over these same stories. At sea, they are the motivational fuel for surviving the underpaid routine. Discussions on race, politics, and religion are rare and quick. But the consensus on why the oligarch loves a contemporary artist so much was overwhelming amongst believers of all stripes: it’s all about “a pretty picture” and an image of the artist next to the captain for the company’s next PR book. Or as Hito Steyerl has put it: “It just works for him.”³⁶

It works for him at a distance in a gallery, in a freeport storage box, and at the worldwide grand openings for which he is rubber-stamping approval, at the advice of an enthusiastic marketing manager. It works for him in spite of the crew, who step over the Indian port workers that sleep on the bare deck and carry the artwork up and down the ladder. Or perhaps because of them.

Towards the end of the tour, I set up a exhibition along the corridor leading to the canteen—for crew eyes only—gave away all my prints, and was saluted off the ship in Shanghai.

A month later, during a burst of sea-legs melancholy, I wrote to the bird catcher, who has become a friend, to inquire about the legacy of my residency. “You know, I’m a bit disappointed, I was expecting scrutiny and rumors, but no one said a thing. It back to usual boredom here and everyone moved on. It is as if you were never here.” He sent this response from a satellite e-mail service, economizing on adjectives and punctuation to save precious e-mail coins.

The presence of artists on container ships, at first bedazzling, has become the new norm within the logistical routine of global commerce, of which the container ship itself is a living exhibit. Having been on a circular route for ten years, the cargo ship I sailed on, and any other ship like it, has surely amassed a vast permanent collection on the subject. This collection could constitute a floating museum, or rather an extraterritorial floating museum complex.

A museum of the ideal citizen, with a particularly strong selection of archives on the trajectory of the Ukrainian-Russian-Israeli engineer-mechanic who today occupies so many engine rooms on ships.

A museum of the flawed concept of time. The time of day doesn’t just shift back and forth as the ship sails. Rather, the very concepts of time and value change amidst different nationalities whose work contracts operate on different terms, at varying pay rates unadjusted for inflation since the nineteenth century.

A museum of objects for hyper-productivity, of institutional design, with each cup carefully labeled, each drawer positioned exactly in accordance with rank.

A museum of a relational order-space, a space that is defined by the coexistence of the things it contains. A space in which nothing is allowed to be useless or out of place. An order that follows the militant power system on board, which actually extends into a twenty-four-hour lifestyle.

A museum of imperial cartography, of military geography, of private security industry booms, past and future.

A museum of indifference; of boredom and casual racism; of pornography, etymology, cultural relativism, and the “nominal” family of men, all formed through shared meals and video games, without women; of chameleon flags of convenience, creative bureaucracy, and the drum beat of Hyundai engine techno music drenched in sweat and blood and crushed bones.

Unfortunately, this museum would never have any visitors, except for the port authorities, the sailors’ wives, and a few select enthusiasts willing to wait for the ship for twenty-four hours only to be immediately rushed off the premises because everything must get where it is going as



A decommissioned MSCHOA (The Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa) map outlines risk areas for potential piracy attacks.

fast as possible. And now artists-in-residency.

At the heart of the Container Residency lies a promise of opportunity: to explore this museum, to be at once in a spectacular space and an anti-spectacular place. The opportunity for access and direct participation. The opportunity to rest, or perhaps to ride from point A to point B, as one sometimes takes the ferry to work. More importantly, the opportunity to be paid to work as an artist unrestrictedly. But is this promise actually realized?

The potential problems—the agendas and conflicts of interest—presented themselves long before we set sail. The cultural buffer zone that is usually part of a residency—that is, the curator, museum, or cultural institution that facilitates it—was absent, and the contract was offered directly by the company. The contact demanded, in multiple bullet points, the artist's total collaboration with the company's PR initiatives, to which the artist must lend his or her name without hesitation. Detailing the perceived duties and obligations of the artist in an authoritative, legalistic tone, the document was clearly drafted by someone skilled at contact writing and yet unfamiliar with—and indifferent to—the discourse of

contemporary art. The contract also included a nondisclosure agreement, serving as catchall insurance against any possible unforeseen contagions.

The nondisclosure agreement effectively rendered the artist's access to the ship and its crew meaningless—you may observe but not share. This is a solipsistic privilege usually reserved for state officials and corporate industry insiders.

While art shouldn't necessarily rely on the didactic methodology of gathering facts obtained through access, art that capitalizes on the ambiguity of the situation to conceal the nuances of its production in accordance with corporate demands isn't the same as art that willingly chooses to avoid the banality of explanation. It's like committing a crime under the cloak diplomatic immunity: while you might not get away with murder, small transgressions like speeding are certainly okay. Everyone does it, and you'll never get anywhere if you don't. But such capitulation is unbecoming in the extreme.

Sure, many art initiatives today are manufactured with the aid of oligarchic sponsorship. Some of the more elaborate



Artist's personal space on board Zim Qingdao.

“art-washing” initiatives of the recent past include opening a Louvre in the UAE while the Tate and MoMA pleaded with the Emirati government to stop barring artists and academics from entering the country.³⁷ Art residencies are a modern form of advertising. Sponsoring art is perceived, much like recycling and sending memos denouncing sexual harassment, as a signifier of progressive politics. It provides a great smokescreen for government initiatives and commercial ventures of all kinds.

Each of us participates in commercial exchange, no matter how much we might desire not to. Artists simply cannot produce art locked away in towers, and we are undoubtedly part of the same social ecosystem as the sailors, curators, and museum-goers.³⁸ And I agree that the institutional critique of the 1970s and '80s has itself become an institutional product.

But to reject all institutional critique entirely is premature and defeatist. Accepting the status quo inhibits any progress the discipline might make in the future and diminishes what has been achieved in the past, including what has made most art residencies possible. If

parrhesia—speaking truth to power—is at the heart of institutional critique, then the rejection of all institutional critique assumes that we're all equal now, and that provocation is no longer necessary or effective.

The question is not *whether* to participate, but *how*. An expanded institutional critique need not be a scandal-product, nor another *Fountain* signed by R.Mutt. Rather, it could offer a studied look at the corporate sponsorship of art, and could facilitate direct dialogue among artists, curators, and institutions, paying particular attention to the demands made by sponsors.³⁹ It could also generate discussions on how art produced under these financial arrangements is evaluated, and by whom. It could launch a debate about the complexity of residencies that take place in an environment where it is very difficult to negotiate the competing exigencies of politics, war, commerce, and art. At a minimum, an expanded institutional critique could foster a discussion about what is actually advertised by an artist for an oligarch, and what is made secret.

As it stands, when an artist is invited to sail aboard an armed container ship and trusted to turn the event into PR,



Artist's personal space on board Zim Qingdao.

she is indeed an actress playing an artist in an advertisement, a reality exhausted by its commercial function. A container-ship residency extends the logic of containerization to art, artists, and their easily transported institutional critiques. Putting things in readily stackable boxes limits the ability of artists and dockworkers alike to interfere with the accumulation process.

And that's the con in the "perfect con." While such opportunities might provide a temporary fix for an artist, the means of their production prevent the creation of a work of art. Instead, "experience" is accepted by all parties as the interchangeable currency of the arrangement. Any artwork is a byproduct, an escapist entertainment infamous for the crew for exactly a week until it is discharged for a sequel. This byproduct—however provocative, radical, or ambitious—is secondary to the PR effort, and to the contractual fine print in which the artist not only tacitly agrees with questionable business practices, but also elevates them, usually for far less than what is promised by a "like-for-like" market exchange. And we're told so to our faces, if not by our ever-forgiving and confused audiences, then by the sailors and the art-loving oligarchs themselves.

X

Container Artist Residency is a project by artist Maayan Strauss that takes artists onboard commercial container carriers along existing international shipping routes. The first edition of this project was launched in 2015 in collaboration with ZIM Integrated Shipping Services.

Thank you to the crew of the Zim Qingdao for the many poignant conversations, especially the team of engineers and deck workers, and officer Alexander Shapiro, whom I promised to credit in bold red font. Thank you to my indefatigable, brilliant research assistant and fact checker, Paul Mutter. Thank you to Laleh Khalili, Sveta Libet, Daniel Trilling, Emma Beals, Elisha Baskin, Marian Kaiser, Adrien Cater, Hester Keijser, and Isabelle Darrigrand for your time and a sound advice, to the Hackquarium collective and Kunstbetrieb, and to Kostiantyn Strilets and Shaw Xu for technical and logistical assistance. All images copyright of the artist.

Mari Bastashevski is an artist, writer, and researcher. Her installations—the result of extensive field and data research—combine texts, photographs, and documents, exploring how secrecy within systems of state and corporate power contributes to the perpetuation of armed conflicts. She was one of the six artists selected for Container Residency 01. She is currently a world fellow at Yale. You can reach her at mari.bastashevski@yale.edu, maribastashevski.com, or by tweeting @maribst.

- 1 In the memo, the management of the ship had stated explicitly that all photography was forbidden during the passage through the Suez Canal. However, according to the captain and the crew it appeared that only photographing sensitive operations, the offloading of dangerous cargo, and military installations was truly prohibited.
- 2 "Legacy," zim.com <http://www.zim.com/aboutus/pages/legacy.aspx>.
- 3 "About XT Group," xtholdings.com, 2015 <http://www.xtholdings.com/#!about-us/c17bj>.
- 4 See 2016 profile of Idan Ofer at [forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com/m/profile/idan-ofer/) <http://www.forbes.com/m/profile/idan-ofer/>. In 2006, Forbes ranked Yuli Ofer as Israel's twenty-seventh richest person http://www.forbes.com/lists/2006/81/biz_06israel_Yuli-Ofer_QQIM.html.
- 5 John Reed and Mark Odell, "Zim agrees restructuring with creditors," *Financial Times*, January 23, 2014 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/58e5ff40-8440-11e3-b72e-00144feab7de.html#axzz4A9TPdYHV>.
- 6 Reut Shpigelman, "Calcalist, May 30, 2016 <http://www.calcalist.co.il/markets/articles/0,7340,L-3689168,00.html>.
- 7 "Israel Corporation Approves Spin-Off of Kenon," sec.gov, 2015 <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1611005/000119312515005166/d846607dex991.htm>.
- 8 "As Zim sinks, Ofer family's UK shipping cos prosper," *Globes English*, February 2, 2014 <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-as-zim-sinks-ofers-uk-shipping-prosper-1000914096>.
- 9 "ynet, April 9, 2013 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4365721,00.html>.
- 10 "ynet, April 8, 2013 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-436>
- 5210,00.html ; John Reed, "Idan Ofer: Fleeing Israel's New Populism," *Financial Times*, April 12, 2013 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/36ce978e-a294-11e2-9b70-00144feabdc0.html>.
- 10 "Port 2 Port, May 29, 2016 <https://www.port2port.co.il/article/%D7%94%D7%95%D7%91%D7%9C%D7%94-%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%AA/%D7%A1%D7%A4%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%95%D7%99%D7%AA/%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%90%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%A4%D7%A1%D7%93-%D7%A0%D7%A7%D7%99-%D7%A9%D7%9C-56-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%A8-%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9F/>.
- 11 For the ZIM container-ship residency, the resident artist signs a contract with ZIM requiring him or her to provide one work created during the residency to an auction, the proceeds of which will be donated to charity. This is also the case with shipping company owners Philip Niarchos and George Economou, who hold their art in a warehouse until it appreciates in value. Art is a lucrative side gig and thousands of works are stored away. The value of some of these collections eclipses the GDP of some small countries. Also see J. L. Holzgrefe and R. O. Keohane, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal, and Political Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 12 "Eyal Ofer Family Foundation gives £10 million towards Tate Modern's new development," www.tate.org.uk, July 2, 2013 <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/eyal-ofer-family-foundation-gives-ps10-million-towards-tate-moderns-new>; "25 million gift for London Business School's Old Marylebone Town Hall," www.london.edu, September 26, 2013 <https://www.london.edu/news/landmark-25-million-gift-for-london-business-schools-old-marylebone-town-hall-1585>.
- 13 Anshel Pfeffer, "Israeli Shipping Tycoon Sammy Ofer to Be Knighted in London Next Week," *Haaretz*, November 13, 2008 <http://www.haaretz.com/israeli-shipping-tycoon-sammy-ofer-to-be-knighted-in-london-next-week-1.257124>.
- 14 "Globes, July 26, 2009 <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000484057>.
- 15 "The Marker, February 15, 2010 <http://www.themarket.com/law/1.568298>.
- 16 "ynet, September 15, 2008 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3597138,00.html>.
- 17 The trailer for *The Best Day Ever* (Самый лучший день) can be viewed on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9HF1PI5Pg0&list=PL2By_FFavTL4W7S721fTq92lxppwZyrNQ.
- 18 *ZIM 70* is a PR book produced by the company to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of its founding in 1945 <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2862198-anniversarybook70.html>.
- 19 "Above all, you had to find a ship." Claude Levi-Strauss reached safety out of occupied Europe on the *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle*, chartered by the Emergency Rescue Committee in 1941. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20171019224014/https://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/entry.php?rec=154>. Also on board were Anna Seghers, André Breton, and the novelist Victor Serge. Walter Benjamin committed suicide only one day short of getting on board a ship, although according to Hannah Arendt, he didn't see a solution in Israel nor in the United States. A monument to Benjamin was, by coincidence, erected in Spain by Dani Karavan, an artist whose murals now figure prominently in the seventieth-anniversary publication. See <http://walterbenjaminportbou.cat/en/content/lobra>.
- 20 ZIM's relationship to clandestine operators is made quite clear in the company's official history when it notes that ZIM's ships and personnel helped run the "Aliyah Bet" operation, which secretly transported Jewish passengers to Israel under the nose of the British Mandate. For more on the operation see <http://www.palyam.org/English/HaMossad/mainpage>.
- 21 This speech was written in the wake of the great Arab unrest of 1936 that included a massive strike at the Port of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. See Z. Ra'anan, "Israel—Bridge or Bridgehead? Some Regional Transportation Aspects and Trade Effects," *Israel Studies Forum*, vol. 18, no. (Spring 2003): 107–26; 113 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41804924>.
- 22 Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), 74 https://issuu.com/polinacia/docs/fish_story_allan_sekula.
- 23 P. Hounam, *The Woman from Mossad: The Story of Mordechai Vanunu and the Israeli Nuclear Program* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 1999), 75–76; N. Mann, "ynet, December 30, 2000 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3192074,00.html>. ZIM operated its own freighter named *Noga* that was built in the 1960s in France. The *INS Noga* was built in Holland in the 1950s, so they only shared a named and were of course not the same vessel.
- 24 But from 1967 to 1975, fifteen other freighters—all from Europe or the US—rusted at anchor in the canal's Great Bitter Lake, unable to transit the route at all. It was dubbed the "Yellow Fleet" for the sand that piled on the ships' decks over the years. See Ken Jennings, "There Once Was a Country in the Middle of the Suez Canal," *Condé Nast Traveler*, February 22, 2016 <http://www.cntraveler.com/stories/2016-02-22/there-once-was-a-country-in-the-middle-of-the-suez-canal>.
- 25 For an brief account of Israel's seizing of the Sinai, see <http://www.witnsources.com/shotlist/RTV/1967/12/14/BGY506140252/>. See also M. B. Oren, *Six Days of War*:

June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156, 165. The crew of the *Dolphin* was released after the episode failed to produce resounding condemnation by the UN, and Israel and Egypt reached an impasse regarding the circumstances under which Nasser would let oil tankers flying flags of convenience past the blockade in exchange for certain security guarantees. See M. B. Oren, *Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli War: Egypt, Israel, and the Great Powers, 1952–56* (London: F. Cass, 1992), 54–55. Absent from ZIM 70 is the account of the freighter *Inge Toft*, another “test case” for the blockade that ended with the vessel and her Danish crew impounded by the Egyptians for almost a year between 1959 and 1960.

26
I. Lewis, “Nkrumah Was a True Visionary: A Genuine Pan-Africanist,” *The New Crisis* 45 (July 1998): 44–46 https://books.google.com/books?id=ZIkEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA45&lpg=PA45&dq=black+star+nkrumah+garvey&source=bl&ots=SuhfVU-nHa&sig=XQOmGYS_FUGsGqUMxjhi0TE5kA4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjFkq2S-OPMAhVE8j4KHY_SAOYQ6AEIUTAL#v=onepage&q=black%20star%20nkrumah%20garvey&f=false.

27
The original Black Star Line, active from 1919 to 1922, was founded by the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the US. It carried passengers and cargo between American and African ports. As the first steamship line owned and operated by African-Americans, it inspired the Ghanaians to adopt its name, and the black star itself for their own flag. See “West Africa: Black Star Line’s Role in Ecomog,” *allAfrica.com*, September 14, 2001 <http://allafrica.com/stories/200109170419.html>.

28
Danny Zimrin, “,” February 1, 2012 <https://dannyzimrin.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/%D7%96%D7%9B%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%A7%D7%94/>.

29
Interview conducted with the company in Haifa on March 29,

2016. The *Patria* and *Ronitz* are also named in Appendix B of Uri Bialer, *Fuel Bridge across the Middle East: Israel, Iran, and the Eilat-Ashkelon Oil Pipeline*, *Israel Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2007): 29–67 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245672>. Other ships named on the list, such as the *Siris* (lost in 1973) and the *Nivi* appear in the pages of ZIM’s anniversary book, though without mention of their involvement in the Israeli-Iranian pipeline venture. For a further listing of ZIM tankers from this era, see Danny Zimrin, “,” March 17, 2012 <https://dannyzimrin.wordpress.com/2012/03/17/%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%9C-%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%90-%D7%91%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%A9%D7%94/>; and Yossi Melman, “Inside Intel: The Story of Iranian Oil and Israeli Pipes,” *Haaretz*, October 11, 2007 <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/inside-intel-the-story-of-iranian-oil-and-israeli-pipes-1.230884>. The entity controlling EAPC was registered in Lichtenstein in 1959 with 10 percent Iranian ownership.

30
“What’s the mysterious story behind the Ofer Brothers’ ‘Iran-gate’?” +972, May 31, 2012 <http://972mag.com/whats-the-mysterious-story-behind-the-ofer-brothers-iran-gate/15484/>; “,” *Mako*, June 1, 2011 <http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-d43f142b11a4031004.htm>; Ryan Jones, “Report: Israeli commandos operated inside Iran,” *Israel Today*, June 5, 2011 <http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/173/nid/22814/Default.aspx>.

31
John-Clark Levin, “Maritime Mercenaries or Innovative Defense? Private Security & the Evolving Piracy Threat,” *War on the Rocks*, September 29, 2014 <http://warontherocks.com/2014/09/maritime-mercenaries-or-innovative-defense-private-security-the-evolving-piracy-threat/>; Hazel Healy, “How the war on piracy became big business,” *New Internationalist*, September 2013 <http://newint.org/features/2013/09/01/pirates-keynote/>.

32
Debora Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: The Economics of Piracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 157.

33
Berbera Port is the maritime

economic entrepôt of the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland.

34
The IMB Piracy Reporting Centre uses three threat-level indicators: 1 means that vessels should be on the lookout for danger, 2 indicates moderate risk, and 3 is a full alert denoting extreme risk.

35
About terrorism, Israel and Palestine, war in Ukraine, Neptune, women, masculinity, the origin of religious rituals.

36
“Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive? One guess: the production of art presents a mirror image of post-democratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm. It seems unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by inspiration and genius. Just as any oligarch aspiring to dictatorship might want to see himself ... Both models operate within male bonding structures that are as democratic as your local mafia chapter. Rule of law? Why don’t we just leave it to taste? Checks and balances? Cheques and balances! Good governance? Bad curating! You see why the contemporary oligarch loves contemporary art: it’s just what works for him.” Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>.

37
Javier Pes, “MoMA and Tate directors urge UAE to lift artists’ travel bans,” *Art Newspaper*, June 1, 2015 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2015/06/01/moma-and-tate-directors-urge-uae-to-lift-artists-travel-bans>.

38
Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* (Brooklyn: Melville House), 3.

39
In “Politics of Art,” Hito Steyerl writes: “But now we need a quite an extensive expansion of it. Because in contrast to the age of an institutional criticism, which focused on art institutions, or even the sphere of representation

of large, art production (consumption, distribution, marketing, etc.) takes on a different and extended role within post-democratic globalization. One example, which is a quite absurd but also common phenomenon, is that radical art is very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in the rhetorics of the city marketing, branding, and social engineering.” See also Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,” 2006 <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/raunig/en?hl=:> “If institutional critique is not to be fixed and paralyzed as something established in the art field and confined within its rules, then it has to continue to develop along with changes in society and especially to tie into other forms of critique both within and outside the art field, such as those arising in opposition to the respective conditions or even before their formations. Against the background of this kind of transversal exchange of forms of critique, but also beyond the imagination of spaces free from domination and institutions, institutional critique is to be reformulated as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice.”

Ahmet Oğüt

Obscure Sorrows: Thoughts around the 9th Berlin Biennale

1. Anticipointment¹

During the press preview of this summer's 9th Berlin Biennale, in the main room of Kunst-Werke, I saw a distracted visitor who didn't notice a pool of water surrounding a video installation.² He ended up falling into it. This unintentional encounter apparently happened to many visitors, and it became a symbolically tragicomic way to begin my visit to the biennial: like a joke that is not funny, nor ironic. What is it then?

This time around, we are not talking about how an old generation controls the decision-making, or about what a young generation finds slick and appealing, or how it tells the old generation what's new and cool. What is happening is not a generational issue in which an accelerated present takes precedence over an obsolete past and announces the abolition of the future it envisioned.

2. Énouement³

On November 26, 2016, the fortieth anniversary of the release of the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK," Joe Corr , the son of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, plans to burn his collection of irreplaceable original punk memorabilia, valued at around £5 million. In a press release, Corr —who turned down membership in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire—said:

People are feeling numb. And with numbness comes complacency ... The most dangerous thing is that they have stopped fighting for what they believe in. They have given up the chase. We need to explode all the shit once more ... These days, everyone's worried about their brand. We live in an age of conformity. Burning this gear is about saying we don't subscribe to those values.⁴

Corr  deliberately chose a controversial act of vandalism against the beloved heritage of "punk." Is it also a defensive maneuver? When necessary, we might have no choice but to kill our heroes, or fire ourselves. Maybe one day we will have no choice but to end biennials as well, in order to prevent their total capture by commerce and the corporate aesthetics of self-branding, digital nihilism, individualism, superhighway populism, cyber-utopianism as marketing gimmick, absolute alienation, transhumanism, loops of consumption, hyperconfiguration, privatization, product placement, hyperlinking, artificiality, selfish youthfulness, fetishized novelty, and the institutionalization of neoliberal and colonial agendas that cannot distinguish sponsorship from



A snapshot of a random shopping bag seen in Wedding, Berlin.

ownership.

3. *Opia*⁵

Since 2010, DIS has established significant autonomy as an independent collective across a range of media and platforms, bringing together what it describes as an international community of writers, fashion designers, photographers, musicians, and DJs. But the combination of the 9th Berlin Biennale and DIS has created a dangerous condition. The danger is to be found in the promotion of a “sarcastic” attitude as a tool for institutionalization, and as a means of legitimizing complicity. Art doesn’t always have to be about legitimizing humanitarian, ethical, and analytical positions, negotiating for structural change, or reclaiming the city. There is nothing wrong with having fun. But what is happening with the combination of the 9th Berlin Biennale and DIS is not “fun.” It’s also not simply about what has been referred to as a new aesthetics, a new generation, or just “the new” in general. It is rather about a glorified sarcastic nihilism that dominates any form of sincerity, humor, irony, emotion, intellectual discourse, critique, or political and social struggle over how modes of art production can be detonators for counterculture and counterfinance.

4. *Occhiolism*⁶

In 2011, I travelled to Moscow for the first time to participate in the Fourth Moscow Biennale, which had a strong focus on new media and technology (I never know what this means, but some critics called it “gadget art”). One of the main venues was the top floor of the Central Universal Department Store, perhaps Moscow’s most fashionable and expensive department store. As we walked up every single floor to reach the exhibition space, we were asked to test perfumes along the way. At the other exhibition sites for the biennial, the first things I encountered were a car being promoted by a sponsoring company, and a kiosk displaying new Samsung flat-screen TVs. Sponsors were present not only through logos but also through competing installations.

Many celebrities walked around with personal photographers looking for an artwork to use as a background. It seemed I had landed in a really bad dream: a future of biennials that no longer distinguished art and its contingent spaces from the corporate visualizations and branding that accompanied them. This future is close, even overlapping with our present. Five years later, with this dystopian future scenario still in my mind, I was not surprised to encounter the 9th Berlin Biennale’s branding, which depicted a so-called post-contemporary cul-de-sac of complicit conditions.

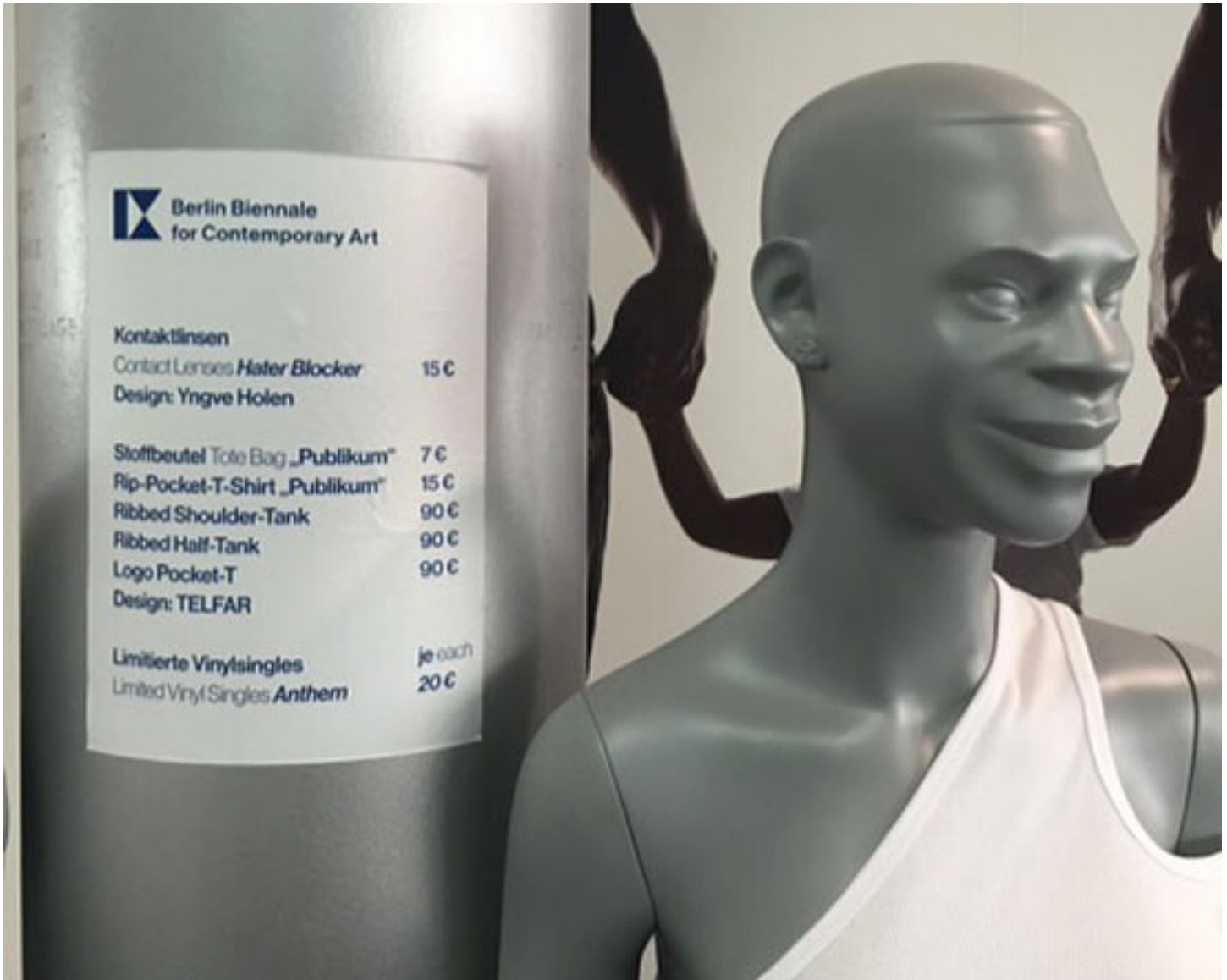
5. *Slipcast*⁷

A few weeks after the Berlin Biennale opened in June, I went to see the exhibition “Human Factor – Endless Prototyping,” organized by Ars Electronica and held at the Volkswagen Group Forum in Berlin. It featured artworks dealing with the challenges of the “digital revolution,” and focused on the human element in an engineered environment. There were projects about bricks made of sand hardened with the help of bacteria, and a prospective future scenario that envisioned a supermarket in which customers could pay only with their personal Facebook data. Innovative projects merging art and science were spread around the venue alongside Lamborghinis and other shining cars—here the distinction between art and commerce was nonexistent.

At its temporary venue on Leipziger Strasse, the Julia Stoschek Collection celebrated the successful institutionalization of so-called post-internet art, which had previously been a low-cost art practice that circulated primarily online. Now it consists of high-budget installations, and is well represented in the art market. In response to this increased market demand, will artists be complicit in corporatized exhibitions, or will they use information technology for countercultural purposes? Berlin is an appropriate place to ask these questions, as it is where the Chaos Computer Club was founded on September 12, 1981. Europe’s largest association of hackers, the CCC advocates for government transparency, freedom of information, universal free access to computers and technological infrastructure, and the human right to communication.

6. *Apomakrysmenophobia*⁸

Even if there has been a strong aesthetic break in recent years, modes of art production and their possibilities should not be altered to fit the SWOT matrix used in the business world to evaluate companies, products, industries, and people: “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.” While our gut reaction might be to say, “A biennial cannot be reduced to a playground for representing successful and desired art genres,” we need to look at what is underneath these slick and appealing desires. The problem is not the genres, but the attitude with a capital A, especially when it comes to decision-making: we must be wary of an attitude that promotes self-centered surplus, competition, and individual success, as is found everywhere in Western capitalism in the neoliberal age. The solution is not to ignore or run away from this million-dollar question. Mimicry is not an answer either.



A price list for merchandizing on sale at the 9th Berlin Biennale.

7. Kuebiko⁹

In order to develop counterfinance strategies, we need to understand that the financial world and its tricks are not based on the “real” economy, on the actual production of goods and services in a traditional sense. They are based on speculation, on the buying and selling of shares and debts.

The word “debt” appeared in the press statement of the 9th Berlin Biennale only once, and since then it hasn’t been around. Although one thing must be acknowledged; early last year DIS’s online platform organized an eloquent debate concerning the issue, as did the biennial catalogue and the texts commissioned especially for the biennial and published online under the heading “Fear of Content.” During the press conference held at the Allianz Forum, not a single question was asked. “Fear of Content” could have

initiated a stimulating discussion, but in the actual exhibition spaces sarcastic nihilism mostly covered up issues that are still taboo.

Today’s economy makes it increasingly difficult to pursue higher education and earn a living as an artist, especially in New York, where DIS is based. DIS was formed two years after the 2008 global financial crisis, which eliminated many commercial creative jobs. Given the precarity of artmaking in the US, it is safe to assume that most of the American artists participating in 9th Berlin Biennale, especially if they were born in the 1980s or later, are buried in student loan debt. We can’t ignore such a life-alerting fact; as Maurizio Lazzarato has written, the “indebted man” is a central subjective product of the neoliberal age. This age, according to Lazzarato, began in the mid-1970s with changes to the financing structure of the welfare state.



A Lamborghini parked next to artworks at Human Factor – Endless Prototyping exhibition organized by Ars Electronica in their Volkswagen Group Forum premises.

Berlin has been thought of as comfort zone where people can escape unpleasant debates around economic issues, income inequality, rates of artist compensation, wage stagnation, and rising tuition costs. It is perhaps the suppression of these concerns that generates the slick image of young, glamorous, skinny, beautiful bodies in front of white backgrounds. All those who lost their jobs during the 2008 financial crisis and had to become “creative technologists” and “innovative designers” have returned to the art world, but only a few will find commercial success amidst the new institutionalized genre-fication.¹⁰ The rest, as life dictates, will be forced to continue working multiple jobs such as art handling, bartending, and other low-paid gigs.

8. Zielschmerz¹¹

What has been the position of the Berlin Biennale when it comes to urgent questions about the city itself? What has it advocated for? In the history of the Berlin Biennale, the 7th edition—curated by Artur Zmijewski and held in 2012—bent the rules the most. But it ultimately failed because of a few tactical mistakes, such as failing to review over five thousand project proposal submitted through ArtWiki, and inviting the Occupy movement to occupy only the main exhibition space of KW. An institution is made up not only of exhibition space. The occupation should've been extended to the office space, where the decisions were made. Still, we can view this as

a productive failure that enables a step forward rather than back.

I have a feeling that since Zmijewski's edition, the dominant factor in decision-making around the Berlin Biennale has been a “fear of failure.” At this very particular “present” in history, it would be ridiculous if the trajectory of the debate were stuck on the question of either politics or aesthetics. It is definitely time to step out of our comfort zones.

9. Rubatosis¹²

Meanwhile, there is a lot happening in Berlin related to long-standing debates about city politics. The fear-driven hostility expressed by traditional, outdated models of cultural hegemony¹³ is a product of current polarization campaigns around Europe. Corporate city branding strategies that promise a generic cosmopolitan experience (“be Berlin,” “I amsterdam,” “OPEN Copenhagen”) should not be confused with the necessity for progressive and engaged culture institutions. In Berlin, the Humboldt Forum, which will open in 2019, is one scandalous example. The Humboldt Forum's plan is to relocate the ethnological collections of the Museum Dahlem (which was one of the venues for the 8th Berlin Biennale) to a reconstructed Prussian palace in the center of Berlin—a multicultural West German-East German gesture on the part of German neofeudalism, in the



A Bentley parked next to artworks at Human Factor – Endless Prototyping exhibition organized by Ars Electronica in their Volkswagen Group Forum premises..

colonial competition among networked global museums.

This is something that cannot be subverted with either a top-down or a bottom-up approach. Rather, it necessitates a hybrid strategy. This year in Berlin, several new laws have been passed that cap rents for the quarter of a million people who live in the city's public housing. This will hopefully head off unsustainable rent hikes before Berlin turns into another Williamsburg or East London. In January 2011, under the name "Haben und Brauchen" (To Have and to Need) a group of artists, curators, scientists, art historians, critics, exhibition-makers, gallery-owners, politicians, architects, and planners published an open letter that aimed to make Berlin's complex of cultural and political problems accessible to the general public.¹⁴ Two years later, in April 2013, Haben und Brauchen published another letter about the planned Berlin City Tax.¹⁵ As the layered, long-term issues of the city are deliberately absent from the 9th edition of the Berlin Biennale, it is interesting to note the absence of any statement by Berlin's artists and culture workers expressing discomfort with genre-fication.¹⁶

10. Lachesism¹⁷

I would propose that in times of heavily militarized technology, we should learn how to be time-sensitive when talking about "present, past, future." If, when talking about the "present," we mean the timespan between the initial conception of the 9th Berlin Biennale and its subsequent opening, none of us knew that on June 3 more than 340 people would be rescued from a boat thought to

have been carrying seven hundred migrants to Italy, calling to mind the 2011 case of the migrant boat "left to die" by the NATO-led coalition fighting in Libya;¹⁸ or that on July 3, shortly after a coordinated bomb attack in Baghdad killed over three hundred and injured hundreds more, Iraq's prime minister would order the removal of British-made fake bomb detectors and renew a corruption investigation into the sale of the devices from 2007–10, which cost Iraq more than £53 million; or that in the early hours of July 8 in Dallas, for the very first time US law enforcement officers used a robot (the Remotec Andros Mark V-A1) to kill a suspect, who was an Afghan War veteran; or that on July 15 members of the Turkish military would attempt a coup d'état, flying F-16s over Istanbul low enough to create sonic booms that sounded like explosions. These are only some of the catastrophic incidents that have been happening, and unfortunately there are more to come. And no matter where we are, they impact us. Therefore one should not see catastrophe and human tragedy as time-related or distance-related; they are motion-related and often technology-monitored.

Regarding the statement of the 9th Berlin Biennale, the discussion should not be narrowed down to the ABCs of post-post-internet art (aesthetic) or post-contemporary art (genre-fication). What if the catastrophe is not somewhere far away, but just around the corner? Does Jon Rafman's virtual reality simulation *View of Pariser Platz* (2016) make us feel safe, as if the Berlin Biennale itself is far away from such a doomsday scenario? Even staying within the safe zone of the art world, why do we keep hearing about new campaigns to save art institutions that are on the brink of disappearing ("Save Malmö Art Academy," "Save De

Appel,” or recently closed institutions like the Townhouse Gallery, YAMA, and SALT Beyoğlu)? Can we even be sure that the Berlin Biennale as we know it will exist much longer?

11. Flashover¹⁹

As many have already asked, does the 9th Berlin Biennale present a better art world, or does it give up on art entirely? Artists like Trevor Paglen (who has collaborated with journalist, artist, hacker, and security researcher Jacob Appelbaum) and Hito Steyerl (who, instead of using existing footage, travelled to shoot at the actual site of the former National Observatory of Iraq, now within the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government) are well aware of the urgent question of how to navigate information technologies that are under the pressure of state-monopolized and militarized conditions. This should not be confused with other positions that are limited to mimicry. Babak Radboy, the creative director of the influential *Bidoun* magazine, was one of the people responsible for the biennial’s highly problematic marketing slogan “Why should fascists have all the fun?”²⁰ He deliberately avoided responsibility for this question, claiming as a tactic that he was technically “not in the biennial” and “not the creative director,” even though his ad campaign was at the heart of the biennial. The best response to this evasive attitude can be found in the self-critique of Mike Meiré of Meiré and Meiré, who was behind the visual identity of the 9th Berlin Biennale. In a 2002 interview he discussed the early years of branding:

By the mid-Eighties we at One Blow had sixty people. We were very successful. Many magazines covered us. We were showpiece yuppies. Naturally that was a great time, but in a certain way it also perverted me. You live in your own world, which consists of a sort of conditioned sounding board. By that I mean that for everything you do, you get feedback only from your own clique. You somehow only function within this scheme. You have to make sure that you can break out again.²¹

Perhaps it is impossible to expect a biennial to directly address the urgent issues that surround us today. Yet DIS could still have taken a focused stand, maybe by embracing queer theory as an anarchic and transformative concept, as was indirectly promised by the biennial’s title, as Tess Edmonson points out in her review of the Biennial, “The Present in Drag.”²² They could have attempted to problematize or “disengage from networks of capital and power”²³—or they could have simply made art fun again by bending the rules. Instead, DIS remained in its own echo chamber and stayed complicit with neoliberalism.²⁴



A Federal Government ad announces the launch of a multibillion dollar program for the deployment of broadband networks in Germany. Here photographed as seen in Mitte, Berlin.

X

The author would like to thank Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle, and Noah Barker, for their challenging

conversations and generous input. A special thanks to Kinga Kielczynska, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Puck Verkade, and Emily Roysdon. All photos courtesy of the author.

Ahmet Ögüt (born in 1981 in Diyarbakır, Turkey) is a sociocultural initiator, artist, and lecturer who lives and works in Istanbul, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Working across a variety of media, Ögüt's institutional solo exhibitions include *Forward!*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2015); *Happy Together: Collaborators Collaborating*, Chisenhale Gallery, London (2015); *Apparatuses of Subversion*, Horst-Janssen-Museum, Oldenburg (2014); *Stacion – Center for Contemporary Art Prishtina* (2013); *Künstlerhaus Stuttgart* (2012); *SALT Beyoglu, Istanbul* (2011); *The MATRIX Program* at the UC Berkeley Art Museum (2010); *Künstlerhaus Bremen* (2009); and *Kunsthalle Basel* (2008). He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including the 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (2014); *Performa 13, the Fifth Biennial of Visual Art Performance*, New York (2013); the 7th Liverpool Biennial (2012); the 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011); *Trickster Makes This World*, Nam June Paik Art Center (2010); the New Museum Triennial, New York (2009); and the 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art (2008). Ögüt has completed several residency programs, including at the Delfina Foundation and Tate Modern (2012); IASPIS, Sweden (2011); and Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam (2007–2008). He has taught at the Dutch Art Institute, Netherlands (2012); the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Finland (2011–2014); and Yıldız Teknik University, Turkey (2004–2006), among others. Ögüt was awarded the Visible Award for the Silent University (2013); the special prize of the Future Generation Art Prize, Pinchuk Art Centre, Ukraine (2012); the De Volkskrant Beeldende Kunst Prijs 2011, Netherlands; and the Kunstpreis Europas Zukunft, Museum of Contemporary Art, Germany (2010). He co-represented Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale together with Banu Cennetoğlu (2009).

1
The section titles in this text are all from the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. Created by John Koenig, this dictionary consists of neologisms (and their corresponding definitions) that designate emotions hitherto unnamed in English <http://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/>. Anticipation refers to the sinking feeling when anticipation fails to be the greater part of pleasure.

2
This pool was part of Cécile B. Evans's immersive installation that consisted of her works *What the Heart Wants* (2016), *Endurance Study – A Pictorial Guide I, II, III* (2016), and *Handy if you're learning to fly I, II* (2016).

3
This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

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This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

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This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

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This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

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This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

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This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

11
This word can be defined as the exhilarating dread of finally pursuing a lifelong dream.

12
This word can be defined as the unsettling awareness of your own heartbeat.

13
Haben und Brauchen: "In contrast

to other big cities, Berlin was devoid of any exceptional pressure on the housing market, and the range of available spaces enabled diverse and often self-organized art practices. Now this situation is beginning to change dramatically. Rents are on the rise, and pressure on the conditions of production and living is increasing without any increase in money making opportunities. Most people engaged in cultural production still earn most of their money outside of Berlin. The bustling art scene in Berlin evolved less through the specific support of the city and more through its historical situation. Nevertheless, at the very moment when the conditions for people engaged in cultural production are worsening dramatically, the city prides itself on its artists; and the attention is welcome—in principle. Formed in response to these issues, Haben und Brauchen seek to be advocates in the field of art as well as in art's neighboring occupational fields with a platform for discussion and action." See <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en/category/haben-und-brauchen/chronic/page/2/>.

14
Haben und Brauchen: "In contrast to other big cities, Berlin was devoid of any exceptional pressure on the housing market, and the range of available spaces enabled diverse and often self-organized art practices. Now this situation is beginning to change dramatically. Rents are on the rise, and pressure on the conditions of production and living is increasing without any increase in money making opportunities. Most people engaged in cultural production still earn most of their money outside of Berlin. The bustling art scene in Berlin evolved less through the specific support of the city and more through its historical situation. Nevertheless, at the very moment when the conditions for people engaged in cultural production are worsening dramatically, the city prides itself on its artists; and the attention is welcome—in principle. Formed in response to these issues, Haben und Brauchen seek to be advocates in the field of art as well as in art's neighboring occupational fields with a platform for discussion and action." See <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en/category/haben-und-brauchen/chronic/page/2/>.

15
Haben und Brauchen: "We demand the implementation of the statement made in the coalition agreement between the governing parties that they wish to increase support for independent cultural production and to improve its structural framework in concrete, active political action: independent of if and when the City Tax does eventually become reality. We demand a new, qualified and sustainable cultural policy which recognises the reality and social relevance of a self-organised artistic practice which has grown out of the specific historical conditions and free spaces to be found in Berlin." See <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en/2013/04/haben-und-brauchen-offener-brief-zur-geplanten-city-tax-in-berlin-2/>.

16
Discomfort with the genre-fication of politically engaged artistic practices was addressed in a public letter collectively written by a loose group of Berlin-based artists and cultural workers during the three-day congress of Artist Organizations International at HAU Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin, January 2015.

17
This word can be defined as the desire to be struck by disaster.

18
In the summer of 2011, the "research agency" Forensic Architecture launched the Forensic Oceanography project. Its aim was to support a coalition of NGOs demanding accountability for the deaths of migrants in a region of the central Mediterranean Sea that, starting in March of that year, was being tightly monitored by NATO as part of its arms embargo against Libya. During the events of the "left-to-die boat" case, this monitoring enabled NATO and participating states to become aware of any migrant distress signals—and therefore be effective in assisting. The Forensic Oceanography report turned the knowledge generated through surveillance into evidence of responsibility for the crime of nonassistance.

19
This word can be defined as the moment a conversation becomes real and alive.

20
This slogan was part of a

marketing campaign called "Not in the Berlin Biennale," created for the biennial by Radboy, Roe Ethridge, and Chris Kraus.

21
Mike Meiré in an interview with Peter Martin, *Branding Interface*, June 2002.

22
See Tess Edmonson, "The Present in Drag," 9th Berlin Biennale, Art-Agenda (June 4, 2016) <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/%E2%80%9Cthe-present-in-drag%E2%80%9D-9th-berlin-biennale/>

23
Tess Edmonson, "The Present in Drag," 9th Berlin Biennale <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/%E2%80%9Cthe-present-in-drag%E2%80%9D-9th-berlin-biennale/>

24
Again <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/%E2%80%9Cthe-present-in-drag%E2%80%9D-9th-berlin-biennale/> Tess Edmonson, "The Present in Drag," 9th Berlin Biennale <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/%E2%80%9Cthe-present-in-drag%E2%80%9D-9th-berlin-biennale/>

There was a dyke story in one of Max's porn magazines. It was my favorite, but not because I liked it exactly. Reading it by the light of my flashlight was like examining a photograph of dead relatives.
—Camille Roy¹

Help us poison position.
—Dawn Lundy Martin²

Ariel Goldberg Simplicity Craving

I got a speeding ticket from a surveillance camera on my way to what was being talked about as the biggest and most controversial show featuring artists who represented homosexuality. Half a year later, my father handed me a blurry photo he got in the mail with his car's license plate and the amount due. I am willing to confess I harbored a strange enthusiasm for "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." I thought it would be an easy target to exercise the nascent argument of this essay—"it's dangerous to label art queer." The show was curated by Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, two white men, and presented an overwhelming majority of gay male artists and subjects. In 2010, "Hide/Seek" was not "new" or historic outside its tenuous government walls and focus on portraiture. It was record-breaking only in terms of how many tax dollars funded it.³ The show compelled me to ramble through recent histories on my own, not only by way of the curators.

Through interlibrary loan I ordered the catalogue for "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art," the New Museum's now trendy sounding 1982 show. Some artists refused to be a part of this show; they refused to be thematized, or to be outed. Then I read the catalogue for the 1995 Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive's exhibition "In a Different Light," which announced itself as the "first queer art show" that included artists who did not necessarily identify as queer, but rather whose work the curators interpreted as queer. Robert Atkins reflects on how "In a Different Light" "rejected the notion of identity politics in favor of an amorphous notion of queer sensibility."⁴ To include artists and writers who didn't identify as queer was a decision that appeared to Atkins "apolitical" and "over-aestheticized."

A lukewarm form of irrelevance characterized the "Hide/Seek" show in its adherence to a flawed canon. Yet this canon still exuded risk within the context of the National Portrait Gallery. Many arts organizations across the country responded in protest to The Smithsonian Institution's baffling decision to censor David Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*; I saw an "emergency

screening” at San Francisco Camerawork directly after the work was removed from the show.⁵ The super-8 film collages scenes familiar to Mexico City (but not to the tourist) with staged gestures in private tableaux. *A Fire in My Belly* contrasts how violence is performed for the voyeur of mass entertainment (Lucha Libre wrestlers) against emanations of pain (a hand sewing a mouth shut, blood slowly dripping). Destruction and pleasure slowly brew: an effigy of Jesus Christ appears at times with ants crawling on it, as does a flickering view of a person jerking off. The flashing images accumulate into a crescendo of a map of North America burning. Mexico’s fire spreads to its northern neighbor. A spinning toy eyeball that opens the film, covered in bulging red veins, combusts. Coins fall into a bowl of blood (splash) and a bandaged hand (ow). Wojnarowicz’s visual ingredients mix to tell overlapping stories of how colonialism and capitalism inflict and lick their wounds. Wojnarowicz shot the film between 1986 and 1987; it was left unfinished at the time of his death, in 1992. The film now exists in two versions, one thirteen minutes, the other seven. I sat on the floor of SF Camerawork taking in this work, thinking about the steady but frantic images of violence and witness refracted onto the standing-room-only crowd.

I had visited SF Camerawork a handful of times already in the fall of 2010 to see the exhibition “Suggestions of a Life Being Lived,” which represents the more common “queer art” show—one at a small nonprofit in a city with no shortage of gay and queer culture. I was eager to see a show that was, as the press release promised, “unconcerned with coming-out narratives.” In contrast to the looming 1995 precedent of the organizational structure of “In a Different Light,” the curators of “Suggestions ...,” Danny Orendorff and Adrienne Skye Roberts, wanted to address “how a sense of liberated queerness is pursued and mediated within public spaces and behaviors.”⁶ Gay Shame protest documentation and Killer Banshee ephemera hung in the entrance to the gallery; records of direct action activism served as the entry point of the show.

Adrienne gave me a guided tour of the exhibition as I interviewed her. I held on to her catch phrase: “What I’m interested in is a queer set of political alliances.” I was admittedly flirting a little with Adrienne, and hoping to impress her with my handheld tape recorder. She had mentioned a partner, but I wondered if that also meant an open relationship. When I asked her why, on encountering this show, I felt so frustrated with the phrase “queer art,” she told me she could relate. She had just been interviewed for the web series Culture Wire, where Meg Shiffler of the San Francisco Arts Commission asked, “What’s the show about? What is queer photography?” Adrienne responded: “I don’t know. I have a better sense of what queer means to me. Queer art is what makes that sense of queerness visible.”⁷ Shiffler’s proposition to define something hit as the gravest offense.

When wall texts, press releases, and artist statements are littered with the word “queer,” I start to grow suspicious of what the word is trying to say, as if temporarily fooled into the word functioning as a measuring tool. The word “queer” easily loses its gunpowder when used effusively. In what ways can language persist as “radical” when the language is being used in a predictable routine?

My primary apprehension about “Suggestions of a Life Being Lived” was based on the concern that this was the one chance a San Francisco alternative art space was getting at a “queer” show, outside the month of June, when there are always multiple “queer art” shows. What did I want from this show? For there to be art with no trace of stereotypical “queerness”? That stereotype is both too wide and too subjective to understand. Knee-jerk associations with queerness are often what shows like “Suggestions” are working to resist. I had to shake that feeling that there wasn’t enough space for artists who are queer.

A catalogue for “Suggestions” went to print after the exhibition so that the curators could include their evolving thoughts on the work they’d curated. In it they reflect on the process of making the exhibition in the contemporary climate of assimilation and violence. Adrienne describes how the illusion of “police officers escorting [gay pride parades] rather than raiding our bars ... completely denies the reality that there still exists state-sanctioned violence against minority subjects, including queer people, in our cities, on the streets, and through the prison system.”⁸ Halfway through their conversation, which spans the entire length of the catalogue, Adrienne says to Danny, “I think we should also talk about our ambivalence towards the category ‘queer art.’”⁹ I have found this ambivalence toward the category to be its most common characteristic.

When I first saw “Suggestions,” I crudely tried to put the work on a spectrum of “queer content” to imagine *if* a curator of a “queer art show” ever evaluated how much “queerness” was in a work. The show was organized around themes such as the public sphere, intentional communities, utopia, and self-determination. Kirstyn Russell’s large-scale photos of landscapes are whispers of “queer content.” Her photo series *Where We Are Not Known* features gay bars or building exteriors with traces of a word that can be read as queer, even if only by the recontextualizing frame of the camera. The “Dyke” on signage for a store shows a fraction of a business owner’s last name. I imagine how people may watch Russell when she is constructing or finding gay signposts, how that live action of cropping is a quiet but powerful performance. The viewers in the gallery, when looking at the pictures framed on the wall, stand removed from the scene. But postcards of the images, on a rack free for the taking, are ready to travel outside the gallery. Aay Preston-Myint represents a seemingly louder version of “queer content” with *SMILE II*, a photobooth installation that “invites

visitors to imagine themselves within a post-apocalyptic family portrait studio where gender and sexuality have become fluid." Crocheted beards, wigs, and other textile costumes made by Preston-Myint reroute gender norms to riff on the conformity underlying the portrait studio. As opposed to Russell's finished photos, visitors must ultimately produce Preston-Myint's work at the site of the gallery.

The failed endeavor of quantifying queerness calls on the verb capability of "queer" as a lifeline to escape the fixity of an adjective. At least verbs need action to be performed. I have watched the unsavory trends of the art market temporarily crown ever-incomplete versions of "the political" or "the queer" as fashionable. In order for "queer" or "political" to also be risky adjectives, they must fall out of fashion. One cannot control all the language that swarms around art. Especially unrealistic is the possibility of control over which word form (adjective versus verb) is used. I am reminded of the game rock, paper, scissors. An adjective is the paper that covers the rock, suffocating it, a verb the scissors splitting the paper into a new shape. I hope the demarcation of work that critiques hegemonic discourse is not the only work named "political." I like to use the word "political" to describe work that isn't "counter-whatever-the-culture-is" but rather hides its opinions—if the art has any at all—and maneuvers to mirror the safety of the status quo.

"Suggestions of a Life Being Lived" did not use the word "queer" or "gay" in the title, nor did "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." I cannot parse the words "difference" and "desire" as euphemism or rejection. Many of the smaller-scale group shows that thematize queerness play effusively with the word "queer." For example, San Francisco's SOMArts June 2011 show was named "Queer It Yourself—Tools for Survival." But "Hide/Seek" did not serve an explicit queer community. More than one friend told me that they saw the show with their parents. The national exhibition brought a discussion to supposedly not "queer" or "gay" spaces or relationships. This gesture to produce "culture" felt dizzying because the national government's dominant culture has been to keep artists who are gay or queer without funding—in other words, to keep artists who are gay or queer as unseen as possible, which ultimately has threatened the most basic survival of artists who are gay or queer, especially those without independent wealth or patrons.

"Hide/Seek" could afford to produce a perfect-bound catalogue that, in its girth, resembles the level in *Super Mario Brothers* when everything is enlarged. Long after the guards gently reminded me the National Portrait Gallery was closing, I studied the show's every decision about how to present information. I was torn between learning new things and feeling frustrated by the curators' blind spots. The wall text, reproduced to face all the plates in the "Hide/Seek" catalogue, is concerned with decoding

the "desire" embedded in the portraits by pointing out either that the artist was known to be gay/queer or the subject was gay/queer. Katz and Ward's quantification was that simple, which I find devastating. Berenice Abbott, whose portrait of Janet Flanner adorns the "Hide/Seek" catalogue cover, once responded to questions about her homosexuality with the statement: "I am a photographer, not a lesbian."¹⁰ Abbott vociferously denied "homosexual" framing of both her life and her wide-ranging body of work, which includes New York City in its constant state of transformation, physics textbook illustrations, and portraits of artists and writers in 1920s Paris. Her early portraiture documents what history now refers to as a formidable cadre of lesbians, though Abbott and her contemporaries did not call themselves that.

The image in "Hide/Seek" that continues to haunt me is Peter Hujar's portrait of Susan Sontag. The wall text reads: "[Sontag] later regretted that she had not spoken more publicly about her lesbianism, but that kind of personal revelation was at odds to her cool analytical tendency."¹¹ In Hujar's portrait, she is on her back, glancing upward over her shoulder, supremely self-satisfied. Her chest appears almost flat in a ribbed turtleneck. Drips of hardened white paint are visible on the imperfect wall behind her. When first writing about this image from memory, I saw endless drafts of paper with messy handwriting strewn about her like a fan. This is actually a photo Annie Leibovitz took of Sontag but I saw it as a double exposure onto Hujar's portrait.

In 2012, The Builders Association premiered *Sontag: Reborn*, a performance based on her adapted journals. A video of an older Sontag plays throughout, talking back to the younger Sontag. Moe Angelos, who has been working as an out lesbian in downtown New York theater since the early 1980s, plays Sontag at both ages. Angelos's adaptation highlights the entries where Sontag struggled painfully with lovers, soaked up philosophy, wandered helplessly as a prodigy in Europe, and whoops, got married. Having just read the first published journal in the trilogy, I mouthed along to the line I had transcribed into my own journal: "My desire to write is connected with my homosexuality. I need the identity as a weapon, to match the weapon that society has against me."¹² I left the play unsure of how to maintain my criticism of Sontag's not being out enough and of the historical dishonesty of the "Hide/Seek" exhibit's focus on the fulcrum of out versus not out. I started to understand how Sontag came of age in a different time, a time when the word "queer" wasn't actively used as a label to describe a potential aesthetic, a time when she coded a related endeavor with the word "camp."

Sontag's journals send me to an uncomfortable memory of seeing Leibovitz's retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. Looking at the many pictures of Sontag felt like suddenly finding a yellowing lesbian newsletter past its heyday of circulation. Sontag is pictured in bed, in a bath,

in the hospital, on vacation. Leibovitz also shot still lifes of Sontag's literary traces, such as an early apple computer alight with a chapter to her book *The Volcano Lover*. Standing in the museum's galleries, facing the photos on the wall, I learned for the first time that Sontag was staring into Leibovitz's camera as her lover. I strained to remember my history of photography classroom, the lights turned off, where a slide projector hummed next to my guide, Shelley Rice, who thrives on adding brassy gossip to her memorized lectures. I couldn't recall if Shelley digressed into a story about Sontag and Leibovitz. It was much easier for me to associate the slides of Claude Cahun's self-portraits with lesbian history than Sontag's *On Photography*.

I reread Sontag's *New York Times* obituary, which clearly maps her marriage to a man, and their divorce, which, in the scheme of her life, was a blip. In the year of her death, 2004, the *Times* mentioned absolutely nothing about her lesbian partnership. Only an insulting trace: she was "photographed by Annie Leibovitz for an Absolut Vodka ad."¹³

The Believer ran an article on how divisive the international-straight-mainstream-media's obituaries were for Sontag: the overtly supportive and then the overtly undermining of her writing and thinking.¹⁴ One point remained united in these obituaries: no mention of her dykehood. I think of AA Bronson, thirteen years Sontag's junior. Bronson's career as a successful gay male artist is credible in the art world. He is a sort of inspiration to mostly young, gay, male-identified artists, while Sontag is a problem for me to reckon with.

Now that Sontag is dead, her lesbian relationships seem to be all people want to talk about. When Sontag writes, "Being queer makes me feel more vulnerable,"¹⁵ she takes on both the "strange" and the "slur" of the word "queer"'s official definitions. "Queer" sounds quaint in the context of her journals, but Sontag's irresolute relationship with her sexuality and its relationship to her work is far from outdated. I imagine her handwriting as I read her mass-produced journals, the typeset words working like a stencil to help me draw a line between Sontag's choice not to "come out" and the zero pressure I feel to be silent about my sexuality. Sontag's rockstar intellectual status complicates her desire for privacy. Which begs the obvious question: Would she have had so many book contracts with mainstream publishers if she had been "out"?

And then my mom calls to tell me how the Poet Laureate is a lesbian *and* she teaches basic skills English, like I do. She read an article about it in *The New Yorker*. I forgot about this news flash for what felt like a year. When I finally looked up Kay Ryan, Library of Congress, I was surprised to see Ryan's salt-and-pepper hair trimmed in a scruffy James Dean just-back-from-a-whirl-on-a-mountain-bike look. My butch

vocabulary is surprisingly limited. In her author photo, Ryan's fingers rest on her chin in a classic pensive pose while her white shirt pops against the professional photographer's red backdrop. Her blue eyes asked me to see her, to which I promptly replied, not just any poet who is also a lesbian is necessarily relevant to me.

But then I was haunted by the question, how does a dyke get to be the Poet Laureate? The obvious answer: she keeps her mouth shut about it. Dogma has its blind spots—how does "lesbian poet" feel in my mouth—this identification doesn't make much sense when applied to Ryan. Sarah Schulman flings me into urgency when she writes in 2009, "Lesbians are being treated as though we are not human and do not deserve representation—in literature or anywhere else."¹⁶ Kay Ryan has plenty of "representation," but she is not explicitly representing "lesbians" with her language. It's not unfathomable for a Poet Laureate to be gay (Elizabeth Bishop). What's unfathomable is for the very lesbian content that I keep problematizing to be present in a Poet Laureate's work. The Library of Congress's description of Ryan on her profile page reads:

Unlike many poets writing today, [Kay Ryan] seldom writes in the first person. Ryan says: "I don't use 'I' because the personal is too hot and sticky for me to work with. I like the cooling properties of the impersonal." In her poem "Hide and Seek," for instance, she describes the feelings of the person hiding without ever saying, "I am hiding."¹⁷

I feel suspicious of how distant Ryan's "personal life" is from her work. Ryan is out by virtue of her frequent reference to her late partner Carol Adair, who died of cancer when Ryan was in residence at the Library of Congress. Ryan dedicates all her books to Carol. In *The Poet's View* documentary, which claims "unprecedented access into the life and work of America's Finest Poets," Ryan says she likes to write "Personal poems in such a way that no one has to know *that*." Then, on her plush beige couch, she tells a story about reading the Sunday paper in bed with Carol, who found an Aaron McGruder *Boondocks* comic that happened to quote one of Ryan's poems about the "sustainability" of "waiting."¹⁸

Ryan's first book of poems, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, was published in 1983, the year I was born. Ryan's early work was slightly more willing to get into "the hot and sticky." In the poem "Letter from the Front" she writes:

I have enlisted in a
disbanded army—always
attracted to the supernumerary—
...

Louise, I am not welcome as I enter the city.
Mothers do not hold their children up to see me.
What would be the point of remembering one;
no single costume is a uniform.¹⁹

While this poem narrates a tale of a male soldier in some European war, I was eager to read it otherwise. I want to know, who is Louise? She is addressed in the first person, followed by a metaphor about being invisible and misunderstood. "Letter" does not rhyme. The poem has less of a children's book vibe (an oft-cited muse for Ryan) and more a tenor of what adults talk about after the children go to bed. The majority of Ryan's work is devoted to an air of constancy. As if to intuit there is no unknown in her work, she will choose one poem to read twice at her public appearances, interjecting with explications on the second reading. On the page, I find her poetry's confidence grating. Yet Ryan's banter at readings rouses ample laughter from the audience, mostly because of her lighthearted, self-effacing jokes.

Ryan's poetic language matured to become more vague, as if to unite human behavior with such tidying formal motifs as recombinant rhymes. She adores wisdom derived in hindsight. Her vocabulary includes words like "innocence," "god," "truth," "savior," and "man." In Ryan's poem "Outsider Art" the narrator produces an *ars poetica* in reverse. The lines react against cluttered art, characterized by such eyesores as "burnt matches" and "glue on charms." The "dense admonishments" that adorn the art are rendered "too small to be read" perhaps because they were written in with the illegible pen of "nail polish."²⁰ The poem portrays a set of artists who have excessive desire or complaints:

Most of it's too dreary
or too cherry red.

Ryan mocks the "outsider artists" whose work drips beyond flat two-dimensionality to "the backs of things." I understand this poem as a disparagement of a supposedly uncrafted, undisciplined aesthetic that only gets shown because of the social ties that support it.

There never
seems to be a surface equal
to the needs of these people.²¹

I have no idea what Ryan means by "Outsider Art" and find this poem to be a confused portrait. Perhaps Ryan penned the poem after being irritated at what she thinks is bad art

in a Marin strip mall café.

I am not interested in going on a journey tracing the label "Outsider Art." Instead, I pause at the word "outsider," as a loaded and derisive term because of its blanket othering of groups of people and stabilizing an unspoken "inside." I wonder if this poem is a way for Ryan to distance herself from stereotypical associations of "Outsider Art" because she came to be a successful poet "outside" of well-trodden routes. Ryan did not take poetry workshops. She never narrates an entry into a social scene of readings to share her work with a local audience, which is the route I see many poets take. Instead, she taught herself writing by doing it every day. For years, she faced rejection from sending poems cold to nationally-established publications and contests. The succinctness of Ryan's poetry aligns with her restricted public persona.

The more I encounter Ryan in interviews repeating the same punch lines, the less and less I care that she is gay. Ryan does claim allegiance to the teachers and students in free and low-cost higher education. She poured her energy as Poet Laureate into the Community College Poetry Project, initiating a National Poetry Day on community college campuses and a website featuring students' work from colleges across the country. She made a point of doing most of her public events when Poet Laureate at community colleges. Ryan and Adair taught for over thirty years at Marin Community College. Ryan identifies as working-class and attributes her success to the education she received at Antelope Valley College in Lancaster, California, which she insists provided a better education than the one she received once enrolled at the massive UCLA, due to the personal relationships she had with her teachers.

Ryan rejects various poetry establishments in favor of the unpretentious hermit trope of the poet. In doing this, she disassociates herself from being a writer within a community of writers. Ryan admits, "I never read poetry" and "I like to read my poems, but I don't like to hear other people read theirs."²² At public events, she makes fun of poets as a way of connecting to her audience, which is apparently sparsely populated by poets. I might as well be asking how a poet rises to national recognition in this country—which is relevant to how someone dodges certain notions of identity in their public persona and embraces others.²³ I sense a connective tissue between how Ryan maneuvers around the lesbian label and the poet label and her separateness from their associated, overlapping communities.

More familiar and admirable to me is the poet who embeds in every aspect of their work their systems of survival as dependent on communities of writers. In her essay "Poetry in the 80s," Eileen Myles writes about running The Poetry Project at St Mark's in New York for two and a half years (1984–86). The sexism and homophobia she dealt with every day defined her

experience and influenced how she used her position of power. Myles recalls how Tim Dlugos, who edited the Project's newsletter at the time, ran paintings of his friends who died of AIDS. Readers actually complained, asking: What does this have to do with poetry, with The Poetry Project? Myles witnessed the sudden appearance of art galleries and limos in the East Village amidst the neighborhood's cheap rent, homelessness, and crime. Meanwhile, the NEA was figuring out ways to defund the arts by encouraging non-profit organizations to turn to corporate funders. In "Poetry in the 80s," Myles describes her visit to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. to defend The Poetry Project as an organization that (still) serves poets and audiences in ways more infinite than calculable. She documents how the Project's programming was read as unknown:

Tim O'Brien screamed why doesn't anyone read Shakespeare anymore. Stanley Elkin [sic] in response to the fact that 20,000 people used our programs each year—I did the math—had I exaggerated. What if it was twenty. What if it was two. He screamed is this a literary institution or a gymnasium. It gave you sort of a racist feel. More bad public smell. The bodies were unavoidable in the 80s. That was the problem. Cynthia Macdonald raised a list of all the people who had read at the Project since 1966. Who are these people she screamed and she really did scream. At the break everyone calmed down. We walked around and schmoozed people we liked which were few. Heather McHugh came over to me and explained kindly and sweetly I really like street theater. I was thinking she meant Nuyorican poets but I really didn't know what she meant. I remember her purple clothes and that she was nice and meant well. She was not them, she was us was what she wanted to say. But the flag of us and them had been utterly raised over the room and what I had learned was the central poetics of American life as I understood it was now one stream next to a roiling corporate affiliate, the mainstream.²⁴

What this stuffy wing of the government snubbed most was the notion that poets could run an organization for poets. Existing outside the mainstream brands, the Project was deemed threatening in its unquantifiable-ness. Poets had taken on a form of self-government. I link this account of Myles's brush with the state's highly exclusionary version of literary support to how she ran for president in 1992 as a performance piece. This intervention might as well have been saying, I'll never be Poet Laureate but I'd rather be the president anyway.²⁵

I have a memory of Guillermo Gómez-Peña performing at Charlie Jane Anders's "Writers With Drinks" series in San Francisco. In between pieces, he told the story of his

fraught relationship as a correspondent with National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. Gómez-Peña reflected on how NPR tried to steer him toward talking *only* about art and culture. Not politics. As if current events aren't an artist's realm of expertise. Similarly, poets put in proximate association with the state are often in a promotional exchange with the state and therefore too compromised to make much of a statement.²⁶ Barack Obama chose Elizabeth Alexander to read at his first inauguration. Kevin Quashie, in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, examines how Alexander's reading stands as an important moment of "quiet" as opposed to "resistance," which he argues is the dominant expectation of black culture:

Many people felt underwhelmed by her reading, largely because Alexander is a poet who reads with measured emphasis rather than dramatic performativity. Perhaps she did not match this moment when the whole watching audience wanted an expressiveness that would speak to their excitement, to the historic elation of the country's first black president, to the hope brimming around the corner and the desperations lingering in the air. Perhaps she did not—or even could not—match the public expectations of the moment.²⁷

Four years passed. In the winter of 2013, I heard the word "poet" spoken on the radio, which felt like a shocking news story in and of itself. The voice belonged to Richard Blanco. The interview cut to a clip about his experience of being invited to read a poem at Obama's second presidential inauguration:

Of course, the first impulse was—because I was the youngest, first openly gay, first Hispanic or Latino—the first impulse was: I have to represent all this in the poem, and sort of be more of an in-your-face kind of poem. Then I took a step back from that and I realized, well, yes, it's all those things, but I think there's a larger platform here.²⁸

The word "first" repeats as if trying to convince Blanco of something. He is not "the first" of any of these identifications outside the context of reading a poem at the inauguration. And so, "the first" becomes contingent on the delivery of a nugget of literature, not on the literature itself or the life producing the literature.

I had a dream that the writer and activist Sarah Schulman attempted to clarify how Ryan's absence of lesbian content is as predictable as a clock's second hand. Time is upside down. Minutes don't add up. Things are moving

slowly like gravity nodding its head no. I said what about Eileen Myles's aesthetic of complete straightforwardness, where the "lesbian" cannot exactly be excised? Schulman demanded eye contact; look at me, "I have been censored because I say what no one wants to hear." I tried to reply, "But it's also how you say it." In the dream, Schulman's voice grew soft after this gust of polemic. "All I really want are for my lesbian protagonists to be with all the other protagonists." I then dreamt of going to my playground of a bookstore and finding the "LGBT section" (or "queer section") gone and Schulman's books shelved in "fiction" and "nonfiction." I panicked. I wanted the section back. I woke up and thought of the Bureau of General Services—Queer Division, with its separate shelves for all the various identity and genre based subdivisions a queer bookstore houses, like neighbors who may or may not say hi to each other.

Then I was actually scouring a used bookstore in Lincoln, Nebraska, for books to help me write the one this essay is part of, on a stop along the cross-country drive that pulled me back to New York. I asked the bookseller to point me to the LGBT section, which was tucked away in the back, a cove akin to the porn section of a video store. I found Schulman's *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/ Bush Years* on a stack yet to be alphabetized and shelved. Then I walked across to the poetry section and found a few of Kay Ryan's books. I told the poet Jocelyn Saidenberg about this problem as we sat in the packed audience of a screening for the documentary *T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s*.²⁹ Jocelyn asked: "Can't we have both?" Ryan and Schulman's books should be located in "both" sections.

Jocelyn was one of the first people to answer an awkward call I sent out for interviews about how art is labeled "queer." She invited me over for dinner in her amazingly adult home. I remember cabinets encasing books, to reduce dust and enhance archival endurance. Jocelyn served me a nourishing vegetable curry while I asked her to tell me about how she came to be a poet in San Francisco. I didn't turn on my tape recorder. I left the conversation understanding how queerness is extremely valuable because she told me about the ways her queerness has been honored, not marginalized. I was shedding my internalized homophobia as she spoke. She recalled being welcomed into the Small Press Traffic poetry community where fellow queers, Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy, invited her to read. Jocelyn told me about Kris Kovick and her 17 Reasons reading series at the Red Dora's Bearded Lady Café. Kovick introduced Jocelyn to the audience as a geeky brainy poet—which I translate to mean Jocelyn did not read autobiographical prose. When Jocelyn began curating at Small Press Traffic and later at New Langton Arts, she looked to Kovick as a model for how she brought together different aesthetics at the risk of the audience's discomfort. Five years after this conversation, I emailed to ask about what exactly she

learned from Kovick. She wrote about the importance of alliances: Kovick "never championed a particular aesthetic to the detriment of other kinds of writing. She was loyal to her friends and also very inclusive."³⁰

Jocelyn's life as a poet, she told me, is really a lot about friendship. I began to understand "queerness" in poetry functioning similarly to the ways friendship unfolds in the life of the writer. At the early stages of writing this book, I read Jocelyn's work fervently because I identified with it. Like my bad experiment to quantify the "queerness" of the art in the "Suggestions of a Life Being Lived" exhibition, I started to study Jocelyn's poetry by locating the "queer" content as though tracing a map. I was massaging the question of, am I trying to theorize the untheorizable? Jocelyn traverses a range that includes Ryan's feigned "hot and sticky" of lesbian subjectivity in the first person, as well as challenging the gender binary altogether. Jocelyn begins her first book, *Mortal City*, by addressing the process of resisting the impulse to name something:

this is called
the impermanence of things
of nothing shows
behind the image
except the nail

and the wall³¹

Artistic production is a routine and so Jocelyn's poem shows us the image's backside. In asking how visual representations operate in codes, the narrator turns their attention to the structural support underneath "the image." In the contractual poem entitled "SIGN HERE," Jocelyn instructs the reader to "desert the surface" and "wrestle platitudes."

I have a theory about Jocelyn's poetry after reading it over the past five years: she steadily uses the language of weather patterns to express how individuals and groups navigate turbulent emotional atmospheres. The narrator in *Mortal City* struggles to activate a singular voice as though lost in a fog; they are studying a place by emphasizing its disparate parts. I pretend to be a meteorologist and find restlessness in Jocelyn's poetics, not unlike the Bay Area's mix of microclimates. Themes of gender, desire, politics might seem quantifiable, but the writing is more about the permeability of all of the above, like the way glitter sticks on a pillowcase after lightly poking your eyelids.

In Jocelyn's fourth book, *Dead Letter*, she tells the story of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* from the tormented and inexplicable copyist's point of view, not the boss's. On Jocelyn's terms, Wall Street becomes the stage for a failed romance between the path of least resistance

lawyer and Bartleby, whose refusal to work has no perceptible logic. Jocelyn's narrative begins where Melville's story ends, with the realization that Bartleby's previous job was in the dead letter department of a postal service in a time of more robust mail activity. Bartleby announces, "I am the dawn." Then, I am "atmospheric" and finally, "I am as weather shadow cloud and as weather shadow cloud I depart."³² The poetry chants a reflective opaqueness that suggests cause and effect but resonates instead as fixed generalities of "weather shadow cloud." Sunlight, and the lack thereof, shapes Bartleby as disposable. He dies of a hunger strike in jail. Dead Letter circulates around the poetics of fending off and embracing vulnerability and perception after one has received the secret missives of so many bodies through undelivered personal letters.

Jocelyn's context is the fairly insular world of Bay Area experimental poetry. She has published with small presses, which operate with a different type of visibility than Kay Ryan's publisher, Grove Press, does. This is a crude division and one based on the numeric quantifiers: book sales and distribution, grants and awards. I was interested in Jocelyn's work because she accepted my invitation to ask her about how and why she wrote it. I am always reckoning with the reality that poets are rarely household names in this country and that the relative notion of a queer's invisibility is not so different than a poet's invisibility. For a person who is queer and a poet (among many other "things") their potential "invisibility" becomes a long division equation with a trail of numbers stretching past the decimal point. By invisibility, I do not mean to make visibility the goal; I'm invested more in "invisibility" as an honorable un-doing of the popularity routine. "Visibility" with a capital V often prioritizes the lowest common denominator of the masses as opposed to prioritizing the material needs of a poet who is queer.

The book that includes this essay has been a cover for what feels like many urgent and messy conversations. When I began writing, I was desperate to feel swaddled in dyke mentorship. But I never admitted that to myself, exactly. Instead, I did things like get Judith Butler's haircut. I brought a picture of Butler to the Male Image, a barbershop in the Castro. Butler poses as if to end up in the neat grid of a yearbook. Her hair is gray and side parted in a graceful mushroom cut. Her smile complies with conventions of the school portrait studio. I covertly printed the picture at the Academy of Art Writing Center when a student didn't show up for their session to fix grammar mistakes. I ripped the paper around Butler's portrait to make my haircut stamp-size and portable in my wallet. The barber was slightly irritated when I pulled it out; a tension radiated between his scissors and me. Was it that a dyke interfered with the man-on-man vibe of the space? I said the haircut was for a performance. He asked when it was. I said, I don't know, soon.

I retold this story at a holiday party filled to the brim with

queers and I felt a sense of victory when the room responded with roaring laughter. Then I felt like I had to start really reading Butler, past her pop song essays. I was relieved when no one quizzed me on Butler's recent work on precarity. I then found a French documentary about Butler, where a soundtrack of klezmer music plays as she attests to not knowing what "queer theory" was until people were telling her she had a hand in making it.³³ She started out in feminism and gender and now adamantly writes a philosophy that considers feminism and gender but is mostly about the dehumanization of people the US is waging war against. Starting in 2013, she became active in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian Liberation.

Jacqueline Francis's *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* brings up Harold Rosenberg's "famous" question from the 1960s, "Is there a Jewish art?" Francis notes "in subsequent decades many exhibition catalogue writers and survey text authors have taken up the question as well in discussions that answer Rosenberg's query in the negative and simultaneously expanded the notion of Jewish Cultural Production."³⁴ The questioning of labeling is so firmly planted in history, yet the reappearance of the question isn't exactly redundant. It's like tourists going through the motion of taking the same picture of a beautiful site. Everyone needs their own copy. Why did I pretend, with the flimsiness of a haircut, to look like Judith Butler? I criticize myself now for choosing a famous philosopher to be in imagined dialogue with. She's packaged as a hero, ready to be adored by the newly queer. Why did I study Jocelyn's writing? Why did I parse Sontag's obituaries? I think about the bizarre façade in ethnic longing. So what if I am drawn to these white jewish lesbians of varying generations away from mine? There was a moment when talking to Jocelyn and reading her work that helped me fit some pieces into place: the legibility of art labeled as queer depends on highly specific localized groups of people and the individuals supporting each other within these communities. "Queer" means little when stripped from its context. There was a moment of trying to reach Kay Ryan through her agent and giving up. I had to remind myself I'm not searching for long-lost family—I'm trying to build my own.

Perhaps it is not that I want to stop critiquing what is called "queer art" but just to recover from being barraged by it. My eyes grow tired when any word repeats. I lose interest. I don't want reinvention. I want more specific language. This particular naming needs a counterpart of always asking about all the art that falls outside the "queer" category that might really be sharing something with this category. When I first began writing this, a friend warned me about how I was using the word "scene," not "community," in my understanding of social and artistic landscapes. I asked, "What's the difference?" not yet understanding how cynical and critical the word "scene" sounded. Like I was locked out. But really, I was young(er) and hadn't been in one place long enough to contribute to

various communities built around shared interests and experiences. I could only have been compelled to write this at that acute moment of estrangement.

X

*"Simplicity Craving" is an excerpted chapter from Ariel Goldberg's book-length essay **The Estrangement Principle**, forthcoming from Nightboat Books in October 2016.*

Ariel Goldberg's publications include *The Photographer* and *Picture Cameras*. They have received research fellowships at the New York Public Library's Wertheim Study and Allen Room, a Franklin Furnace Fund grant for a series of slideshow performances, and have been an artist in residence at Headlands Center for the Arts, The Invisible Dog, Residencias Artísticas Intercambios and SOMA in Mexico City.

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- 2 Dawn Lundy Martin, *The Morning Hour* (New York: The Poetry Society of America, 2003), 8.
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Geert Lovink

On the Social Media Ideology

Scraping the Social: "We are unknown to ourselves—and with good reason." Friedrich Nietzsche—"Even the retards are starting to figure it out." (comment)—"In data we trust." Priceonomics—"The Internet fails to scale gracefully." Chris Ellis—"I want to be surprised by my own bot"—"There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Leo-nard Cohen—"Just did my sheepish biannual LinkedIn visit, which felt too much like my sheepish biannual sweeping of dry cleaner hangers into the bin." Dayo Olopade—Organic Reach Technologies (company)—"It's not a pilot study. It's small batch artisanal data." @AcademicsSay—"No Reply" The Beatles—"A Facebook-Op occurs when one takes a photo just to upload it to Facebook later." Urban Dictionary—"If you start to think that people are awful, you can always sign on to Twitter. Get some further proof. Then go on about your day." Nein—"The right people can work around a bad technology, but the wrong people will mess up even a good one." Kentaro Toyama—"My secrets won't make you happier." Amalia Ulman—"You can wake up now, the universe has ended." Jim Stark—"Stop treating internet like it's a different thing and start focusing on what you actually want your society to look like. We have to fix society, before we can fix the internet." Peter Sunde—"We may be decentralised and disagree on a lot of topics amongst ourselves, but operations are always carefully coordinated." Anonymous—#Apply: The same boiling water that softens potatoes, hardens eggs—"Insults from complete strangers. This is the true promise of social media." Neil—"How valuable is reputation if any idiot off the street can rate me?" #peeple—Social media or "how to turn our thoughts violently towards the present as it is" (Stuart Hall)—"Man is the master of contradictions." Thomas Mann.

Contradictory consciousness-management has superseded social anxiety about Bad Faith. This has long been the thesis of Slavoj Žižek. Let's work on this thesis and take seriously the cynical statement "They know what they do, but they do it anyway" and apply this to social media. There is no longer a need to investigate the potential of "new media" and deconstruct their intentions. The internet has reached its hegemonic stage. In previous decades it was premature to associate intensive 24/7 usage by millions with deep structures such as the (sub)conscious. Now that we live fully in social media times, it has become pertinent to do precisely that: link techne with psyche.¹

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The revelations of Edward Snowden arrived long after our daily surf-and-swap routines had become firmly entrenched. We know we're watched by surveillance

systems but who can honestly claim to constantly be aware of them? Artistic masks are promoted as protective face shields—yet who wears them? The internet may be broken, as the phrase goes (and IT engineers have reached a consensus about this troubling analysis), but this cannot be said of social media.² Like Snowden's revelations, Sherry Turkle's evidence about smartphones inhibiting one's empathy and ability to enjoy the virtues of solitude have arrived late in the social media game.³ How hard has it become to confront offline boredom? It's a straight-up torture.

The slogan "You are what you share" (Charles Leadbeater) expresses the transformation of the autonomous unit of the self into an outgoing entity that is constantly reproducing its social capital through the transmission of value (data) to others. Let's face it: we refuse to perceive ourselves as "slaves of the machine." What does it mean when we all agree that there is an addictive element to today's social media use, yet none of us is apparently addicted? Are we really returning only sporadically?⁴ What exactly is being captured here? If anything, we're encapsulated by the social sphere as such, not by the software, nor by the protocols, network architectures, or the assuredly infantile interfaces.

Under this spell of desire for the social, led by the views and opinions of our immediate social circle, our daily routines are as follows: view recent stories first, fine-tune filter preferences, jump to first unread, update your life with events, clear and refresh all, not now, save links to read for later, see full conversation, mute your ex, set up a secret board, run a poll, comment through the social plug-in, add video to your profile, choose between love, haha, wow, sad, and angry, engage with those who mention you while tracking the changes in relationship status of others, follow a key opinion leader, receive notifications, create a photo spread that links to your avatar, repost a photo, get lost in the double-barrel river of your timeline, prevent friends from seeing updates, check out something based on a recommendation, customize cover images, create "must-click" headlines, chat with a friend while noticing that "1,326,595 people like this topic."

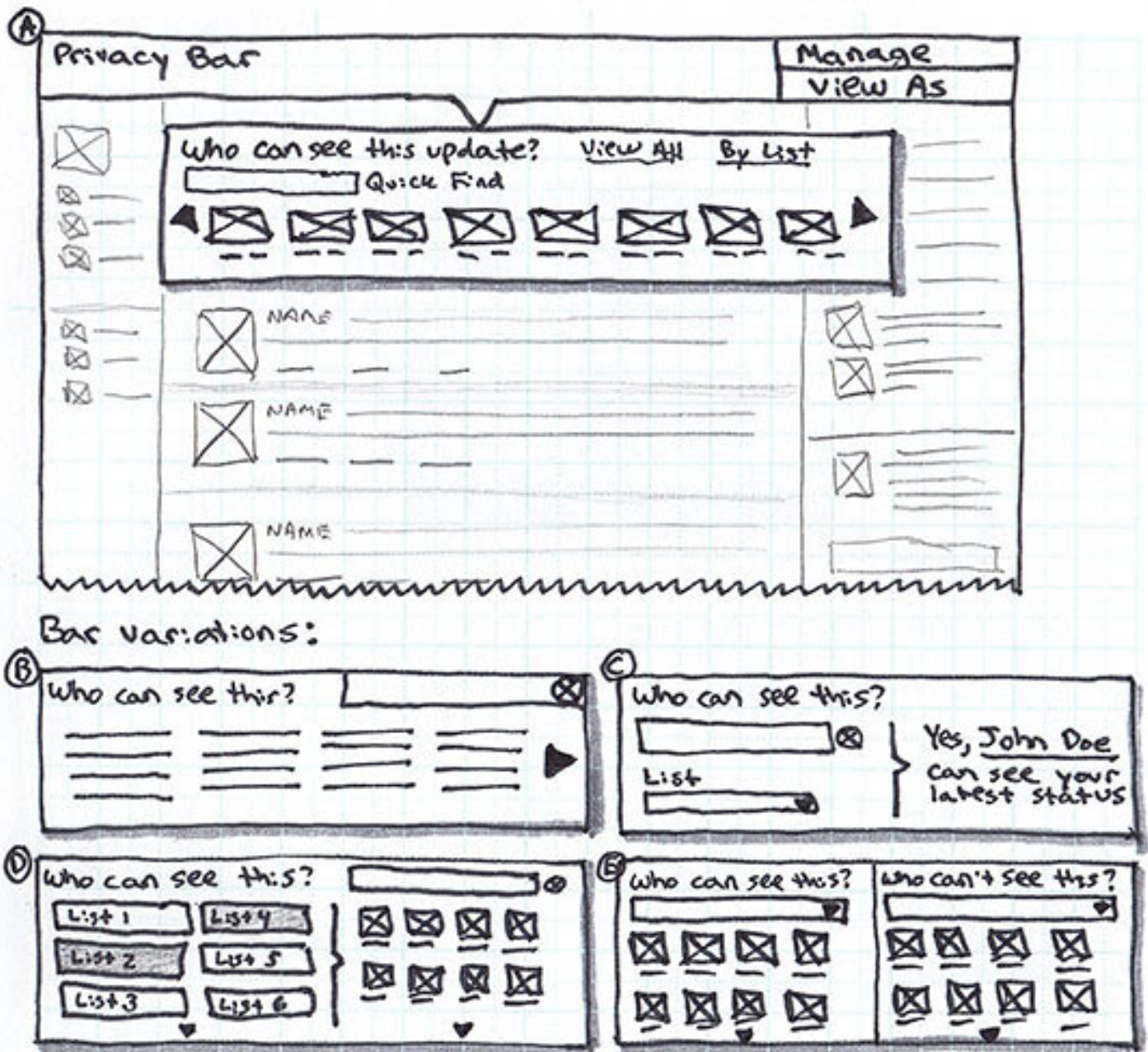
Social networking is much more than just a dominant discourse. We need to go beyond text and images and include its software, interfaces, and networks that depend on a technical infrastructure consisting of offices and their consultants and cleaners, cables and data centers, working in close concert with the movements and habits of the connected billions. Academic internet studies circles have shifted their attention from utopian promises, impulses, and critiques to "mapping" the network's impact. From digital humanities to data science we see a shift in network-oriented inquiry from *Whether and Why*, *What and Who*, to (merely) *How*. From a sociality of causes to a sociality of net effects. A new generation of humanistic researchers is lured into the "big data" trap, and kept busy capturing user behavior whilst producing

seductive eye candy for an image-hungry audience (and vice versa).

Without noticing, we have arrived at a new, yet unnamed, stage: the hegemonic era of social media platforms as ideology. Products and services are of course usually subject to ideology. We have learned to "read" ideology into them. But at what point can we convincingly say they have become ideology themselves? It is one thing to state that Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook) is an ideologue, working in the service of US intelligence agencies, or to document community or political groups using his social media platform in ways unplanned or counter to expectations inherent to its design. It is quite another to work on a comprehensive social media theory. It is a crucial time for critical theory to reclaim lost territory and bring on exactly this: a shift from the quantitative to the qualitative, uncomputable impacts of this ubiquitous formatting of the social. It is liberating for research to sever itself from the instrumental approach of (viral) marketing and public relations. Stop pushing, start analyzing. Network technologies are rapidly becoming the "new normal," withdrawing their operations and governance from view. We need to politicize the New Electricity, the privately owned utilities of our century, before they disappear into the background.

The 2008 chapter of internet criticism is coming to a close. For the next round of *The Critique of the Political Economy*, the internet and digital technologies will have to be fully integrated. The easy opposition of California utopians vs. Euro pessimists has been superseded by much larger planetary issues such as the future of work. We need to take internet critique beyond the normative regulation of behavior and politicize the anxiety of the youth and their particular addictions and distractions. We have long come to terms with the actual and virtual nature of the social, as its potential for play and manipulation seems increasingly in abeyance. Social media demand from us that we perform in a never-ending show. We keep coming back, always remaining logged in, until the #DigitalDetox sets in and we're called to different realms.

The social, political, and economic promise of the internet as a decentralized network of networks lies in tatters. Social media alternatives, five years after their initial appearance, haven't made much progress at all.⁵ Despite all well-intended critical predictions, the herds have not moved on to greener pastures. The overall picture is one of stagnation in a field defined by the corporate domination of a handful of players. We all remain stuck in the social media mud, and it's time to ask why. Comparable to the late-1970s stagnation in mainstream media critique, a political economy approach will not be sufficient if we want to come up with workable strategies. One possible way out could be a post-Freudian answer to the question: *What's on a User's Mind?*⁶ We need to answer the question as to what social media actually offer. Which desires do they appeal to? Why is updating

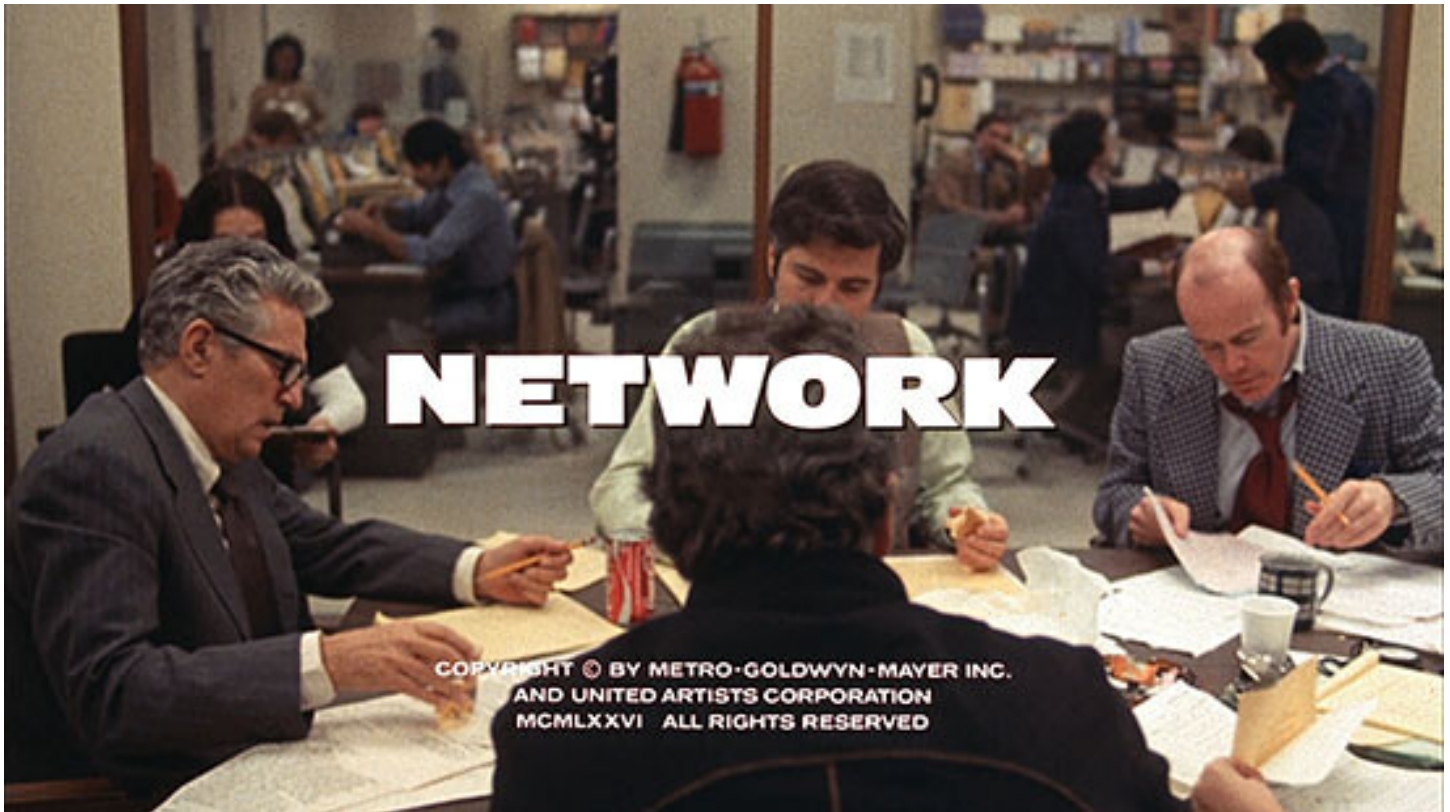


Fortune.com requested a series of User Experience Designers to sketch out how they would redesign Facebook's privacy settings to address indignation over privacy concerns.

such a seductive yet boring habit? Can we develop a set of critical concepts that would describe our compulsive attraction to social media, without reducing that attraction to addiction rhetoric?

A starting point for reading social media as ideology would be Wendy Chun's 2004 essay on the idea of "software" as ideology.⁷ Chun's work, along with the work of Jodi Dean and others, speaks strongly to the media theorist coming to terms with the peak of neoliberal transition and the triumph of proprietary software. The prominence of

ideology as a central term in debates has faded away since the mid-1980s. The backdrop of ideology theory in the 1970s was the spectacular peaking of the power of the state apparatus (also called the welfare state) that was commissioned to administrate the postwar class compromise. Whilst Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology*, as announced in 1960, had arrived with the victory of neoliberalism at the end of the Cold War, there was an intuitive feeling that ideology—with a small *i*—had not yet left the stage, and the World Without Ideas was not yet within reach, despite concerted efforts to diminish the role



A film still from the opening credits of Sydney Lumet's 1976 satire on television broadcasting, *The Network*.

of public intellectuals and critical discourses.

The “Californian ideology” as defined in 1995 by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron helped us trace the motives underlying the internet back to their Cold War roots (and the ambivalent hippie culture). Fred Turner’s 2006 classic *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* did much the same. But the historical perspective is not much use if it cannot explain social media’s contemporary and persistent success since the 1990s. Now, as in the 1970s, the role of ideology in navigating the limits of existing systems is all too real. To study ideology is to take a close look at this everyday life, here and now. What remains particularly unexplained is the apparent paradox between the hyper-individualized subject and the herd mentality of the social. What’s wrong with the social? What’s right with it? Positivity is as pervasive in California as it is in the Italian cyberspace scene, which, in a Gramscian move, has embraced the “social network” as a sign within popular culture that the multitude can beat the mainstream in its act of mediation. Italian critics, activists, and artists are not unlike many others in being hyperaware of all the controversies that surround the products and services made in Silicon Valley, while remaining mostly positive about the magic potion called social networking.

One function of ideology as defined by Louis Althusser is recognition, the (in)famous interpellation of the subject that is being called upon.⁷ We can apply this and speak of

the process of becoming-user. This is the unnoticed part of the social media saga. Before we enter the social media sphere, everyone first fills out a profile and chooses a username and password in order to create an account. Minutes later, you’re part of the game and you start sharing, creating, playing, as if it has always been like that. The profile is the a priori part and the profiling and targeted advertising cannot operate without it. The platforms present themselves as self-evident. They *just are*—facilitating our feature-rich lives. Everyone that counts is there. It is through the gate of the profile that we become its subject.

For Althusser, we live inside ideology in this way—the formula applies in particular to social media in which subjects are addressed as users who do not exist without a profile. It is justified to use this slightly authoritarian, hermetic concept of ideology because of the highly centralized top-down structure of social media architecture in this age of platform capitalism, which leaves zero space for users to reprogram their communication spaces.

Despite all the postmodernism and cynical neoliberalism that has deemed it redundant, it is no surprise that ideology (again) rules. (It is more remarkable how total the concept’s fall from use has been.) The main issue is that we are less and less aware of *how* it rules. When it comes to social media we have an “enlightened false

consciousness” in which we know very well what we are doing when we are fully sucked in, but we do it anyway. This even accounts at a meta-level for the popularity of Žižek’s insights—and could be one of the best explanations for his success. We’re all aware of the algorithmic manipulations of Facebook’s news feed, the filter-bubble effect in apps, and the persuasive presence of personalized advertisement. We pull in updates, 24/7, in a real-time global economy of interdependencies, having been taught to read news feeds as interpersonal indicators of the planetary condition. So in what way does Louis Althusser need updating?

Four decades after the Althusser era, we do not associate ideology with the state in the same way he and his followers did. To qualify Facebook and Google as falling within the Althusserian definition of “ideological state apparatus” sounds odd, if not exotic. In this era of late neoliberalism and right-wing populism, ideology is associated with the market, not with the state, which has withdrawn into the role of merely securing the market. But lest we forget, it was ideology theory itself that contributed to the “crisis of marxism.” It led the way in opening up marxism to issues thrust to the fore by the student movement, the rise of feminism, and other “new social movements,” and also highlighted the stagnation and bankruptcy of the Soviet Union. The growing interest in media and “cultural studies” did the rest.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, weakened Communist parties could no longer “annex” and overrule the rainbow of justice and redistribution issues of the “properly” (or revolutionary) social state, let alone its countercultural practices. The tactics of overdetermination in the name of the working class therefore no longer worked. The so-called “patchwork of minorities,” non-applying themselves to the new normal, were left literally to their own devices, without an overarching political framework, let alone organization (or antagonism). Within a decade, two of the defining centripetal forces of Marxist theory as ideology critique lost their dominance: State and Party. The associated disappearance of ideology as a main focus of attention in philosophy and the social sciences turned into the common belief that while “ideas still mattered,” they are no longer able to rule people’s lives. Nowadays, ideas are praised because they can shape the future, but taken as rules and norms they are believed to be too messy to govern our contradictory everyday lives under capital.

Treating social media as ideology means observing how it binds together media, culture, and identity into an ever-growing cultural performance (and related “cultural studies”) of gender, lifestyle, fashion, brands, celebrity, and news from radio, television, magazines, and the web—all of this imbricated with the entrepreneurial values of venture capital and start-up culture, with their underside of declining livelihoods and growing inequality. Every user has their confession: “It’s definitely harder to

avoid social media than it is to give into it. Most people tend to give into it, because its easier” (Adele).

Wendy Chun wrote her 2004 essay on software as ideology in the golden 2.0 era of the web, when software was coming to be considered synonymous with—and confused with—PCs and laptops. She wrote: “Software is a functional analogue to ideology. In a formal sense computers understood as comprising software and hardware are ideology machines.” She noted that software “fulfills almost every formal definition of ideology we have, from ideology as false consciousness to Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology as a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” In an age of installed, micro-perceptual effects and streamed programming, ideology does not merely refer to an abstract sphere where the battle of ideas is being fought. Think more in line with a Spinozan sense of embodiment—from the repetitive strains of Tinder swiping, to text neck, to the hunched-over-laptop syndrome.

What is crusted as orthodoxy in Althusser needs some adaptation and updating, not only in terms of a class analysis. But it is still remarkable how smoothly an Althusserian ideology framework fits today’s world, as Chun proves:

Software, or perhaps more precisely operating systems, offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware: they do not represent transistors but rather desktops and recycling bins. Software produces users. Without operating system (OS) there would be no access to hardware; without OS no actions, no practices, and thus no user. Each OS, through its advertisements, interpellates a “user”: calls it and offers it a name or image with which to identify.

We could say that social media performs the same function, and is even more powerful.

“What are you doing?” said Twitter’s original phrase. The question marks the material roots of social media. Social media platforms have never asked “What are you thinking?” Or dreaming, for that matter. Twentieth-century libraries are full of novels, diaries, comic strips, and films in which people expressed what are were thinking. In the age of social media we seem to confess less what we think. It’s considered too risky, too private. We share what we do, and see, in a staged manner. Yes, we share judgments and opinions, but no thoughts. Our Self is too busy for that, always on the move, flexible, open, sporty, sexy, and always ready to connect and express.

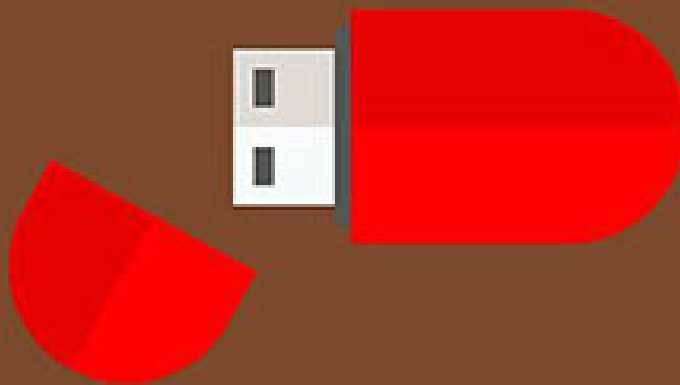
With 24/7 social visibility, apparatus and application become one in the body. This is a reversal of Marshall McLuhan’s *Extensions of Man*—we are now witnessing an *Inversion of Man*. Once technology entangles our senses and gets under our skin, distance collapses and we no



longer have any sense that we are bridging distances. With Jean Baudrillard we could speak of an implosion of the social into the hand-held device in which an unprecedented accumulation of storage capacity, computational power, software, and social capital is crystallized. Things get right in our face, our ears, steered by our autonomous finger tips. This is what Michel Serres admires so much in the navigational plasticity of the

mobile generation, the smoothness of its gestures, symbolized in the speed of the thumb, sending updates in seconds, mastering mini-conversations, grasping the mood of a global tribe in an instant. To stay within the French realm of references: social media as the apparatus of sexy and sporty “active acting” makes it a perfect vehicle for the literature of despair epitomized by Michel Houellebecq’s messy body(-politics).

 New device may contain malicious software



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Protecting the adventurous

The illusion with which the user surrounds him- or herself while swiping and tapping through social media updates feels natural and self-evident for the very first time. There is no steep learning curve or rite of passage; we need not shed blood, sweat, and tears to fight our way into the social hierarchy. From day one the network configuration makes us feel at home, as if WhatsApp, QQ, and Telegram have always existed. Down the line, however, this immediate familiarity becomes the main source of discontent. We're no longer playing, like in the good old days of LambdaMOO and Second Life. Intuitively, we sense that social media constitute an arena of struggle where we display our "experientialism" (James Wallman), where hierarchy is a given, and profile details such as gender, race, age, and class are not merely "data" but decisive measures in the social stratification ladder.

Social media's imaginary community that we stumble into (and leave behind the moment we log out) is not fake. The platform is not a simulacrum of the social. Social media do not "mask" the real. Neither the software nor the interface of social media are ironic, multilayered, or complex. In that sense, social media are no longer (or not yet) postmodern. The paradoxes at work here are not playful. The applications do not appear to us as absurd, let alone Dada. They are self-evident, functional, even slightly boring. What attracts us is the social, the never-ending flow, and not the performativity of the interfaces themselves. (Performativity seems to be the main draw of virtual reality, now in its second hype cycle, twenty-five years after its first).

Networks are not merely arenas of competition among rival social forces. This is a far too idealized point of view. If only. What fails here is the "staging" element. Platforms are not stages; they bring together and synthesize (multimedia) data, yes, but what is lacking here is the (curatorial) element of human labor. That's why there is no media in social media. The platforms operate because of their software, automated procedures, algorithms, and filters, not because of their large staff of editors and designers. Their lack of employees is what makes current debates in terms of racism, anti-Semitism, and jihadism so timely, as social media platforms are currently forced by politicians to employ editors who will have to do the all-too-human monitoring work (filtering out ancient ideologies that refuse to disappear).

Whereas gadgets such as smartphones and cameras have a (hyped-up and thus limited) fetish quality, the social network as such fails to have such a status. The network has an ecological status, comparable to Sloterdijk's theory of the spheres. It surrounds us like air; it's a *Lebenswelt*, a (filter) bubble, comparable to the medieval worldview or imagined Mars colonies. Today's cosmology consists of layers made of dating apps, soccer portals, software forums, and porn sites woven together by search engines, news sites, and social media. As in the case of air, it will become quite a task to prove its existence, but once

ideology shows its ugly side, therapy works through the unconscious, paradoxes start to fall apart, and the ideology unravels.

Going back to 2004, Wendy Chun was occupied with the issue of metaphors when taking software seriously as a new kind of social realism: "Software and ideology fit each other perfectly because both try to map the material effects of the immaterial and to posit the immaterial through visible cues. Through this process the immaterial emerges as a commodity, as something in its own right." The details seem less interesting to deal with: "Users know very well that their folders and desktops are not really folders and desktops, but they treat them as if they were—by referring to them as folders and as desktops. This logic is, according to Slavoj Žižek, crucial to ideology." Is it useful to also note that the Facebook category of "friends" has become a similar metaphor. We can surely say the same of the Facebook "news feed."

So, what will happen when the audience becomes too much to deal with? More important than deconstructing surface appearances is, in Chun's words, to argue that "ideology persists in one's actions rather than in one's beliefs. The illusion of ideology exists not at the level of knowledge but rather at the level of doing." Here, the rhetoric of "interactivity" obfuscates more than it reveals about the way users negotiate interfaces; since the computational and control mechanisms of interfaces are hidden, users cannot technically "interact" with them directly enough to understand them. The *like* economy "behind" our smart devices is a particularly relevant social media example. What, for instance, will happen when we reveal that we have never believed in our own likes? That we never liked you in the first place?

Let's appraise the bots and the *like* economy for what they are: key features of platform capitalism aimed at capturing value behind the backs of their users. Social media are a matter of neither taste nor lifestyle, in the sense of "consumer choice." They are our technological mode of the social. In the previous century we would never have regarded writing letters or making a telephone call as matters of taste. They were "cultural techniques," massive flows of symbolic exchange. Soon after its initial emergence, social media transformed from a hype and online service into essential infrastructure, just like letters and telegrams and the telephone used to be. It is precisely at this juncture of "becoming infrastructure" that we (re)open the ideology file.



Mark Zuckerberg presents the virtual reality headset Oculus Rift in the 2016 Mobile World Congress.

X

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1

When terms or symptoms are inflated, they lose their meaning. This might be the case with addiction. If entire societies are addicted, the term loses its ability to create differences and it is time to search for alternative concepts. A possible new term could be "stickyness." Julia Roberts on social media: "It's kind of like cotton candy: It looks so appealing, and you just can't resist getting in there, and then you just end up with sticky fingers, and it lasted an instant."

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5

See the announcement for the launch of the Unlike Us network, July 2011 <http://networkcultures.org/unlikeus/about/>

6

A variation on the title ("What's

On a Man's Mind") of a popular drawing of Freud with a naked lady worked into his forehead. A poster of the drawing decorated my teenage bedroom in 1976–77.

7

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," first published in *La Pensée* 151, June 1970. English translation available in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

The Idea of an Archive

An archive is a non-random collection of things, or the place where such a collection resides. The concept of non-randomness or purposiveness implies that archivists have a reason for archiving—that an archive is a meaningful project with a set of goals. It is possible to generate an archive by accident, so long as some party in the future can attribute meaning to this accidental collection of things.¹ An accumulation of dangerous nuclear waste is not normally considered an archive, but the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico fits my definition of a “non-random collection of things.” Just as a collection of ruins functions as an archive for archeologists and other scientists, in the far future the vast collection of nuclear waste in the New Mexico desert should provide abundant clues to the civilization that produced it. In this case, the primary archival materials are injurious to human life, and if future generations are unaware of their danger, signage in multiple languages will provide clues. Accurate interpretation can be a life-and-death matter.

Three very basic questions are asked of any archive:

1. Why does this archive exist?
2. What is missing from the archive?
3. Why does this archive contain this item rather than another?

One of the most famous archives in the world is the US National Archives and Records Administration, run by the US government. A lesser-known archive on the West Coast of the US is the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Containing an astonishing amount of documents and other objects, both present a controlled picture of the past and the present.² Access to these archives is restricted, and each contains items that frequently shed a poor light on the past actions of the US government. But the sustained presence of these items in the archive, and the existence of the entire archive itself, represent the continued power and justification of the US as an ongoing national concern. This understanding of the *raison d'être* of archives such as these should be uncontroversial, and in fact their mission statements reflect this interpretation.³

Furthermore, the vast breadth of these archives attests to the global superpower status of the US. Some items in their collections are contested and function like artworks plundered during the Age of Imperialism. For example, the diaries of Chinese generalissimo Chang Kai-shek are housed at the Hoover Institution, where access is restricted and copying forbidden. Given the historical importance of Chiang Kai-shek to the modern history of China and Taiwan, doesn't it make more sense for his diaries (or at least a copy of them) to be housed in an archive in Taiwan or perhaps China? ⁴ Rather than languishing in a basement in California, shouldn't Chiang

James T. Hong

The Suspicious Archive, Part I: A Prejudiced Interpretation of the Interpretation of Archives



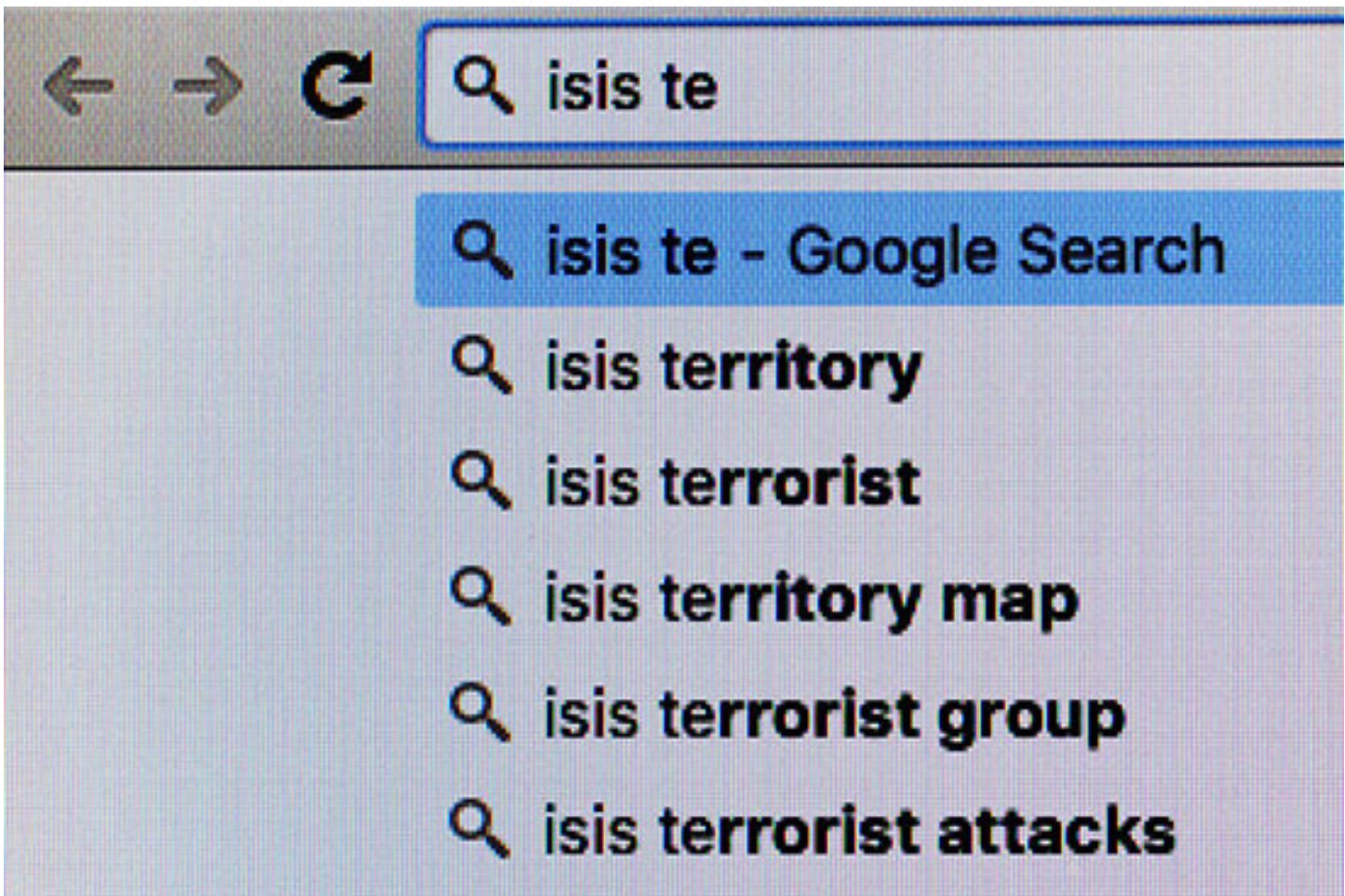
An ad hoc archive made from items taken from the author's pocket.

Kai-shek's diaries be accessible to the very public he so greatly affected? The fact that they're in the US, under lock and key, demonstrates the US's political relationship to Taiwan and China.

The whole internet itself can be considered a vast, if decentralized, archive. Due to its unfathomable size and

ever increasing growth, a search engine like Google, Bing, or Baidu is required for examining and cataloguing its contents. Just as we are not unbiased (we have our own beliefs and preferences), Google and other search engines are not ideologically neutral research tools. **5**

As the dominant internet search engine in the world,



Some auto-typed keywords as suggested by Google.

Google can arrange and hierarchize information, putting what its engineers and their algorithms regard as most important at the top of search results. This ability to rank information gives Google enormous power, the operation of which is, for the most part, unrecognized by its users. Researchers have shown that SEME ("search engine manipulation effect") can be especially effective in altering perceptions of politicians during elections. Thus Google can also operate as an invisible kingmaker in world affairs.

6

We should also consider the ideologies that social media corporations themselves promote. Corporate authorities collaborate with government entities to block and remove material that they deem unacceptable, such as support for terrorism and calls to violence. But who polices the web police? And isn't rational (or irrational) discussion of ideas, no matter how ugly they might be, a pillar of a "free society"? Removing the "ugliness" cleanses the archive, and the archive *is us* for future generations. This cleansing is thus a gross manipulation of the record of our present world.

Censorship is not only top down. As subjects and

consumers we also knowingly and unknowingly censor ourselves to conform to society's standards. A good citizen knows that there are some beliefs and thoughts that she should not make public (even though reckless people habitually do so on social media). There are certain things we should not say and perhaps may not say. It is rare for us to actively gather information that might dispel or debunk our generic view of the world. Everyday, millions of people search Google for things they already know or already accept. Google even provides a list of key search-words before one finishes typing! According to internet pioneer Eli Pariser, "a world constructed from the familiar is a world in which there's nothing to learn—invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas." 7

In other words, our prejudices are reaffirmed, digitally, everyday—and in an ever increasing fashion by the use of web personalization. According to former Yahoo executive Tapan Bhat, "The future of the web is about personalization ... now the web is about 'me.'" 8

Pornography is one of the most profitable industries on the internet, so we can also consider the internet a

gigantic archive of porn. Porn offers us seemingly any fetish, and though the porn consumer might try a few new kinky things, he knows what gets him off. When it comes to pornography, we already understand what we see before we even see it. Our expectations reveal a prior comprehension regardless of any particular content. This pre-recognition, or predisposition, can be understood as a pre-judgment or prejudice in a *hermeneutic* sense. Prejudices are usually considered unreflective, knee-jerk reactions. The word “prejudice” is a pejorative, and well-educated citizens of developed nations pride themselves on resisting prejudiced thinking and claims, especially those concerning social issues. This is a purely negative conception of prejudice—a prejudice against prejudice. In this conception, prejudices only serve to limit thinking and restrict interpretative horizons.

In his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960), the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer takes pains to rehabilitate the hermeneutic positivity of prejudice. While prejudices can and frequently do limit the horizons of thinking, they are also an essential part of an anticipatory structure of human understanding. We do not produce cultural objects, such as texts and artwork, spontaneously out of nothing. Rather, we create them within a social world this is already loaded with meaning before we ever come into existence. In the jargon of Gadamer’s infamous mentor Martin Heidegger, we are thrown into a world that “always already” has meaning. Education is a form of conceptual and social training that prepares us for whatever events might occur in the future, short of total catastrophe. This conceptual training is the indoctrination of prejudices, which equips us with the skills for understanding our shared social world.

The Hermeneutic Circle: Human Existence Is Itself Interpretative

As a young philosophy student, Gadamer trained with Heidegger, who had expanded the conventional method of textual interpretation, or hermeneutics. Traditionally, hermeneutics focused on biblical exegesis and the development of a rigorous procedure for interpreting sacred texts. German theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey applied the methodology of hermeneutics to the interpretation of any text and to the human sciences and humanities themselves.

When we pick up a text—the Bible, a dime-store novel, or even an artwork—we already have a general, if vague, idea of what it *will* contain. This original anticipatory awareness of the text guides our understanding, while also being revised as we read further. In Heidegger’s words, “Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to

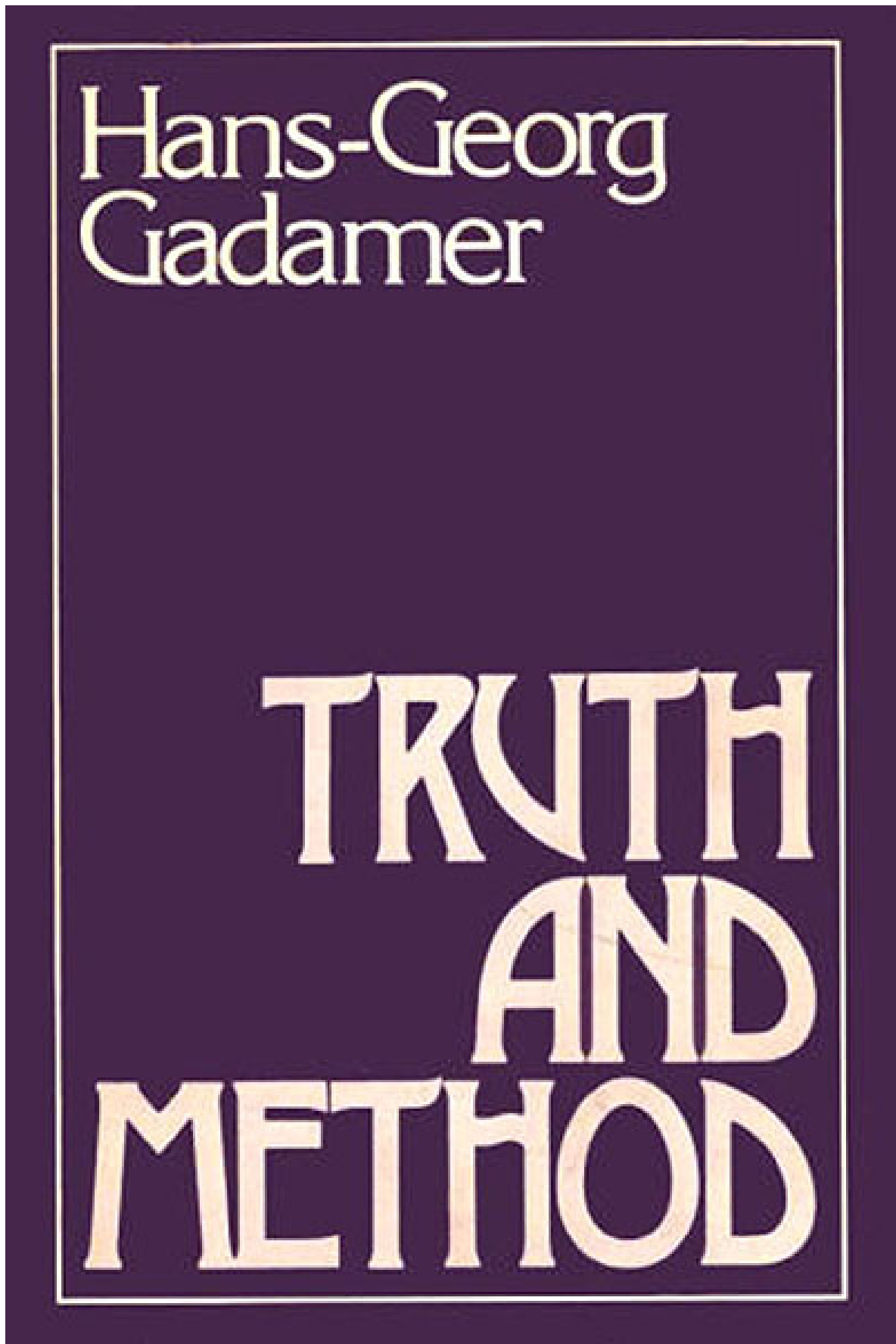
be interpreted.”⁹ This basic interpretative structure is called the “hermeneutic circle.” We have initial expectations concerning the whole text, which influence our understanding of its parts, which then affect our understanding of the whole. Our analysis of a text also complements and perhaps reframes our initial prejudices concerning it.

Moreover, the interpreter is always situated within a specific meaningful context, viewing the text from a certain cultural (or multicultural) perspective. The interpreter is versed in a particular social vocabulary or set of vocabularies and concepts, which affect and comprise his or her prejudgments concerning a text. A completely objective “view from nowhere” is impossible,¹⁰ and a situated view is necessarily a prejudiced one. For Heidegger, hermeneutic or interpretative understanding is not limited to the understanding of literal texts, but applies to our very human existence. Put nicely by the philosopher Cristina Lafont, “to be human is not primarily to be a rational animal, but first and foremost to be a self-interpreting animal.”¹¹ In other words, interpretation is not simply an activity in the course of life; it is the very form of human life.¹² Understanding is always also interpretation, which is made possible and informed by prejudices.¹³

The notion of “being-in-the-world” (*In-der-Welt-sein*) is one of the most important concepts in Heidegger’s early masterpiece *Being and Time* (1927). The world as traditionally conceived by philosophers and scientists is the totality of all entities in the universe—the entirety of the physical cosmos. In Heidegger’s analysis, the world as it *usually* is to us is not some cold abstract entity, but rather a “referential context of significance” (*Verweisungszusammenhang der Bedeutsamkeit*). We are born or “thrown” into a society that already has meaning and value to many other human beings. We can understand this hermeneutic notion of the world as something akin to a culture. Infants are socialized and acculturated within an already established cultural context—a nexus of potentialities, senses, paths, choices, histories, etc.¹⁴ This present and historical context communicates to us as “tradition.” In *Truth and Method* Gadamer notably claims that

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*¹⁵

When referring to conventional or hackneyed interpretations, Heidegger uses the seemingly derogatory term “idle talk” (*Gerede*)—“the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the



The cover of the English translation of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* uses a font in an art nouveau style.

thing one's own."

16 Examples include the news, elections, scandals, and even what we assume to be our country's past. Notwithstanding the dreck that makes up gossip or the comments sections of websites, idle talk is a genuine social phenomenon that makes it possible for people to communicate despite having different levels of education, experience, and knowledge. Idle talk and the way in which things have already been interpreted are unavoidable and inescapable.

*"Being that can be understood is language"***17**

We grow up in a cultural world of significance, and we share this world with everyone else within it largely through the mediation of language. In other words, the hermeneutic notion of the world is one that is *linguistically articulated*. As limited beings, we can never have a complete awareness of the entirety of our cultural world, but we can read or hear about it and thus share a common understanding of it. As Heidegger explains, "It is not so much that we see the objects and things but rather that we talk about them. To put it more precisely: we do not say what we see, but rather the reverse, we see what *one says* about things." **18**

In a linguistically articulated world, language is not simply a set of arbitrary signs that refer to objects within the world; language is rather the very means with which the world shows itself to us. Interpretive understanding is always a mediation between the strange and the familiar in some kind of *language*. **19**

Since we cannot escape our linguistic upbringing and its concomitant prejudices, it would seem as if we were trapped inside a vicious hermeneutic circle, and indeed Heidegger does consider it as such. His advice is not to attempt to avoid the circle, but rather to enter into it "correctly." **20** For Gadamer, being blindly imprisoned inside the hermeneutic circle, or conversely, being free to create any interpretation willy-nilly no matter how fanciful, would result in "hermeneutic nihilism," which he opposes. The question is: How can we come up with satisfactory interpretations that are also truthful?

Understanding and knowledge occur within normative (and contestable) contexts. This is most obvious in scientific claims, which can be considered interpretations working within established scientific paradigms. **21** The "politics of poetics"—the interpretation of artworks—is no less fraught with orientating prejudices. (An archive can be understood as one accumulation of history.) **22** (The archive can be understood as the accumulation of history according to these matrices.)

Any normative context is prejudicial and betrays a basic interpretative attitude. The hermeneutics of trust or faith is Gadamer's basic optimistic position; he believes that

meanings can essentially be "restored" via philosophical hermeneutics. This is also the standard attitude of the biblical or religious scholar.

On the other hand, the "hermeneutics of suspicion," as developed by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, pursues and uncovers conspiracies, lies, and occlusions. **23** Ricoeur's examples are Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the three "masters of suspicion." For Nietzsche, all interpretations, be they of texts or of one's own life, betray a fundamental desire for a "will to power." Marx focuses on class positions and cultural and economic products as hiding and justifying relations to the "means of production." And Freud sees dream images and symbols as deceptive expressions of fantasies, wishes, and drives—usually sexual in nature—while the real truth remains unconscious. For each of these thinkers, the underlying meaning of a text is disguised or concealed. We should not simply trust the ostensible meanings we encounter in the world; we must decipher them. And if we can alter an already established interpretation (i.e., alter the status quo), then there is space for some kind of freedom.

For the suspicious theorist, if we become aware of our imprisonment inside the circle of false consciousness, then there is a possibility for liberation. But this suspicious attitude can easily turn so bitter that when we approach a text that we consider unreliable, we discern only malevolent intentions and outright lies. We should remember that propaganda is sometimes true and that even a lie is but one interpretation. Sometimes wading through the lies can reveal a pathway to the truth. **24**

Edward Snowden described his cache of classified documents as an "archive." **25** He said he reviewed the archive of damning documents himself before selectively disclosing them to Western journalists, who themselves screened the documents again before publication. According to the journalists involved, "Several [documents] gave details of previously undisclosed intelligence operations abroad. There was no public interest in betraying them." **26** In other words, the public release of only some of the documents is aimed at reinforcing the public's suspicions and prejudices concerning American surveillance overreach—more confirmation than revelation. Moreover, without direct access to the archive, much of what the public really knows is mere idle talk.

Some American experts and politicians accuse Snowden of damaging national security, such as when he "carelessly" leaked information about the US government's covert surveillance of Al Qaeda. **27** Snowden of course claimed that he was motivated by public interest. But which public? Like other libertarians, Snowden opposed the American program of Social Security, which, despite its critics, was implemented with the intention of enhancing the public good. **28** And like other young American nationalists, he also joined the US



A special edition swipe card for Taiwan's metro system features a Japanese porn star and special packaging. Photo: EasyCard Corporation, Taiwan.

military hoping to fight in “the war on terror.” In his own words, “I wanted to fight in the Iraq war because I felt like I had an obligation as a human being to help free people from oppression.” ²⁹

Deemed a hero by many in the US and around the world, Snowden’s actions have effectively buttressed American soft power (the dominant culture in the world) by showing that despite any crimes the US might have committed, there are still some great Americans who promote American exceptionalism and the US Constitution—an idealized American notion of liberty. According to Snowden, “America is a fundamentally good country ... We have good people with good values.” ³⁰

Ultrationalists frequently believe in their own nation’s patriotic rhetoric and nationalist traditions more than their own governments do. As such, ultrationalists can become a threat by fomenting revolution or seeking radical governmental reform. Snowden sees himself in a similar light: “Perhaps, in such times, loving one’s country means being hated by its government.” ³¹ In my reading, Snowden’s archive is designed to represent a form of ultrationalist American conscience.

WikiLeaks and Facts

Publicly represented by Julian Assange, WikiLeaks is both an organization and an archive. Like any good curator, Julian Assange and his team are guilty of selection bias, since WikiLeaks does not publish every submission it receives through its website. Moreover, the timing of its releases is designed for maximum propaganda value.

WikiLeaks’ original mission was broadly journalistic—to create an “uncensorable version of Wikipedia” ³² that was “designed to maximize the flow of information to maximize the amount of action leading to just reform.” ³³ Assange’s prejudices lean toward social justice, opposition to state violence, and the exposing of governmental lies and corruption—what he calls “positive political reform.” ³⁴ Despite WikiLeaks’ protestations to the contrary, its releases increasingly seem to reflect Assange’s own convictions and grudges, e.g., against the US government and Hillary Clinton. WikiLeaks claims that its searchable database consists of “pristine primary source archives.” ³⁵ “Pristine” implies completeness, but any real-world archive is unavoidably incomplete. And what is missing from an archive can be just as important as what is included.

Notably, Assange’s organization is incapable of actually validating the content of its releases; that is to say, it cannot actually verify that what it publishes is true—it cannot verify facts. The best WikiLeaks can do is verify that the documents it publishes are authentic, e.g., that a diplomatic cable is a real one and not forged. But its authentication process remains mysterious, and we

should remember that governments do at times document falsities. Moreover, if any of WikiLeaks’ pristine primary source archives were in fact surgically tampered with (a word here, a short sentence there), there is currently no effective mechanism for catching such minute but perhaps significant manipulations.

So Assange’s leaks have meaning, but this meaning is malleable. To WikiLeaks and its supporters, its archive represents proof of “the greatest unaccountable power of today—the United States and our Western democracies.” ³⁶ For others, “WikiLeaks stands to improve our democracy,” ³⁷ since “ours is shown to be a democracy that daily operates on the basis of lies, secrets, and mass ignorance.” ³⁸ When it comes to WikiLeaks, “there are no facts, only interpretations,” ³⁹ and if we search long enough on WikiLeaks—or Wikipedia for that matter—we’ll find what we’re looking for.



A sizeable English language school for children across the street from a McDonald's in central Taipei, Taiwan. According to the motto of the Giraffe English School in Taiwan: "English is a beginning; character is forever."

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All photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.

James T. Hong is a filmmaker and artist based in Taiwan. He has produced works about Heidegger, Spinoza, Japanese biological warfare, the Opium Wars, and racism and most recently completed a documentary about nationalism and disputed territory in the East China Sea. He is currently researching the concept of morality in East Asia and will present a new experimental work about Nietzsche and metempsychosis at the 2016 Taipei Biennial.

1

So when the photographer Allan Sekula claims, for instance, that “clearly archives are not neutral: they embody-- the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoarding,” he is really talking about our interpretations *of* archives. See Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2002), 446.

2

Of all documents and materials created in the course of business conducted by the United States Federal government, only 1%–3% are so important for legal or historical reasons that they are kept by us forever” <http://www.archives.gov/about/> .

3

For example: “With its eminent scholars and world-renowned Library & Archives, the Hoover Institution seeks to improve the human condition by advancing ideas that promote economic opportunity and prosperity, while securing and safeguarding peace for America and all mankind” <http://www.hoover.org/about/mission-statement> .