# Editorial

The term "nerd" might have originated in the 1950s, but today we can really see how the rises and changes in its usage followed rises and changes in the usage of intelligent machines. Let's follow the term for a moment through a particularly male scenario: If the nemesis of the nerd in popular culture was the jock—an able-bodied, handsome man from a family of good standing—then it was probably right that they should go to war against each other. The jock combined all of the characteristics that the dominant world economies (especially the US and UK) needed for maintaining industrial and corporate command—social entitlement, physical strength—until the late twentieth century, when command would shift to a "nerd" register: technical, hidden, arcane, taxonomic, and antisocial. It may have been only when Bill Gates amassed historically unprecedented wealth that it became clear that another order was on the rise.

Franco "Bifo" Berardi warns in this issue of *e-flux journal* that "when intelligence is not restrained by sensibility, it deploys as brutal force." Where intellect might once have been seen as the softer alternative to physical force, today we need to understand how a form of violence specific to deterministic machines renders intellect the dominant power in the Darwinian game. How, then, can we decouple sensibility from intellect so that it might stand as a check on the indifferent calculations of the latter?

Nowadays, we are teaching robots myopia: find the image with a crosswalk; mark all images with a stoplight until there are none left to mark; click all images that show no future. Locate all humans in the stadium with criminal facial characteristics.

Sometimes, not seeing the larger picture is the whole point: we need frames, close-ups, and jump cuts if we are to have images at all. On the other hand, congenital aphantasia, or the total lack of a mind's eye, may also have its advantages, but it certainly has its drawbacks, too.

What happens if we measure affect like this: How many images of trees burning must we swipe through before the screen itself gets hot, before the viewer's own temperature changes? What happens if in this scenario, the trees are swapped out for museums, and, more largely, what happens if the viewer is an intelligent being without sensibility? On another level, what if artificial programming isn't all bad, and in fact is responsible for human artistic output? Alina Popa asks, "What if an artwork is not human performance but the artificially programmed human, or all the nonhuman serendipitous elements that have programmed her?" In any case, it seems that we as humans still have a chance to get a leg up on the automatons—but the window may be closing rapidly. Ahmet Oğüt concludes that our modes of self-design are being steadily overtaken by unrestrained intelligence: "Before algorithmic-design completely takes control, there is still another chance: the more we confuse the algorithm, the more liberated we are."

Still from Jeff Kanew, Revenge of the Nerds (1984)

In terms of a shared vision, artistic or otherwise, while there are both trees and forests still available for viewing, it's unclear whether we—a *we* that includes automated beings, unrestricted by sense—are seeing in bits and pieces these days, or whether there is rather some semblance of a whole that exists outside of shared violence. It's about time, as T. J. Demos posits amidst climate and other kinds of disasters, to consider a new ecology of images.

Meanwhile, it is important to keep in mind the vast range of possibilities for the sources of the weather(s) that engulf us. Harun Farocki notes in *Parallel I*, that "in cinema there is the wind that blows and the wind blown by a wind machine. With computer images, there is only one kind of wind. A new constructivism."

Somewhere between the dimensions of space and time lies weather. We probably need long-range vision and long-game thinking to make it through fire, wind, flood, glitch, and fog with our morphing, possibly cyborgian, but stubbornly ill-adapted bodies. "Is it possible," Tyler Coburn asks of our human form, "somewhere between now and the suspension of everything, that our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone—when the human, as we know it, fragments or even ceases to exist?" Tony Wood raises the stakes, or changes them: "Why should we assume humankind has

any right to decide whether it gets perpetuated—and if it does, in what form? Why should the future mean more of the same?"

It comes as no surprise that science fiction, once the domain of nerds, now increasingly reads as prophetic for opening technical or scientistic endgames to unknown affects. Wood looks at three science-fiction stories—Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, and Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy—as portraying worlds defined by collapsed orders, seemingly anticipating a total reckoning. The collapsed orders are often in fact disorderly sequencings of production and consumption—even of the human itself, where the prospect of humanity consuming itself through its own production looks eerily similar to a punishment inflicted by an alien force. Caught in a Darwinian loop, the question of sensibility arises again, but now as a last resort in determining which improvements have rendered the human too monstrous even for itself.

**X**

Franco "Bifo" Berardi
# (Sensitive) Consciousness and Time: Against the Transhumanist Utopia

*Hegel and Leibniz*

Two pan-logical projects tower above the history of modernity: the recombinant project of Leibniz and the teleological project of Hegel. In Leibniz's, the world is preordained as a computational program, while in Hegel's the order of the world is the final result of historical conflicts that pave the way for the realization of the Absolute Spirit.

But as Baudrillard writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: "Finalities have disappeared, models are generating us."[1]

So, at the end of modernity the historical project of Hegel has collapsed and now lies torn apart in the chaotic geo-scape of the postmodern century.

Simultaneously, at the intersection of biotechnology and artificial intelligence, a transhumanist utopia is emerging as a Leibnizian dream (or nightmare): the reduction of the human world to computation, the prescriptive potency of a recombinant computational god.

The transhumanist utopia feeds on the rotting of humanism, and on the current catastrophe of critical reason that Yuval Harari outlines as a dissociation of intelligence and consciousness.

As I know that the word "consciousness" is gravid with spiritualist and idealist abuse, I have decide to replace this word with "sensibility," in order to define the kind of mental activity that cannot be reduced to computation or biological determinism. In this sense, consciousness implies sensibility.

*Chaos and the Automaton*

Two actors on the stage of the imminent: artificial intelligence and natural dementia. When we speak of new technologies converging toward the implementation of the cognitive automaton, we should not forget that this process develops amidst spreading psychosis and identitarian obsession.

Inorganic intelligence, incorporated into social life through a network of techno-linguistic info-devices, is governed and applied by a demented social organism: artificial intelligence in the hands of the ferocious stupidity that prevails on the political stage.

The self-building automaton emerges in the context of global chaos, and in the process, sensibility is separated from intelligence. The sensitive organism does not comply with the computational perfection of the automaton.

Artificial intelligence and social dementia coalesce in the imminent scene.

Max de Esteban, Twenty Red Lights, 2008-2018. Pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

*Techno-Totalitarian Reich*

The shame and disgust of being human (of having human bodies, and bodily minds) is the psycho-epistemic premise of transhumanist ideology.

From Baudelaire to Huysmans to Bataille to Houellebecq, repugnance towards the sexual body (especially relevant in French literary culture) meets California techno-culture and gives birth to the transhumanist eternity of the frozen extra-bodily techno-brain.

Ray Kurzweil argues that the miniaturization of computers will result in nanobots that can enter and repair the human body. Human life could thereby be prolonged to the stage where it would become possible to download the human brain onto a computer, making humans immortal.

I do not know if this project (recalling Marvin Minsky and his idea that minds are simply what brains do) is technologically well-founded (I don't think so), but that's not my point here. My point is that this technological project is based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of "human."

Kurzweil writes:

The power (price-performance, speed, capacity, and bandwidth) of information technologies is growing

exponentially at an even faster pace, now doubling about every year ... Human brain scanning is one of these exponentially improving technologies ... Nonbiological intelligence will be able to download skills and knowledge from other machines, eventually also from humans ... We will be able to reengineer all of the organs and systems in our biological bodies and brains to be vastly more capable ... Nanobots will have myriad roles within the human body, including reversing human aging (to the extent that this task will not already have been completed through biotechnology, such as genetic engineering).[2]

Following the Cartesian pathway, transhumanist thinkers take a dualistic approach to the mind–body problem, and assume that the human mind can exist, independently from the body, in a computer.

What is interesting in this dystopian utopia is not the technological anticipation (which may or may not be true), but the political and philosophical implications.

The transhuman vision is based on the reducibility of conscious life to artificial intelligence: this techno-determinism outlines the prospect of a techno-totalitarian empire that obviously reminds one of the German experiment in Ubermensch civilization.

I want to abstain from any ethical or political scandal on this point: I do not consider Nazism the absolute evil, just a particular example of the cruelty of history. My only focus here is the philosophical coherence of the techno-determinist view, regardless of its ethico-political outcome.

In 1958, Günther Anders wrote:

> We can expect that the horrors of the Reich to come will vastly eclipse the horrors of yesterday's Reich. Doubtless, when one day our children or grandchildren, proud of their perfect "co-mechanization," look down from the great heights of their thousand-year reich at yesterday's empire, at the so-called "third" Reich, it will seem to them merely a minor, provincial experiment; one which, in spite of its enormous effort to spread itself everywhere ("tomorrow the whole world," they said), and its cynical extermination of everything it could not use, was nevertheless unable to remain standing.  And doubtless, they will see what happened there as simply a dress rehearsal for totalitarianism, adorned with a foolish ideology, into which world history had ventured prematurely ...

> A new age began on August 6, 1945: the age in which we are able at any moment to transform any location,

in fact the entire planet, into a Hiroshima. Ever since this day we have become *modo negativo* almighty. However, since we can now be exterminated at any moment, this also means that since this day we have become totally powerless. No matter how long it takes, even if it lasts an eternity, this age will be the last. This is because its *differentia spezifica*—the possibility of our self-extermination—can never end, unless it be through this end itself.[3]

It is time to fully understand the core of Anders's argument: Nazism should not be seen (only) as a traditionalist and reactionary movement, but also (and mostly) as a cult of functionality, the anticipation of the functional potency of the automaton.

The implementation of transhuman entities that can perform inhuman tasks without the participation of humans: this is the perfection of Nazism. The absolute priority of the functional, the rebuilding of the social world based on the principle of economic functionality. The world we are going to irreversibly inhabit.

### *The Inhuman and the Collapse of Euro-CenteredHumanism*

The new technologies of the XXI century may reverse the humanist revolution, stripping humans of their authority, and empowering non-human algorithms instead.[4]

In "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?," Yuk Hui remarks that the thread linking humanism to the Enlightenment is "the full realization of a single global axis of time in which all historical times converge into the synchronizing metric of European modernity. It is the moment of disorientation—a loss of direction as well as of the Orient in relation to the Occident. The unhappy consciousness of fascism and xenophobia arises from this inability to orient: as a response, it offers an easy identity politics and an aestheticized politics of technology."[5]

The process of digital globalization has broken this synchronizing metric of European modernity and the cultural supremacy of West-centered Reason; we dwell in the aftermath of this cultural collapse.

Because of connective mutation, and because of the psychotic explosion of the unconscious of the media-enhanced social mind, the anthropological dimension that the modern age identified as "human" is

dissolving.

The crucial effect of this mutation is the dissociation of consciousness (sensibility) and intelligence in the cognitive activity of the social brain.

### Decoupling, Divergence

In economics and war, intelligence is mandatory: if you want to survive, if you want to beat the competition, you need to be more intelligent than your competitor. Consciousness is superfluous, and even detrimental in many cases. The less intelligence is limited and slowed by sensibility, the more it can pursue automatic goals. The more intelligence is free from the limitations and ambiguity of sensibility, the more an intelligent organism will be effective in the struggle for survival and supremacy.

The transhumanist project is based on the premise that technology is going to enable a perfect simulation of intelligent life. The tacit implication of this project, however, is that intelligent life can be decoupled from sensibility, because from the point of view of the evolutionary economy, sensibility is an unnecessary residual quality, a factor of slowness and inexactness.

The history of social civilization in the last two centuries may be read as an attempt to escape the inflexible law of the survival of the fittest. Social solidarity has been the attempt to transform the world into an anti-natural place of no competition. The autonomy of politics and ethics from the natural law of evolution was based on the conscious limiting of the power of intelligence. When intelligence is not restrained by sensibility, it deploys as brutal force.

The ontological autonomy of human knowledge and human action is the core of the humanist breakthrough. Simultaneously, however, modernity has asserted the economic criterion of evaluation, and has reduced knowledge to the economic principle of competition for survival: effectiveness as power.

Modernity, in fact, is the sphere of permanent conflict between the Christian principle of compassion and the Darwinist principle of survival of the fittest.

If we wonder who the fittest is, the answer is unequivocal: the fittest is the organism that deploys the strength of intelligence without the limitations of sensibility.

The social meaning of democracy results in an attempt to shelter human life from the laws of Darwin: this attempt has been successful up to a certain point, as long as intelligence and sensibility were combined. This convergence reached its high point in May 1968, then it broke down, and sensibility started to diverge from intelligence.

As democracy has submitted to financial capitalism, and solidarity has been overwhelmed by competition, social civilization has been dismantled and the law of competition has taken the upper hand in the daily business of life.

So, the subjection of technology to capitalist competition has paradoxically paved the way for the comeback of Nature: the principle of natural selection. The philosophical core of Darwinist science has broken the restraints and shelters built by the autonomy of ethico-political action—restraints that constituted the legacy of humanism.

Nature is back, and technology has been the instrument for its triumph.



*Ex-Perience, Duration, and Death*

In the past there were many things that only humans could do. But now robots and computers are catching up and may soon outperform humans in most tasks ... Humans are in danger of losing their economic value, because intelligence is decoupling from sensibility.

Until today high intelligence always went hand in hand with a developed consciousness. Only conscious beings could perform tasks that requested a lot of intelligence, such as playing chess, driving cars, diagnosing diseases or identifying terrorists.[6]

At this point we need to define the meaning of the words "intelligence" and "consciousness."

My definitions are the following: intelligence is the ability to make decisions about decidable alternatives. Consciousness is the ability to decide about undecidable alternatives. Intelligence implies computation and combination, while consciousness implies sensibility (aesthetic and erotic) and ethical judgment.

Nevertheless, I feel that this answer is too succinct, and I need to go deeper. I need to develop the implications of the concept of intelligence starting from Leibnizian computational ontology, starting from the conceptual distinction between the discrete and the continuous in the transmission of information, and in the evolution of life.

By the term "discrete" (in opposition to "continuum") we refer to individual entities that can be reduced to finite information. By the term "continuum," on the other hand, we refer to the flow of experience that cannot be reduced to information. The flow of experience is essentially the self-perception of the becoming-other of the sensitive organism. Sensibility detects the infinite variations of becoming in time, as it is based on the self-perception of an organism whose existence is in time. The etymology of the word "experience" implies death: *ex-perire.* Therefore, the conscious organism perceives reality as becoming-other against the background of the destiny of expiration of the conscious and sensitive organism.

Modern philosophy, since Descartes, has based the self on the *cogito*, so certainty is based on intellection.

This Cartesian reduction of the self to the intellectual ability of the mind has blurred the border between intelligence and consciousness.

Reason is a projection of measure, a reduction of the world to what is measurable in discrete terms. This reduction of the self to reason as the ability to measure

lies at the origin of the late-modern catastrophe (Adorno and Horkheimer recognized this point in the preface to the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*).

Descartes finds proof for the existence of the "self" in the unquestionable existence of thought, but it is more useful and more comprehensive to find the foundation of the self in sensibility: I feel therefore I am.

But self-perception has no logical meaning, nor is it measurable or reducible to discrete minimal units. There is no measurement for self-perception, as self-perception happens in the sphere of the infinitely divisible, that is, in the sphere of the continuum.

Existence does not correspond to reason. Only sensibility allows for an integration of intellection and judgment (ethical judgment, and in the end, aesthetic judgment).

*Time and Temporality*

Assuming the infinite divisibility of physical matter, Leibniz is aware of the duplicity of matter in time. It is simultaneously "actual discrete divided infinitely," and also a continuum of experience.[7]

The continuity of experience is the perception of the continuum, a flow that deploys through time—or rather emanates through time as duration. The continuity of an aggregate of extensive discrete states is intensive. This is consciousness as sensibility—the intensive elaboration of the extended world. Extended realities draw their perceptual consistency and their experiential continuity from the intensive vibration of becoming in time.

This means that death, the ultimate destination of time, is the source of the intensity.

As Carlo Rovelli writes, "Quantum theory does not describe things as they evolve in time, but it describes how things are evolving in mutual relation."[8]

Since the time of Zeno and the tortoise, the problem of the infinite divisibility of matter (and of time) has been crucial. To define the relation between intelligence and consciousness, let's say that intelligence is the ability to acknowledge an aggregate as a combination of discrete units (i.e., the ability to compute a temporal extension in terms of discrete units of conventional time).

Consciousness as sensibility, on the other hand, is the ability to experience the continuous quality of matter, and of temporality.

In *Dur é e et Simultan é it é,* Henri Bergson writes:

> We cannot speak of reality as duration without
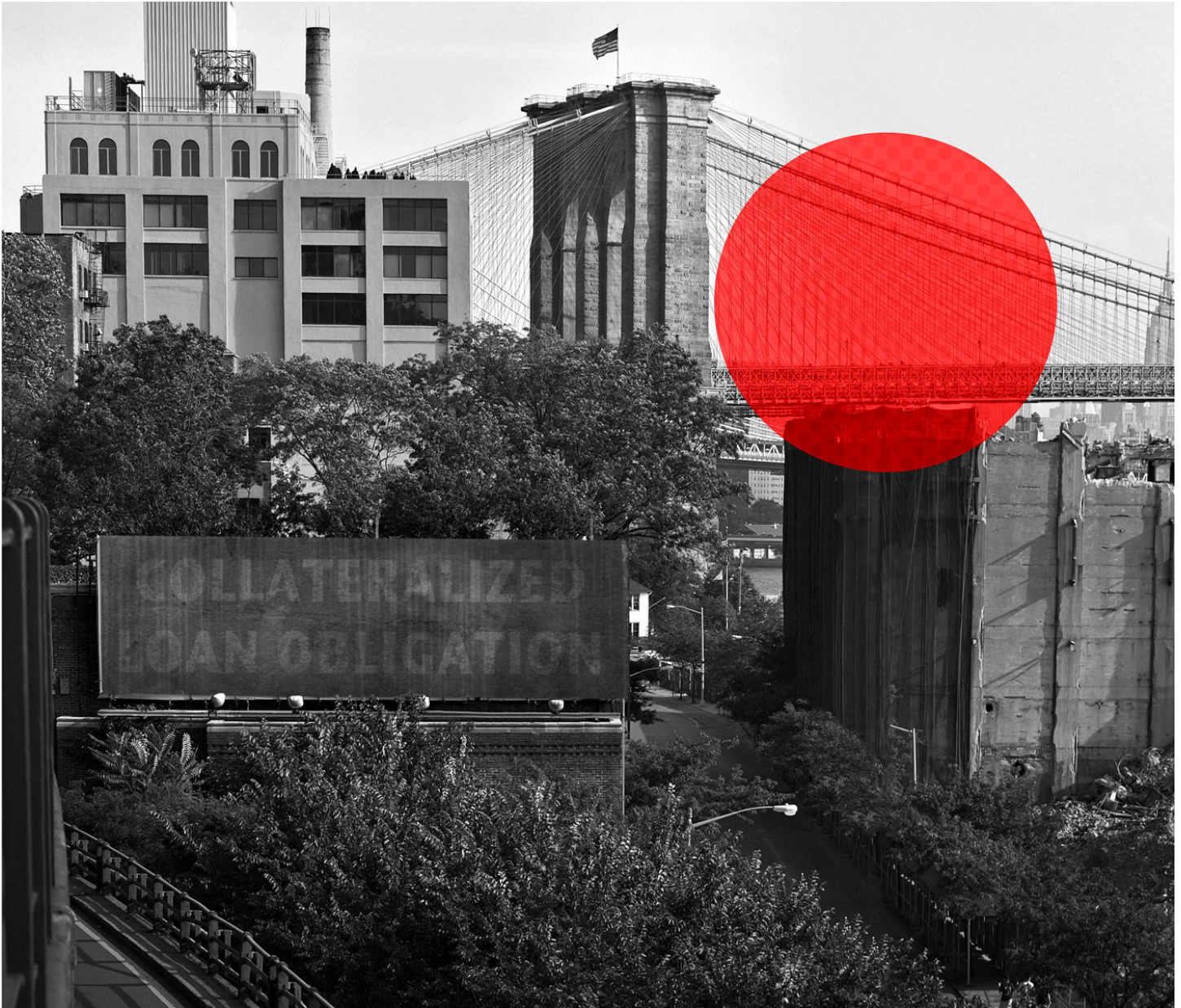
introducing consciousness ... The mathematical person will not take notice of it, because rightly she is interested in the measure of things, not in their nature ... Duration is essentially the protraction of something that exists no more into something that does exist.[9]

Mental activity is indissociable from the perception of time, from the subconscious awareness of body–mind decomposition: the subconscious of death, inasmuch as death means becoming other to the conscious sensitive organism. Therefore, we can define consciousness as the cognitive implication of death.

Bergson distinguishes computational time, objectified in clocks and the economic value of goods, from lived

temporality ( *temps vécu*), a duration that is not reducible to computation.

Computational time is the subject of mathematics and economics, but society lives in the incomputable time of death as destination (not as destiny). Ethics and aesthetics are suited to think this incomputable time. But ethical and aesthetic judgments have little to do with intelligence, and nothing to do with certainty and truth.

Transhumanism is an ideology that mistakes computation for existence, and therefore is a philosophical deception. It is the other face of the inhuman dementia that grows in the shadow of the forced computabilization of the incomputable.

Here we should start to reflect on extinction, on death as

the condition for the perception of time, and on consciousness as the vibrational situatedness of the self.

Rovelli:

> Fear of death seems to me as an error of evolution: many animals have an instinctive faculty of terror and escape if a predator approaches. It's a healthy reaction, as it allows them to avoid danger. But selection has generated hairless apes with hypertrophic frontal lobes who have an excessive ability to predict the future. This is a helpful privilege, but the risk is that we permanently see the inevitability of death, thus igniting persistent terror and a need to escape.
>
> Hence I think that the fear of death is an accidental and silly disturbance that blends together two independent evolutionary pressures: a product of bad automatic connections in our brain. Everything  has a limited time of existence. Including the human race.[10]

**X**

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

1
Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993), 9.

2
Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Viking Books, 2005), 25, 28.

3
Günther Anders, *Die Atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen zum atomaren Zeitalter* (Taschenbuch 2003), 93.

4
Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus* (Penguin Random House, 2015), 397.

5
Yuk Hui, "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?," *e-flux journal* no. 96 (January 2019) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245507/what-begins-after-the-end-of-the-enlightenment/ .

6
Harari, *Homo Deus*, 361.

7
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, letter to Burchard de Volder, referenced in Stefano Mugnai, *Introduzione alla filosofia di Leibniz (* Einaudi, 2001), 114, my translation.

8
Carlo Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo* (Adelphi, 2017), my translation.

9
Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultaneité* (Presse Universitaire de France, 1922), 48.

10
Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo*, my translation *.*

*This piece started as a written interview with Alina, conducted by Garett Strickland. While answering Garett's first question, Alina found herself writing a full essay. —Ed.*

And so, sharpening the tip of my pencil with the intellect's razor, preparing my darkness with poison, comparing the blackness of the color with melancholy itself—because what can be more worthy of such an image?—I decided to paint something black on black in the hope that my work would be something elegant and at the same time convenient. Of all the colors that the eye of man can judge, there is none closer to nothingness, none that escapes human sight more swiftly, none that so greatly deceives the faculty of seeing, being indistinguishable from the darkness, which, as the ancients liked to say, comes into existence once the sun—flame, eye, and father of the universe—disappears, spreading all over, like the darkest black of nothingness. As the black-colored human science and the black tableau of my capacities are by no means distinguishable, but, on the contrary, to put it more clearly, precisely because the tableau of my capacities is exactly like the darkness, what can I paint on a canvas of the same color? Oh, intolerable calamity! Mixing the darkness of nothingness with the night of human science, what kind of hue do we think we can yield? Not a black one? In the same way, when the blackness of my all-too-miserable science, based on perception, is mixed with the aging poison of my tongue and painted on the darkest canvas, what kind of face do I think will be shown to me?

—Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723), *Metaphysics: Sacrosanctae Scientie Indepingibilis Imago*

**Garett Strickland:** I'm interested in how your work manages to articulate a concept—often quite mystical or abstract—into the body by way of performance/event. I'd align much of your textual work within a tradition of metaphysical speculation, which tends often to soar beyond embodiment, and so to bridge its formulations into, for example, the movement arts. It strikes me as something very unique and a bit tricky. Could you elaborate a bit on that process, its entry and/or exit points?

**Alina Popa:** It's true that my work in the past years, especially in the *Unsorcery* project with Florin Flueras, has been preoccupied with the performative potential of abstract concepts (Life Programming, Artworlds, Second Body, Dead Thinking, Eternal Feeding, End Dream, and Black Hyperbox), with their potential effects upon the organization of mental space, life, and body practices, upon the production of art and of what, when, and where a performance/art work is. It's also important that in the

# Alina Popa
# Art after Cantemir

Alina Popa, You Are, date unknown. Performance at Salonul de Proiecte. Photo: Petre Fall

process of coming up with the concepts that have further oriented our artistic work, we have not only read, discussed, and thought, but have cultivated specific somatic practices inspired by spiritual exercises, contemporary dance, awareness through movement, and what Foucault called technologies of the self and Agamben called forms-of-life. The concepts came out of the hybrid doing-thinking.

Our idea was that if life and movement have already been captured by the neoliberal apparatus, and if thought itself is movement, providing orientations in the space of the mind and being deeply connected to one's life-form and body arrangements, then they have to be provided with different choreographies than those enforced by default. Not only have we noticed that there are life-forms imposed if one's practices are left unchoreographed, but there is also a standard form of thought and action when it comes to overcoming capitalism. One of the reasons behind the *Unsorcery* project was the mental saturation with the same thought movements performed by the leftist mind: being against, exercising criticism/critique, deconstructing, etc. Not only capitalism but also its enemies seemed to have been captured in default thought

forms.

At the same time, not only has the body's spatial arrangement been produced by modernity's concepts (see the chapter "The Taming of the Rebel Body" in Silvia Federici's book *Caliban and the Witch*). Even what the 1960s thought of as the freedom of the body, as the rebellion of the body against its historical taming, has been turned into a commodity—when subjectivity, with its potential for dissent, infinite freedom, desire for communication and social bonds, and with its individual marks of differentiation, started to be commodified and successfully sold under post-Fordist rule. This is how, for example, the concept Second Body came into being, as a quest for a body that is not free as in the 1960s, not only deconstructed as in the seminal choreographic work of the 1990s, not only made into a provider of liveness and memory for the visitor to a contemporary art museum in the blooming experience economy of the 2000s.

I guess it remains to find out how that body can show itself, and how it can show its own production as "another" through a concept to whose making it itself has contributed. It has to be a continuous process, a sort of

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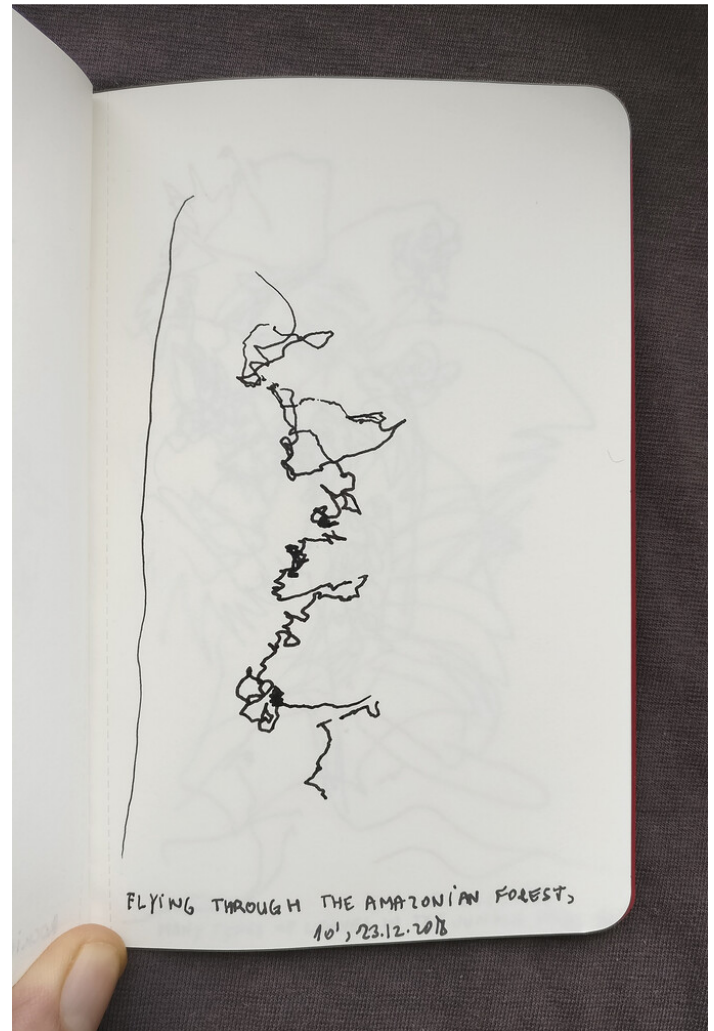
Alina Popa, Drawings Made with Closed Eyes, Notebook on the Chest,
December 2018-January 2019.

navigation in and out of determinations, floating on the edge of identity, being no one without consolidating the "no one" into an identifiable category, but keeping its negation alive. What we are now working on is the implementation of the idea of an *artwork as artworld* —which would be able to include more than just a body appearing on stage or in a museum, something other than the usual performative act. We are interested to see if there is a way to establish in the format of an artwork something which is as complex and immaterial as a world, made of bodies, bodies produced by life-forms and idiosyncratic concepts that these bodies themselves have helped to articulate.

I also think that the conflict between concepts and the body fully disappears if one understands—at a political level—that the body has not always been as it is today in Western societies, but has been produced by modernity's concepts, while its liberations have been incorporated into neoliberal concepts—concepts which in turn produce contemporary bodies. This is one of the reasons why I

have been interested in Brazilian anthropology—to have a glimpse of a concept of the body, and a concept of the concept that is outside modernity's reach. Interestingly, the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, following Amazonian worldsense, presents thought with an altogether different concept of the concept—one closer to art's concept of the concept, which is not necessarily an immaterial idea, but it can be an aesthetic complex, that unfolds either in space (a landscape of images, objects, words, etc.) or in time (for example, a performance whose object is the rhythm of the changing affective atmospheres in a given context). Not only the generic but also a complex of particulars can be a concept—this is what both contemporary art and premodern Amazonians affirm.

One can also mitigate the conflictual duality abstract concept–material body on a philosophical level. We can look at the content of a philosopher's work in conjunction with her biography, her life-form. It is mainly this form that shapes the trajectory of thought. There is always a meta-history, a particular structure of consciousness that has driven minds into certain philosophical systems or even against systematicity. The environment is perhaps
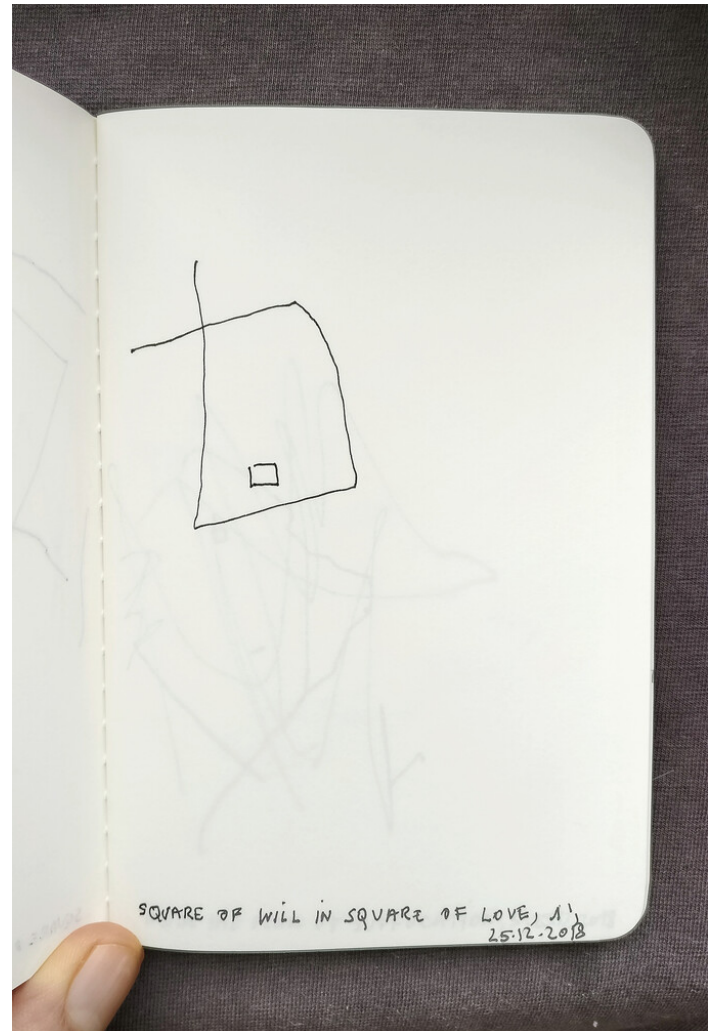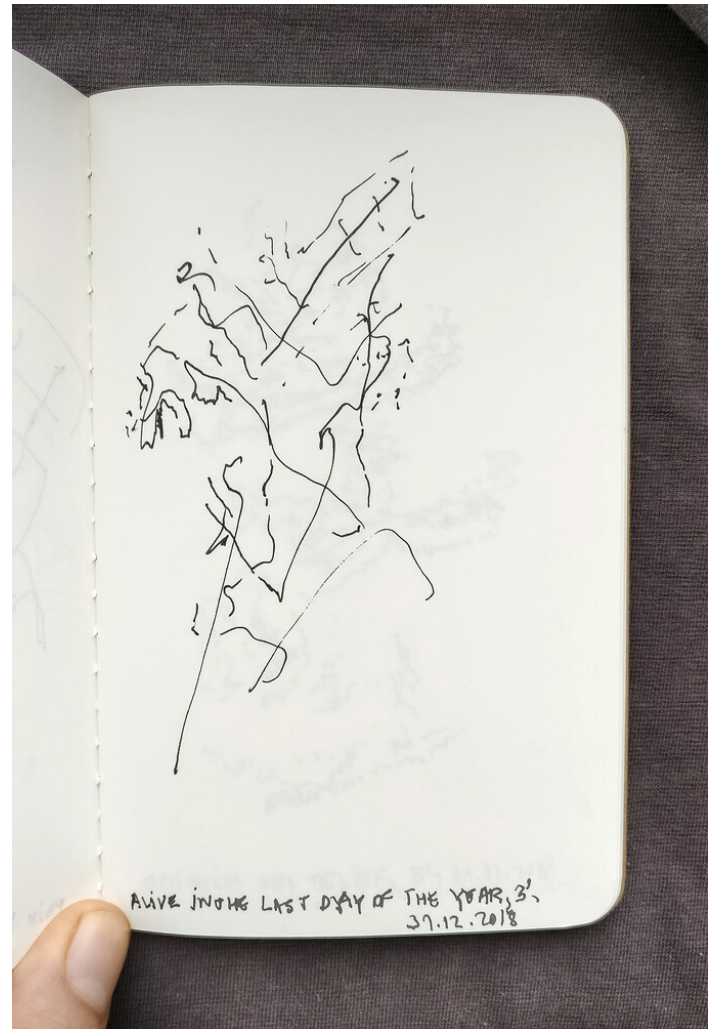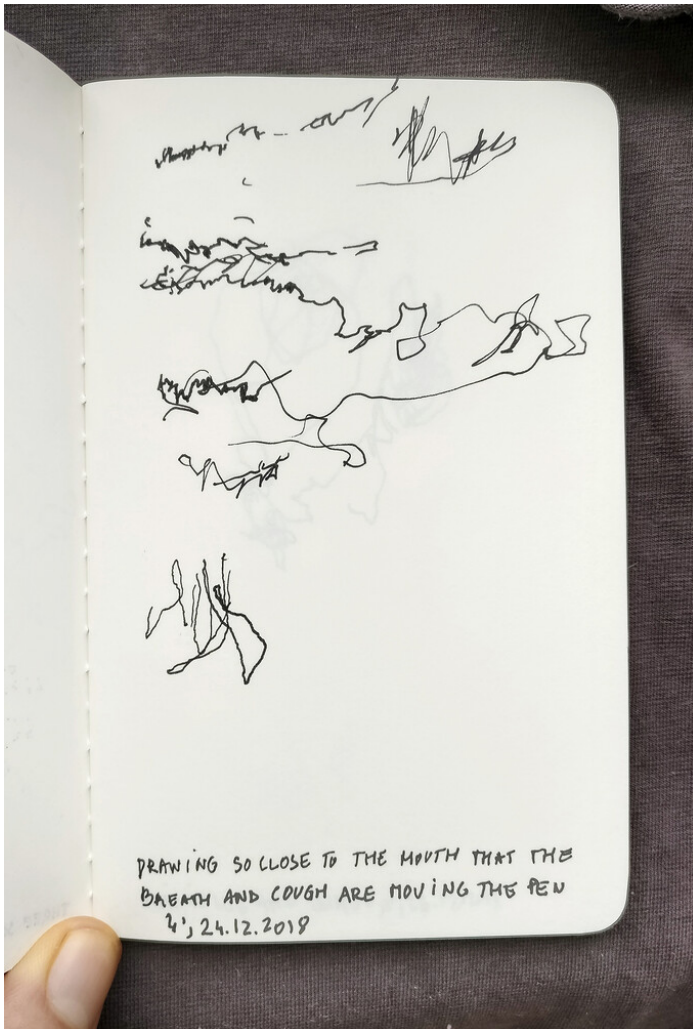
the main force bending thinking and behavior in different directions. As Viveiros de Castro put it at a philosophy conference in Paris: "Thinking in Rio is not the same as thinking in Paris." In relation to this, but also to the question of metaphysics, I have in mind two examples, one at the foundation of critical philosophy, Kant (1724–1804), and the other one, Cantemir (1673–1723), unknown by Western canons, a Moldavian polymath trained in Constantinople, a very exciting precritical mind.

If we were to compare these two and their work on metaphysics to painters (at least to artists trained as painters), Kant is maybe Duchamp, investigating the conditions under which metaphysics (art) is possible at all, and Dimitrie Cantemir is certainly Malevich avant la lettre, as he himself explained in his *Metaphysics* (see the epigraph to this essay). We need to understand that Kant slept very little, thought prayer was useless, was certain that there are planets in the universe inhabited by fully rational beings, and would sometimes stamp his feet in order to better ground himself. Cantemir composed music, prayed, had visions and out-of-body experiences, dreamed of God, and cried, melodramatically lamenting his human limitation in providing knowledge with an

accurate image of the Absolute. In a way, the precritical Cantemir went even deeper than Kant, deconstructing the Western mind's infatuated pathos for totalization. Kant's is a fixation on the possible, on trust in reason as one's given capacity to throw the human tentacle beyond perception, through pure reason, further away into the world as it is, the world-without-us—yet this fixation is humbled by the inaccessible Absolute, as he himself is forced to admit. Cantemir is haunted by the impossible, by his own humiliation as a body incapable of extracting itself out of the world to see it as it is, incapable of looking at God from the outside in. It is the Prussian order and the Reformation's rational rigor versus Constantinople's Orthodox mysticism and the Eastern aesthetic dimension. No doubt, as Malevich and Duchamp, both (should) have gained a critical edge in the history of their profession.

In his precritical reasoning, Cantemir anticipates the modernist gesture of Malevich, who painted the black square, black on black, a mystical gesture (his black square was to replace the Orthodox icon), whose precritical incapacity for figuration discovers critically the support of the canvas, the meta-painting, the conditions of possibility of painting. And with this apparently naive

DRAWING SO CLOSE TO THE MOUTH THAT THE BREATH AND COUGH ARE MOVING THE PEN
4', 24.12.2018



ALIVE IN THE LAST DAY OF THE YEAR, 3',
31.12.2018

statement, painting goes beyond its concept, turning into a gesture—art travels into its own foundations. We also see from the quote that I tried to translate for you at the beginning of this interview that Cantemir focuses aesthetically on the initial gesture of any metaphysician—and this is where he finds *Black Square*. He lingers in this moment of interior lament, of profound human humiliation, of out-of-body experience, of trance, of desire. He speaks of the aesthetics of the human desire to create, which is the same as to know, to cry, which is the same as to reason, to make a coherent tableau of the whole, to abstract, which is the same as to become God. As one of his visions shows, the face of God is impossible to fix in a single image. The face of the old man that appears in his dream as God, or metaphysics, constantly changes, like Philip K. Dick's scramble suit, yielding no conceivable image. The initial chapters of Cantemir's book on metaphysics could alone turn philosophy into melodrama, and art and aesthetics into the scary ghost of knowledge. Imagine a philosophy book written together with a detailed description of the depression that led to its writing, of human lament over one's own limitations, of the misery of attempting to understand!

Of course, I am more impressed by the Eastern mystical moment of beginning to think, all the more so because the consciousness that naively dramatized such confessions remains hidden from accepted philosophical canons. Yet Kant's example can be equally interesting, and helps me illustrate here the bifurcated relationship of performance art and metaphysics that I am interested in. To reach Kant, as I said, we must go through Duchamp. Two years after Malevich paints *Black Square*, Duchamp establishes the readymade in making his *Fountain*. The readymade is a whole apparatus. It states that an object of the world put in the institution of art, the museum, becomes art—and it is with this gesture that art becomes a performative proposition. It is now art itself that can say: "This is art." And so art becomes the producer of its own concept, a modern meta-machine par excellence. Art produces its own metaphysics, without much Cantemirian lament. What does this have to do with Kant? Kant provides metaphysics with its own metaphysics, and this is where the link to Duchamp becomes apparent. They both dig into the conditions of possibility, into the frame of a context. While Cantemir, and even Malevich, provides methods for the process of individual creation, Kant and Duchamp rather deal with the level of interpretation. In philosophy,
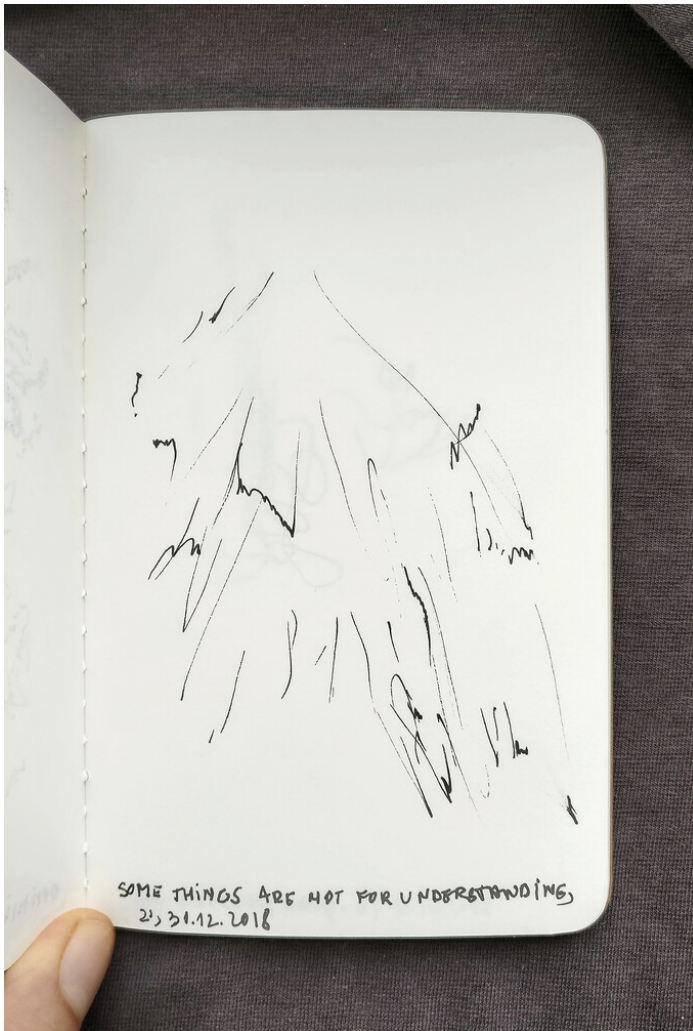
as in art, both are generative.

As you can see, I have opened two levels on which the question of the body can be linked to metaphysical problematics. The first one regards the process of creation (Cantemir's laments) and the other one the level of reception, of interpretation (Kant's coldness). The first is about how you do art (naively, in excess, holistically, with your body) and the second about where and when you do it (smart, strategic, alienating, in the institution/art world). Of course, the two are interconnected, if we think about Duchamp's obsession with form-of-life and Malevich's own overturning of the concept of art.

In the process of creation, to reach what is not available directly through the senses, or through immediate understanding, one needs to perform practices that enhance or enlarge the spectrum of both perception and reason. Gabriel Catren writes beautifully about this in his essay "Pleromatica," published in *Black Hyperbox*, the book that Florin and I edited, published by PUNCH last year—and you [Garett] are also part of it. He explains how Kant ignored Cantemir's insights—that precritical practices can actually enhance the workings of a critical
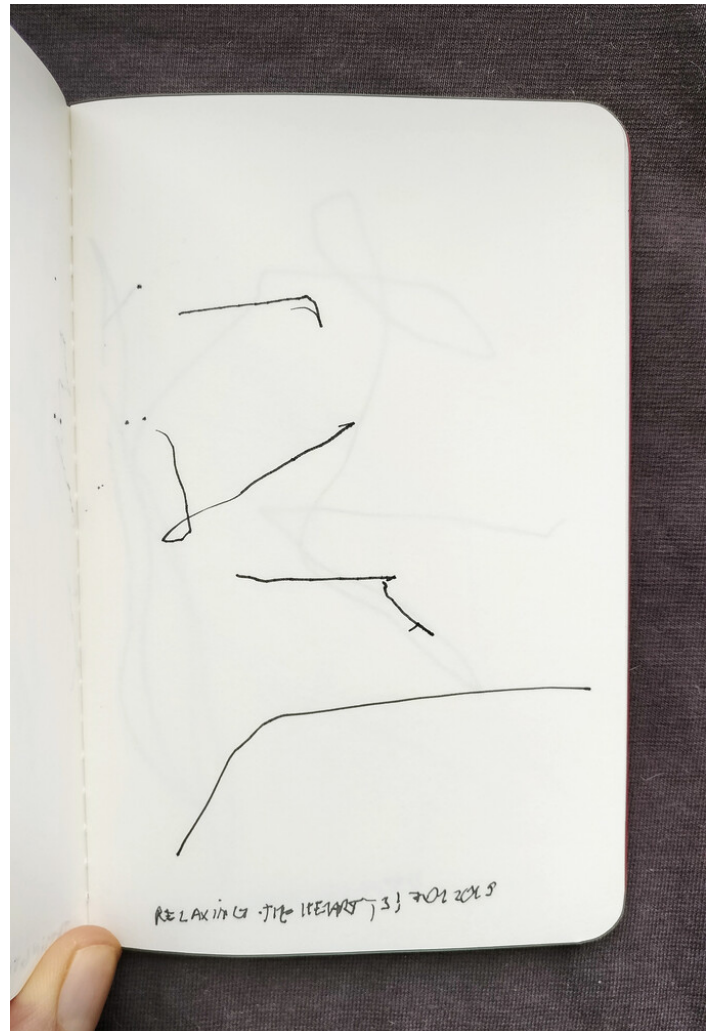
mind. We can enter metaphysics more deeply than Kant had thought—and working with the body, with one's organization of life, employing aesthetics alongside conceptual production, are all indispensable for this purpose. To tap into the unknown, into what is out there, into what is beyond the available reach of the senses and reason (let's call this a metaphysical preoccupation), which are themselves biologically and culturally legislated, there is methodological work to do.

This is where my interest in metaphysics comes in. It is more an interest around its access and the impossibility of its access—with the whole aesthetic interior maelstrom that this can generate, à la Cantemir. I am preoccupied with developing performative practices, both somatic and discursive, that give form to the invisible, that give gravity to the immaterial. I have already mentioned technologies of the self and form-of-life as performative methods in the process of creation. In the last year, being also in a process of healing after a major health issue, I have used the occasion of being more isolated from the rapidly spinning art world to trim life and to work on the structure, on discipline, on all the practices behind the product. I am working on the immateriality of immateriality—since the
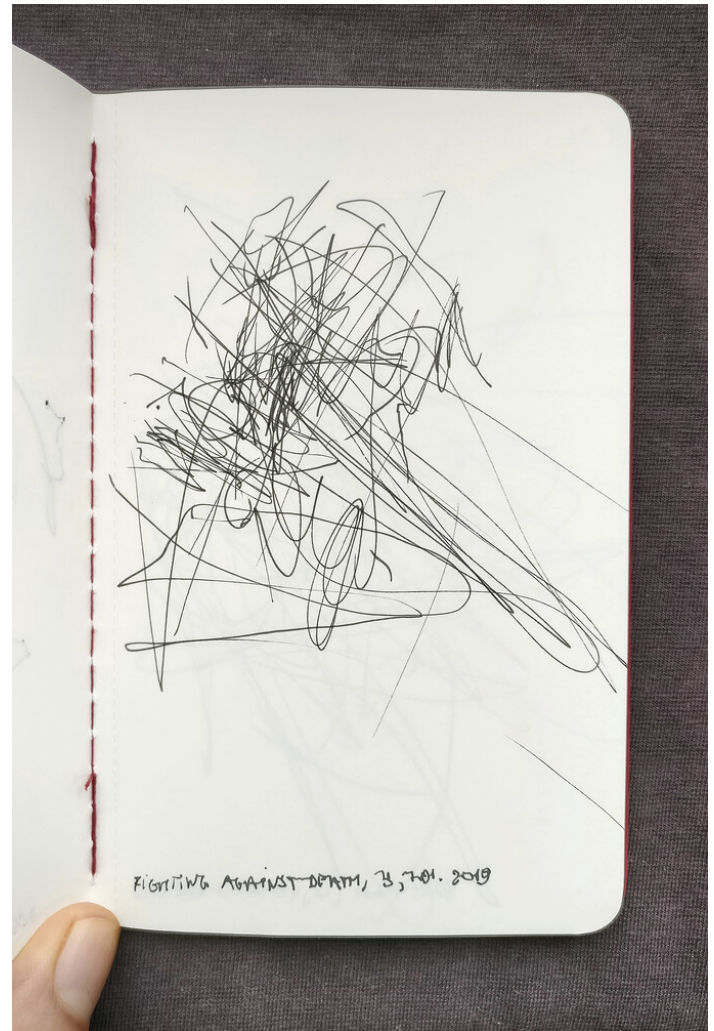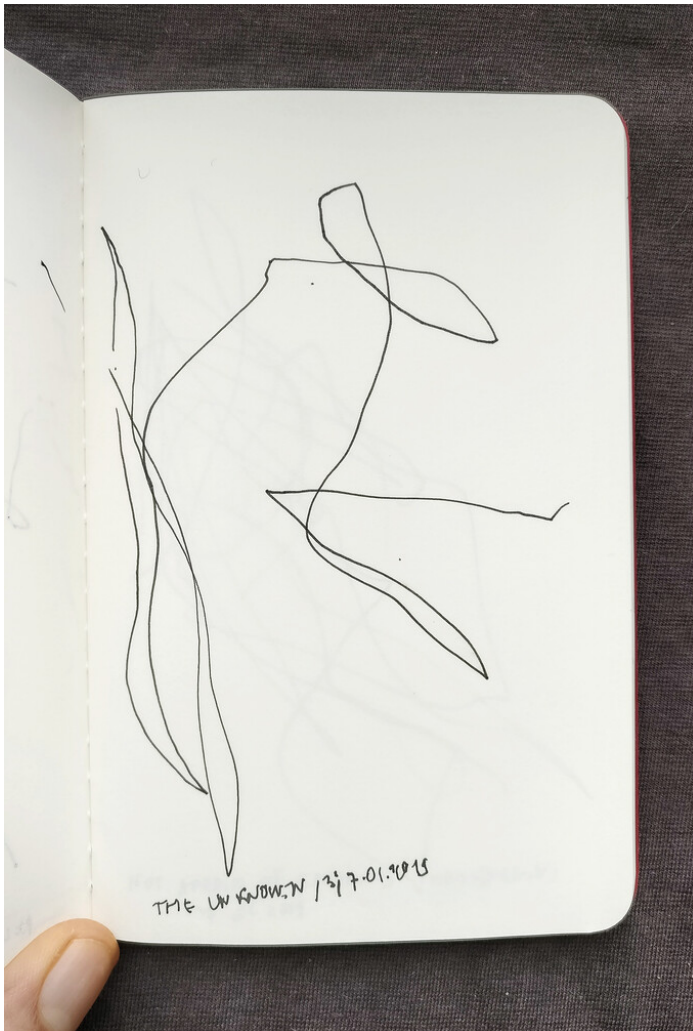
artistic products of my solo work were immaterial anyway (though sometimes the practices that I do can include materiality, such as drawing and small-scale painting).

There is a therapy that I do called You Are — I am doing this in performance situations as well. I am lying on the floor asking the audience to offer me touch therapy. My body, heavy on the ground, my mind, lightly wandering, I set the situation of a lecture, of a first contact, of therapy, of an immaterial dance of thoughts held to the present by the material gravity of the setup. When I am home, I am interested in assigning a time frame to each practice. An intention can even give form to empty time. To give you an example, one healing practice called The Invisible Clinic is just the intention of going to a "fictional" or immaterial, empty clinic to be worked on by invisible forces. You have to do all the protocols, set a time, a duration, go with the intention, prepare mentally and then, while you really are in the clinic, let go of your body, will, and reason, trusting that at the end of the session you will be repaired. I think this would be even stronger as a communal empty space where the patient-audience can go and get better.

The latter is a practice that is actually equally productive in the process of creation, but it works on the frame, on the preconditions for any clinic to be effective, to be performative, that is, to act and heal the body. The Clinic is an "artworld" that will be organized in the Romanian countryside this summer with guest artists or other people interested in participating. The Clinic is in turn part of a more general artistic framework I have created with Florin Flueras, "Artworlds." Within these artworlds we are developing the concept of Life Programming, under which all sorts of invented practices (somatic, language-related, conceptual), like The Invisible Clinic, You Are, Heal the Line, and Unexperiences, are put together to create the conditions of possibility for a different artistic practice, for a different thinking about art to emerge. Life Programming is about constructing artificial lives not only as a process of creation but as a way of interfering with contemporary art's process of interpretation. What if the artwork offers Life Programming (and deprogramming) services to the audience, beyond the economy of lifestyle, that is, without promoting a certain identity? What if an artwork is not human performance but the artificially programmed human, or all the nonhuman serendipitous elements that have programmed her? The name "Life Programming" poses questions related to the recent boom of

performance programming at contemporary art museums, and investigates how this type of art dealing with the immateriality of immateriality can interfere with the "live programming" of visual arts. It is also an occasion to think of the precept "art as life / life as art" now that it is clear, unlike how it was in the 1960s when the enthusiasm for happenings opened a new chapter in art history, that "life" itself is already captured by the neoliberal apparatus, and that to make life art implies new life choreographies.

By giving this example of work, I have already jumped to the second level of my interest in metaphysics. As I explained about Duchamp, one cannot be naive about the context where you insert your art, or whatever other gesture. But one has to be naive in order to have an honest process of creation. And here lies the paradox that is to be worked with, in different manners, by each artist. All good art and thought oscillates between honesty and betrayal, naivete and suspicion, singularity and alienation, percept and concept. To restate my example, I am doing my own naive work at home, every day. And sometimes I come together with Florin and we do the strategic work, we look into the conditions, into the invisibilities, into questions about the concept of art, and how the immateriality of the immaterial can ever change this. Or if it cannot change it, we create our own. And at the end of the day this seems even more naive. We, strategically, naively, come up with a concept which is a frame, which is practice, and ultimately art, Artworlds, which is about the possibility of sub-artworlds, or second artworlds, or ghost artworlds to emerge.

This is the only political gesture available to me from art's semiotic prison—creating a ghost of the prison, to escape. Not to escape interpretation but to change interpretation, if possible. Thinking metaphysics philosophically in a different way, as for example Viveiros de Castro does in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*, is political. And thinking politics in a different way, which is preoccupied with what is implicit but not visible, may sometimes benefit from the metaphysical, which is about giving structure to fundamental invisibilities. Artworlds are artistic and political ghosts that try to bring the levels of creation and interpretation as close as possible. And there is obviously something else here, beyond the two levels mentioned, which is metaphysical in the "artwork as artworld" concept. It lies in an attempt to find a glue for worlds otherwise separate, a concept-glue that brings together bubbles remote from each other and unites singularities, not in consensus, but to work idiosyncratically, in proximity, with the trust that something beyond the social as we know it, beyond the trap of identity, brings them together on a plane that we can imagine, fictionalize, dream about, and which is probably not only full of humans but also something else.

(February 2018)

**X**

T. J. Demos

# The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics

With the recent burnings of our planet—in California, Australia, Greece, Sweden, Brazil, and more—we confront the hypervigilant immediacy of catastrophe: devastating and indiscriminate, the complete consumption by fire, the destruction of everything flammable, asphalt and metal melting. We—and especially those of us worldwide viewing the reporting of the burnings through an endless stream of media—witness a new kind of fire, which threatens witnessing itself: its intensity, we're told, is unprecedented, requiring a new language—firenadoes, pyro-cumulus clouds, weather-producing infernos that spread violence at eighty football fields per minute, giving terminal velocity another meaning. An explosive lethality. The massive loss of life, homes, and habitats, the financial costs and lives ruined, all inconceivable. A world-ending event, on many scales at once.

It's an intensity with global reach too: last summer, more than six thousand wildfires burned worldwide, large and small. In California, the Mendocino Complex Fire incinerated half a million acres, with smoke spreading over half the country. In November of the same year, the Woolsey Fire struck Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, and the Camp Fire, California's Central Valley; the latter was the deadliest blaze in the state's history. In British Columbia, more than three million acres burned in 2017, with smoke making its way to Europe. In frozen (melting) Greenland, around the same time, wildfires spread, as they did in Sweden the following year, where forests in the Arctic Circle burned to the ground, similar to scenes on the Russia-Finland border, and smoke from Siberian fires was blown all the way to the US mainland. In summer of 2018, Greece's seaside burned, killing one hundred people, trapped in flames so hot that aluminum wheels melted into liquid. Over the last year, there were record-breaking fires also in the UK's Saddleworth Moor, and devastating peatland conflagrations in Indonesia, releasing 2.6 gigatons of carbon (nearly half of average annual global emissions). Approximately one hundred thousand fires burned in the Amazon in 2017 alone, more destructive to the rainforest than logging.[1]

Despite all the pictures of devastation circulating online with each new wildfire, we face the insufficiency of the image. Frozen and flattened, images of fire present a misleading visual field of aesthetic contemplation. Framed and objectified, they offer only a privileged sort of distanced voyeurism, a reassuring domination of disaster, but also a failure to capture the momentousness of loss, its duration and nonspectacular wake of suffering, its bureaucratic and financial devastations that move trauma to banality. With these images, we face the un/meaning of visual evidence; they constitute indisputable facts on the ground, but remain unclear in significance, as if fires burn meaning itself. We have *images of devastation*, but these images, mostly found on news and social media sites, don't, can't, show the *devastation of images* wrought by such apocalypses: burning aesthetics.

An owl sits on the beach in Malibu, Calif., on Nov. 9, 2018 as the Woolsey Fire approaches. Photo: Wally Skalij/Los Angeles Times.

Welcome to the Pyrocene, the geological age of fire, matched by the overwhelming affects of fear and dread, and complicated by the very incomprehensibility of responsibility. We're dealing with the unstoppable spread of chain reactions of material oxidation, releasing more carbon dioxide that causes further warming and droughts and that prepares more ground for fires, all sparked by the depersonalized, historically agglomerative networked agency of the petrocapitalist political economy—that ultimately burns itself. The power of this socio-climatic event ultimately negates the safe separation between traumatic experience and investigative security, between present emergency and forensic aftermath. Its threat is that there will be no aftermath.

We're not only talking about the human toll, but also costs to the web of life: animals, insects, plants, trees (with fires contributing to the death of over one hundred million trees, mostly conifers, in California during the 2010s).[2] It's a massive winnowing, part of the ongoing destruction of ecosystems worldwide, planetary habitat loss (twenty-seven soccer fields of forest per minute), insectageddon, biological annihilation, and darkening seas. Climate breakdown is leading to a mass species extinction event, the sixth in world history where more than 75 percent of species die out. In fact, 60 percent of animals have been killed off since 1970, as the WWF reported recently,[3] in part a consequence of burnings. So too have wildlife representations burned: bioacoustic ecologist Bernie Krause's archive of fifty years of audio recordings made in habitats around the world for his company Wild Sanctuary was charred in the Camp Fire.[4] With the burning of habitats comes the burning of media

environments, the extinction of life and the obliteration of its traces.

What is an image of extinction but a perversion of visuality? The late ecological ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose offered the phrase "double death" to describe the full scope of this perversion: the death not only of individual animals, but also the death of livability itself, the latter escaping the realm of the visible.[5] Not even the techno-utopia of what's called "de-extinction," or resurrection biology, aided by genetic engineering, can repair the termination of ecological systems, of symbiogenesis that makes life possible in the first place. Owls cannot live on beaches, like the one seen desperately seeking clean air on the Malibu coast during the Woolsey *Fire*, a refugee without a refuge, a forlorn but temporary survivor, soon to fall prey to double death. In freezing life, images are also part of the problem. They are a salvage paradigm, compensatory, fetishistic, taxidermical, a last-ditch effort to deny the undeniable, to restore hope in hopelessness.

Fire images are situated in a media ecology of denial. According to the nonprofit organization Media Matters for America, mainstream news networks mentioned "climate change" in less than 4 percent of their recent coverage of the deadly California wildfires.[6] Images, media, corporations form an edited scenography of climate denialism, a hyper-visibility of blindness, where the narration of fires typically points to singular occurrences, displaying an emergency temporality but a forgotten history, a negated context. Or they tell a story of the "normal" cycle of destruction and rebuilding on the West

Coast, but one divided between resource support for luxury enclaves like Malibu and Laguna, and structural privation for inner-city communities.[7] I suspect this pattern is global. Normalization is the enemy in the ecological state of exception. Coincidentally, is it surprising that even in the wake of devastation, climate-change-denying survivors of fires retain their denials, motored by right-wing media that shows exactly these images of dramatic unprecedented burning to selectively frame the disasters? Is it possible that circulating social-media images themselves are somehow expressions of climate denialism, a denialist visual epistemology where fires burn more than wood and bodies but also scientific knowledge, a different kind of double death? If so, then it's the very fantasy of separation, between the security of being here and not there, that helps seal that conviction, enhancing the power of media narratives, government propaganda, industry lobbying, with burning aesthetics. We confront the visual culture of human exceptionalism, reassuring even in the face of the most devastating evidence of devastation. Perhaps we should let these images burn.

Even more perverse than using evidence itself (of drought, mega-fires, devastation) to negate causality (global warming, climate change, petrocapitalist agency) is the aesthetic delectation of images of beautiful destruction, where the photographer, or more likely cell-phone user, positions themselves in the thick of things, so that the viewer, distanced, protected—at least temporarily so—can witness destruction as a sublime aesthetic object. It's an "IPOcalypse" brought to you by Apple, Facebook, and Google. Haunted by the ghost of Benjamin, whispering about fascism (still) enjoying its own destruction aesthetically, images are fed into media streams, as disaster drives a networked imaging system in which viewers are able to escape the clutches of death, even as they can witness, in acts of perverse enjoyment, its visual, if not physical, encroachment. It's familiar in other kinds of disaster imagery and its psychodynamics of trauma—but I'm afraid that history is itself burning with these fires, overwhelmed by current emergency alerts. Imminent disaster demands response, but there's no time for structural analysis of etiology. We seem to be blinded by emergency, restricted to its immediacy, magnifying the emergency itself. Plus, belying its own seemingly invulnerable systems, the IPOcalypse ultimately cannot provide witness to ultimately unassimilable experience, where fires rise up, suddenly, uncontrollably, in the sudden termination of life. Fire's rising agency threatens the death of the witness (not so much in terms of the photographer killed by fire, but in fire's life-killing power, where the only image it leaves is ultimately ashes of death).

I'm less interested in the *picturing of ecology*—a proposition that, for me, reiterates the basic problem of the institutional enclosure of ecology as framed image, contradicting ecology's radical relationality, its living and boundless intersectionality[8]—than an *ecology of pictures*: how social-media and network images might be read against the grain, against their conventional framing, against the burning—despite all. I'm curious about what they might indicate, also, in relation to the fate of research and museum exhibitions, in the era of catastrophic climate breakdown, with fires providing a glimpse of a coming Ballardian burned world, elsewhere a drowned world, even while acknowledging the privilege of being in a position to research these days, a privilege granted by surviving the flames and floods (even though none will survive completely the onslaught of ongoing environmental destruction).

When the issue of fire emergency response is raised by environmentalists—the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Environmental Defense Fund—it's typically to proclaim sympathy with victims, to highlight the exacerbating factors of global warming, drought, unsustainable development, industrial logging, and forest mismanagement. With their ecology of images, they call on politicians to act so as to limit the causes of environmental breakdown, signaling that the denial of cause represents an ongoing political failure.[9] But what's meant by "cause"? Sierra Club is exemplary of mainstream environmentalism: "Global climate disruption," they say, is "caused by the unfettered emission of air pollutants called greenhouse gases, most notably carbon dioxide."[10] The passive-voiced formula (conspicuously without agent) repeats the technocratic and scientistic language typical of the IPCC, which, in its most recent report, warns of twelve more years before we commit the earth, without significant mitigation efforts, to a minimum global temperature rise of 1.5C above preindustrial levels, and likely more. That's right around the corner. The environmental journalist David Wallace-Wells notes that the IPCC warning is a "beyond-best-case scenario."[11]

Of course fire imagery doesn't show broad-scoped and complex causality. And while Burning Man might supply the Anthropocene's exemplary figuration according to Donna Haraway,[12] such imagery doesn't capture the deep circumstances of its emergence, focusing instead on the visible effects, capturing the burning and aftermath of when emergency, abetted by decades of invisible neoliberal structural debilitation, overwhelms history and contextual determinants—though we get a little closer with images of scorched cars and fossil fuel infrastructure. But where are the views that dramatize how PG&E, which provides power to sixteen million Californians, is currently under investigation for causing last November's Camp Fire, owing to unmaintained electric lines? (One could take this much further still: where are the images of petrocapitalist and juridico-political responsibility for allowing corporations like PG&E to operate as such, historically and in the present day?) While the power company will doubtlessly pass on liability costs to consumers through jacked-up rates, no state regulation prevented CEO Geisha Williams from resigning with a

Brazil's National Museum burns, Rio de Janeiro, September 3, 2018.

severance payment of $2.5 million even while PG&E's stock was downgraded to junk status.[13] The fires, though capable of being recorded in the image, nonetheless burn the bridges to causality, offering instead the visuality of acute stress.

Meanwhile, the US president believes that global warming is "a total, and very expensive, hoax," and recently claimed that his "natural instinct" for science made him confident that the climate will soon "change back."[14] Trump blamed the fires in California on "gross mismanagement of forests," and while visiting devastated parts of California last November, he was asked if what he had seen and heard had changed his mind about climate change. He responded dumbly with a monosyllabic "No."[15] But let's not allow such buffoonery—what would be criminal in a just world—to distract from the real work Trumpism (as well as Kochism) is doing for the fossil fuel and logging industries in eliminating half a century of environmental protections after the recent fires.[16]

These fires, part of a global pandemic, represent the violent entrance of the ontological into our realms of being—in other words, something more than mere representation. But if for ontology existence and meaning are synonymous, with fire it's largely a matter of de-existence. The immediate meaning of fire is its very physical transformation of material existence, which is rapid, final, and nonnegotiable (these new fires obliterate the idea of "management" and simply demand escape from the oncoming vector of destruction). But it's not enough, apparently, or as yet, to disrupt political epistemes, evident when victims of California fire storms, among them Trump supporters, continue in the aftermath of their destroyed lives to deny the reality of climate breakdown. Producing scenes of devastation where whole landscapes and habitats are transformed into geographies of nonlife, filled with fossils of ash, fires mirror the spread of intellectual death proffered by capitalist automation. The zombie apocalypse is here and they are wearing red MAGA hats. The haunting knowledge that Paradise—as in the California town of the same name that burned to the ground last November—won't be the last, these images fuel future hauntings, giving rise to a hauntological futurism. We remain focused on our homelands, as our homes burn. Just as the answer to gun violence is more guns, as conservative pundits tell us, the solution to climate change, more economic growth, if only

"sustainable"—a slippery non/meaning supporting above all the interests of sustaining economic development. But the future belongs to fire.

These images provide a sense of the visual, and by extension, physical mastery over an uncontrollable situation (where in fact it is really humans being mastered by fire). It's a situation that by definition can't be controlled, both in the physical proximity of destructive wildfires, and in the cosmological witnessing of the irrepressible destruction of the world—at least of the twelve-thousand-year-old Holocene, which we know has been made historical. What's behind this desire for mastery? The short answer: disaster capitalism, which flips runaway climate change into an economic opportunity, achieved through techno-scientific rationality matched by Silicon Valley funding (namely, geoengineering as technofix, which I've written about elsewhere[17]). The benefits tempt fossil industry greed (yet more pipelines, drilling sites, airports, self-driving cars, spaceships), and, with government compliance (deregulating the industry, providing subsidiaries, denying climate change) motored by corporate media (cheerleading for the growth economy), it proves irresistible. Consequently, causality and culpability are denigrated. Yet the logic represents nothing less than a recipe for world-ending catastrophe, and a crime not only against humanity, but life, even the earth itself—for which there's no real word. "Ecocide" doesn't quite do it, limited as it is to regional ecosystem death; plus, if the word remains decoupled from criminal enforcement, it remains defanged, marked too by an indefensible belief in a just legal system that more often than not serves the status quo. Probably the only appropriate term for what brings about the earth's sixth mass species extinction would be one that simultaneously experiences its own destruction when articulated—another version of burning aesthetics. If aesthetics concerns cultural modalities of organizing sensibility, then burning aesthetics extends both to the incineration of sensation and to the destruction of the ability to sense, burning sense-ability, constituting a further debility that renders those affected more vulnerable to future burnings, impacting in turn response-ability (to use Haraway's terms). At times, and perhaps increasingly, these two aspects of burning aesthetics converge.

Consider the burning of art institutions. In December 2017, the Getty Museum was threatened by the Skirball Fire, another of California's recent conflagrations. But the museum, private and bequeathed by petro-industrial wealth with a nearly $7 billion endowment, survived untouched. Manfred Heiting's substantial holdings of photobooks and vintage photographs weren't so lucky in 2018—the more than thirty-six thousand volumes were incinerated in ten minutes in Malibu's Woolsey Fire just before Thanksgiving, a massive loss to photography history.[18] Burning aesthetics includes the burning *of* aesthetics. Brazil's National Museum—public, and

systematically defunded over the years—burned in September of 2018, telling yet another story. A result of years of structural neglect, set within the broader context of Brazil's right-ward movement toward post-democracy and authoritarian capitalism, the museum's destruction seemed to foretell the catastrophe of the soon-to-be with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who expresses a deep nostalgia for the country's erstwhile military dictatorship and has openly threatened genocide against Indigenous peoples who stand in the way of his extractive plans for the Amazon—for environmentalists, the planet's lungs; for Indigenous peoples, Mother Earth; for Bolsonaro, a commercial bank with unlimited funds.[19] The National Museum's fire allegorizes petrocapitalism's destruction of culture and science. As the museum's artifacts, taxonomies, genres, conservation, and dioramas burn, so too does history burn, forever more impoverished, glimpsing its own extinction. Perhaps, as indicated above, the very problem is enclosure, control, ownership—which the logic of anthropocentric whimsies that turns living ecologies into dying ecologies, ecologies of death and dying, of quick and slow violence, of quick and slow death, in the last analysis, will lay waste.

Other images do show climate breakdown as more than abstract biogeophysical transformation, portraying the former's effects unevenly distributed according to unequal access to resources. These translate into social injustice, showing climates of extractive labor and racial capitalism. In those areas not directly burned but still affected by fire's air pollution, many (including my family in Santa Cruz) were safely ensconced in their homes breathing clean air thanks to consumer air filters—an index of individualized neoliberal response to toxicity exposure. Others, such as farmworkers, many of them migrants, some undocumented, continued to work the fields, picking fruits and vegetables, while the homeless sheltered in cardboard boxes and tents, all without the luxury of choice. More than a hundred thousand people, representing California's houseless population, had no protection from air pollution levels rated as unhealthy to hazardous, where air mixed with particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide, potentially causing asthma, respiratory illnesses, neurological disorders, and cancers.[20] This is especially the case when fires sweep through constructed environments and burn all manner of products (cell phones, computers, refrigerators, cars). Where the Pyrocene meets the plastisphere, the result is a swirling toxic miasma composed of hydrochloric acid, sulfur dioxide, dioxins, furans, and heavy metals. Washington State's air, normally pristine, was worse in quality than Beijing and Delhi combined, as California's airspace became a toxic waste site. Meanwhile, nearly a quarter of the thirteen thousand firefighters battling blazes across California were, are, prisoners, earning $1 per hour, with convict labor saving California up to $100 million annually.[21]

These class and racial divisions point to the socio-environmental inequalities of disaster, which bely

Farmworkers in Camarillo, California continue to work the fields regardless of the smoke hazards or oncoming fires. Nov 13, 2018. Photo: Andy Holzman/SCNG

Inmate firefighters build a containment line ahead of flames from the Butte Fire near Sheep Ranch in September 2015. Photo: Rich Pedroncelli/AP

any claim that climate breakdown strikes all equally. Placed in the terms of racial capitalism, climate—in the expansive socio-environmental terms that integrate its differential impacts, histories of violence, and social conditions—means anti-blackness, as Christina Sharpe has phrased it.[22] Indeed, fires produce emergency environments of racialized inequality, necropolitical atmospherics where environmental maladies are submitted to privatized health systems, fueling their corresponding cycles of indebtedness and expanding structural debility. This is one form of extraction, the dominant paradigm of advanced capital, yet invisible to much environmentalist concern.[23]

One problem of mainstream environmentalism is that it views climate crisis as a political *failure*, instead of the *answer* it represents, particularly within post-democratic populist formations. "Catastrophic climate change is not a problem for fascists — it is a solution," writes Umair Haque.[24] He's not wrong. "The government has not *failed* on its own terms. It consistently *fulfills* its primary role: protecting the interests of fossil capital," notes Chris Saltmarsh, an environmentalist addressing the recent activism of the group Extinction Rebellion.[25] He points out how Extinction Rebellion, at least its UK branch, frames climate breakdown as a moral issue instead of a political one, and seeks to universalize the legitimacy of its movement on this basis. However, in doing so, it risks overlooking the inequalities that structure the crisis as a manifold rift-zone where a well-resourced minority

imposes climate violence on a systematically disempowered and dispossessed majority. Saltmarsh says: "Capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy is the nexus organizing our global economy and underwriting climate breakdown. If our movements only make demands within the current paradigm rather than seeking to fundamentally transform our economy we can neither decarbonize it adequately, nor do so in the interests of social justice."[26] The urgencies demand, however, that, rather than simply critically attack these movements (as does Saltmarsh), we actively join ones like Extinction Rebellion, or the Green New Deal, pushing them to mobilize around these radical analyses.[27]

In a recent *New Yorker* article, environmentalist Bill McKibben points out the crimes of the oil majors—Exxon, Shell, BP—and details how their disinformation campaigns have cost humanity, and the earth, a generation of nonaction, ramping up wide-scale suffering, loss, death, and extinction to untold levels, all for short-term profits.[28] But these fire images, when mobilized critically, show an ecology of relations that extends well beyond the fossil fuel industry. Indeed, it includes the criminal justice system, slavish agricultural and penal labor, economic inequality, and racial injustice—in other words, the nexus of capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy, which, when engaged directly, expands our struggle outward toward all major organizational systems.

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz terms current apocalyptic populism

global "carbo-fascism," considering the regimes of Trump, the Philippines' Duterte, and Bolsonaro in weaponizing and instrumentalizing climate change in their own interests.[29] That position updates Naomi Klein's analysis, in *This Changes Everything*, where she observes that what makes environmental transformation catastrophic is its historical coincidence with neoliberalism, an era when policy-makers, thinktanks, economists, and politicians, are all seeking ways to dismantle the state's social provisioning functions, privatizing everything, from healthcare to education, the penal system to social security. Consequently, there is only meager state-level capacity to respond to the newly regional and global-scale crises. Shaping ability and debility becomes a structural act of power.

The fires are also particularly hard on elderly people; in addition, for the multitudes without wealth and resources, without the ability to afford air filters or pay private firefighters to protect their mansions, they, we, are structurally disabled. As Jasbir Puar would point out, this is a result not of failure, but of the successful continuing and intensifying conditions imposed by extractive capital and its alteration of climate.[30] With infrastructural debilitation, we critically lose our sense-ability, response-ability. As fascism, authoritarian capitalism, nuclear nationalism—complimenting what Wendy Brown calls apocalyptic populism—become global, spreading as if like wildfire, we face new and emboldened regimes around the world that mobilize emergency to suit their causes, whether against migrants or minority ethnic groups, Indigenous land protectors or religious communities, as the ongoing work of petrocapitalism continues unabated.

Pyro-aesthetics spark affect, discernable too in these flaming images. It begins with the register of fear, including worry, apprehension, dread, foreboding, panic. They extend to pain, invoking agony, anguish, hurt, misery. They move on to sadness, as in depression, dejection, despondency, gloom, melancholy. And they end with disconnection and disassociation, expressed in feelings of alienation and abandonment, immobilization and end-of-world numbness. If climate breakdown evokes emotions of "pre-loss," similar to what some enviros call "pre-traumatic stress syndrome," these images concern what's to come, what's to lose, what soon will be, what eventually will have been. It makes it hard to carry on, as nihilism tempts.

Critically reading these images does some work to restore hopefulness—that provided by research, interpretation, writing, teaching, learning, building community. It grants new life, against all odds, even if against optimism and its cruelties, perhaps resulting in something like undefeated despair. Yet if anything is recovered through its process, then it can't be in the name of what's come before, life in the name of hierarchy and privatization, capital and uneven dis/abilities. Any cultural analysis that might emerge must be dedicated to decolonizing knowledge,

opposing the nexus of capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy that set fire to the planet in the first place, and building new worlds in the ashes.

**X**

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27

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ust-be-rooted-in-a-just-transition/ ;
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What if this world contained another one? One subgenre of speculative fiction features an uncanny realm in which everyday reality has ominously, irrevocably broken down. At first glance, everything in that other space seems similar to the world we know, but it soon becomes clear that something is wrong: the sun and moon aren't where they should be, the laws of physics are warped, people themselves seem to change. For the time being, the danger is contained within a limited sphere of its own. But since no one in these stories understands how or why this zone of exception managed to insert itself into their world in the first place, they also can't be sure it won't spill over, spreading across the rest of the planet. It could be a benign oddity, but it could also be an apocalypse in a nutshell, which some kind of transgression or mistake or accidental incantation might suddenly crack open.

These scenarios all bear what Mark Fisher has described as "the marker of the weird," representing as they do "the irruption into *this* world of something from outside."[1] In this subgenre, as in other kinds of speculative writing, contemporary fears are interwoven with alarms about unfamiliar disasters to come; worries about alien invasion mix with guilty recognition of our existing faults. At the same time, these fictions stage a more specific epistemological crisis: as Fisher puts it, the arrival of the weird acts as "a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously deployed are now obsolete."[2] But is there another bedrock to these stories—a material(ist) basis on which to read them? Drawing on three examples from very different times and places—Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, written in the US in the 1970s; Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, filmed in the USSR in the same decade; and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, published in the US in the 2010s—I want to sketch out here some connections between fantasies of otherworldly intrusion and broader, systemic forms of malaise within the societies that produced them.

# Tony Wood

# Intrusions: Or, The Golden Age Is Not in Us

The skies of Bellona, a fictional city in the heart of America, are shrouded in smoke. No one knows why, but random fires smolder in the shells of abandoned houses, only to flare lethally into infernos that swallow entire neighborhoods. It seems as if we are in the aftermath of a vast industrial accident, or trapped in an alien experiment—or both, or neither. Many of Bellona's citizens have fled, but plenty have stayed—including its long-marginalized African-American population—and new residents and visitors keep arriving, such as the nameless central protagonist of *Dhalgren*, an amnesiac wanderer and would-be poet known only as the Kid. The city's remaining authority figures are cloistered in their suburbs, and though the local press mogul still prints his

Still from the 1979 movie Stalker by Andrei Tarkovsky.

newspaper, it's not much use when it comes to keeping track of events (he assigns the day, month, and even year of each issue according to his own obscure whims, and in total disregard for the calendar). The real power in Bellona seems to belong to the Scorpions, a cluster of leather-clad gangs who wear strange devices that project neon-bright images of animals around their heads, like dazzling carnival masks. They raid shops and houses, rob the occasional remaining resident, or shake down a hippie colony for food. Sometimes they fight amongst themselves, but mostly they sit around, drink, talk, and fuck.

Bellona is in some ways only a slightly exaggerated version of the 1970s American bourgeois nightmare of urban decay: a burning city, half emptied and turned into a playground for gangs, countercultural freaks, and wandering poets. It's a dystopia for the white middle class, represented in the novel by the Richards family, who struggle so hard amid the chaos to maintain all the

structures and rituals of a certain vision of postwar American normality—the nuclear family, the male breadwinner, dinner parties with Jell-O for dessert—that they soon come to seem like the most outlandish thing in the book. Yet the very darkening of the bourgeois horizon seems also to represent an unprecedented margin of freedom for everyone else. The main character spends much of the novel writing jagged, expressionistic verse, while others make music, or indulge in weird projects such as slyly shifting all the street signs around; one character decides never to wear clothes again; everyone has a lot of sex, in pairs or in groups.

Although not everyone is experiencing Bellona's strange emergency in the same way, it's clear that the social contract as a whole has not disintegrated. There is much violence and tension, but there are also collective bonds of solidarity being formed; this isn't a *Mad Max*–type postapocalypse with all-out Hobbesian warfare. Something else has broken down in Bellona, something

abstract but also familiar and pervasive. Quite simply, the whole phenomenon of consumption that underpins capitalist society has been paralyzed. There is no longer any need to purchase anything, and no need to work to earn the money to do so; there are no wages, no debt—in short, no meaningful relationship between human needs and the flow of capital. This is, to be sure, far from a utopian breakthrough into postcapitalism: on the contrary, it's taken an incomprehensible disaster, wreathed in fire and brimstone, to carve out this brief respite from the whirl of commodities. But there is a sense, in much of the novel, that this unmooring of life from its capitalist foundations is even more unsettling for Bellona's better-off residents than the disruption of the physical world: it's as if they could handle the moon and stars being out of alignment, if only the usual round of transactions—working for a salary, paying for things with money—could be resumed.

*Dhalgren* seems in many ways to collapse together, in exaggerated and fantastical form, two of the Western postwar order's biggest crises: the youth and worker rebellions of 1968, and the steady decline of industry from the mid-1970s onwards. Bellona is both Paris and Detroit, experiencing their two crises as a single, otherworldly shock rather than an unfolding sequence of historical developments. The combination is not just a matter of setting or atmosphere, though. It expresses precisely the import of Delany's dystopia, which is to imagine the crumbling of the Western postwar settlement—not the end of the world, but the end of a world owned and run by a particular set of people.

Although the science-fiction anomaly that is responsible for Bellona's condition seems far-fetched, contemporary analogues for the ruined city are everywhere: from the militarized favelas of Rio to New Orleans after Katrina. These are, of course, only the most extreme variants of urban breakdown, which has all along been fully compatible with, or even instrumental to, the pursuit of profit. But what if the chain of consumption were somehow simply to snap or be replaced, not just in one or two disaster zones but everywhere? Would we all then find ourselves in some version of Bellona, each navigating our own way between disparate dangers and newfound freedoms?

*3.*

The Zone—the eerie, silent realm at the heart of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*—is at first glance entirely different from Bellona.[3] For one thing, it is almost empty of human life, except for the three individuals journeying to its center. For another, its violence remains implicit, submerged within the uncanny landscape rather than apt to break out among any unruly residents. And while Bellona may be a damaged place, it's still recognizably a city; the Zone, by contrast, is a series of waterlogged fragments, ruins strewn here and there with traces of a

former human presence—pieces of photographs, syringes, coins—like a shattered archive of some lost civilization. What has happened seems to be a dismantling so thorough as to make the fact that people ever lived here the inexplicable part.

Yet the film shares with *Dhalgren* the core conceit of a delimited, uncanny area where reality has been replicated and at the same time modified, in inscrutable and possibly threatening ways. No one says so explicitly, but it seems that the Zone was created by the arrival or intrusion of an alien object or will. The Stalker, the main character leading the travelers through the Zone, certainly attributes a consciousness to it, insisting that the landscape itself is mercurial and treacherous. The three characters' destination is a room at the center of the Zone, rumored to have the miraculous power of seeing what one most deeply desires and making it real. This can be a punishment as much as a gift: the Stalker tells the others the story of Porcupine, who made it to the Room and back and acquired a fortune, but soon thereafter committed suicide. It is darkly implied that those who enter the Room are being weighed in some kind of moral scales.

On one level, Tarkovsky's film is a kind of secularized Grail narrative, in which characters who are little more than abstractions—the Stalker, the Writer, the Scientist—journey in search of a lost purpose or meaning to their lives, seeking something that will shock them out of their cynicism or help them rediscover their vocations. Of course, this kind of anguish was more or less a constant among the Soviet intelligentsia. But the film seems to dramatize a more specific existential uncertainty that set in during the long stagnation of the Brezhnev era—a particularly late-Soviet version of moral drift. *Stalker* was made in the depths of state socialism's 1970s systemic slowdown, as the factories and steel mills built during the USSR's forced-march industrialization of the 1930s began to age, and overall economic growth began to stall. It's little wonder, then, that the predominant feeling in the film is one of stasis, captured in the many long, still shots of silent, unpeopled spaces, of pools of reflecting water, of abandoned rooms and buildings, of meadows in which nothing is happening, could ever happen.

If *Dhalgren* shows us the crumbling of consumption in a capitalist society, *Stalker* portrays the collapse of the whole mechanism of production in a state-socialist one—symmetrical disintegrations that reflect the respective priorities of the rival Cold War systems. The collapse in *Stalker* goes beyond industrial production, which was the raison d'être for the Soviet planned economy as a whole—represented in the film by rusting equipment, warehouses that now store nothing but wind-sculpted sand—extending to the production of knowledge and meaning, the exhaustion of which is portrayed by the Writer and the Scientist. When all the machinery of the state-socialist system begins to seize up,

what rationale or guiding principle can sustain people from one day to the next, let alone in decades to come? This is a moral crisis, to be sure—but a systemic, rather than an individual or personal one.

*Stalker* might strike some viewers now as prophetic, its forbidding Zone an anticipation of Chernobyl's radioactive exclusion zone—as if it depicts the aftermath of that 1986 disaster in advance. But like Bellona, the Zone is not the product of an accident. Both are the fictionalized figures of a different kind of misfortune: an estrangement from reality, an incursion from elsewhere that tells us, whether we choose to recognize it or not, that a world-historical reckoning is on its way.

*4.*

Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy also suggests a settling of accounts. The series revolves around a mysterious Area X—both its effects on those who enter it, and the potential threat it poses to those outside it. *Annihilation*, the first volume, recounts the fate of a four-person expedition sent into the strange zone, which has apparently been cut off from the rest of the world for decades now. As in *Stalker*, these individuals are shorn of names, abstracted into a profession or skill set—the biologist, the anthropologist, the surveyor, the psychologist—but their different personalities begin to emerge as we watch them respond to their strange new environment.

At first, the landscape of Area X seems to be a lusher, wilder version of the world we know, so long emptied of humans that Nature has moved back in and run riot. But it is unmistakably dangerous: the four women on the team are the twelfth set of humans to be sent into Area X, and we know that some of the previous expeditions met grisly ends, either committing mass suicide or blasting each other away with bullets. One expedition, the eleventh, made it back—but its members had been reduced to silent husks, and soon they all died of cancer. Area X, though, is not another deserted, Chernobyl-type exclusion zone, quietly administering lethal doses of radiation or psychosis. This expedition immediately comes across unmistakable signs of a nonhuman will or agency, in the form of a spiraling underground structure which they tentatively, tensely begin to explore.

The biologist makes some other troubling observations: for example, there is something different about the animals she sees in Area X—something unexpectedly searching in their expressions, perhaps even something human. Is this, in fact, what happened to the previous expeditions? Have they metamorphosed, Ovid-style, into birds and deer and rocks? The reader comes to suspect that those who enter Area X get absorbed into the biome for recycling as new flora and fauna, that they are cloned or reconfigured according to some alien design and sent

out into the world again.

Several different fever dreams are present in the *Southern Reach* trilogy—alien invasion, medical experiments gone wrong, survivalist stories, human–animal metamorphic crossovers, ecological disaster—but the place where they all converge is this nightmare of unwanted transformation. In Area X, the boundaries of the human have broken down; that is, the normal chain of replication of the species has been interrupted and diverted along an unknown set of paths, with seemingly random and capricious results—a deer with a human face, a tentacled monster writing stream-of-consciousness poetry on a wall. In other words, where *Dhalgren* dramatizes the collapse of consumption and *Stalker* shows production at a standstill, in VanderMeer's trilogy it is reproduction that has ceased to function. The fact that the latest expedition is all-female, and that the previous large all-male one has bitten the dust, becomes significant. Southern Reach itself, the shadowy human institution that sends in these expeditions, comes to seem culpably complicit in this process, as if the organization knows a lot more than it lets on; as if it, too, is watching and waiting for the results of the experiment to feed through. In the trilogy's second and third parts, *Authority* and *Acceptance*, the effects of Area X begin to seep back into the organization's headquarters, in a kind of existential blowback; the intrusion has breached its boundaries.

It is fitting that a fiction with these underlying concerns should appear at a time of increasing alarm over the cost of humankind's scientific advances—the sequencing of the genome, genetically modified crops—and over the unfolding catastrophe of anthropogenic climate change. For as we advance ever deeper into the Anthropocene, there would seem to be legitimate moral grounds for questioning the logical sequence of human reproduction. It's not obvious, and perhaps never was, that the relentless succession of one generation by another should be preferable to whatever accidents and mutations chance or an outside, alien will might choose to inflict. Why, in other words, should we assume humankind has any right to decide whether it gets perpetuated—and if it does, in what form? Why should the future mean more of the same?

*5.*

In a way, reproduction is also at the core of the dystopias in *Dhalgren* and *Stalker*, since consumption and production are likewise geared to the maintenance and continuation of the human world, to the stable and steady replacement of humans by their chosen successors. The intrusions at the heart of all three fictions throw that line out of joint, bend or break it so that whatever rules drive human activity in the present come to seem redundant. Normal service in these weird zones has not just been suspended, but abolished.

That abolition itself throws into question not only the succession of generations, but also some of the key assumptions that have governed humankind's actions for centuries. Towards the end of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss describes human striving as being driven by a faith in the possibility of a better future: "What was done but turned out wrong, can be done again." He approvingly quotes Rousseau on the location of that better future: "The Golden Age, which blind superstition had placed behind us, is in us."[4] The discovery that progress is a mirage, and that belief in a better future is itself a kind of blind superstition, leads to the obvious conclusion that time itself has never been on anyone's side—and from there, perhaps, to the impossible fantasy of halting history itself, of stepping outside time into a uchronia that confounds the very idea of narrating it.

Yet behind this meta-historical *Angst* lies a more primal anxiety. The best figure I can find for it in these three works is the Stalker's child. For most of the film, it's possible to imagine that all the powers attributed to the Zone may be a purely psychological phenomenon—that the Zone itself exists only in the minds of the humans surrounding it, and that there is no actual alien presence or intrusion, no danger at all. But then, in the film's final shot, we see the Stalker's young daughter, her head leaning against a wooden table, looking at a glass of water that is resting on the table's surface. She stares at it, seemingly without any particular interest or emotion; a few snowflakes fall and swirl in the air. Then the glass moves. This child, it seems, has kinetic powers, perhaps bestowed upon her by the Zone itself or exposure to its radiation. Either way, she is not like her parents, not like previous generations of humans: she has a gift and affliction of her own, which she will no doubt use in the world she will inherit.

This figure of the powerful mutant child is familiar from legions of comic books and superhero films, from *Superman* to *X-Men*. But in *Stalker* it has a more ominous valence, condensing a double terror that is at once banal and all-pervading. On the one hand, she expresses the fear that what comes after us will be people so fundamentally different from us that they might as well be from another planet—and that they will be just as hostile and dangerous to us as alien invaders would be. On the other hand, there is the fear that, despite their fundamental alienness to us, despite their future rejection of our being and matter as unsuitable or unworthy, they and the world to come will also be our responsibility, our fault.

**X**

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1
Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 20. Thanks to Elvia Wilk for drawing my attention to this text, which helped clarify some key terms and concepts.

2
Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 13.

3
Tarkovsky's film is loosely based on the Strugatsky brothers' 1972 novel *Roadside Picnic*. Even though film and prose fiction are such distinct forms, I discuss the film rather than the novel because *Stalker* shares with my other examples a concentrated focus on a single intrusion (whereas *Roadside Picnic* features half a dozen, and unfolds in several different locations across the globe).

4
Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Pocket Books, 1977), 448.

Tyler Coburn
# Ergonomic Futures

*Great Chain*

In the beginning, there's a model—specifically, there's the tree. Sometimes it grows upwards from root to tip; sometimes the branches get longer with each generation, like the neck of a giraffe; sometimes they sprout leaves of as many kinds as there are beaks of a finch; sometimes the tree is cut, and on its stump are the intricate veins that I'm told are us; and sometimes it's allowed to grow in the most novel ways, the branches feeding back into other parts of tree, building you, me, and every eukaryote we know.

Sometimes the tree isn't a tree but a chain, which once hung all the way from heaven to hell—which was intimately known by our ancestors, for it held them in perfect harmony. Everything was linked in the chain, even the ugly stone, the treacherous snake, and the louse. Nothing was an error of creation, because everything had a place.

The trouble came with the human, who occupied a sensitive link between heaven and earth. Here was a creature whose wit and will distinguished him from his fellow animals, yet a creature substantially less perfect than even the stupidest angel.[1] Surely God hadn't erred in designing the chain. Surely everything had a place. Surely, the scholars of the Enlightenment reasoned, it was the Elizabethans who had drawn the chain wrong—who left out links between humans and angels, to be filled *not* by the creatures of the known world, but by those from other planets: supra-human, sub-angelic beings.

Unlike the extraterrestrials of the present age, those of the Enlightenment weren't foreign to humankind. They fit hand in glove with its logics.

*Shara*

A few years ago, a group of alien "believers" approached Shara Bailey, an NYU anthropologist working on the dental morphology of early humans. They claimed to have found an ancient jaw, and they were pretty certain that it belonged to an extraterrestrial …

Shara agreed to talk with the television reporter covering the story. She said something to the effect of: "In my professional opinion, this jaw is a fake. There's nothing on earth that looks like this." Well, Shara's first sentence was cut from the segment, so she'll forever be remembered by the "believer" community as the scientist who said, on broadcast television: "There's nothing on earth that looks like this."

Shara told me this story a while back, when I visited her office. I had originally contacted Shara because I wanted her to imagine a scenario, at some point between now and
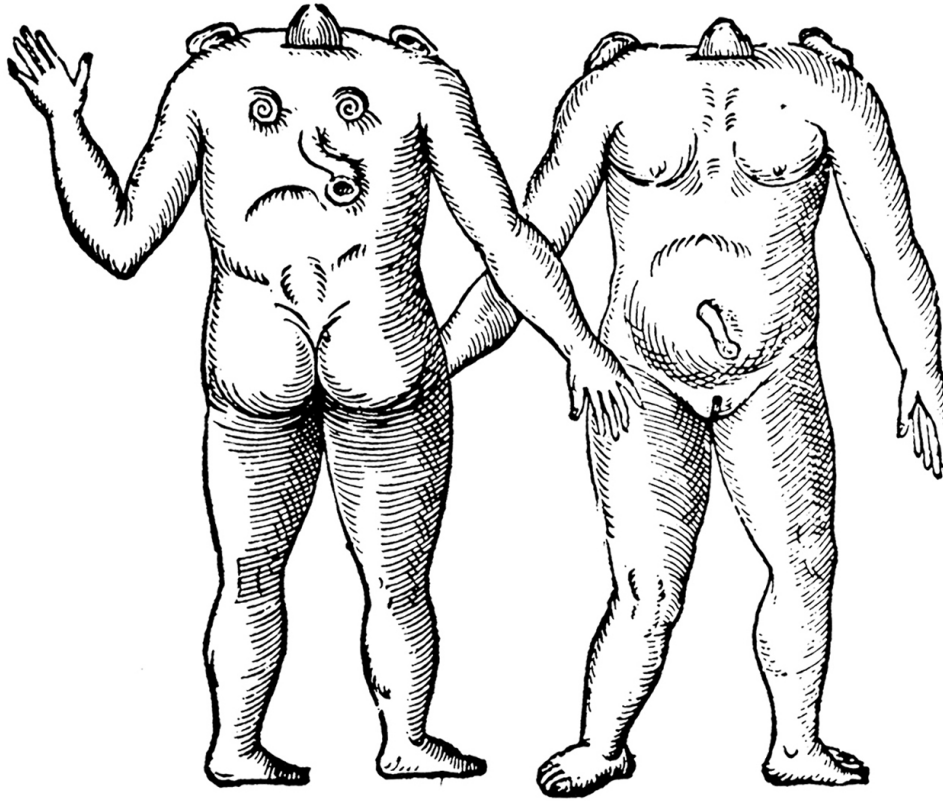
Illustrations from the book by Ambroise Paré titled On Monsters and Marvels (1573).

the bitter end of the universe, when our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone—when we undergo speciation.

In Shara's opinion, outside of genetic engineering, the only way we'll see drastic change is if humankind fragments into groups, isolated by geography, culture, or ideology. Owing to their limited scale, each group would experience low genetic variation, meaning that over generations, recessive traits would have the possibility of becoming prominent.

This phenomenon is often known as the "founder effect," suggesting that the founders of a given community can have a huge influence on its gene pool.

There are a few famous cases of the "founder effect":

There's the Amish, who suffer Ellis–van Creveld Syndrome. This syndrome wreaks havoc on the skeletal system, causing dwarfism and cleft palates, growing extra fingers and toes.

There's a famous community in the Dominican Republic, where most of the children are born female. Around the age of twelve, some develop penises and become—biologically and culturally—boys.

There are the Blue Fugates, a family that's lived in Kentucky since the 1820s, near the towns of Hazard and Troublesome Creek Times. The founders of the Fugates were Martin and Elizabeth, who shared a rare genetic disorder. Their blood produced a surplus of hemoglobin that couldn't release oxygen into the body, thus turning their skin blue. As Martin and Elizabeth lived in geographical isolation, their condition spread over generations ... The human equivalent of the Smurf clan was born.

One of the Blue Fugates showed his family tree to a reporter. "You'll notice," he remarked, that "I'm kin to myself."

*Baby*

Sometimes a tree isn't a tree but a chain. And sometimes a chain is a chart, its links compressed into tiny statistical points where the beggar, the dumb, and the deaf mute—where every human has a place.

The stone, the louse, and the snake can live on the charts of a different field; for the social statisticians of the nineteenth century, like Adolphe Quetelet, the chain is a human chain, the coil a human coil, its length stretched not from heaven to earth but curved around an invisible
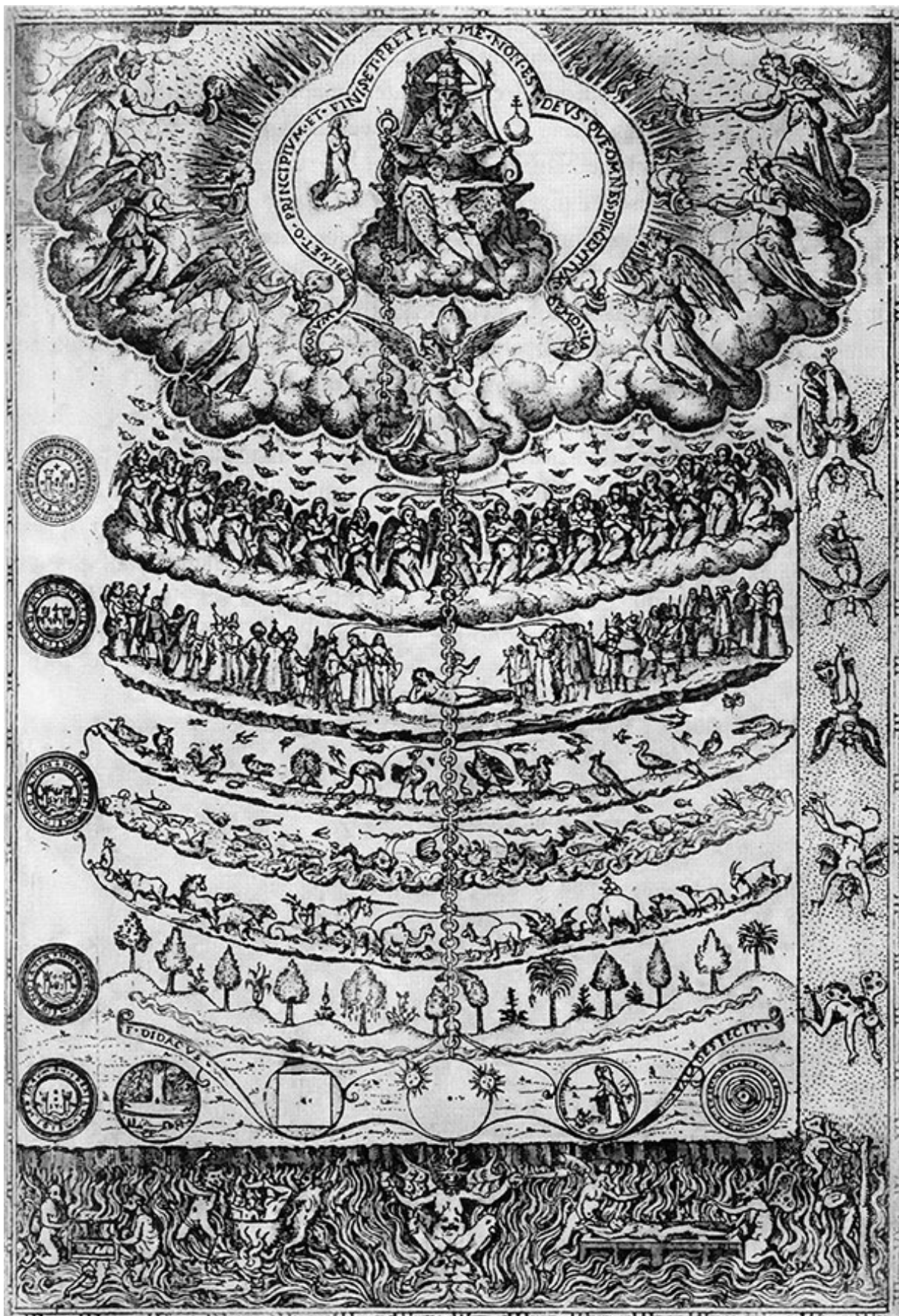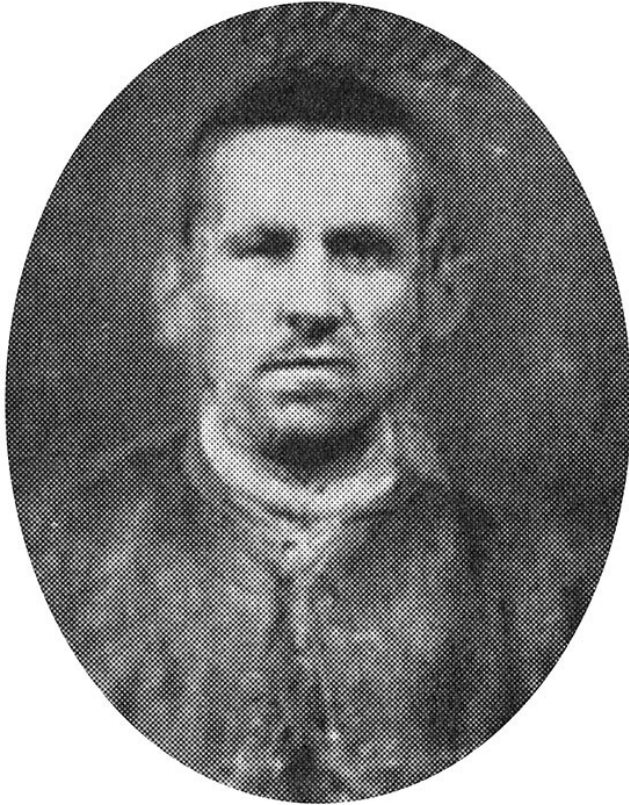
Illustration "The Great Chain of Being" from the book Rhetorica Christiana (1579) by Didacus Valades.

Galton's composite portraits of criminals. Plate XXVII from Karl Pearson, The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton, vol. 2, 1924.

bell and centered on "the average man."

Who is "the average man"? His figure, his face? How is life lived on the fiftieth percentile? It's strange to speak of an empirical fiction, but this human surely was one. Every time Quetelet added data to the chart, his "average man" grew less lifelike and less precise.

There were other problems with Quetelet's model, particularly for members of the nascent eugenics movement. For one, the bell curve made "the average man" the norm. The scope of deviation thus included both the shorter and the taller, the dumber and the smarter, the browner and the whiter. To remedy this spread, the eugenicist Francis Galton reimagined the norm to be less a statistical "reality" than an aspiration, a hope, a want for social betterment, for selective breeding, for a kingdom of the taller, the smarter, and the whiter ...

"The average man" was one of the nineteenth century's many hallucinations; Galton's composite portraits were among the most notorious. In these images, a different empirical fiction is on display: three, five, sometimes nine portraits of criminals have been merged to reveal their common facial traits—to expose the fundamental likeness of "the criminal type."

Digital technology could intensify this technique—pixel by pixel, layer upon infinite layer—but alas, composite photography is a thing of the past: another tombstone in the graveyard of pseudoscience. The norm no longer lives on the surface of images but deep in the grain of the self.

The Human Genome Project, according to David Serlin, is *also* a composite: an empirical fiction that invents norms from a genome in constant change. Donna Haraway has called it a "standard reference work" that purports to tame the unruly diversity of our species by the sheer power of exhaustive code.

By sequencing our genes, we follow in the footsteps of Adolphe Quetelet. We add data to "the average man." We observe the scope of deviation. But to engineer the perfect human, we have to move in Francis Galton's direction. Galton had to rework Quetelet's bell curve in justifying eugenic practices. Genetics, in turn, must strive to do more than plot and measure our genome. To engineer the perfect human—to incubate a designer baby—it must rid our genome of its every last fault.

*Dreyfuss*

Over the past three years, I approached a number of people, like I approached Shara, and I posed the same question: Is it possible, somewhere between now and the suspension of everything, that our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone—when the human, as we know it, fragments or even ceases to exist?

I wanted to know how a designer would answer this question, so I called Jonathan Olivares, who wrote the 2011 book *A Taxonomy of Office Chairs*. Jonathan remarked that evolutionary change can't be envisaged in a vacuum. We need to consider the geographical, cultural, and ideological qualities of a community, as Shara had said. We need to study the broader environment. We also need to look to design—and particularly, to ergonomics. These are fields that can respond to the practical needs of the human. Moreover, they can prescribe and evolve those needs.

Ergonomics is a young discipline—a child of the Taylorist years, when its main task was to increase the efficiency of the working body: to minimize wasteful movements; to keep the eye trained on its machine; to quicken the pace of materials as they raced towards the market. We know ergonomics better in its modern sense, popularized in Henry Dreyfuss's 1955 book *Designing for People*. Dreyfuss's ergonomics focuses on enhancing the comfort of the human body in the workplace and beyond. The more comfortable a worker feels—at his seat, within his
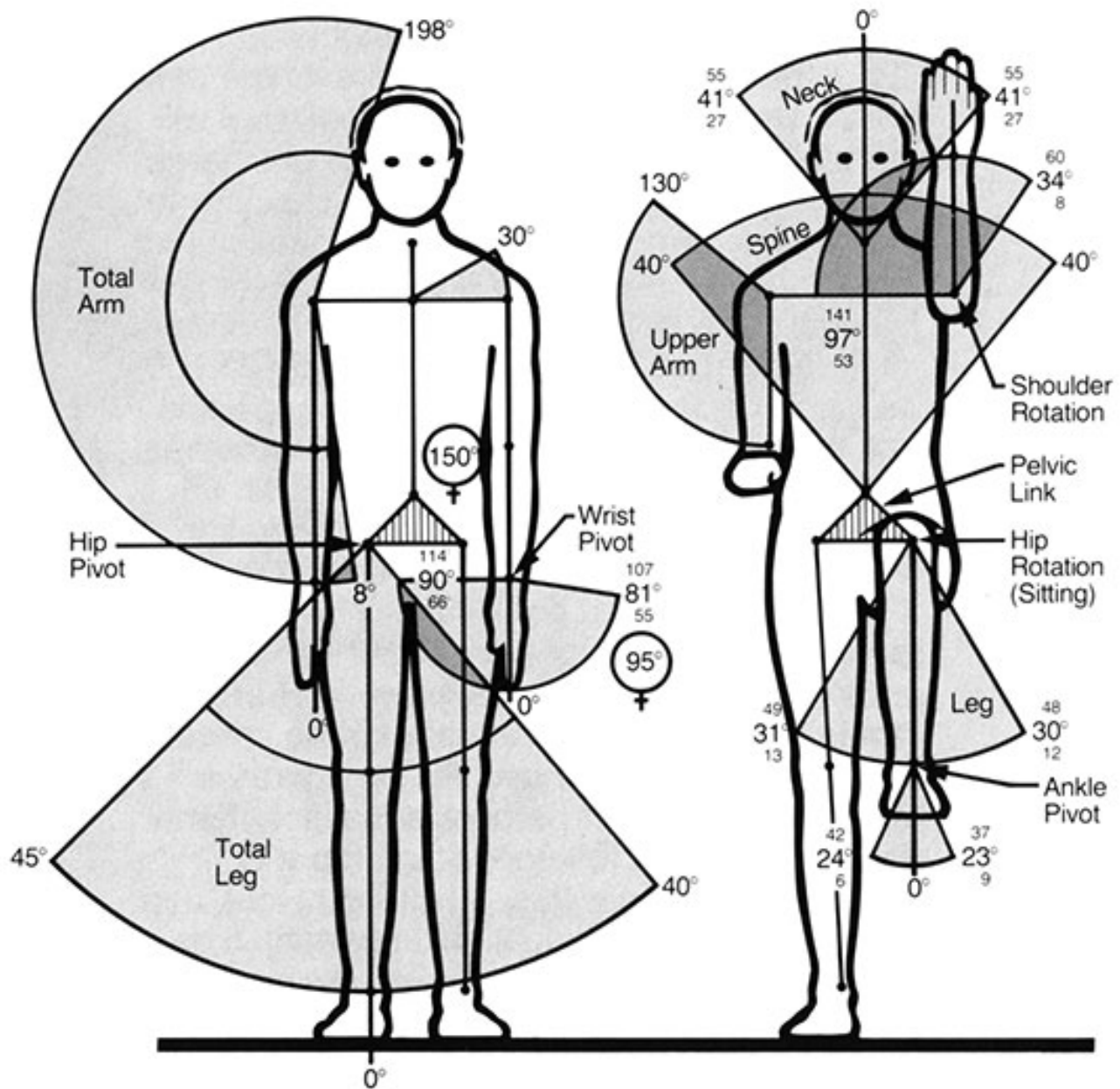
Diagram from the book Humanscale 1/2/3 (1974) by Niels Diffrient and Alvin R. Tilley.

machine—the more productive he will be.

Dreyfuss was an interesting figure. In his early career, he designed theater sets in New York, which led to a commission for the 1939 World's Fair to create *Democracity*: a diorama in the round that scaled democracy to the size of a future city. This was a Greenfield City par excellence, where each and every resident could enjoy a garden apartment, a bucolic view, the landscaped highway to his job downtown, the landscaped highway for a swift retreat. *Democracity*

claimed to depict the world in a hundred year's time, though suburbia arrived much sooner.

In the sixteen years between *Democracity* and *Designing for People*, Dreyfuss zoomed in from his Greenfield City to the intimate lives of its users—from utopian theater to the intricacies of ergonomics.

The protagonists of *Designing for People* are "Joe and Josephine": paragons of mid-century American gender. Joe can be found working on a linotype or in a tank, and
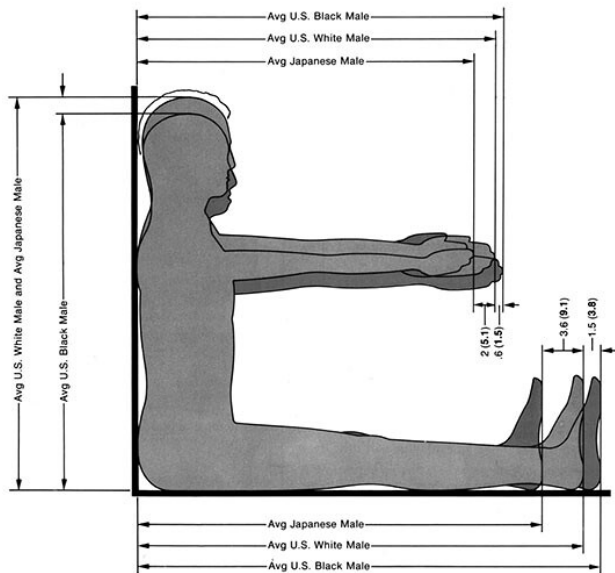
Diagram from the book Humanscale 1/2/3 (1974) by Niels Diffrient and Alvin R. Tilley.



A stand-in image for a designer baby. See →

Josephine over an ironing table, or at the switchboard.

Ergonomics didn't limit itself to templates like Joe and Josephine. Books from that era include design for the elderly and disabled, for children and the obese, for the standard US male body of black, white, and Japanese descent—for the standard US female body of the same provenance. Their diagrams appear to be more complicated than the charts of Adolphe Quetelet, but don't mistake what they share. The norm has gone granular, yet "the average man" persists. The visuals change. The tendency to typologize remains the same.

*Church*

I approached Shara and Jonathan. And still, the question remained: Is it possible, at some point between now and oblivion, that our bodies experience such a degree of evolutionary change that the biological, ontological, and legal criteria of the human come undone—that the kernel of anthropocentric egotism is ground down beyond repair?

I took my question to Seth Shipman, a fellow in geneticist George Church's lab. Seth and I discussed a 2014 symposium on "Genetics and Society," where Church claimed to have identified the genes that should be modified to make the human body survive better in

"extraterrestrial environments": modifications to give us extra-strong bones, lean muscles, and lower cancer risk.

Taking Church's human to its historical precedent, we arrive at a 1960 NASA research proposal that imagines a human perfectly adapted to space—who can live in "space qua natura." This human, according to the authors, could breath without lungs and spacewalk without suits.

What this required were exogenous devices: fuel cells to replace the lungs, intravenous feeding tubes to save the labor of mastication. Pressure pumps would be injected beneath the skin, triggering drug infusions to stave off the ravaging effects of radiation. When these mechanisms functioned effectively, they'd be so integrated into their user as to operate "unconsciously."

When they didn't function effectively, the human was presumed to be the problem. In such cases, drug infusions could be triggered remotely from Houston or by a fellow crew member. For nearly every conceivable problem, drugs were the obvious solution.

NASA's model astronaut was a human freed from biological limitations yet bound by imperfect devices and doped to ease the pain of those imperfections—doped to palliate the anxieties of being haplessly invaded by the future. To describe this new human, the authors invented a term: "cyborg."

### Chimera

Sometimes a tree isn't a tree but a chain. And sometimes a chain is a chart, left outside for so long that when found again, it's yellowed and tattered: pieces missing, pieces torn. The perfect model is beyond our reach, and what's left are oddities, embarrassments, and chimeric monstrosities.

The chimeras of lore had lions for heads, goats for bodies, and snakes for tails. Sometimes, they had the claws of dragons; sometimes, glorious manes; always, mouths filled with fire that imperiled any who stood too near.

Chimeras are still among us, though we can scarcely distinguish them from the rest. Chimeras can even live in human guise, unaware of their fearsome gifts.
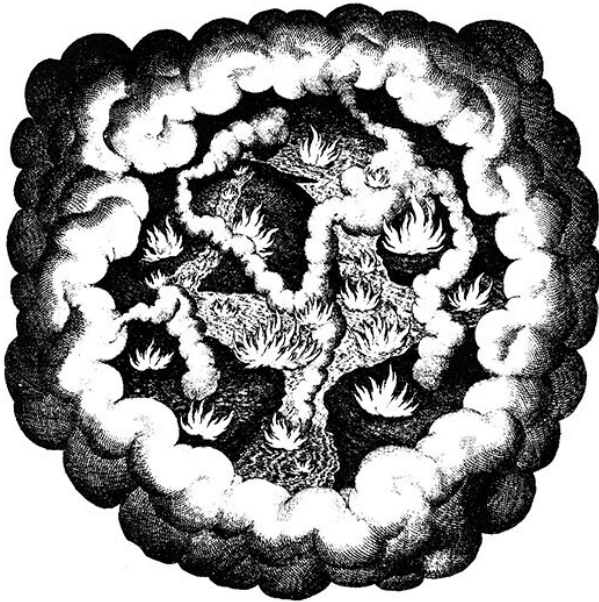


Image from the book Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atqve technica historia (1617) by Robert Fludd.

Consider Lydia Fairchild. By chance, two of her mother's eggs fused before insemination, causing Fairchild to be born with forty-six chromosomes, or two DNA signatures. Unbeknownst to her, Fairchild was multiple people.

This fact finally came to light in the early 2000s. Fairchild applied for public assistance, which required her and her children to take DNA tests. The results revealed that Fairchild was not the mother of her children, leading the state to suspect that she was attempting welfare fraud.

Eventually, an additional DNA test was given to a baby that

Fairchild *had just birthed*—again, with the same results. And so, the odd but correct conclusion was finally reached: that Fairchild was both the mother and the aunt of her children.

Fairchild's case illuminates a larger trend, as personal testimony is losing credibility against genetic evidence. Genetic evidence, according to Aaron T. Norton and Ozzie Zehner, amounts to a "technological confession" for someone like Fairchild "through a privileged objectification of her biological attributes."

Though genetics is usually privileged for this supposed objectivity, there are some telling exceptions. Recent years have seen cases of transgender parents who have a genetic relationship to their children yet find their parental rights nullified for not matching their original sex.

What this example reveals is that, far from being an objective force in contemporary jurisprudence, genetics is *selectively* deemed to be objective when it's aiding and abetting social norms—when it's affirming traditionalist thinking about identity and parenthood.

Sometimes you judge a book by its content, through usually you just glance at the cover.

### Great Chain

The Great Chain wasn't the invention of the Elizabethans but the Greeks: less a chain at first than the product of paranoia, not a model of anything but the madness of Zeus. It dates back to the Trojan War, when the gods were vying to stack the decks—to be far more than bystanders to glorious war. Zeus responded with a warning: Any gods who played a role in the war would suffer no less a fate than exile. And any attempt to overthrow his authority would be tantamount to folly. He was too powerful to budge.

Say the gods latched a chain to the heavens in an effort to yank him down. Well, Zeus would simply pick it up, give it a tug, and the rebel gods, their earthly minions, *the entire carnal world*, would be flung through the cosmos to an untimely end. With a mere twist of his finger, Zeus could take control of the chain: as a weapon, a keepsake, a necklace for the peak of Olympus.

Zeus never acted on this threat, but his gauntlet kept hanging. With each passing era, it grew ever more like a chain. The natural world took a liking to this object. Creatures began to clamber up and take shelter in its links. By all accounts, they loved the altitude and the elliptical life.

Gods come and go, and still the chain keeps hanging. Trees have sprung up around it, but if we look closely, we can see it: a weathered thing, more rust than metal; a

testament to all we've forgotten to remember—to the worlds of old epistemologies, to the aliens of the Enlightenment.

At some point, the future may reclaim this chain:

For the ugly stone, the cyborg, the deaf mute, and the telepath to join together in lasting congress.

For designer babies to have a trinket that reminds them of the world before human perfection.

For mechanical overlords to ensnare the last vestiges of earthly life, pulling chain links around necks as a hangman would.

For the founders of space colonies to climb their way to the stars—to spread their genetic stock throughout this galaxy and the next.

For citizens to have a cautionary tale of what comes from living within empirical fictions written by models, charts, and norms.

Whatever purpose the chain will hold for those to come, it will keep hanging.

**X**

This text is part of a larger project, including furniture designed with Bureau V and a website  of
stories designed with Luke Gould and Afonso Martins.

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1
For more on the human (and the many other things referenced in this article), see: Aaron T. Norton and Ozzie Zehner, "Which Half Is Mommy? Tetragametic Chimerism and Trans-Subjectivity," *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol. 36 (2008), 106-125.; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* Vol. 29 (1986): 3-64.; A.R. Templeton, "The theory of speciation via the founder principle," *Genetics* 94 (1980), 1011-1038.; Cathy Trost, "The Blue People of Troublesome Creek," *Science 82* (November 1982).; David Gelertner, *1939: The Lost World of the Fair* . New York: Free Press, 1995.; David Serlin, "The Other Arms Race." In *The Disability Studies Reader: Second Edition,* edited by Lennard J. Davis, 67-75. New York: Routledge, 2006.; Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* . New York: Routledge, 1991.; Erica Fudge, "How a Man Differs from a Dog," *History Today* (June 2003), 38-44.; Eustace M. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* . New York: Vintage, 1959.; Francis Galton, "Generic Images." In *Proceedings of the Royal Institution* , vol. 9. 1879.; Gabriel Egan, "Gaia and the Great Chain of Being," 2011, see http://gabrielegan.com/publications/Egan2011a.htm. ; Genetic Engineering and Society Center, "George Church on the Future of Human Genomics and Synthetic Biology," *YouTube* video, 28:24, September 19, 2014, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E0a5ZaE6Gk ; Henry Dreyfuss, *Designing for People* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955.; Kenneth Chang, "Beings Not Made for Space," *The New York Times* , January 27, 2014.; Lauren F. Friedman, "The Stranger-Than-Fiction Story Of A Woman Who Was Her Own Twin," *Business Insider,* February 2, 2014, see http://www.businessinsider.com/lydia-fairchild-is-her-own-twin-2014-2 .; Lennard J. Davis, "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism: On Disability as an Unstable Category." In *The Disability Studies Reader: Second Edition,* edited by Lennard J. Davis, 231-242. New York: Routledge, 2006.; Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," *Astronautics* (September 1960), 26-27, 74-76. Neal Stephenson, *Seveneves* . New York: William Morrow, 2015. National Space Biomedical Research Institute, "The Body in Space," see http://nsbri.org/the-body-in-space/ Sarah Knapton, "The astonishing village where little girls turn into boys aged 12," *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2015, see http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/12/the-astonishing-village-where-little-girls-turn-into-boys-aged-1/ ; W.B. Provine, "Ernst Mayr: Genetics and speciation," *Genetics* 167 (2004), 1041-1046.

Ahmet Oğüt

# From Self-Design to Algorithmic-Design

Back in 2003, Berlin was described by its former mayor Klaus Wowereit as " *arm, aber sexy*" (poor, but sexy)—despite being one of the fastest-rising property markets in the world, with as much as 35 percent overvaluation. Berlin still boasts many creatives, with more affordable studio and living spaces than New York or London, albeit fewer job opportunities.[1] To understand why most freelance creatives struggle with depression and face the stigmas associated with mental illness in Berlin, one could look at some commonly used words that exist only in the German language: *Unverbindlich,* non committed; *Phlegmatisch,* skipping everything to the point of not doing anything; *Verrafft,* people who are confused about life; and something right-wing extremists like to use: *Links-Grün-versifft*, left-green-dirty.

Yes, Berlin is still proudly a stronghold of the left, green, and dirty; and its queer club scene also actively fights to protect the city's politically engaged culture so that Berlin doesn't become just another global center for entertainment.[2] In spite of all this, it's not at all a coincidence that Germany was represented at the 2017 Venice Biennale by an artist who wore a Balenciaga hat while receiving the Golden Lion award for best pavilion.[3] This was perhaps a double confirmation of the institutionalization of streetwear garments as high fashion, developing hand in hand with the adoption of "attitude" as high art. This is a far cry from the days when, for example, legendary fashion designer and activist Katharine Hamnett met with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 and wore a T-shirt that read "58% DON'T WANT PERSHING," protesting the installation of US missiles on British soil. Following the appearance of the Balenciaga hat in 2017, it was a wonderful surprise to see that the artist chosen to represent Germany in the next Venice Biennale is Natascha Süder Happelmann. This is a deliberate misspelling of the artist's name, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, in order to highlight thirty years' worth of misspellings of her name by public officials.[4] "Happelmann" didn't say a word at the press conference; her head was hidden under a papier mâché stone, replacing the Balenciaga hat.

As argued by Boris Groys, the position once occupied by religion has been replaced by a new obligation for the modern subject to "self-design," which "forces the artist—as well as anybody who comes to be covered by the media—to confront the image of the self: to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image."[5] Groys sees the modern artistic avant-garde as a design-free domain, one of honesty, high morality, sincerity, and trust.[6] Looking at the economy of symbolic exchange explored by Marcel Mauss and George Bataille, with their theories on the gift economy, Groys reminds us that individuals who show themselves to be especially nasty receive the most recognition and fame. By contrast, Groys argues that there also exists a subtler and more sophisticated form of self-design, one that takes the form of self-effacement and self-sacrifice: the death of the author.[7] But in surveying

what is happening in the world today, particularly with the algorithmic takeover of everyday life, it seems that religion has not left us so easily.[8] And just as religious-design has never really left us, nor has state-design, given that the nation-state acts as a continuation of the ethics and politics of religious power. This, of course, has been in progress for some time. In the 1920s, police in the US would stop women on the beach to make sure their bathing suits weren't too revealing.[9] World War II and wartime austerity didn't make things easier. In 1942, the US government issued regulation L85, around the same time that the British government issued regulations for "Utility Clothes": both policies introduced rationing measures for women's clothing, regulated women's skirt lengths, and required the repossession of all nylon for parachutes and other military uses, leaving only cotton and rayon for the production of stockings.[10] In 1970s Korea, under dictator Park Chung-hee, police took young women into police stations to measure their skirts. They also stopped men with long hair in the streets and subjected them to involuntary haircuts using the scissors they carried with them at all times.

In 2007, Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin proposed the term " *mahalle baskısı*"—which translates as "community pressure" or "peer pressure," and which refers to the practice of neighborhoods policing themselves—to describe a common experience in urban Turkey today: a clash of intolerance between secular Turkish society and

Islamic lifestyle. With the rise of right-wing forces all over the world, *mahalle baskısı* can be found in many places—wherever conservatism and patriarchy reign. This leads to a new danger, in which two kinds of policing combine: *mahalle baskısı* and "algorithmic-design," which is self-design mediated by algorithms for the collection of user data, the production of brand value, and surveillance. As an potential response to this danger, Groys's original conception of self-design can be empowering, though given the more complicated nature of self-design today, we will have to go further.

Self-design has been deployed by countercultures, LGBTIQ* communities, and social movements for identity-formation, political expression, and survival. But self-design is also used by conservatives and right-wing extremists. All of this happens under the shadow of algorithmic-design, commanded by powerful technology companies and governments, characterized by the increasingly invasive collecting of user data.

As alluded to above, on the individual and community level, self-design can be empowering. One well-known example is queer ballroom culture in 1980s New York, where gender norms and class divisions were overcome through performance and fashion. Less know are the "Sapeurs" of present-day Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. ("Sapeurs" is derived from "SAPS," which in French stands for "Société des Ambianceurs et

des Personnes Elégantes," or "Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People"). Despite high levels of poverty, Sapeurs dress in stylish French fashion from the early twentieth century.[11] In Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, young men have formed the gentleman's club "Mr. Erbil," despite the years of war that have ravaged the city. The members of Mr. Erbil dress in stylish Western suits, some designed by local fashion designers. Amidst violence and poverty, the men of Mr. Erbil also advocate for women's rights and organize weekly events in their neighborhoods, featuring activists, designers, musicians, and artists. Through this self-design strategy, Mr. Erbil members know how to generate international attention, although they purposely reveal little about their daily lives behind the scenes.[12]

However, self-design has also been used for utterly destructive and violent purposes. For example, from 1931 to 1945 the German clothing brand Hugo Boss supplied uniforms to the Nazi party and military, using forced labor by Polish and French workers.[13] More recently, Anders Behring Breivik, a right-wing extremist who murdered seventy-seven people in a bomb and gun attack in Oslo in July 2011, has refused to wear anything other than a red Lacoste sweater for his public appearances in court and at police stations. Before the attacks, he even prepared photos of himself wearing Lacoste sweaters in different colors, to be used by the press after he carried out his crime. In the 1516-page manifesto that Breivik emailed to his followers shortly before the attacks, he outlined a dress code, advising his followers to wear Lacoste clothing in conservative colors to avoid arousing suspicion. Lower-cost brands, he wrote, are not as effective at sending the "psycho-socio-economic signals" necessary for tricking potential targets.[14] Here, self-design is a way to accumulate, and designate, identity by way of a brand. Another case: among Turkish right-wing extremists, white winter hats have become a popular item, even a uniform. Ogün Samast was clearly wearing one when he gunned down Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in 2007.

At the annual Business of Fashion event in November 2018, Christopher Wylie, a Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, explained how fashion profiling—codifying and targeting individuals based on the clothing brands they wear—has been a key metric in building Steve Bannon's global unified alt-right.[15] Wylie mentioned that brands like Wrangler and L. L. Bean were aligned with conservative traits, while brands like Kenzo were aligned with liberal traits. He also explained that knowing peoples' preferred clothing brands is useful for producing algorithms to find out how they think and feel about other issues. Employed by Cambridge Analytica, this strategy was possible only because the company had access to the data of fifty million Facebook users. The dynamics of branding are being harnessed by neofascists to spread their politics. Hugo Boss recently apologized for its Nazi past, and Lacoste has demanded that Norwegian police prevent Breivik from wearing its clothing in court. These brands are trying to prevent their images from being tarnished, but they often remain complicit.

*The Hijacking of Anti-Anti*

What do these examples tell us? What does it mean when an article of clothing like the bomber jacket, with its military origins, made to be versatile and functional, is symbolically repurposed by English punks or the postwar Japanese counterculture? It eventually made its way into high fashion, with adaptations by Raf Simons, Helmut Lang, and others.[16]

Other trends that, despite themselves, have become high fashion are normcore and the anti-fashion movement. Are these really just fashion trends, or are they sociocultural concepts? In its initial incarnation in the 1990s, the anti-fashion movement was not only a rebellion against the status quo of the fashion industry; it also emerged as a general symbol of cultural revolt. Normcore's return to the "norm" goes one step further; as a set of generic, ordinary tropes adopted by fashion-conscious youth of today, it's the antithesis of the highly stylized hipster look.[17] With this second wave of anti-fashion, urban subcultures prioritize *being with* over *being special*. But as Rory Rowan argues (building on the original normcore concept devised by the collective K-Hole): "Normcore smuggles in the backdoor an implicit idea of what is normal (white, middle class) even as it shuts the front door on the mainstream."[18] Today, this has translated to brands like Gap flaunting their normcore collections. Fashion designer Rick Owens has even perfected the "avant-normcore" look, with runway models wearing "normal" clothing.[19] Normcore has become what it was supposedly against.

In 2014, something very unusual happened in Paris. A new fashion brand made its debut, with the ironically generic name Vetements, meaning "clothing" in French. Designed by a collective of designers who remained mostly anonymous at first, Vetements steered attention back to the clothes themselves. It was not the first fashion brand to do this; the luxury brand Maison Martin Margiela had done something similar through the use of allusive, mysterious marketing. But what was new was the ironic abolition of the brand, the absolute return to the clothing, in radical contrast to the established idea of fashion. Vetements fought against the traditional fashion landscape. It brought back a sense of fun to fashion by hacking other high-fashion brands, repurposing non-fashion brands, and creating an aesthetic that was independent of trends.[20]

The main designers who launched Vetements studied together at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. It is also important to note that one of them, Demna Gvasalia, was born in 1981 in a small town in Georgia and grew up during the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict in the early 1990s. Another member of the Vetements collective, Maja Weiss,

grew up in the small Slovenian city of Crnomelj, in the former Yugoslavia. Laura Tanzer, another Vetements designer, was born in South Africa in 1994, the year that apartheid officially ended and the African National Congress came to power; she was thus part of the first "born-free" generation in South Africa. This multi-gendered and multi-opinionated collective of creatives were well aware of what trend forecaster and educator Lidewij Edelkoort outlined in her 2015 "Anti_Fashion Manifesto": "The fashion world is still working in a 20th-century mode, and this places fashion out of today's society and makes it old-fashioned." They also were keenly aware of another key point from the manifesto: "The consumers of today and tomorrow (now we call them influencers) are going to choose for themselves, creating and designing their own wardrobes. They will share clothes amongst each other since ownership doesn't mean a thing anymore. They will rent clothes, lend clothes, transform clothes and find clothes on the streets ."[21] This is clearly on display in cities like Berlin. (Vetements lost its radical attitude and original mission when Gvasalia took a job at Balenciaga.)

As Naomi Klein writes in her book *No Logo*, when one brand gets all the attention and criticism, others are let off the hook.[22] But brands today are constantly shifting, buying up smaller companies and hiding behind their less stigmatized image.[23] Klein also remarks that it's not only brands that should be on our radar: "Faceless resource-based corporations continue to conduct their operations in relative obscurity."[24] Still, brands are not untouchable—not even the faceless ones. Self-design may have an important role to play when it comes to confusing the processes of algorithmic-design.

### *From Self-Design to Algorithmic-Design, From GenerationY to Generation Z*

In her work *Most of Us Are* (2018), Alina Bliumis provides a summary of recent global demographic research and opinion polling: "Most of us are named Mohammed, last name Lee, 28 years old, have black hair, brown eyes, blood type O, like the color blue, often say OK."[25] What algorithms tell us here is that the "most typical" person worldwide may not be who we imagine as "most typical." But who are we?

According to demographers at the Pew Research Center, the "millennial generation" (which includes those born between roughly 1977 and 1997—also sometimes referred to as "Generation Y") currently makes up 27 percent of the global population, or about 2 billion people. According to researchers, Generation Y is less brand-loyal, but very self-design-conscious.[26] Its successor, Generation Z, is already taking things to another level, using algorithmic-design as a tool for self-design in ways that Generation Y could hardly imagine.

Since millennials have come to represent the largest segment of the global population, they will play an increasingly significant role in the redefinition of the legacy of self-design. It will have less to do with religion, less to do with the nation-state, and even less to do with traditional luxury. These will be replaced by the idea of rent-to-own luxury—a kind of "time-share" luxury. Social media will play an enormous role in this shift, with a new generation of "influencers" (formerly known as "consumers" or "buyers") deploying a self-developed visual vocabulary and reaching a broader public.

With followers in the low thousands, influencers can make $50 to $100 per post. When the followers add up, the cash adds up too. Influencers with five thousand to twenty-five thousand followers can get paid up to $250 per post. With twenty-five thousand to fifty-thousand followers, these numbers go up to between $200 and $450 per post.[27] Offering a wry critique of this state of affairs, in 2014 Constant Dullaart, using an eBay contact, bought 2.5 million artificially generated "followers" and distributed them free of charge to a selection of art world Instagram accounts for his *High Retention, Slow Delivery*.[28] Artificially generated followers are often used to boost the profiles of brands, political parties, artists, curators, and celebrities. Dullaart's democratization of this technique was a critique of the growing power of the attention economy under hypercapitalism. This new people-powered ecosystem initially appeared as an opportunity for emancipation, at least to Generation Y. But Generation Z sees what's was coming next: algorithmic-design taking over what religious-design and state-design used to dictate.

There is still a generational gap of understanding here. Considering that we know so little about Generation Z, it may be unfair to propose Groys's model of self-sacrificial marginalization and withdrawal as the only counter to narcissism, nihilism, sarcasm, and depression. Algorithmic-design keeps reinventing itself, learning from self-design as an empowering but also violent tool. In fact, algorithmic design is predicated on an "algorithmic imaginary" that can be shattered and overcome.[29] Thus, before algorithmic-design completely takes control, there is still another chance: the more we confuse the algorithm, the more liberated we are.

**X**

All images courtesy of the author

**Ahmet Öğüt** (b. 1981, Diyarbakır) is an artist, sociocultural initiator, and lecturer. Working across a variety of media, including photography, video, and installation, Öğüt often

uses humor and small gestures to offer his commentary on rather serious or pressing social and political issues. Oğüt is regularly collaborating with people from outside of the art world to create shifts in the perception of the common. He has exhibited widely, more recently with solo presentations at MoCA Skopje – Museum of Contemporary Art, Kunstverein Dresden, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Chisenhale Gallery, and Van Abbemuseum. He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, most recently at FRONT International - Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art (2022); Survival Kit 13 -  Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (2022); Asia Society Triennial: We Do Not Dream Alone (2021); In the Presence of Absence, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2020); Zero Gravity at Nam SeMA, Seoul Museum of Art (2019); Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale (2018); and the British Art Show 8 (2015-2017). Oğüt has been a guest professor, mentor, tutor, advisor, and research teacher at several schools including Institut für Kunst im Kontext at Universität der Künste Berlin; Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht; Sandberg Institute Amsterdam; Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki; TransArts - Transdisziplinäre Kunst, Institut für Bildende und Mediale Kunst Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien; and DAI (Dutch Art Institute) Arnhem. Oğüt 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 (2009).

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See https://www.atkearney.com/web/global-business-policy-council/article?/a/where-are-the-global-millennials- . It's important to look at the characteristics of cohorts within generations—and not only according to a Western-centric bias, but also in other parts of the world. Some examples are those in Malaysia known as Battling Lifers (born before 1942), Idealistic Strugglers (1943–61), Social Strivers (1962–77), Prospective Pursuers (1978–91), and Neoteric Inheritors (1992–present day). In Japan there are groups known as the Danso Generation (1951–60), the Shinjunrui Generation (1961–70), the Post-Bubble Generation (1986–95), and the Yutori Generation (1987–96).

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Klara Kemp-Welch

# NET: An Open Proposition

In 1971, Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski conceived of a conceptual proposal that was designed to be universal, prompting extensive East–East and East–West exchange.[1] Kozłowski recollected: "Kostołowski and I met very frequently and talked about art a lot, swapped books and so on. The idea of ignoring all the physical barriers and borders which limited contacts was born in a very natural way, as was the idea of using the post to get in contact with various artists around the world."[2] On paper bearing the rubber-stamped blue header "NET," the pair painstakingly typed out a nine-point statement which they each signed and mailed, from Poznań, in Poland, where they both lived, to more than 350 recipients, reading:

> - a NET is open and uncommercial
> - points of the NET are: private homes, studios and any other places, where art propositions are articulated
> - these propositions are presented to persons interested in them
> - propositions may be accompanied by editions in form of prints, tapes, slides, photographs, books, films, handbills, letters, manuscripts etc.
> - NET has no central point and any coordination
> - points of the NET can be anywhere
> - all points of the NET are in contact among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects, and other forms of articulation
> - the idea of NET is not new and in this moment it stops to be an authorized idea
> - NET can be arbitrarily developed and copied

The proposal was produced in two versions, one in Polish, one in English, and was an open platform to be shared by others independently of its original designers. Initially a nominative exercise—a conceptual artwork that was intended to become a generative principle—it was to be a connector that would bring artists together within the structure of a unifying proposition. Significantly, though, Kozłowski insists that NET "was never a group" and was, above all, "concerned with dialogues between individuals."[3] In addition to announcing a conceptual framework for NET as a type of activity, the mailing also played a crucial role in helping to put artists in contact with one another, for every statement was accompanied by an appendix listing the names and addresses of the "persons invited to be co-creators of NET."

The long list of recipients consisted mostly of North American and Western European artists. However, a selection of Eastern European figures were also included: from Poland, Wiesław Borowski, one of the founders of Galeria Foksal, Urszula Czartoryska, Ireneusz Pierzgal- ski (Łódź), and Maria Stangret; from Bulgaria, Slatni Boyadgiev (Plovdiv);[4] from Hungary, Endre Tót; from Czechoslovakia, the conceptual artist Dalibor Chartny and the artist and

First reception of NET, Poznań, May 1972. Courtesy of Jarosław Kozłowski.

visual poet Jiří Valoch (Brno); from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the visual poet Carlfriedrich Claus; and the Yugoslav artists Janez Kocijančić (Novi Sad), Miroljub Todorović (Belgrade), and Srečo Dragan (Belgrade). Kozłowski would later invite several of those originally on the list to exhibit at Galeria Akumulatory. The original mailing list reveals the limited connections among Eastern European artists at the time, and highlights the degree to which artists remained largely oriented to the West. This not withstanding, NET represented considerable progress in fostering independent connections between artists in the Soviet satellite countries.

Kozłowski explains that "at least to begin with, everyone got the list. Later it wasn't so coordinated any more. At some point we stopped sending the list. We sent out a few batches of the manifesto with the first list, and then there were appendixes when the list grew, then there were two or three appendixes. But later I stopped sending appendixes because the whole thing became internally generative and there was no longer the need to inform people about it."[5] He stresses that NET was addressed to

"artists who were not interested in careers, commercial success, popularity or recognition: artists who devoted more attention to the issue of their own artistic, and therefore ethical, stance than to their position in the rankings, whether the ranking in question was based on the highest listing on the market, or the highest level of approval from the authorities. These artists professed other values, and other goals led them onward, they were focused on art, conceived as the realm of cognitive freedom and creative discourse."[6] The assumption was that such attitudes transcended the ideological frameworks of both really existing socialism and capitalism.

Kozłowski and Kostołowski saw parallels in artists' responses to the cultural shortcomings of both systems, reflecting that their contacts with Western artists had convinced them that artists there had "attitudes analogous to those we had here," in spite of certain obvious differences in circumstances. As Kozłowski later put it: "Here, ideology was really related to the system, while over there it was about commerce, institutions, the whole

53

commercialization of art and institutionalization of art that was very present."[7] NET highlighted the common basis of the two systems and parallels between the ways their respective circuits for distributing art were guarded by gatekeepers, whether state-appointed representatives of cultural institutions or capitalist gallerists and museum workers. The ideological criteria of both distribution systems forced artists to try to negotiate certain models which would be rewarded. In both cases, the artist had to jump through hoops and engage in professional networking in order to achieve visibility, confronting a range of bureaucratic and institutional obstacles. NET sought to bypass existing art world mechanisms by proposing a field in which artists could distribute their ideas freely.

The proposal played with adopting an official aesthetic. Kozłowski reflects that the distinctive blue block lettering of the header "NET," achieved by carving the letters out of rubber, was part of a strategy designed to dupe censors or controllers at the post office into thinking that the letter had been issued by an o   cially supported organization of some sort, and did not merit closer scrutiny. Their decision to sign the document added to the bureaucratic "look" they sought to cultivate.

The artists also declared that "the idea of NET is not new." Kozłowski explains: "We wanted to be pragmatic. So we didn't want to emphasize that it was our idea, as authors—authorship would have interfered," but they signed the documents because they "wanted to act responsibly."[8]

In defining NET as a decentralized, infinitely reproducible scheme for the transmission of ideas to interested receivers, Kozłowski and Kostołowski offered a pioneering theorization of the alternative network. But they were also describing a system that was already in operation, drawing on existing instances of unofficial artistic exchange and sociability. Their statement declared that all such activities were now connected; that all independent initiatives were significant and that everyone acting autonomously in some way was also doing so within the framework of a new, powerful, solidarity.

Kozłowski had deployed the Polish postal system to artistic ends in an early series, *Correspondence I-V*, anonymously distributing five conceptual propositions in the years following 1968. [9] He explained: "The anonymity of the correspondence piece came out of a desire to avoid authorship and not to construct an artistic identity or a name for oneself—to escape attributing whatever exists in art to the signature." The mailings contained proposals for participatory artworks, some of which entailed the recipient taking action of some sort upon receipt of the instructions. These included counting grains of sand, making a paper airplane to be signed and thrown out of the window, and pairs of half-photographs mailed to different people accompanied by the name (without

further contact details) of the person who had been the recipient of the other half. He had been interested in forming connections that were unlikely ever to be translated into meetings: "If I sent it to Mr X, there was information that the rest of the photograph, which wasn't there, was in the possession of Mr Y, and Mr Y's with Mr Z, and in this way a huge circle was produced." If the proposal was a game that raised questions about the limits of knowledge while courting connectivity, it was not an entirely hopeless case insofar as there remained a chance that the two halves of the image might at some point be reunited. While Kozłowski mailed out at least one hundred copies of each proposal, they were not all sent to strangers: "They were sent to people I knew and to people I didn't know, whose addresses I took from the phone book … Not necessarily artists." While he had deliberately conceived of these first five pieces as a form of mail art, he had not considered NET to be a mail art activity: "It was just that the mail was the only possible way to distribute the idea." One of the earlier mail art pieces had been destroyed by the postal service: "The name of some high-up politician happened to be among the addressees, which led them to be suspicious. To be on the safe side, they destroyed the entire batch of correspondence, which I had carelessly sent from just one post office."[10] He did not make the same mistake with NET and mailed the letters from different post offices. The project ultimately came to the attention of the secret police anyway, though by different means.

Although there were comparatively few Eastern European artists on the first list, those who had been included soon managed to get the ball rolling. NET worked according to a system of permanent recommendation and expansion. Eastern European artists were among the most enthusiastic recipients of the proposal, and many people wrote to Kozłowski and Kostołowski asking to be included in the project, requesting to receive materials and to have their names added to the list. Tót conveyed information to other Hungarians, Chartny and Valoch to others in Czechoslovakia, and so on. There was a sense of urgency about international contacts at this time, manifested particularly strongly by artists in Czechoslovakia, whose conditions had turned from being very open to being dramatically curtailed in a short space of time. When concrete poet Jiří Kocman in Brno wrote to Kozłowski in 1972 to request a copy of NET, he mentioned that he already knew Groh, Stembera, Valoch, and Perneczky. He also summed up the general feeling among these artists: "Communication between us all is very important now!"[11] Although a degree of concern with the appearance of the typed copies is clear, the physical copies of the communiqué were not conceived of as artworks: "In a sense the objects and works are peripheral. But it is only natural that the registration of the idea—the proposition—becomes the language of exchange."[12]

Other artists were soon using the list to carry out their own initiatives, taking NET into a new phase and realizing its potential for expanding communication in practice.
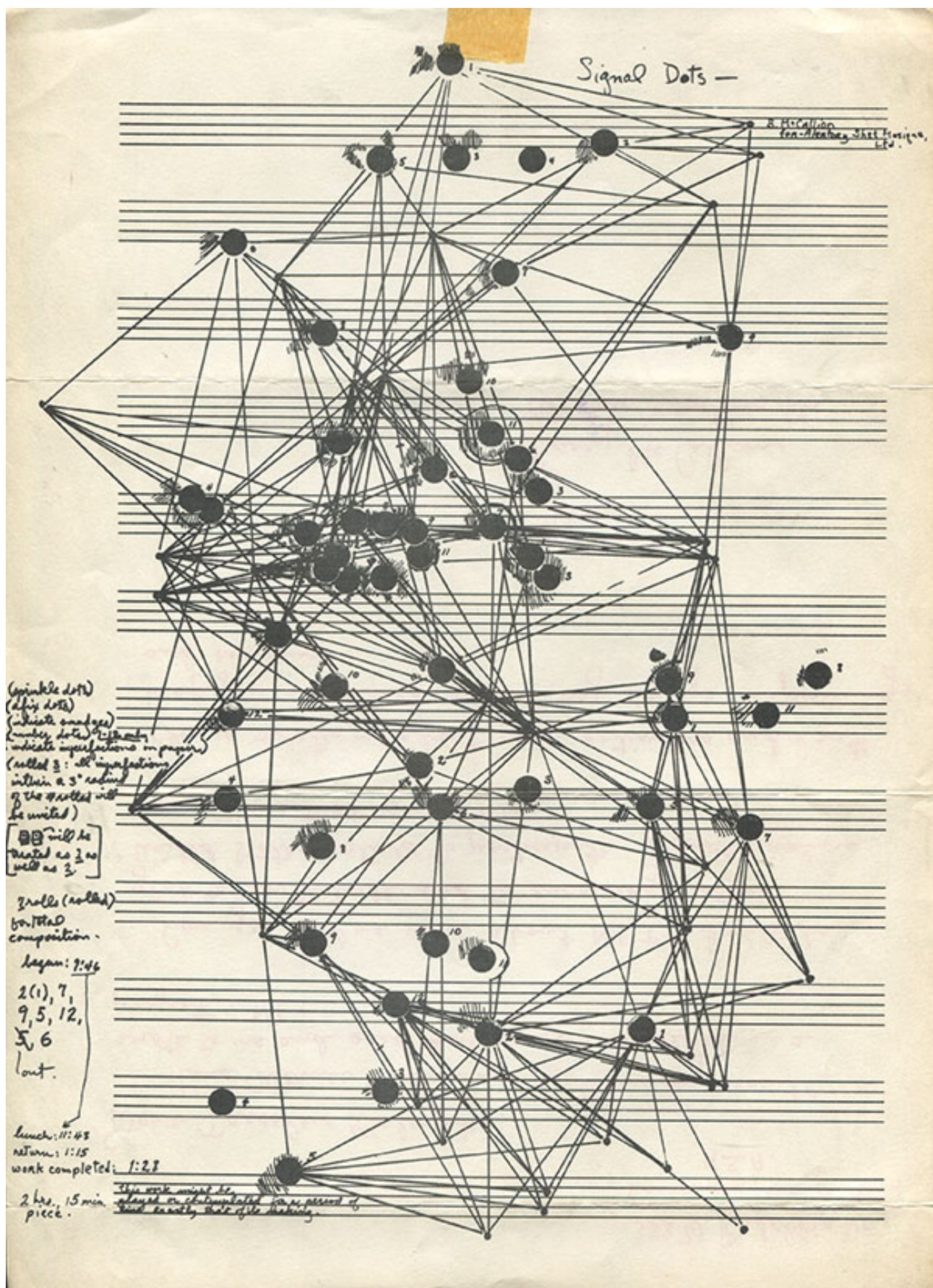
Barry McCallion, Signal Dots, 1972. Courtesy of the artist and Jarosław Kozłowski.

Hungarian conceptualist László Lakner, for instance, sent a mailing inviting recipients to eat a piece of cake (torte) made of cardboard, providing a circle sliced into equal portions with one section labeled as having crossed over into "reality" (dated March 1, 1972). He invited participants to photograph themselves eating the slice, to hang it on the wall, or, in the event that they did not wish to do either, to give it to an ex-convict. His playful exercise demonstrated that there were many ways to take an image and make it real: consumption and display being two of these, with sharing as an important third option. Petr Stembera provided a reproduction of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting of Charles de Solier of 1534–35 and requested that people copy the sitter's gestures, photograph themselves doing so, and send him a copy. Kocman invited NET recipients to take part in a Butterfly-Environment Series: to "interpret" an environment for a given butterfly, sign it, and return the results to him in Brno. The hundreds of initial hours Kozłowski and Kostołowski had spent typing at the outset of the NET initiative could read as a gift of labor to the artistic community: by sharing the extensive contact list that they had compiled, the pair enabled countless others to share their work and to initiate new collaborations. What mattered was "exchange and getting to know people." Above all, NET enabled artists to share what Kozłowski called artists' "attitudes."[13]

The project echoed the wider ethos of those times and a growing concern with the distribution of ideas rather than objects. Kozłowski was committed to overcoming boundaries between artistic forms. But most importantly from the point of view of international relations, he saw this as a parallel project to the overcoming of borders more widely by way of art, to create new dialogues modeled on friendship rather than rivalry. As he explained: "NET … aimed to cross not only geographical, ideological and political boundaries, but also those set by artists, which were in a sense breached by the conceptual revolt. All -isms, -arts, and other divides became irrelevant, it was all about art in its great diversity … utterly different articulations, attitudes and underlying ideas … a breeding ground for artistic friendships, which were arguably the most important value of the NET … I was immensely suspicious of all attempts at categorization or division."[14]

Kozłowski's assessment is in line with Lippard's theorization of dematerialized art as being "all over the place in style and content, but materially quite specific," referring in particular to "work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized.'"[15] Both the article on the "dematerialization of art" and the NET project, in their own way, carried forward Dick Higgins's pioneering use of the term "intermedia." Higgins's 1966 statement explained: "Our real enemies are the ones who send us to die in pointless wars or to live lives which are reduced to drudgery, not the people who use other means of communication from those which we find most

appropriate to the present situation." He went on to observe: "For the last ten years or so, artists have changed their media to suit this situation, to the point where the media have broken down in their traditional forms, and have become merely puristic points of reference. The idea has arisen, as if by spontaneous combustion throughout the entire world, that these points are arbitrary and only useful as critical tools, in saying that such-and-such a work is basically musical, but also poetry. This is the inter-medial approach, to emphasize the dialectic between the media."[16] Higgins clearly saw intermediality as a political statement of sorts: a matter of artistic solidarity in opposition to the political status quo. He was especially concerned with the Vietnam War and with the crisis in the labor movements in the United States.

And it was not only Eastern European artists who wrote asking to be included in NET. The US artist Barry McCallion, for instance, wrote to Kozłowski explaining that he had heard about the project from Hans Werner Kalkmann and that he would be happy to contribute and to "encourage other United States artists to participate if participation is something that you want." The letter was penned on the back of a page of sheet music covered by an array of smaller and larger black dots—a piece completed in 2 hours 15 minutes, as he noted, between 9:46 and 1:23 with a break for lunch. The dots are connected in a complex formation, accompanied by a numerical system. Perhaps by chance, McCallion's "chance-play" or "process-mapping" itself resembled a network.[17]

Kozłowski arranged a "reception" of the materials that the recipients of NET had sent him in response to the proposal in his apartment in Poznań on the evening of May 22, 1972. Though the reception was a way of sharing the materials that had arrived in the post ("after a month or two all sorts of mail arrived") from twenty-four of those to whom they had sent the proposal, it was more informal than an exhibition, with materials hung all over the place, piled up on tables, and arranged on the floor for lack of space. Among them was Perneczky's series on the theme of identification, suspended above a desk. Kozłowski had written to Perneczky (in German) in March 1972 after receiving a card from him, promising to put him on the NET appendix and send him a copy soon. He explained that he was planning to present the NET materials received to date in May and asked to include "Deine Concept Art."[18] The artist had invited just ten close acquaintances to the reception, making the raid that occurred forty-five minutes after the invitees arrived all the more shocking, since it was clear that one of his friends had informed on him. The materials were duly confiscated, including the film from the camera used to document the meeting itself: "They took it all down and took it away."[19]

Interrogations and investigations followed for more than a year: "The leitmotiv was that we were founding an anarchist organization directed against the state … Later, they calmed down and a day before the court hearing

First reception of NET, Poznań, May 1972. Courtesy of Jarosław Kozłowski.

which was due to take place I was informed that they had abandoned the idea."[20] Kozłowski's everyday possibilities were curtailed, despite the decision to drop the case: he was unable to travel abroad, banned from teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts, and assigned to work in the library for the next five years.[21] He continued to pursue the many new contacts that had been established as a result of the original mailing and the extended network that had subsequently evolved though. While he could not leave the country, his work continued to be shown internationally: "I sent my works by mail, as simple as that. At that time, I used to receive many invitations to present my work abroad, but my passport applications were automatically rejected ... It was only in the late 1970s that I started traveling abroad."[22]

He turned to self-publishing: "books offered freedom," a means to circulate art without recourse to galleries and

institutional structures.[23] As he explains: "For us, in the East, books gave opportunities to find modes of expression beyond the official system of institutions. The only obstacle in the way was censorship." Kozłowski devised ways to pass through the censorship process: "On some of my books, you can find the names of imaginary publishers ... They were made up but necessary in order to get the censor's stamp, which allowed you to print a hundred or so copies."[24] He distributed the books among friends and through his international networks and used his new contacts to find publishers for his artists' books abroad, finding a home for his book *Lesson* with Beau Geste Press.

The Press had been founded by a collective of artists who had come together in rural Devon in England when Mexican émigré artists Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion moved there in 1970. Their rented manor house in Collumpton became Beau Geste Press, initiated by Ehrenberg and Hellion with a number of British collaborators, among them David Mayor. They would devote two issues of their magazine *Schmuck* to Eastern Europe—one issue entitled *Aktual Schmuck* edited by Knížák, and a survey of contemporary Hungarian art put together by Dóra Maurer and László Beke.[25] Mayor, who has been described as "an obsessive letter writer," was instrumental in the organizational aspects of the Press.[26] His correspondence with Kozłowski about his book projects, outlining a range of options for printing and distributing, gives insight into the peculiar combination of ad hoc decision making and professionalism that characterized the Press as an independent enterprise. Mayor specifically asked that Kozłowski send him the NET list, showing that its significance went well beyond the Eastern European network it helped inspire.[27]



flowers with an identification-ring
ready for an eventual trip south in autumn

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Géza Perneczky, Identification Program (1 of 5), 1971. Courtesy of the artist and Chimera-Project Gallery, Budapest.

In addition to continuing to pursue such dialogues, Kozłowski found new ways to use loopholes in the system, in particular, the relatively relaxed rules relating to professional social spaces known as "clubs." A second NET reception was held in October 1972 at the Club of the Creative Unions in Poznań and lasted just three hours. Kozłowski explains that what mattered was "to do another show and not to give up."[28] The second reception was more focused than the first, consisting of printed documentation from exhibitions held at the Art & Project gallery in Amsterdam suspended on wires strung between the walls, so that spectators could encounter the objects physically in space and handle the displays. This time there was no interference from the secret police.[29]

Together with three students from Adam Mickiewicz University, Kozłowski secured the use of a students' club under the aegis of the Union of Polish Students (later called the Socialist Union of Polish Students) on shared terms with a student nightclub, to hold exhibitions four days a week. The Union provided minimal funding for costs such as invitations, printing, nails, wall paint, and photographic documentation.[30] The international exchanges initiated by way of NET were central to the exhibition program of the new space, which they called Akumulatory 2 (a name taken from the neon sign over the space advertising car batteries). The aim of the gallery was "the presentation of exhibitions of avant-garde artists, representing—to as broad an extent as possible—the newest tendencies in Polish as well as world art."[31] They could rely on attracting a good crowd: "There was a permanent audience, a group of about forty people, who regularly came to the gallery, in addition to which there were sometimes more people. It was a very good audience, mostly artists and students from the academy and from art history, art historians, but also from the university, from other departments."[32]

Kozłowski sought to run the space in as democratic a way as possible: "We worked with established and also with very young unknown artists. For example, we had an exhibition of work by Richard Long, and the following week we had a show by a fourth-year art student. There was no hierarchy." Artists were simply invited to take over the space, without intervention by the organizers: "There was nothing formal, or written to say so, but still artists had a certain responsibility as a matter of principle. After all, they were all strangers to me and when they came to have their show, they would all live at my place. There was no state sponsorship." There was still a requirement to provide evidence of proposed activities to the censors, but Kozłowski recalls that it was all something of a charade: "I had to take every exhibition invitation we proposed to print at Akumulatory to the censors, it all seemed a bit puerile. They were ready to buy or accept anything provided it was presented in such a way that it didn't arouse suspicion; of course, it could have done, but it was a matter of interpretation. It was a simple-minded system."[33] Postal exchanges could be erratic, though: "Correspondence

went missing. It was controlled at that time after all. There was in existence a paradoxical institution called the Office of Postal Exchange, which carried out checks. As regards all foreign correspondence, I assume that in those countries something analogous existed. And as a result the letters were lost. Contacts were often interrupted."[34]

One of the first to be invited was Stembera, who later commented that "besides the Hungarians, the Poles were the only ones in Eastern Europe interested in what we were doing here." What's more, Poles had at their disposal "a whole mass of galleries which were not subject to censorship, outside the official structures ruled over by the communists."[35] It was a particularly difficult time in Czechoslovakia and the full weight of "normalization" had descended on artistic circles, with experimental artists expelled from the Union of Artists en masse, though Stembera was an employee of the Museum of Decorative Arts and not registered as an artist. Kozłowski "organized an exhibition in his name," which ran from January 15 to 18, 1973.[36] In addition to his documentation of the Transposition of Two Stones, he sent a selection of the Daily Activities, such as Tying Shoelaces and Button Sewing.[37] The exhibition was called "Genealogy," and the invitation consisted of a family tree.[38]

Besides being immensely active in disseminating his own work, Stembera was also attuned to the work of other artists in Czechoslovakia and in neighboring countries. Valoch recalls that he had initially mailed out "photographs of his land art installations and his conceptual books. Somewhat later came his Weather Reports … a very interesting transfer of meteorological news in the form of a mailed message." Such pieces, Valoch argued, entailed a disavowal of the artist's subjectivity and a desire to become "a mere middleman in the transfer of information."[39] Maja Fowkes likewise notes that the Weather Reports were "both a means of communication and a way to emphasize the problem of information transmission," but she argues that this was not just any "banal, objective, and neutral scientific data" but "factual information about changes in the weather system," pointing out that the weather is "something that everyone is exposed to" and represents "one of the most universal bodily experiences."[40] László Beke was an early recipient of these reports.

Stembera also wrote about art (like Valoch, who regularly contributed essays to artists' exhibition catalogs).[41] He provided a pioneering survey in English of experimental trends in Czechoslovak art in 1970, which was first printed in Puerto Rico and then reprinted in edited form in Lucy Lippard's Six Years.[42] The text, entitled "Events, Happenings, and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information," was the first attempt by an artist to offer an international audience an overview of the contemporary Czechoslovak alternative art scene. Stembera made links between developments in Czechoslovakia and international trends, saying that "news trickled into Czechoslovakia about the work of the American
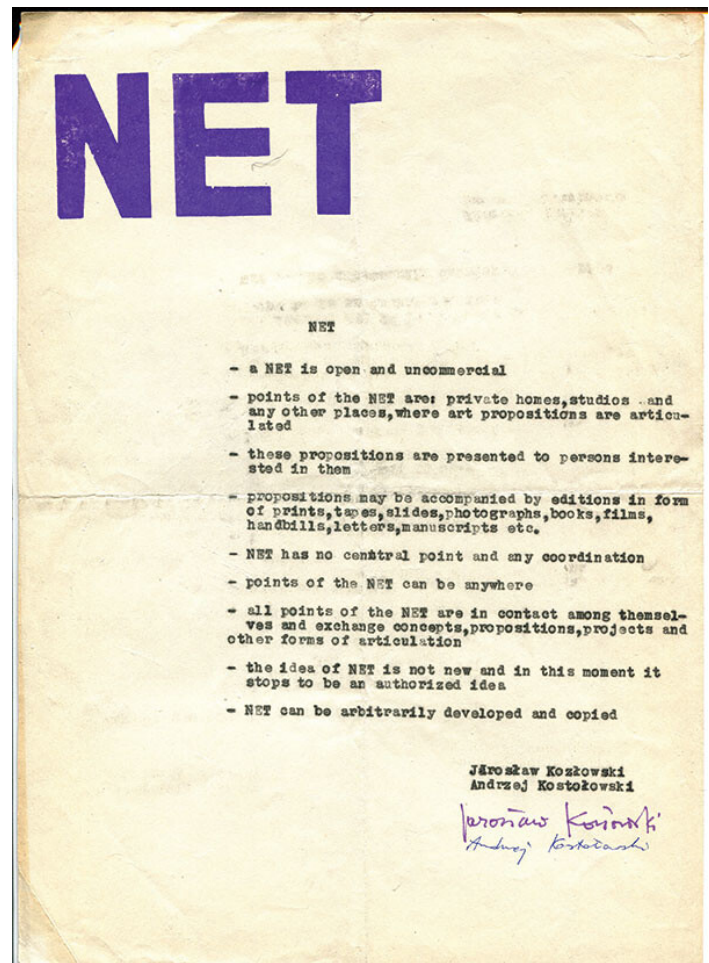


Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski, NET, 1971. Courtesy of Jarosław Kozłowski.

happenings men, in the first place the names of A. Kaprow and the Fluxus group." He argued that the information they received in the 1960s was "too incomplete and short to be capable of really influencing and forming anybody." He noted, however, that "Knížák himself acknowledges Kaprow as one of the lasting personalities of happening art, and he proves this in 1968 with his trip to America, which was actually a trip to see Kaprow."[43] While paying his dues to Knížák as a pioneer, he remarked, perhaps a little pointedly, that "we have but a small choice of information at our disposal about the present-day activities of the indubitable leader of Czechoslovak happenings, Knížák … as he has been living in New York since 1968." In his text, Stembera offered brief sketches of the activities of the Aktual Group, Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, Eugen Brikcius, Eva Kmentová, Zorka Ságlová, Václav Cigler, and Hugo Demartini. The artist only referred to his own activities very modestly toward the end of the text, writing of himself in the third person: "Petr Stembera stretches out sheets of polythene between trees in a snow-covered landscape, and stretches out textile ribbons in a single color, paints rocks, etc."[foonote Stembera, "Events, Happenings, and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia,"

reproduced in Tom Marioni, *Vision*, no. 2 (1976), 42.]

Stembera played an active role in writing and disseminating the art history of his moment. This self-historicizing strategy coincided with a wider shift in the period toward a new fluidity between the positions of artist, critic, and art historian—a shift that is observable in the case of quite a large number of the experimental artists from Eastern Europe active in international circuits. Not least because of the absence of a supporting infrastructure, some artists felt compelled to contribute to the construction of a context for the reception of their work. Stembera's artistic, social, and scholarly activities would all prove central to the expansion of the network. Among others, he provided the impetus for Klaus Groh's landmark book *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa*—the first survey of experimental art in Eastern Europe.

**X**

This text is an excerpt from *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* by Klara Kemp-Welch, published in February 2019 by MIT Press.

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1
My previous publications on NET include Klara Kemp-Welch, "Autonomy, Solidarity and the Antipolitics of NET," in *SIEC—Sztuka dialogu/NET—Art of Dialogue* , ed. Bożena Czubak (Warsaw: Fundacja Pro I, 2013).

2
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch," *ArtMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012).

3
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch."

4
Possibly a misspelling of the painter Zlatni Bojadijev.

5
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

6
Jarosław Kozłowski, "Art between the Red and the Olden Frames," in *Curating with Light Luggage*, eds. Liam Gillick and Maria Lind (Revolver Books, 2005), 44.

7
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

8
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

9
One of the earliest events to strategically incorporate the post office into an experimental project in Poland had been Tadeusz Kantor's happening *The Letter* of 1967 in Warsaw, discussed extensively in my *Antipolitics in Central European Art.*

10
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

11
Jiří Kocman, letter to Jarosław Kozłowski, June 17, 1972.

12
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

13
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

14
Jarosław Kozłowski, "Exercises and Paradoxes: An Interview with Jarosław Kozłowski by Bożena Czubak," in Jarosław Kozłowski,

*Doznania Rzeczywistości i praktyki konceptualne 1965 – 1980 / Sensation of Reality and Conceptual Practices 1965 –1980*, exh. cat. (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Znaki Czasu and MOCAK, 2015), 103.

15
Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* , ed. Lippard (1973; rpt., University of California Press, 1997), vii.

16
Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia" (1966), in *dé-coll/age* 6 (Typos Verlag and Something Else Press, July 1967).

17
Barry McCallion, email communication with the author, August 2017.

18
Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski, letter to Géza Perneczky, Poznań, March 29, 1972, reproduced in Géza Perneczky, "A KOLN—BUDAPEST KONCEPT Bizalmas levéltári anyag az 1971-1972-1973-as esztendők magyarországi és nemzetközi Koncept Art mozgalmának a tudományos kutatásához," unpublished manuscript, 2013, 141.

19
When the material was returned, Kozłowski also received the prints made from the confiscated roll of film, so that the secret police themselves ended up playing a part in the production of the documentation of the event they had interrupted. "'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation." See also Luiza Nader, "Heterotopy: The NET and Galeria Akumulatory 2," in Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East: Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mittelosteuropa* , exh. cat. (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), 111–25.

20
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

21
J. Kozłowski and J. Kasprzycki, "Alternatywna Rzeczywistość, Akumulatory 2," *Arteon* no. 4 (2000), 49.

22
Kozłowski, "Exercises and Paradoxes," 99.

23
Kozłowski, "Exercises and

Paradoxes," 99.

24
Kozłowski, "Exercises and Paradoxes," 99.

25
For an overview of the Press see Donna Conwell, "Beau Geste Press," *Getty Research Journal* no. 2 (2010), 183–92.

26
Donna Conwell, "Beau Geste Press," 183.

27
David Mayor, letter to Jarosław Kozłowski, October 14, 1972, Kozłowski archive.

28
"'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

29
Art & Project was the subject of a MoMA exhibition in 2009 entitled "In & Out of Amsterdam: Art & Project Bulletin 1968–1989."

30
Luiza Nader, *Konceptualizm w PRL* (Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2009), 146–47.

31
Jarosław Kozłowski, "Program działalności Galerii Akumulatory 2 przy RO ZSP UAM w Poznaniu w roku 1972/1973," dated October 10, 1972, cited in Patryk Wasiak, "Kon- takty kulturalne pomiędzy Polską a Węgrami, Czechosłowacją i NRD w latach 1970–1989 na przykładzie artystów plastyków" (PhD thesis, Instytut Kultury i Komunikowania, Szkoła Wyższa Psychologii Społecznej, Warsaw, 2009), 253.

32
Wasiak, "Kontakty kulturalne," 261.

33
Kozłowski compares this situation with that in the West and finds that it was favorable: "Everything was more transparent in the East. But the perversity of ownership, and the standard concept of freedom that the West attached to the function of art, camouflaged very clever and insidious forms of pressure and control." "'NET,' Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation."

34
Kozłowski cited in Wasiak, "Kontakty kulturalne," 253.

35
Stembera cited in Wasiak,

"Kontakty kulturalne," 261.

36
An early example is Stembera's participation in an exhibition with the laconic title "Encore une occasion d'être artiste" organized by Zelimir Koščević at the Students' Cultural Centre in Zagreb. See *Novine Galerije SC* (December 7–17, 1973).

37
Marika Zamojska, "Czechosłowacka awangarda w polskim życiu artystycznym lat 70," *Fort Sztuki* no. 4 (2/2006) http://www.fortsztuki.art.pl/fortsztuki4.pdf .

38
Stembera distributed invitations to his Akumulatory 2 opening internationally, sending one to Jean-Marc Poinsot, among others.

39
Jiří Valoch, "Incomplete Remarks Regarding Czechoslovakian Mail Art," in *Mail Art: Ost Europa in Internationalen Netzwerk* , ed. Kornelia Röder (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum, 1996), 61.

40
She also writes that as "weather is not subject to political decisions ... it represents ... the abstract notion of freedom." Arguably, of course, we now know that weather *is* subject to political decisions, insofar as political decisions are central to halting the advance of climate change. Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Central European University Press, 2015), 19. On a less environmentally minded note, the project inevitably also calls to mind Holly Go Lightly's defense in Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (released as a film in 1961) upon her arrest for visiting a notorious criminal involved in cocaine tracking while he was in prison (who would give her messages such as "Snow flurries expected this weekend over New Orleans" to pass on to his "agent"): "All I used to do would be to meet him and give him the weather report." Stembera was doing the same, just passing on his weather reports, for his own reasons.

41
He was also committed to helping disseminate Western literature in Czechoslovakia in samizdat and translated key texts such as Fiore and McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967) and, later, writings by performance artists

such as Acconci (for *Jazz Petit*, edited by Karel Srp), presumably with the help of his wife, who studied languages (Stembera had studied social sciences).

42
Petr Stembera, "Events, Happenings, and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information," *Revista de Arte*, Universidad de Puerto Rico, no. 7 (December 1970).

43
Petr Stembera, "Events, Happenings, and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information," reproduced in Tom Marioni, *Vision*, no. 2 (1976), 42.

*Hito Steyerl*

Hito Steyerl, Coco Fusco, and Supercommunity

# Remembering Okwui Enwezor

Okwui Enwezor is dead.

My sincerest condolences to his family and friends.

With Okwui, a whole era dies, and beyond that, a world.

Okwui was a giant, a trailblazer, and his legacy is more urgent than ever.

If anyone helped birth the idea of an art world (as opposed to a few local cliques), it was Okwui.

Okwui's idea of the world was of an incomplete entity which needed to be changed by being curious, courageous, and cheerful. By becoming more complex, more nuanced, more challenging, by acknowledging more colors, different sounds, unknown beauty in between the trodden stereotypes designed to rule and conquer. Importantly, his view of the world differed from the liberal mantra of just adding more consumer-packaged identities. The world wasn't incomplete by chance, but because of historical violence and exclusion. Above all, Okwui strived to rescue justice and history from instrumental abuse, to see them equally as able to spark a sense of beauty, wonder, and profound restoration.

Okwui's world put a lot of different places at ease with one another and many artists and thinkers were allowed to thrive in it. His world wasn't a collection of cultural trophies, no mindless bullet list of innovation talking points, but bristled with elegance, generosity, and intellectual brilliance. He didn't just expand art canons in a geographical sense, but also formally and historically.

The loss of Okwui is an enormous loss to the art world, indeed to the notion of a *world* itself, which without a steady defender of Okwui's caliber slowly finds itself devalued to pimp flat-rate packages for corporate data robber barons and feudal museum franchises. Okwui's idea of an (art) world is under attack, if not breaking apart altogether. This time not necessarily to restore Euro-American supremacy in artistic appreciation, but to glorify neo-authoritarian regimes all over with their "own" art filter bubbles defined by a mix of nationalism and corruption/market interests. And it is to protect and defend Okwui's legacy that I feel many of us must ask ourselves if we did and do enough to oppose an authoritarian globalism from the right, indeed a globalism minus human rights thriving in many non-Western places as well as in the former power centers. The painful question is if the uncritical championing of globalization didn't gloss over its ties to corporate interests and partly also to feudal or plainly authoritarian Western and non-Western elites. The world that Okwui dreamed of is falling apart also because of the weaknesses of a model of globalization that championed cultural difference (and its

Photo: Hans Haacke

perceived or real economic benefits) at the expense of economic, juridical, and political equality.

One of the things I find very painful is that part of Okwui's legacy is already being destroyed by those same nationalist and/or corrupt forces that destroy art worlds everywhere. But we don't have to look to the Gulf, Turkey, or Russia for evidence. Similar forces are active in seemingly liberal Bavaria, where, as with everywhere else, receding public funding is replaced by corrupt market interests intent on restoring an aesthetic (and financial) status quo ante. We see those forces at work in the cancellation of some of the shows that Okwui had planned and the replacement of artists of world standing with regional investment instruments.[1]

But it pains me even more to know that Okwui spent his last year on earth physically fearing for his safety while right-wingers were parading in his neighborhood, and the political elite of the region[2] was busy pandering to extreme nationalists for electoral gain, or maybe just because they ultimately like racism and had finally found an opportunity to publicly support it. I know that feeling—a feeling of ultimate dismay, despondency, and

abandonment—because I have felt it too, in the same city, the same country, for the same reasons. German and especially Bavarian elites like nonwhite people as long as they are successful, profitable, and beneficial for their own reputation, preferably as soccer players.[3] Okwui of course was way too much of a gentleman to ever say so directly and would cringe if he ever heard me using such undiplomatic language. But I am proudly from Bavarian peasant extraction and this is my personal view of the Bavarian government/bureaucracy: *ruachade Brunzschädln, laminatlätscherte Schoasbladern, geistige Gloahaisler, ogsoachte Afd Phantom-Knieweasler*. (This refers to the ultimate humiliation of being too posh to perform the Bavarian male tribal ritual of urinating on one's own knees and having to call in Nazi-leaning right-wingers to do it, i.e., to wee on the Bavarian government's knees on its own behalf.)

I am so sorry that Okwui, who was such a genuinely generous, refined, curious, convivial, collegial, and noble person, had to face this collapse of basic civility or maybe just of the facade of civility that sustains the deafening numbness and instrumental irrationality called structural, unspoken populist racism.

But of course Okwui's legacy goes way beyond eye-rolling provincialism.

It consists of his unrivaled ability to communicate and share his love of art and other forms of thinking. His Documenta 11 was a mind-opener for many, and indeed Okwui and the wide network he was consistently able to draw on have profoundly changed my view of art (and its discontents). My breathless notes from the period of my marginal involvement with the Documenta 11 platform in Vienna reflect my sheer exasperation at Okwui's enthusiasm and seemingly never-ending energy. I tried to write as fast as I could in order not to miss a single word of his extensive sentence constructions that bristled with surprising, meandering, and sometimes also bewildering combinations and constellations. But above all, it is Okwui's love of the world and his trust in the intelligence and basic decency of his audience that I would like to thank him for. Okwui firmly believed that people weren't stupid, that they were totally capable of dealing with serious and complex propositions. Anyone. All of them. All of us, the people.

To hold this basic yet extremely sophisticated line against a daily onslaught of reaction and diminishment on all fronts (political, aesthetic, and yes: also ethical) will be a tall order. Okwui is sorely missed already.

### Coco Fusco

In the days since the news of Okwui's death was made public, he has been eulogized as a brilliant curator and thinker who transformed the landscape of contemporary art. And that he was—a true cultural giant in a field where many imagine themselves to be grander than they actually are. The reality that he was a self-made immigrant without the usual art-world pedigrees made his acumen and meteoric rise all the more inspiring. Okwui established a global view of artistic practice as the standard for the field, making narrower models of internationalism feel obsolete.

Though New York served as a base for much of his career, he never treated it as the sum total of what counted in art. On the contrary, he took American art institutions to task for their chauvinism, and gave a much-needed kick in the pants to artists of all backgrounds whose concerns he saw as too parochial. His vision of what an exhibition could *do* was exhilarating, and his insistence on taking art seriously was a welcome relief from market-driven frivolity. He worked harder than seemed humanly possible, and sometimes exhausted his colleagues in the process. He also expected audiences to open themselves to difficult subjects, challenging tactics, and unusually long hours of viewing. There were critics who, for example, grumbled that his Documenta was just too much, but their complaints sounded like petulance from lightweights to those of us who wanted more from art.

Okwui showed everyone how art could speak eloquently and urgently about the world, and this earned him the respect of colleagues and artists across the globe. I count myself among those artists whose endeavors would never have been given a significant platform had it not been for his tireless advocacy. Many of the artists of my generation who are now championed by institutions that once ignored our interests, our methods, and our cultures of origin know in our hearts that Okwui lifted us out of relative obscurity just two decades ago. Let us not forget that.

Okwui will not only be remembered for his astounding intelligence—he was also remarkable for his commanding presence, his wit, his sartorial panache, his graciousness as a dinner-party host and his talents as a chef, his love of poetry, and his extraordinary ability to land anywhere on planet earth and understand the significance of what lay before him.  Since he passed, my mind has been flooded with memories of him—laughing, arguing, cajoling, and scolding me when he thought I should know better or push myself harder. I hope to be haunted by that voice for the rest of my days.

### Raqs Media Collective

Suddenly, in the middle of a New Delhi summer, a phone call. Not from a number that we knew before. But the voice, a warm baritone, which always began with a chuckle and then grew to fill the space of continents with a laugh, was, unmistakably, Okwui Enwezor.

"Raqs Media Collective, we need to remember the October Revolution, it's now a hundred years. Let's approach it from a tangent, make fresh inroads, let hidden dimensions surface. Come to Munich in November." Okwui's was a voice that required our singular attention, ever since the twenty-first century began.

Once, in the wake of one of his visits to Delhi, while he was on his way to spend a few restful days in Kerala in 2014, we laughed together about how finally, at least one aspect of his vivid life could be described as a journey from Calabar to Malabar. Calabar, the city on the Nigerian Atlantic coast where he was born, and Malabar, where he was headed, from Delhi. It was the kind of rhyming joke that appealed to Okwui. It connected continents and centuries, it tangled histories, it made the world seem expansive and homely, almost intimate, at the same time. During this visit, we went together to see a graveyard of imperial power—the dereliction of "Coronation Park," at the northern edge of Delhi—and we found ourselves reflecting on the strange twists and turns of global history that tied experiences and reflections across continents. While walking in the shadow of dead emperors and frozen viceroys, we discussed the fact that the deepest secret of all claims to power was hubris.

In November 2017 we, along with the artists and poets we had gathered, reached Munich, to think together about the centenary of the events of 1917. His illness had deepened. He was unable to attend the events. On one of those evenings, our dear friend Louise Neri asked us to carry homemade food to him. Kale salad and green prawn curry. She knew that he would not eat much, but that he would definitely inquire about the recipes. Okwui's house in Munich, where this meal was prepared, was rich with books scattered all around, bearing witness to the immense range of his curiosities. A short taxi ride away, across a few corridors, and we were now in his hospital room.

The meal was indeed kept aside, but notes on recipes registered, and a discussion started which continued for the next couple of hours. From his hospital bed, he began scaling out ideas for the reactivation of the idea of the Museum. His questions were simply stated. What is the relevance of the museum today, after the scrambling of canons? What kind of generative force can a museum occupy?

The museum—and its temporary expression, the exhibition—appealed to him, remaining as intersecting platforms, as sites where unrealized historical

propositions were to be rehearsed and activated. We had met him for the first time at one of these platforms: May 2001, the Delhi Platform of Documenta 11. He was always present, debating, wearing white cotton kurtas. He loved white kurtas. They suited him. The Documenta platforms were his idea of "rehearsals for the repositioning of sites of discourse production." In the hospital in Munich, on that November evening, he returned to the idea of the

Platform. Now, he said, it has to do much more. It has to remain nomadic, dispersed, searching, and yet have a stable location, to gather and be the point of dispersal. It has to be hospitable to the untested and uncharted present, and alert to incipient energies. He knew that it would be tough for such an imagination to be articulated institutionally. But that was him. Always testing his own ideas.

He struggled to become comfortable in his hospital bed. A wide-ranging conversation ensued about how to detour away from the grip of the national in the postwar imaginations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. What gestures, personas, events to draw in. What kinds of lines to draw. What new sources to work with. It was as if he was inviting everyone, present and absent, to think together again, and along a fresh path. We shared with him our hologram of the sovereign's empty robe, a ghost that had haunted us ever since our visit with him to Coronation Park in Delhi. We had been developing the hologram in the wake of our work, upon his invitation, at the Venice Biennale. He was entranced by the disappearing act of a viceregal robe turning into digital dust.

He was very ill. His bones ached. His body was slowly dismantling from within. He described it and, along with it, the various regimes of treatment. He inquired about our friend who was diagnosed at the same time as him with the same illness. He liked details. Even the smallest ones. Even the shift of a few points in test results held his attention. We talked about when to meet next and what provisions to gather for the new intellectual journeys. And then, Louise gently reminded him of the need to rest.

We are writing this in Doha. History, and her friend, Serendipity, have brought Okwui Enwezor into our conversations repeatedly over the past few days. We are with Abdellah Karroum, and with Ranjit Hoskote. All of us, in very specific and unique ways, have been touched by the legacy of Okwui Enwezor, and every conversation between us in the past few days has had a moment of speech, silence, wonderment, or laughter at the way in which Okwui lived, worked, and encountered the world.

On Friday, the night of March 15, somewhere between land and sea, off the coast of Doha and so very close to the full moon, Abdellah looked at the sky and said, let us take a photo together, with him behind us. The moon hung large in the sky. Farewell dear friend, and thank you for making the world always more intoxicating, always more challenging.

*Supercommunity*

I was the Supercommunity, and Okwui truly inspired me to come into being. We assembled to critique the retreat of contemporary art's global aspirations, to celebrate its troubled political consciousness and infinite energies. As something that might always-never surpass its own cultural backwardness to join with others like me who want more, who want something better in spite of having no right or access, and instead just got bigger. As the Supercommunity, I saw those possibilities closing around the planet, becoming absorbed into more sinister domains, arenas mobilizing the possibility of finding each other and trying some things out, setting new criteria for what thinking and moving together could only ever be.

The Supercommunity may have been the world turned from a promise into a curse back to a promise again, but looking at Okwui's 2002 Documenta 11 reminds all of me that he was too canny for either of these things. For Okwui, the possibility of the global was a necessary commitment—never so much a promise as the beginning of an emergent politics. An unstable enhancement for anyone familiar with struggles for independence, but also a massive swelling of human life itself as a force alien to technoscientific modernity. This is not really a promise strictly speaking, though it appeared in his Documenta as a force that might overwhelm mediating apparatuses—museums, geopolitical crooked hands, private property. And while it did to some extent, Okwui was already conscious of how unbearable and how impossible such a challenge would be. His ability to identify crucial and nuanced intricacies and explode those onto large-scale work makes it necessary to look much deeper into the politics of the global condition that Okwui saw.

The opening pages of his Documenta catalog feature images of various political struggles and decisive events of the time. Images from September 11, an event that had only just taken place, are a heavy presence, but also one among many others. Together these images seem to address a condition that goes far beyond the availability of information, instead opening itself to the strange pressures of relating to many events and locations in the world simultaneously, training us for a new political geomancy that might become a new planetary commons. To understand and connect to the upheavals happening in so many places is also to understand the world as an intricate braid of struggles, a vast subterranean ocean of important work with little relation to grand narratives claiming to be the motive force of history. Okwui's Documenta captured a rare moment when these grand narratives seemed to step aside for a soft revolution in consciousness.

Today, the grand narratives are back, and they are even more blunt than before. They know they need to actively foreclose any promise of the global in order to survive. But we learned something extremely important from Okwui about the world itself, and we may need to remember that if we are to survive.

Some critics complained that Okwui's Documenta

overwhelmed viewers with *too much* video and cinema—more time-based work than could be seen by a single person in the one hundred days that the exhibition was open. Where grumbles in 2002 were about the inconvenience and impossibility of seeing, it was different from today's zombie excesses of bloat and overproduction. If Okwui was indeed too demanding, too generous, the motive was different. In his introductory essay "The Black Box," he wrote that the exhibition could be read as "temporal lapses that emerge into spaces that reanimate for a viewing public the endless concatenation of worlds, perspectives, models, counter-models, and thinking that constitute the artistic subject." In a 2009 essay, Hito Steyerl revisited those same critiques, identifying Okwui's use of *too much* video and cinema as a canny messianism, an indexical inscription into the canon. Check, we will watch it all later—but through each other: "In fact, the exhibition could only be seen by a multiplicity of gazes and points of view ... but in order to understand what (and how) they are watching, they must meet to make sense of it." For the works to become sensible in sequence, they would need to be reassembled by viewers coming together.

This promise of meeting together to parse out the impossible scale of global humanity may only later have been converted into a curse—harvested by social media, credited with sparking popular uprisings, then forgotten when those uprisings went sour. But this was not necessarily the togetherness Okwui wanted to address. Okwui's Documenta envisioned the political energy of transnational social movements made more ferocious by an oncoming cosmopolitan panpsychism—seeing and feeling other people and their struggles as extensions, reflections, causal mirrors of one's own struggles and desires. Precisely the opposite of a retreat into some Potemkin village of the local where the fishmonger at the port sells frozen fish shipped from the other side of the planet. Logistical management certainly does soothe the pain of the impossible scale of the world, but Okwui smuggled cues and prompts from a tradition that was ready to take that scale on in earnest. For many of us he made art, and the art world itself, about that. The Supercommunity are utterly lost without those, and we need to remember Okwui to find the way back.

X

All photos by Hans Haacke.

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, moving-image artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Her principal topics of interest are media, technology, and the global circulation of images. Through her writing practice, films,

and performative lectures, Steyerl considers the status of the image in an increasingly global and technological world.

**Coco Fusco** is an artist and writer, and a professor at the Cooper Union School of Art.

 is a collective entity inaugurated at the 56th Venice Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor.

1
Jörg Heiser, "Männerbünde in the
Haus der Kunst," *Süddeutsche
Zeitung* , January 2, 2019 https://
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ies-1.4272235 .

2
Such as former Bavarian governor
Horst Seehofer and assorted
cabals.

3
To be fair, I am not speaking
about individual Germans or even
the majority of the population,
who are mostly very different.