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Editorial

Wars can be waged in various forms, from cold to hot, from trade wars to psychological warfare to outright bombardment and genocide. The techniques available for negotiating unresolvable differences can seem endless. But it would also seem that the material of war's underbelly is capable of a strange expressivity. In this issue, Mary Walling Blackburn takes on the genre of "trench art"—objects crafted from war's detritus by soldiers addressing material or spiritual needs, or by prisoners or civilians reflecting on the circumstances of war and confinement. In their detailed making and decorative use, Blackburn finds a contorted, diagonal relation to fine art objects. If trench art often miniaturizes the psychic magnitude of war, what would a proportional relation look like, say, if the estimated millions of tons of rubble, human remains, and unexploded ordinance in Gaza caused by US arms could be materially reabsorbed as an "unholy amalgam" of trench art for US art collections, as collective burial and real consequence? If spent bullet shells, weapons, or other war detritus can become decorative trench art, artist Kim Jones's *Mudman* on the issue's cover demonstrates how the psychological trauma of war can transform into material for art.

Also in this issue, Yuk Hui's introduction to his latest book, *Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking*, suggests that to remain relevant today, political philosophy must address the primacy of technology in determining contemporary conflicts and alliances. Amidst the volatility of trying to achieve a technological sovereignty that may be impossible today, such negotiations often elude the terms of traditional nation-states and military power, creating an opportunity to revise what planetary unity means. Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa compares Cameron Rowland's exhibition "Properties" and Steve McQueen's work *Bass*, simultaneously on display at Dia Beacon, tracing how these artists illuminate the entanglements of aesthetics, politics, and racial capitalism through drastically different approaches.

Anton Vidokle recounts his close relationship with Boris Groys in a personal reflection on the philosopher's unusual sensitivity to artworks and artists as foundational for intellectual work. Vidokle recalls the revelatory moment when Groys introduced him to the idiosyncratic ambitions of cosmism and the early Soviet avant-gardes. Part 2 of Rodrigo Nunes's essay on Aleksander Bogdanov investigates how the philosopher's views of the cosmos, organization, and human adaptation resonate with contemporary theories of anthropogenic climate change. How to reconcile Bogdanov's endorsement of humanity's "dominion over nature" with the present-day polycrisis? Nunes suggests that Bogdanov's insistence on the horizon of "comradely" cooperation has much to offer us.

What does caretaking that is decoupled from biological and gender essentialism look like? The figure of the "Mother," writes iLiana Fokianaki, has become

weaponized in contemporary culture to reinforce binary thinking, white-supremacist logic, and neofascist politics across the globe, especially in Europe. Fokianaki proposes the alternative of "othercare"—a practice that draws from Indigenous kinship structures and builds toward broader feminist alliances. In an excerpt from his forthcoming book *The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising*, Jasper Bernes begins from the notion that forms of revolutionary action like the Paris Commune pull from the past while looking toward the future. In this way, the theory of the commune is "both retrospective and prospective at once." In Marx's theory of value, Bernes identifies a method for "testing" socialist proposals, even if the abolition of value is not itself sufficient to celebrate the arrival of communism.

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iLiana Fokianaki

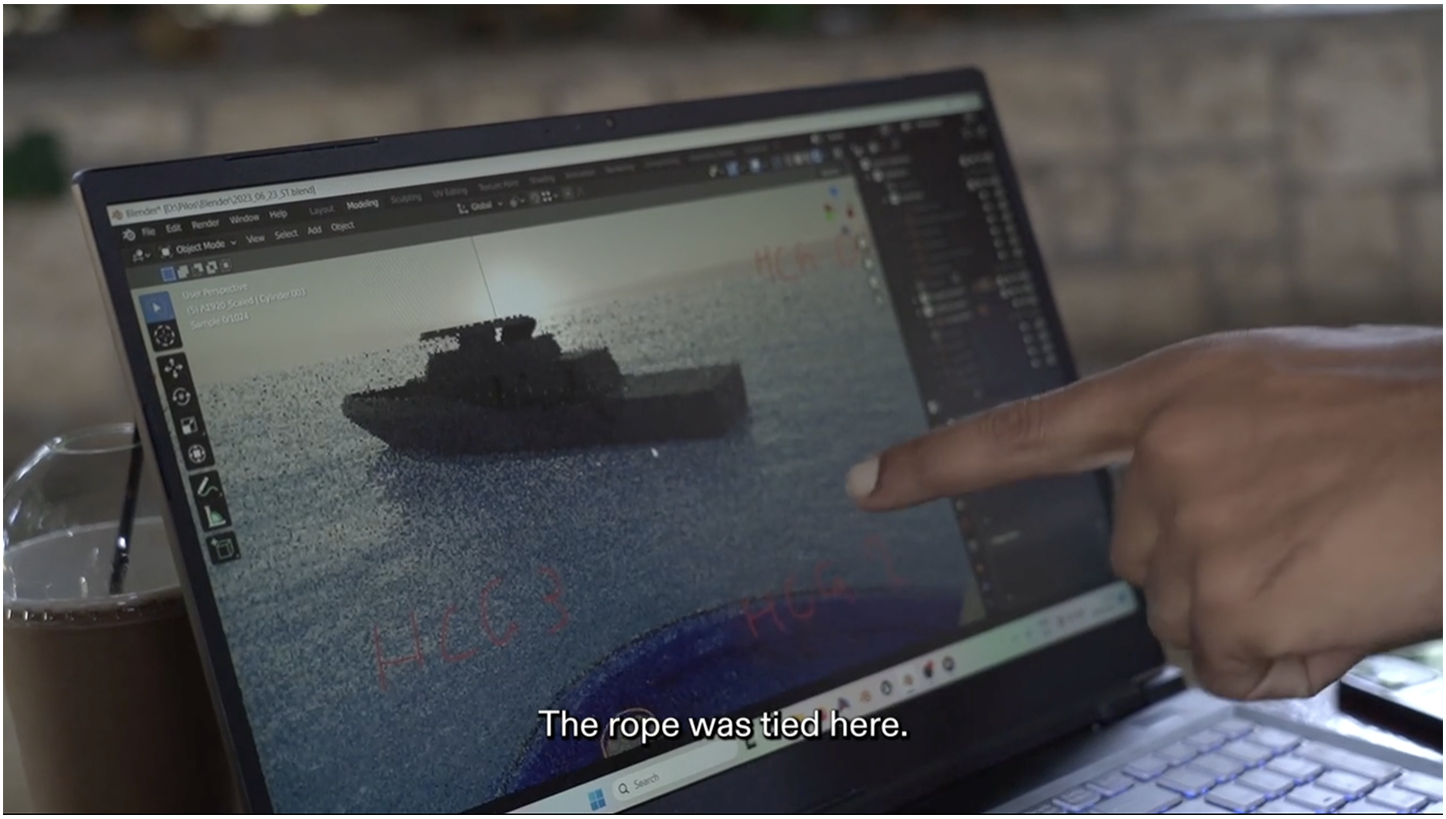
The Mother Is Dead, Long Live (m)Othercare: Care as Alterity, an Introduction

> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.
>
> —Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song" (excerpt)

Why are our lives still governed by binaries? How are binaries such as gender and race maintained, and by whom? I have long been interested in the entrenchment of binary thinking and the systems it reinforces, especially when it comes to conceptions and misconceptions of gender and race in cultural production. Eurocentric white feminism and the way it has evolved over the last thirty years has not helped create a wider, stronger, more powerful alliance between feminisms and LGBTQI+ movements. The intersections between feminisms, and their further intersections with racism, class struggle, social injustice, and disparity, have not been accentuated enough in the mainstream these last decades. The rise of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) exemplifies the problem.

The current ascendance of openly racist and radical-right female politicians in the EU and beyond marks a new era in the figure of women in power, perpetuating what I have in the past called "narcissistic authoritarian statism."[1] Political actors who identify as female, taking the baton from Trump and Bolsonaro, have now taken center stage in portraying and implementing what appears to be essentially toxic masculinity: Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Germany's Alice Weidel are two prime examples. Considering these women in the context of entrenched binaries can open up new ways of thinking about the politics of care and its relationship to gender—or maybe better put, the connection of care to ideas of what femininity is or should be.

I align myself with those who push for an egalitarian approach to care labor that not only stems from the collective aspect of care but breaks with its feminization—and most certainly breaks with the TERF insistence on biology. The TERF exclusion of people who identify as female but who might or might not have a womb destroys urgently necessary feminist alliances in times of neofascism. TERF ideology makes possession of a womb (as a physical space and bodily trait) nonnegotiable for feminist struggles, and plays an important role in stabilizing and propagating neofascism, entrapping forms of feminism in their cul-de-sacs. To discuss this I will use the figure of the Mother as a representative and/or carrier of a predominantly white-supremacist feminism, which, as Judith Butler recently argued, can go so far as to feed the "anti-gender ideology movement" and fixate on a "phantasm" of essentialized identity, which in turn becomes a conceptual



Forensic Architecture, "The Pylos Shipwreck," 2023.

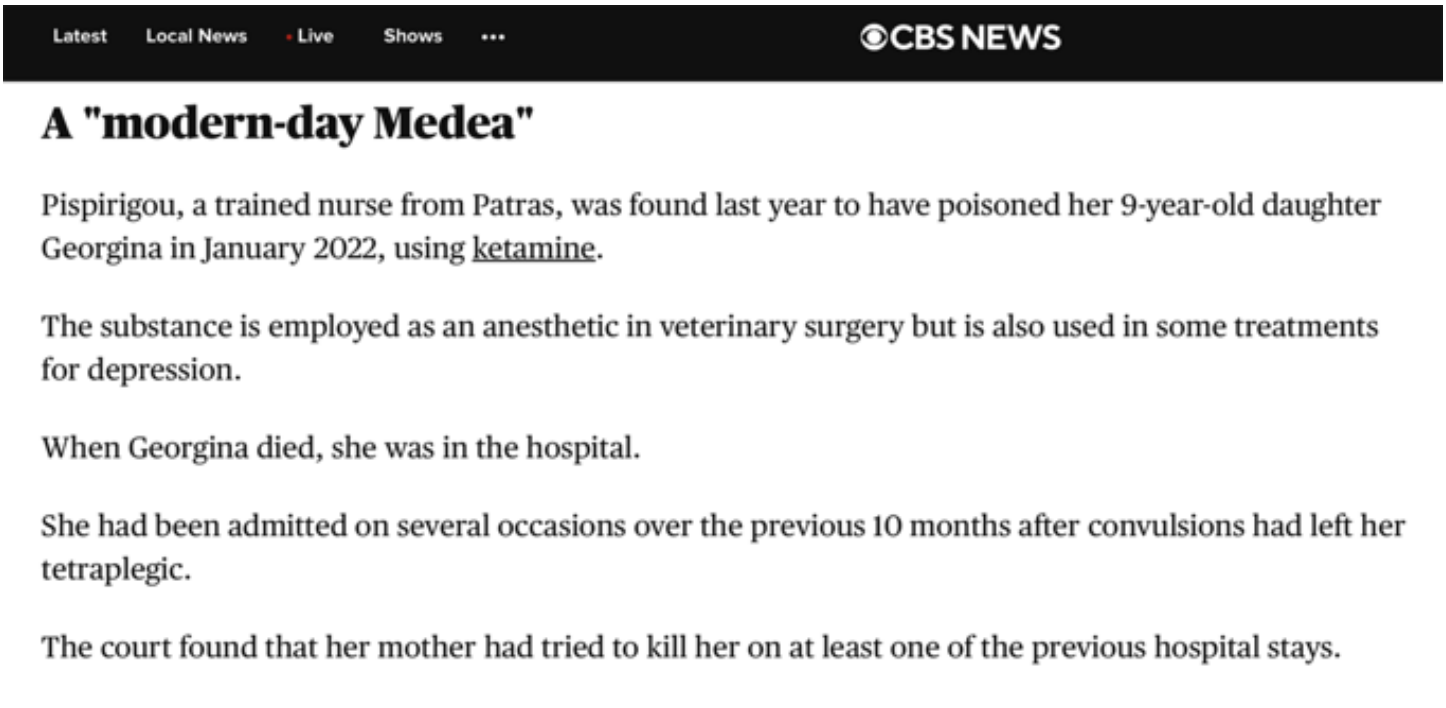
container for neofascism.[2] To reflect that essentialism I will use an ironic capital *M* for "Mother."

I aim to address the figure of the Mother through her predominant performance: *mothercare*. According to my embodied experience, the Mother is still, after decades of anti-racist feminist struggle, collectively understood, addressed, and portrayed as a white Western lady whose role is often strongly connected to nature and nurture. What would happen to our feminisms if we refused to continually recreate and enforce this stereotype of what it means to a mother? What if we killed the sanctity of the biological womb? Is doing so a necessary sacrifice in a time of absolute crisis? Why are some left-wing feminists as disgusted with this idea as liberal and far-right feminists? Some claim it is sacrilege and dangerous to abolish the sanctity of the biological womb and the embodied knowledge of having been born a female, given the never-ending femicides, gender pay gaps, and glass ceilings of gender inequality. Many claim that the sacrifices of previous feminists movements have been too great to now abandon them for other categorizations, given the specifics of gestation, breastfeeding, and other bodily facets of reproductive labor. But are these reasons valid enough to continue to exclude and deny womXn without wombs? Does a womb make one a feminist? Does motherhood make one a feminist? Does motherhood make one a good person? Hardly. How does mothercare frame care politics? I would like to propose a new term, drawing from practices that have informed and infused not only radical feminisms, but more broadly the ethics and politics of care: *othercare*. I propose a practice of care as alterity, a practice that stands opposite to this figure of the Mother.

Mother-Monster Land / Womb Abyss

During my second trimester in summer 2022, the district attorney in Patras, Greece charged a woman for the murder of her children. Roula Pispirigou killed her three daughters—Georgina, Malena, and Irida, respectively aged nine years, three years, and six months old—over a period of three years. She had purposefully made her children ill and taken them to the hospital, suffocated them while sleeping, or poisoned them—apparently to try to keep her husband from cheating on her or leaving her. All three children died under dubious circumstances. The arrest dominated social and mass media in Greece, pushed into the public eye by the outlets close to the neoliberal Mitsotakis government in order to distract from the massive fires across the country in July 2022, which burned thousands of acres of virgin forest and the suburbs of Athens. These were not wildfires but human-made disasters, due to a decade of austerity and a climate-change-denying government that decided not to invest in firefighting staff or equipment. This resulted in an

irreparable ecological catastrophe; thousands of animals were burned alive and biodiverse areas were decimated. At the time, I thought about how typical it was for patriarchy to use a woman to cover its crimes against nature and people.



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A "modern-day Medea"

Pispirigou, a trained nurse from Patras, was found last year to have poisoned her 9-year-old daughter Georgina in January 2022, using ketamine.

The substance is employed as an anesthetic in veterinary surgery but is also used in some treatments for depression.

When Georgina died, she was in the hospital.

She had been admitted on several occasions over the previous 10 months after convulsions had left her tetraplegic.

The court found that her mother had tried to kill her on at least one of the previous hospital stays.

CBS News covers the sentencing of Roula Pispirigou in a March 18, 2025 article titled "Nurse Given 3 Life Sentences for Killing Her 3 Daughters in Greece in Case That Gripped Public for Years."

A year later, while I was breastfeeding my newborn, the *Adriana*, a boat leaving Libya for Italy with hundreds of refugees on board, sank inside the Greek Search and Rescue zone in the Mediterranean Sea. The Pylos shipwreck of June 2023 became the deadliest refugee shipwreck in recent history. Around five hundred people were lost forever, unidentified, deprived not only of their basic human right to asylum (established in 1950), but of a timeless care act common to human and nonhuman animals alike: burial. Refugee drownings in the Mediterranean have been a recurring phenomenon over the past decade, a contemporary equivalent of what Édouard Glissant called the "womb abyss" of the slave ship during the Middle Passage. My thinking begins with this womb abyss:

> What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb of death. The next abyss was the depths of the sea … In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning … Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except—more and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or imagination … Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went.[3]

The *Adriana* was carrying roughly 750 people, mainly from Syria, Pakistan, and Egypt. Only 104 survived, including only one woman; eighty-two bodies were recovered but only fifty-eight identified. According to survivor testimonies, the more than two hundred women and children aboard were in the hold of the ship, with closed doors for their own safety and privacy. The waters

where the Pylos wreckage occurred are the deepest in the Mediterranean, known as the Calypso Deep, at 5109 meters (16,762 feet). According to Greek authorities, the location made it impossible to recover the dead.[4]

Calypso Deep takes its name from the beguiling sea nymph of Greek mythology, because of course Western science continues to fetishize ancient Greece and its archetypes. In this case, the female name is particularly telling. It translates as "she who conceals knowledge," from the Greek "καλύπτω," for "cover," "hide," "conceal." Calypso, siren of sirens, lured Odysseus to the island of Oggia by singing. There she held him captive for seven years, trying to force him to become her immortal husband. Odysseus was referred in ancient Greek as the "πολυμήχανος" (polŭmḗkhănos), or "the ingenious," "the cunning," "the crafty": the one who held knowledge. The myth itself oozes misogyny: Calypso is the archetype of a woman who bewitches a man into a relationship through sexual manipulation. Some feminist readings of the myth of Calypso in *The Odyssey* suggest that Odysseus was in fact Calypso's slave during these seven years. In a 2018 article, classics professor Stephanie McCarter asked whether Calypso was a feminist or a rapist. The semi-goddess, in McCarter's reading, is a classic representative of the Mother I am discussing here: "What Calypso wants is not something new or different from masculine authority but her own feminine one to match it."[5]

The Calypso Deep was discovered on September 27, 1965 by three white European men: Captain Gérard Huet de Froberville, Dr. Charles "Chuck" L. Drake, and Henri Germain Delauze, who entered the waters in the French bathyscaphe *Archimède*. Calypso yet again hides authority and knowledge, just like when she hid Odysseus. Now, in her dark-blue depths she hides the truth about countless victims: hundreds of babies, children, women, and men, concealing their numbers as well as their identities. She is used as a convenient alibi to allow those in power to ignore the magnitude of this tragedy.

During the revelations about the scale of the disaster, the Mitsotakis government, unable to cover up information released by NGOs showing that the Hellenic Coast Guard had received orders from high up to capsize the boat, used an old piece of news to divert attention from this human-made tragedy. A new media frenzy was whipped up by the same government-friendly outlets as before: the case of the modern Medea, the murderous mother Pispirigou, was revived, with fresh details of the babies' killings. The Mother-monster that is the state, or the supra-state of the European Union, the ultimate white-supremacist Mother, has been drowning people since colonial times and keeps hiding its crimes by using female forms like Calypso and Medea—using them and their associations with nature as distractions or bait.

Although authorities claimed that it was impossible to reach the sunken boat holding the drowned refugees, it is in fact very possible to reach the bottom of the Calypso Deep. The French expedition in 1965 was able to explore and measure its depths. Two years before the Pylos wreckage, in February 2020, Caladan Oceanic, a company owned by billionaire entrepreneur Victor Vescovo, reached the bottom of the Deep with its own submersible. Vescovo himself was on board, together with Prince Albert of Monaco. The 2020 expedition validated that the 1965 mission had reached the deepest point of the Mediterranean Sea.

This kind of technology is only produced for and accessible to the techno-feudalists of the world. It is never available to working class or migrant bodies of color, unless it is used to kill them. The rich white people of the Capitalocene understand the possibilities of exploiting the earth and beyond, conquering the dark matter of the universe, the sea, and our planet's minerals, but they are uninterested in the "dark" affairs taking place beneath earthly waters. The complete and total indifference of Mother Europe towards her non-white, non-Christian, other children is reflected in the Mediterranean waters and the shiny holiday packages she books for her enjoyment there. It is not enough to say that the EU's refugee policy is defined by carelessness; more than that, it embodies the necropolitics of dehumanization and death that Achille Mbembe and Silvia Wynter spoke of.[6] It is tragically fitting that less-than-white countries are asked to take care of the migrant problem, from Erdogan's Turkey to Mitsotakis's Greece. The murderous policies of these governments have been defined in recent years by pushbacks and drift-backs, sponsored by eight hundred million euros from the EU.[7] Ursula von der Leyen, the Mother-head of the EU, ensured these funds, and then enjoyed a free holiday at one of Mitsotakis's villas.[8]

Mother Racism

The anti-migratory racist hatred towards these other children, and the suffocating self-righteousness of the Mother and what she deems to be "grievable life" (in the words of Judith Butler), have been clear for many decades.[9] But it was 9/11 that marked the epoch-defining collapse of the Mother as a benevolent white lady who takes care of all the wretched of this earth, leading to the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment, gung-ho military policies, and unlawful invasions by the West.[10] The carnage of the US-made Second Gulf War was so massive that dehumanization had to go on overdrive: the crimes of the Iraq invasion remain hidden and unpunished, but ironically are used today to justify the current killing frenzy by those who commit genocidal acts.[11] The numbers are staggering: one study estimated the civilian death toll of the Second Gulf War at 461,000.[12]

Those innocent Iraqi civilians were meant to remain faceless, nameless numbers: the death of the "soul of [one's] soul" was even then a death with no process, no

honors, no rituals.[13] One might have thought that the elected officials responsible for these crimes would be punished and shamed for lying to voters about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, killing with impunity has only gotten worse since then. The Mother's continued moral bankruptcy is epitomized by the tragedy of Gaza over the last two years. The dehumanization of brown life after 9/11, together with the normalization of racist politics in the mainstream Western public sphere, paved the way for the horror unfolding in Palestine.

The death of Israeli civilians on October 7 was rightfully deemed worthy of mourning by the Mother, but her care labor stopped there. Since then, the deaths of civilians in Gaza have often been deemed "collateral damage"—less important and unworthy of mourning. In Germany—the Mother of all European nations for decades now—the duty of mourning a life, and most importantly of saving a life, has been sidelined by the country's obsessive, illogical *Staatsräson*.[14] It's hard to believe that Germany has real remorse for its colonial and Nazi past given that a large segment of the population normalizes the neofascist political party Alternative für Deutschland, with its racist and Nazi references (in slogans like " *Alles für Deutschland*") and its collusion with far-right paramilitary groups seeking to deport migrants. As a descendant of victims of Nazi atrocities, I am sad to say that Germany has clearly failed to learn from its mistakes.[15] It uses the war in Gaza to absolve itself of the horror of all horrors, the Holocaust. This hypocrisy was recently epitomized, in the cultural realm, by German cultural minister Claudia Roth. At the 2024 Berlinale, Roth insisted that when she clapped for the best documentary winner, *No Other Land* (which would go on to win a best-documentary Oscar as well), she was only applauding for the two Israeli members of the four-person directing team. The other two are Palestinian.

The Mother is not only a person or nation or continent; it is also the West's self-flattering idea of itself. The West portrays itself as the Mother of all Mothers, the beacon of truth and civilization, the arbiter of law and justice. This idea has always been hypocritical, but after the war in Gaza, the West's claim to defend "civilization" has been exposed as grotesque. Indeed, we may have reached a full-circle moment in history: Mother is finally accepting her true nature, as she revisits with pride her past of colonial plunder. This historical period gave rise to the global order we know today, as argued by Raoul Peck's brilliant docuseries *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2021). It's when Mother gave birth to Western capitalism, when she initiated the erasure of nature by declaring her total detachment from it, and when she murdered countless "brutes" through bloodthirsty conquest. Like Medea, Mother today is happy to kill her children—both ideological (progress, justice, equality) and actual—for the sake of power, as she saunters up to a podium and gives a Nazi salute.[16]

White Mother-Boards

The Mother needs to die. And we can kill her if we destroy the Motherboard: the central system that gives commands. It is already broken in so many ways. Given this, a new concept of the mother needs to emerge, one that discusses mothercare without the *M*, one that propagates care as alterity. In *mothercare* transformed into *othercare*, multiple mothers can take care of you. It might be a cyborg or a mechanical womb that breeds and feeds you. You are the responsibility of many; you are a collective endeavor. Othercare builds on the societal structures of Indigenous and First Nations communities that have long understood kinship practices as collectivist performances of care, and that include humans and nonhumans alike. Those in need of care are collectively cared for from a pool of others that (lower-case) mother, regardless of their biology. The system of beliefs underpinning these practices is not beholden to binaries and goes beyond the human. In the words of María Puig de la Bellacasa, this system sees

> care as a human trouble but this does not make of care a human-only matter. Affirming the absurdity of disentangling human and nonhuman relations of care and the ethicalities involved requires decentering human agencies, as well as remaining close to the predicaments and inheritances of situated human doings.[17]

In her performance *Motherboards* (2023–ongoing), artist Selma Selman pries gold from discarded electronics. With the help of her family, she disassembles electronic waste and recycles the extracted gold (a material that symbolizes so many things: affluence, desire, early banking systems, the settler goldrush in the US, and so much more). Selman is a Bosnian artist of Romani descent, and her repurposing of material through gleaning refers to the resilience of her family. It also points to the collective and undervalued labor of all those who collect scrap metal and repurpose it. The gold she recovers is transformed into a carefully constructed sculpture: a golden nail. And the noise resulting from the process is turned into a musical composition. To me, Selman's work highlights communities that have not only managed to survive the Mother nation and its systems of statecraft and bureaucracy, but to thrive against all odds, through collective care structures. In her own words:

> The essence is that the Roma population started recycling iron and other types of waste a hundred years ago, for survival, and on the other hand, to save the planet. To me, this is much more important than today's West, which has only now understood the

Selma Selman, Motherboards, 2023. Copyright Selma Selman, supported by KRASS – Kultur Crash Festival, 2023, Hamburg. Photograph by Mario Ilić.

> economic and ecological essence of recycling. So, my work questions that position of the Western white world towards the minority Roma population. And then it can also be read as a feminist work, questioning capitalism.[18]

M-otherhood

Mother is not only the state, the nation, or the idea of the West. It is also the way that the illusion of Mothering suffocates even the most feminist of mothers. This is explored in Candice Breitz's film *Mother* (2005) (one half of her diptych *Mother and Father*), where six white Hollywood actresses passionately perform the rites of motherhood. They embody blockbuster character types: the self-denying mother who exists in a state of perpetual hysteria ("Everything I did, I did out of love for you!"); the mother who did not want to become a mother; and so on. The work was shown recently in the group exhibition "Good Mom/Bad Mom" at the Centraal Museum Utrecht, one of many recent exhibitions that aim to discuss motherhood—but that mostly fail to disengage it from biology. It is telling that Breitz's film depicts six white American actresses of different generations, all ambassadors of the dominant narratives of the Western cinematic canon.

Predominantly Western or West-oriented feminist theory has had an ambivalent, if not tense, relationship to motherhood. Radical feminists of the second half of the twentieth century were at best suspicious of the human gestation and care labor involved in motherhood. Some argued that these practices could only be exploited by patriarchy to perpetuate the subjugation of women. Shulamith Firestone famously wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex* that "the heart of woman's oppression is her child-bearing and child-rearing role."[19] To liberate women, she argued, we first need to redistribute the burden of reproducing the species. Firestone described pregnancy as barbaric and proposed ectogenesis as a solution—the production of human fetuses outside of female bodies, in artificial wombs. Firestone's proposal is extremely relevant today, not only because fifty years later we may be close to making it scientifically possible, but also because she highlighted the way technology is controlled by patriarchy and needs to be reclaimed by feminists.

Candice Breitz, Mother, 2005, six-channel installation. Courtesy of the artist.

A decade after Firestone's book came out, this debate on motherhood was furthered by lesbian feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich in her much-discussed book *Of Woman Born* (1986). Rich made a crucial distinction between the experience of motherhood ("the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children") and the institution of motherhood ("which aims at ensuring the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.")[20] Around the same time, some feminist theorists began to highlight motherhood's intersection with class and race. bell hooks famously discussed this in her 1984 book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

> White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group … Feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences.[21]

The most compelling argument in hooks's book concerns white second-wave feminists and their position on care and reproductive labor: their solution to oppression is to exit the home for the workplace. hooks contends that this has never been a preoccupation of Black women: "Had Black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education … would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood."[22] She highlights the way racial capitalism produces different feminist experiences. hooks's thinking ties in with Angela Davis's influential book *Women, Race and Class* (1981). Here Davis challenges the Wages for Housework demand to be paid for care labor (as advocated by seventies feminists such as Silvia Federici), juxtaposing this with the reality of Black women who, "as paid housekeepers, have been called upon to be surrogate wives and mothers in millions of white homes."[23] Davis points out that in the US,

> the majority of Black women have worked outside their homes. During slavery, women toiled alongside their men in the cotton and tobacco fields, and when industry moved into the South, they could be seen in tobacco factories, sugar refineries and even in lumber mills and on crews pounding steel for the railroads. In labor, slave women were the equals of their men. Because they suffered a grueling sexual equality at work, they enjoyed a greater sexual equality at home in the slave quarters than did their white sisters who were "housewives." As a direct consequence of their outside work—as "free" women no less than as slaves—housework has never been the central focus of Black women's lives. They have largely escaped the psychological damage industrial capitalism inflicted on white middle-class housewives, whose alleged virtues were feminine weakness and wifely submissiveness. Black women could hardly strive for weakness; they had to become strong, for their families and their communities needed their strength to survive … Black women, however, have paid a heavy price for the strengths they have acquired and the relative independence they have enjoyed. While they have seldom been "just housewives" they have always done their housework. They have thus carried the double burden of wage labor and housework.[24]

Davis, hooks, and Rich address situated feminist experiences and the different kinds of feminism they have produced. More recently, Sophie Lewis has examined the relationship between gestation labor and capitalism in her book *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019). She asks: "What if we reimagined pregnancy, and not just its prescribed aftermath, as work under capitalism—that is, as something to be struggled in and against toward a utopian horizon free of work and free of value?"[25] Jenny Brown, in turn, proposes the option of a "birth strike" in her 2019 book of the same name, where she lays out a compelling analysis of the role of late capitalism in reproductive labor. She argues that feminists should seek to control the means of reproduction and demand a reassessment of the state's support for care labor. Lewis's more recent book *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022), which draws from early radical feminists like Alexandra Kollontai, proposes that care labor could be something that happens outside of the family structure, and offers the term "comrades" instead of "kin."

Care as Alterity: A B eginning

In a world where we are witnessing the rebirth of fascism—or more accurately the successful gestation of neofascism—it is crucial to recognize the important role played by the quintessential Mother: she is deployed to maintain stability, order, and authority by way of biology. From Meloni's changes to laws concerning reproductive and parental rights, to Musk's obsession with eugenics, to the return of the traditional family form via the destruction of reproductive rights, the Mother as a figure of biologically defined, binary heteronormativity is reemerging everywhere. Women who support these ideas are even cashing in on the figure of the Mother. Legions of social media "tradwives" promote traditional motherhood, mixing it with fashion endorsements and product placement. Until recently, some led their millions of followers to believe they voted progressive. Now they wear their MAGA hats shamelessly.

Thankfully, there are "other-mothers" shaking the foundations of these fortresses of binarism. One excellent example is the mothers of ballroom culture, who for

Matri-Archi(tecture) members Khensani Jurczok-de Klerk, Kabelo Malatsie, Aisha Mugo, and Sara Frikech in the first panel of Stokvel, Kunsthalle Bern, April 5, 2025. Photo by the author.

decades have been taking in, raising, and proudly parenting queer kids rejected by their biological parents, from the US to the Philippines. They are a model of othercare that I will discuss further in the second part of this essay. Another example of othercare is the group Mothers Against Genocide, which has been practicing alternative motherhood by seeking to soften the censorship of Meta's platforms and advocating for accountability for war crimes in Palestine. In the cultural realm, a group of cultural workers named Matri-Archi(tecture), founded by Khensani Jurczok-de Klerk, recently organized a series of gatherings modelled on the South African tradition of the *stokvel*. This is an informal "savings pool," typically organized by Black women, to which members contribute funds on a rotating basis, allowing contributors to later withdraw lump sums to pay for things they need. Members usually gather monthly in the home of another member. The *stokvel* provides a familiar social space for fellowship and community. Matri-Archi(tecture) organizes gatherings that aim to catalyze a collective reimagination of the conditions under which we collaborate, using care as an ethic and point of departure.[26]

Othercare is not just a possibility or proposal but a necessity for fighting back against the new wave of far-right racist patriarchy. Abandoning our reproductive organs for collective liberation is the only way for feminisms to come back to life. A womb does not make one a feminist—or a good person for that matter. Nor does giving birth make one a good carer and parent, because care is not tied to biology and familial bonds. One way to set ourselves apart from the Mother is to conceive of care as alterity. The Mother is deeply rooted in the belief that binaries are not to be challenged, changed, or abolished. Through othercare, we can find new terms to describe selfless love. In the words of Sophie K. Rosa, "foregrounding connection, care and community in our

political analyses and action can be powerful."[27] Seizing our means of reproduction and redefining who cares for whom and why might be the only path to the broad alliances that offer a way out of the dark misanthropy that lies ahead.

X

The author would like to thank artist Cameron Rowland for directing me to "Womb Abyss," and Elvia Wilk for her intrepid editing. This text is dedicated to K and other trans activist friends in Berlin and beyond who have been showing me what true love for your fellow human means.

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Very few people I've met in my life know of the Nazi atrocities committed outside of Western Europe, maybe because these peripheries inhabited by lesser white people fall into the category of ungrievable life. Frankly, very few Germans I've met even know that the Nazis invaded Greece. More information about the invasion can be found in the book *The Black Book of Nazi Atrocities in Greece* , a product of the colossal research of survivors, available to download for free in

Greek and German https://www.openbook.gr/mayri-vivlios-tis-katoxis/ . The deaths of my family members are noted within the book's thirty-five pages of documented killings and mass murders (p. 62–97), many of which took place in what Greeks since 1940 have called "holocaust" villages (the word having entered Greek in the 1920s due to the Greek and Armenian genocide of 1915–23).

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Rodrigo Nunes

From the Organizational Point of View: Bogdanov and the Augustinian Left, Part 2

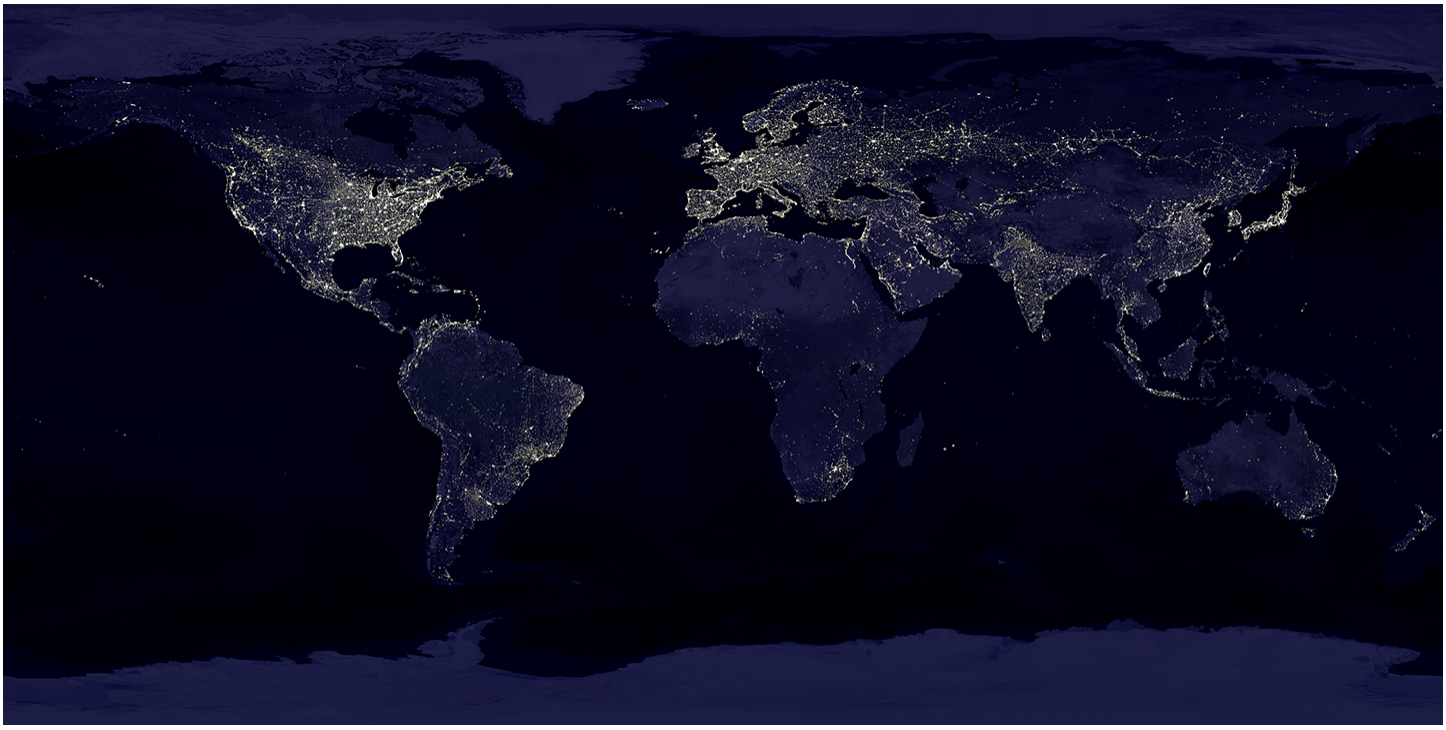
For Dri

Continued from Part 1

Bogdanov in the Anthropocene

There is much in Aleksander Bogdanov to make him appear as a contemporary for those of us living in the so-called Anthropocene: the view of the universe, and by extension the planet, as a self-organized process in which everything is connected; the emphasis on the entropic force of disorganization and the constant tension between the activities-resistances of humans and their milieu; the certainty of the impossibility of a final equilibrium in any relationship with the environment; the understanding that the imperative of viability and adaptation also applies to humankind, which puts it in a potentially precarious situation in a world that is changing rapidly. All this seems to make Bogdanov a contemporary for those of us who inhabit the Anthropocene. More than that: at a time when many claim that the ecological crisis forces us to think beyond anthropocentric exceptionalism, the Russian thinker's monism (which drives him in his search for a single set of principles from which to think the physical and the mental, the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the artificial, the living and the nonliving) and the organizational point of view that follows from it (with the perspectivism and the great levelling that the concept of activity-resistance connotes) indicate that, for Bogdanov, the idea of extending agency beyond the limits of the human would not represent anything new. Finally, as McKenzie Wark has pointed out, Bogdanov demonstrated a visionary awareness for his time of life as "part of a self-regulating system, although not necessarily one that will always find equilibrium," and of humankind's collective labor as something that "transforms nature at the level of the [planetary] totality."[1]

What, however, are we to make today of Bogdanov's assertion that the aim of humankind is "dominion over nature,"[2] or his vision of the "human collective" as the "organising centre for the rest of nature," which "'subordinates' and 'rules over' it … to the extent of its energies and experience?"[3] One must heed, first of all, Bogdanov's observation that expressions such as "conquest," "subordination," and "ruling over" are metaphors through which authoritarian forms of social organization inadequately named the tektological phenomenon of "egression," whereby a complex within a wider system comes to exert a preponderant influence over the other elements of that system.[4] Seen without the fetishes of previous historical moments, the notion of humankind as the "universal egression"—universal in the sense of tending towards expansion, although always effectively limited in its scope—would exclude neither the agency of the nonhuman, nor the possibility of another type of relationship than simple domination between the human and its environment. Rather, it would simply name



This image of Earth's city lights was created with data from the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) Operational Linescan System (OLS). Originally designed to view clouds by moonlight, the OLS is also used to map the locations of permanent lights on the Earth's surface. 1 October 1994 and 31 March 1995. Image: Craig Mayhew and Robert Simmon/NASA GSFC. License: Public Domain.

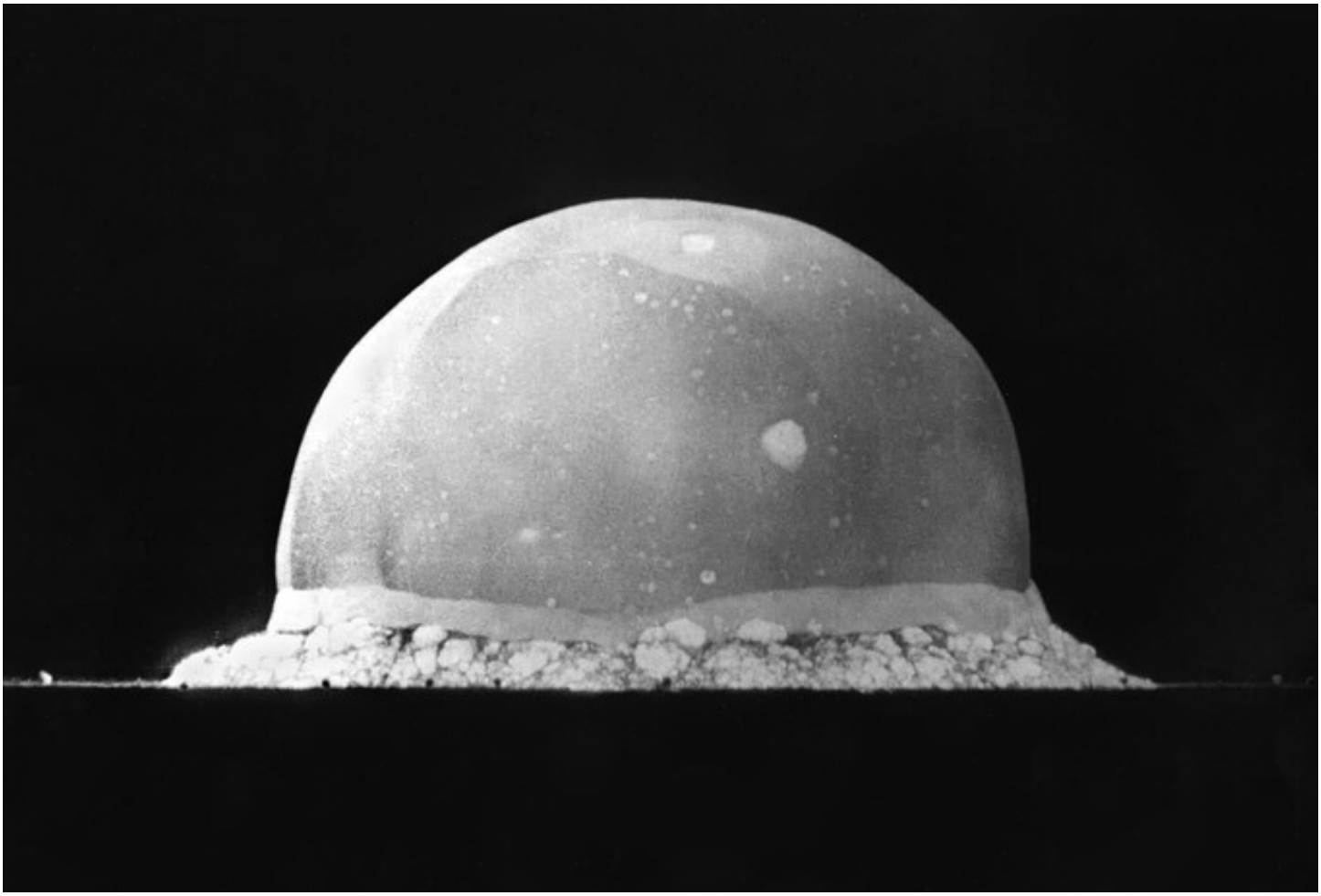
the fact that humans have revealed themselves, in the share of space-time that they have occupied within "the great universal organiser, nature," to be the complex with the greatest organizing power over what surrounded it.[5] Instead of a teleological destiny or metaphysical eminence, in other words, we have here no more than a statement of fact.

This fact, nevertheless, has turned out to have a tragic underside: the concept of the Anthropocene marks the definitive realization that this organizing power is, at the same time, a disorganizing power on a planetary, geological scale. If not anticipated by Bogdanov as such, however, this awareness does not indicate an entirely blind spot in his thinking. To see how it is possible to think the Anthropocene from the perspective of the "universal science of organization," it is enough to recall the perspectivity of Bogdanov's concept of activity-resistance, the principle according to which organization always involves an expenditure of energy, and the observation that the metaphor of the "struggle" against nature expresses a "disorganising correlation."[6]

Here, Bogdanov is clearly considering the relationship from only one of the points of view involved: nature "disorganizes" humanity, that is, it resists the latter's efforts to transform it according to its ends. As we saw above, however, a gain in organization in one part always implies a loss of organization in another, for two reasons: because elements and connections that previously belonged to one complex end up being consumed, transformed, or integrated into another; and because in the activities necessary for this consumption, transformation, or integration, part of the energy expended is permanently lost in the form of heat. Wiener's "local and temporary islands of decreasing entropy" feed off the organization that exists elsewhere, and as such actively contribute to the growth of entropy not only in these parts, but in general.[7]

Organization is, in short, a local phenomenon that always implies the *transfer of disorganization and entropy* to some other place. (You only have to look at the private life of a community or union organizer to see this.) Based on this principle, tektology is in a perfect position to give us an explanation of how and why the organizing activity of "universal egression" could prove to be a disorganizing force on both a local and global scale. It suffices to think that, as this activity grows in power and scope, nature begins to respond not only with the passive (local) resistance of its arrangements and the (general) entropy that increases as a consequence of the activity needed to undo them, but also with the activity of a series of new (global) arrangements and nonlinear reactions triggered by the advance of human action.

In other words, humankind's organizing action, in the same process in which it demonstrates itself to be disorganizing of nature, also manifests itself as *reorganizing* it, and it is the activity resulting from this



Trinity Site explosion, 0.016 second after explosion, July 16, 1945. The viewed hemisphere's highest point in this image is about 200 meters high. Image: Berlyn Brixner / Los Alamos National Laboratory. License: Public Domain.

reorganization that eventually presents itself to humanity as resistance, that is, as a disorganizing force. If it is the export of entropy that "enables some to assert the existence of progress," the ecological crisis signals the realization that there is a limit to the possibility of continuing to export entropy within a closed system without threatening its equilibrium to such an extent that the very continuity of the progress thus built is threatened.[8]

It should be noted, however, that this explanation is, at the same time, an interdiction to any moral reading of the Anthropocene and the expansion of agency beyond the human. To exist is to organize oneself, and to organize inevitably entails costs; this applies to us as much as to any other being, and to say "good" or "bad," gains or costs, always implies also asking "for whom?" What has made humans a disorganizing force on a global scale is not some moral flaw characteristic of the species, which would make it constitutively immune to a predisposition to harmony spontaneous in all others, but rather the combination of a system of production and distribution of wealth that demands constant expansion, and an enormous mismatch between the growth in the capacity to produce effects and the capacity to calculate their costs. Recognizing the nonhuman can give us another perspective from which to make this calculation, but it cannot eliminate the fact that action has costs. It is undoubtedly necessary to drastically reduce those and rethink from top to bottom the priorities according to which they are taken on, as well as the criteria for their distribution, and that of gains. But the fantasy of a *power to* that is not immediately also a *power over*, or of an organization that does not involve costs, does nothing to help the real challenge, which is to find a dynamic equilibrium with the environment in which the maximum flourishing of life, human and nonhuman, is possible.

Granted, from the thought that everything comes at a cost can follow practically any course of action, and the tone of hard-nosed, "no such thing as a free lunch" realism it evinces is more often than not at the service of justifying the worst—not least the sort of behavior that has brought us to the verge of ecological collapse. "The norms of expediency," as Bogdanov points out, "will point with

equal conviction to helping one's neighbour and to cutting his throat."[9] What tektology can make us see, however, is that one need not deny that costs are real in order to oppose such positions; and, conversely, that to believe in the reality of costs does not entail agreeing with how mainstream economic and political discourses calculate what gains are desirable, what (and whose) losses are acceptable, and what trade-offs are worth it. The real question lies in the criteria and how they are decided; by abandoning to these discourses the terrain of realism, what one ultimately relinquishes is, in fact, the prospect of questioning the air of self-evidence in which the criteria they assume tend to come wrapped.

Bogdanov is perhaps a tad too naive (or disingenuous) in claiming that, once society is based on comradely cooperation, "goals and diverse norms that serve them [will] coalesce in a socially coordinated struggle for happiness."[10] After all, clarity regarding "the universal ultimate goal" —"to achieve the maximum life for society as a whole that, at the same time, would correlate with the maximum life for the individuals who comprise it"—cannot guarantee that the means to achieve it, and the standards with which to judge them, would automatically become transparent.[11] For reasons we have already seen, such evaluations cannot transcend their perspectival condition, and therefore may not only not be equally good for "all" (however broadly or narrowly we may wish to interpret that word) but might also be wrong (in the sense of setting unanticipated counter-finalities in motion). Yet Bogdanov's ideal can remain a valuable guide if we bring to the fore the interdependence that is already implied in the tektological project. This allows us to view the "struggle for everything that life and nature can give to humankind" as including, rather than striving to emancipate itself from, both nonhuman nature and nonhuman life.[12] The goal then becomes—in a very broad sense that can only be broken down into concrete evaluations in partial and uncertain terms—one of sustaining a dynamic equilibrium with the environment in which the maximum flourishing of life, human and otherwise, is possible. Or, as Wark puts it, the great organizational "quest" remains the one "to find and found a totality within which to cultivate the surplus of life."[13]

Whose quest though? One point where Bogdanov remains faithful to a certain humanism that precedes and runs through Marxism is the ease with which he refers to humankind as a collective subject. It is true that this subject is split almost from the start by the division between organizers and executors, which is expressed from modernity onwards in the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But at no point does he seem to doubt the unilinearity of a history in which, even if momentarily separated from this scheme, all human collectives finally tend to incorporate themselves into it and, after eliminating that original split, come together in a single community of organizers of their world. Nevertheless, in Bogdanov's writings it is possible to find useful principles for thinking about the synchronous coexistence of diverse human collectives, another issue that the Anthropocene brings to the fore in full force.[14]

His insistence that "cognition is an adaptation" whose "'truth' boils down to its fitness to govern practice," and that "the collective is always the subject of practice,"[15] and therefore also of cognition, amounts to ascribing truth to all knowledge that has become settled in the practice of any group whatsoever in its encounter with everything that resists its labor—that is, "nature."[16] Arising from the friction between collective activity, under its specific conditions of organization, and the activities of the things that populate the environment, truth is always simultaneously objective (because it is limited by the regularities that practice reveals) and relative (because it is conditioned by the relations of production and the contingencies that are specific to encounters—for instance, the greater or lesser natural diversity available within a collectivity's field of action). Since this encounter takes place continuously over time, and its conditions, both social and natural, are changeable, it never reaches a definitive stage, which would be equivalent to a state of static equilibrium: "There can be no absolute and eternal philosophical [or scientific] truth."[17] This other dimension of Bogdanovian perspectivism can be very useful when faced with an issue such as the environmental crisis, which involves and requires reconciling a complex ecology of knowledge and practices, insofar as it establishes a pluralism that does not forsake objectivity altogether.

What is more, it helps us not to lose sight of what is ultimately the point in incorporating a plurality of perspectives. If truth never ceases to be relative, it is nevertheless possible to increase its degree of generality by expanding the number of results and methods accumulated in different fields of experience that it is capable of integrating and organizing.[18] The relative becomes less relative—that is, relative to more things—in the process of attempting to elaborate the system of its own relativity. The assumption of historical unilinearity and the confidence in the emergence of a class destined to take on all of humanity's tasks leads Bogdanov to believe that the project "to unify the experience of all people of past and present generations into a rigorous and coherent system for understanding the world" could converge into a single science.[19] Awareness of the very high prices and enormous blind spots of the process of economic, technical, and cultural unification imposed and propitiated by colonial expansion gives us reason to be much more skeptical about the motivations, viability, and desirability of any such unifying pretensions. What reading Bogdanov today reminds us, however, is that such skepticism should be used pharmacologically, as a prudential principle and a tool for controlling the results of systematization efforts, and not as a reason to give up on such efforts once and for all.

Shelters in Kenya for those displaced by the 2011 Horn of Africa drought. License: CC BY 2.0.

The contemporary "polycrisis," with the ecological emergency at the forefront, presents us with "*organisational* tasks of unparalleled breadth and complexity," the resolution of which cannot be "haphazard or spontaneous." The answer is not less coordination, but more; and this requires not fewer attempts at global modelling, but more and better, more diverse and self-reflective, from different perspectives and at different scales of granularity. For Bogdanov, democracy is a cognitive and practical imperative rather than a matter of ethics or recognition issue: "synthetic" or "comradely" cooperation is capable of greater achievements because a complex collective modeler is, in principle, capable of more complex models. We can be more moderate than him in our optimism without completely abandoning this insight.

The Augustinian Left

A little over a decade ago, the British art historian T. J. Clark caused a stir with a text that called for the creation of a "left without a future": one that did not expect anything "transfiguring" to happen, but rather adopted for itself a pessimism about human nature that had, in the Enlightenment, been the preserve—and strength—of the right:

> There will be no future, I am saying finally, without war, poverty, Malthusian panic, tyranny, cruelty, classes, dead time and all the ills the flesh is heir to, because *there will be no future*; only a present in which the left … struggles to gather the "material for a society" Nietzsche thought had vanished from the earth.[20]

As we have seen so far, Bogdanov occupies a diagonal position in relation to the list of ineliminable givens that Clark compiles. On the one hand, Bogdanov genuinely believed in the possibility of the end of classes, poverty, and tyranny; on the other, he did not mistake this for the end of risk, of effort, of resistance imposed by the environment, or even, as *Red Star* demonstrates, of the struggle against the scarcity of resources, the danger of overpopulation and, eventually, war itself (even if interplanetary). The difference lies, firstly, in where the

Porcelain figurine "I.V. Stalin votes" by A. Sotnikov, Dulevo Porcelain Factory, USSR, 1950.

source of such ills is situated: for Clark, it is in a human nature burdened with an innate tendency towards radical evil; for the Russian author, it is in the play of activity-resistance, in the material and energetic cost of each single thing, in the external and internal work of disorganization. This results in a difference of orientation. Clark's left must function as a *katechon*, and its radicality resides in its recognition of the constant presence of radical evil and its ability to contain its worst effects. Bogdanov's, on the other hand, does not give up on its ambitions in the least, but confronts them without the illusion of a final point of equilibrium; its work never ends, not because the worst is always near, but because disorganization is always there, nothing comes without a cost, and entropy and the dangers of relapse gnaw away at every struggle that aims to make way for the maximum possible abundance and freedom for those who take part in it.

Two lefts, then, one Manichean, the other Augustinian. Which of the two is more deserving of the title of "tragic" that Clark claims? The tragedy of the first is merely human, that of subjects we see "perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end."[21] That of the second is cosmic: it concerns complexes or systems subject to the same mechanisms and laws in a universe where disorganization never goes away, entropy grows, there are nonnegotiable limits, action and inaction have irreversible costs and effects. Although it boasts a disillusioned and "grown up"[22] tone as one of its distinctive features, the former still has in common with much left-wing political thought the fact that it occupies the perspective of a specific type of protagonist: a hero of grand gestures, the activist who throws his life away at the moment when the crisis spills over into conflict or the statesman who weighs up serious and difficult decisions. The only difference here is that the gesture is katechontic instead of Promethean or transfiguring. Bogdanov places us in the point of view of a rarer character, the organizer. A hero whose gestures are less exceptional, in size as well as in frequency, whose pathos is not that of someone who is always faced with the hour of decision, nor of someone who still fantasizes about a final equilibrium, but rather the resigned irresignation of someone who understands that doing and maintaining something always has its cost, that things require continuous effort, that given enough time and not enough work, everything will unravel, that not only is "the struggle itself towards the heights … enough to fill the heart" but that there is much to celebrate along the way[23]—someone who knows that the true human tragedy is the awareness of contingency, of counter-finality, of the inevitability of choices and trade-offs, and of their irreversibility, but who also knows that this does not give anyone an excuse for insensitivity in the face of suffering. Someone who fights not because victory is certain, but because not fighting—that is, not caring about existing—would be impossible.

X

This two-part text is a version of the introductory essay to the Brazilian edition of Aleksander Bogdanov's *Essays on Tektology* (*Ensaios de Tectologia: A Ciência Universal da Organização*, Machado, 2025).

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1
Mckenzie Wark, *Molecular Red*: *Theory for the Anthropocene* (Verso, 2015), 54, 12. Wark's work has played a major role in the recent revival of the Russian thinker in the English language.

2
Aleksander Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology: The General Science of Organization* (Intersystems Publications, 1984), 1.

3
Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology*, 184.

4
Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology*, 184.

5
Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology*, 63.

6
Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology*, 184.

7
This is equivalent to Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's insight into the economic process as the transformation of "low" into "high entropy." Such a convergence is no surprise; like Bogdanov, Georgescu-Roegen was greatly influenced by the philosopher and physicist Ernst Mach. See Nicholas Georgescu-Rogen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

8
Closed, that is, in the technical sense of the term: it exchanges energy but not matter with its environment.

9
Aleksander Bogdanov, "Goals and Norms of Life," in *Russian Cosmism* , ed. Boris Groys (e-flux journal and MIT Press, 2018), 194.

10
Bogdanov, "Goals and Norms of Life," 185.

11
Bogdanov, "Goals and Norms of Life," 185.

12
Bogdanov, "Goals and Norms of Life," 185.

13
Wark, *Molecular Red*, 11.

14
Although he personally does have some unfortunate remarks to make about this synchronic diversity. Aleksander Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience: Popular Outlines* (Haymarket, 2016), 24–25.

15
Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience* , 158, 249.

16
"Nature is what people call the endlessly unfolding field of their labour-experience." Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience* , 42. This should be understood as a sort of retrospective projection, of course: the idea is that, regardless of what concept was used by different human collectivities to designate this totality, it is equivalent to "nature" as Bogdanov understands it; and even if a group did not itself have the concept of such a totality, its experience could still be gathered in such a way.

17
Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience* , 13.

18
For Bogdanov, as for Claude Lévi-Strauss, the impulse in this direction is an internal demand of thought itself, which he explains in organizational terms: "Any organisation is organised precisely to the extent that it is integrated and holistic. This is the necessary condition for viability. This is also true of cognition, once we recognise that cognition represents the organisation of experience. Therefore cognition always tends toward unity, toward monism." Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience* , 236.

19
Bogdanov, *Philosophy of Living Experience* 10.

20
T. J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review*, no. 74 (2012): 75. For a sharp rejoinder, see Alberto Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 180 (2013).

21
A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* : *Essays on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (MacMillan & Co., 1912), 23.

22
Clark, "For a Left with No Future," 59.

23
Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sysyphe* (Gallimard, 1942), 168. My translation.

Mary Walling Blackburn

Wound, Whittle, and Peach

"Trench art" is a term used to describe a range of objects crafted by soldiers in battle, like World War I bullet casings shaped into stippled vases for dried strawflowers, or stray World War II bullets hammered into promise rings—but for which ring fingers? Most have since decomposed.

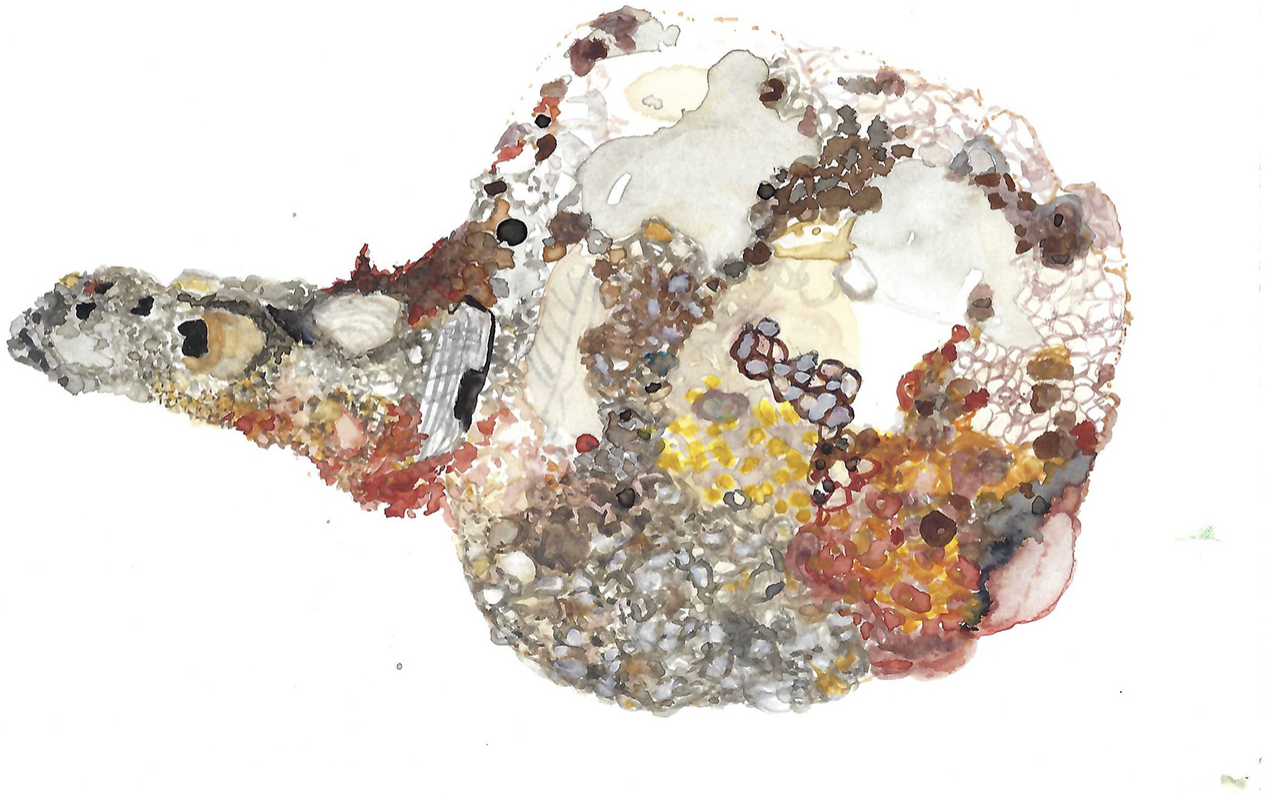
Trench jewelry and trench vases digitally mound on eBay. But as an art form, trench art is more expansive than soldiers' craft; it includes objects made by civilians attempting to mediate their feelings about war as bombings escalate and casualties mount. Yet another category within the form wedges somewhere between soldier and civilian: the prisoner/hostage/detainee who generates crafts while in captivity. These makers and their objects increase in number as we read these words—past, present, and future trench art heaps. Somewhere, someone cobbles a piece of old trench art to new trench art. In our rubble to come, epoxy resin will bind dust to dust.

The definition of trench art extends again, to the post-conflict repurposing of war waste by soldiers, for soldiers. A post-1950s Czech assault rifle butt retrofitted to hold a 1973 daily calendar and pen includes an engraving in Hebrew that, according to its Etsy seller, gives thanks to Shamai "for [his] service" in 1959.[1] Following Shamai's service from 1959 to 1973, does he touch this trench craft each day? When out of use (from 1973 to 2025), can the storage of this object be qualitatively described as an archive more than a crypt? These unknowns multiply. Doubled purgatories of object and human are cloaked in post-traumatic haze. The object is for sale on an online Israeli junk shop; what is clear is that no one wants it—not nationalist, not soldier, not collector, not neat freak, not pervert.[2]

Despite trench art's lesser market value, its emotional value as patriotic object is assumed to be intact. The viewer's sympathies are assumed to flow towards the battlefield fighting man who suddenly becomes artisan or artist, bundling in a critical assessment, the "personal price" of killing others. But because soldiers are terrorists to their others and heroes to their mothers, ideologies pucker at their edges to shape the reception of sculptures with a supposed clinical purpose of healing any war wound.

1. Fulda Gap Middle Finger

A carved ashtray in the shape of a gesticulating hand measures eleven inches tall from its base to the tip of its extended middle finger. Each digit is between two and two and a half inches thick, and the palm, which functions as the tray, is scarred by several cigarette burns. Whose hand is burnt? Who is *burnt out*? And what is being fingered? A clue scorched onto the wrist: "FULDA GAP GERMANY 1967–1970." This object was most likely carved in the Downs Barracks at a US military base in Fulda, Germany.[3] Its carver was most likely a member of the US Blackhorse



Author's watercolor of trench art comprised of fifty calibre cartridges, seashells, and pebbles from a WWII military training beach in South Carolina.

Regiment, aka the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, which most likely engaged in combat in Vietnam just prior to being stationed in a Cold War zone known as the "Fulda Gap," which was deemed central to the "advance of any Soviet attack."[4] Soldiers hauled small, portable nuclear warheads on and off a launch field at the base. None of the warheads was ever fired. After a while, rare birds—redwings, curlews, shrikes—clustered within this interior border.[5] All carefully listened to coded messages and birdsong, bracing for the off chance that a final command to launch might arise. These are the emotional conditions that rendered the Fulda Gap Middle Finger Ashtray.

A joke that was often repeated among soldiers in the Fulda Gap reads as a bawdy, hopeless, and helpless dance score: *Put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye.* The joke hinges on the absurd sliver of time—the duration of an atomic flash—when the grunt's body could operate under its own authority to experience an unregulated intimacy.[6] In this vocal jest, this wooden gag, nonreproductive erotics offer a potentially final salve. After duty, an ashtray that tirelessly *flips the bird* became a soldier's prosthetic. But whom or what is the middle finger lobbed at? Is the gesture directed toward the Soviets? Army bosses? The self? Does the soldier feel fucked, so the antidote is to be literally fucked?[7] For the anonymous carver-soldier, cold and hot war had slopped together; tedium and flashback had interlaced; trenches had merged. At present, the object is for sale.

If the Fulda Gap Middle Finger Ashtray were encased in a museum vitrine, all of its inadequacies as sculpture would emerge. If, instead, a private collector were to take a smoke break—a meditative "breather" amidst unremitting chaos—and stub out her ciggie in the palm of the old Cold War ashtray, the object would be remade again.[8] She would realize with each passing moment—the increasing char of the cigarette butt, the reflections that dotted her smoke break—that she too was listening for a new Cold War.[9] Has it arrived? Can the objects tell us so? *I put my head between my legs ...*

2. Umbra Mortis

Psychoanalysts or art therapists might suggest that trench art sops up a shadow cast by the semi-operable body and psyche of the survivor. Without these therapeutic acts of making, an *umbra mortis*, a shadow of death, would be cast by both the maimed anatomy and the wounded

Author's watercolor of twentieth-century European trench art ashtrays.

pneuma. Without obstruction, the shadow would cling to survivors cycling through spastic or crumpled states. For the somatic destruction of the solider to cease, such a shadow and its sensation must occupy a material. The civilian or soldier must, by craft or art, by a gesture or otherwise, attach trauma to a substance outside of their body. Through this act, the violent density of the soldier's own inclusion in war, their personal allotment of the carnage, can be framed, hung, sold, gifted, and ultimately, carried away. But will the *umbra mortis* be included?

A number of online businesses based in Ukraine ship hand-painted military helmets to overseas buyers.[10] Some were unearthed in the 1950s but freshly painted in 2024. New stock propaganda images stretch across the metal domes: a battleship, a soldier in battle, fighter jets, and flags. WWII military gear is not easily reanimated and the feeling generated by these objects is more flat than gory. The Etsy shop SouvenirsUkrainean, operating as a fundraiser for the war effort, sells recently worn Russian helmets from the battle of Donetsk, emblazoned with skulls, ravens, weaponry, and women painted in a style associated with heavy metal music. The stock languishes; only sixteen sales.[11] Is it too one-to-one, for us consumers, that the process of shucking a corpse leads to depicting death on the metal husk? Are we finally arriving at the edge of what can be metabolized in war? The Etsy shop MemorabiliaGlobal sells WWII helmets, but also fragments of Russian drones, naming the abstract shapes "sculpture" when they are more accurately described as ready-mades. The seller wants the material to exit his country, and he ships to North America. War waste and online markets mesh.[12]

In Lviv, Ukraine, a used electronics shop, tiny and old, has integrated "war trophies" into its online stock. The sales pitch for the one trench art helmet available reads: "A fantastically beautiful helmet from the head of the dead occupier. Red mulberry and the coat of arms of Ukraine are painted on the helmet. The helmet also has two through holes from a sniper's bullet."[13]

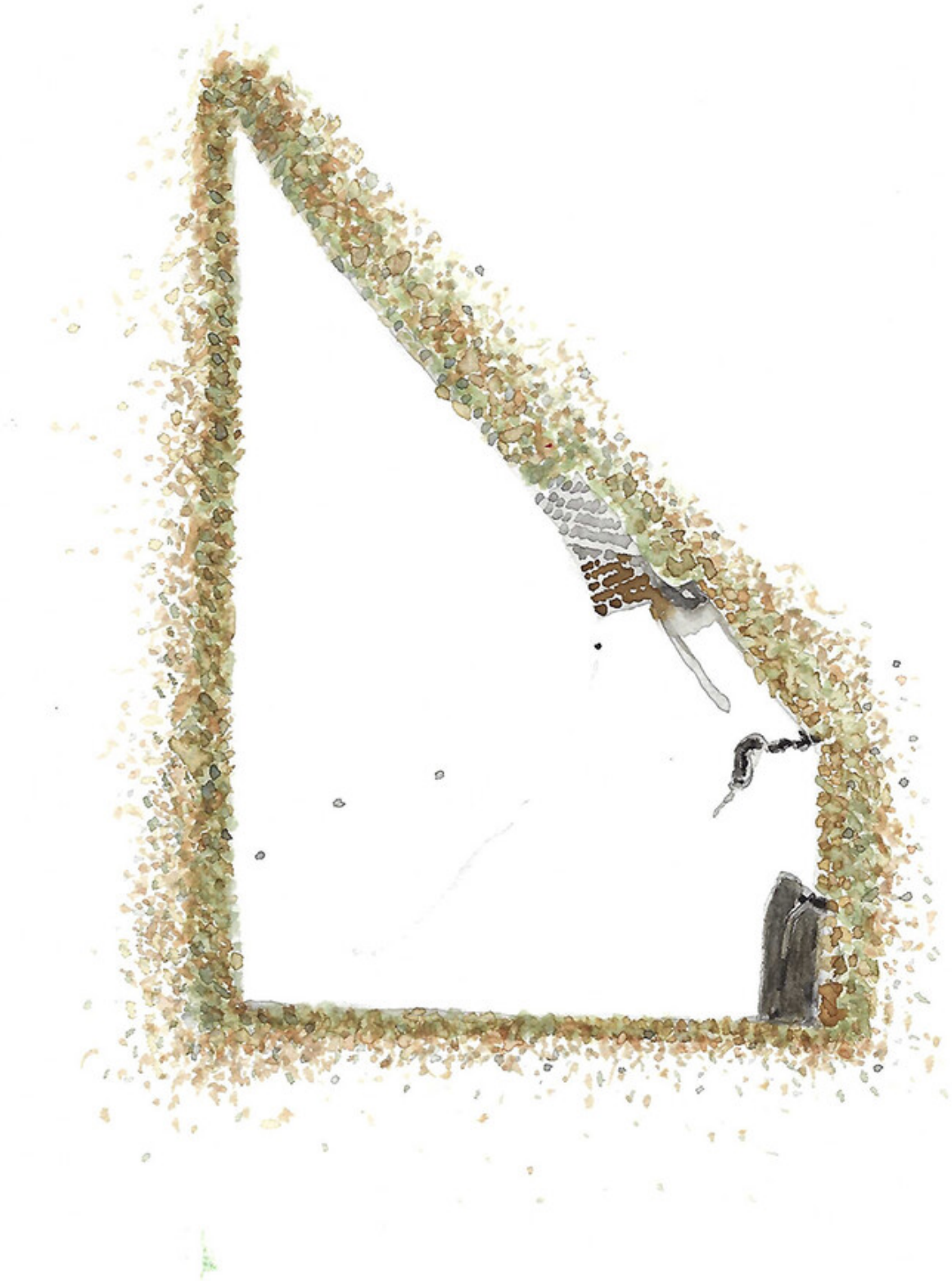
In which direction does art therapy run here? Towards which victim? It seems to move towards and away from both. The surface ornamentation of the helmet with red mulberries and the twin bullet holes exceed the visual limits of propaganda; its sales copywriting swamps commerce in cruel poetry. This object, its maker, and the seller do not ask for the psychological holes to be mended. Unmended, the object remains charged, and rage flows as intended.

3. War Crime: A Clay Replica

In 2016, I remembered a friend telling me that his lover, a lawyer, once interviewed war criminals imprisoned at the Hague. On arrival, the lawyer found the cells empty because the prisoners were in the art rehabilitation room. There, the lot of them, hands muddy, made clay replicas of their penises. In response to this story, I made a series of approximate replicas to stand in for the imprisoned war criminals' cynical approach to making amends for the genocide they had engineered and carried out. My trench art mimesis aimed to broadcast the inadequacy of restitution at this scale. I've since lost track of my sculptures, and the original war criminal prison phalli were never documented or archived. My sculptures and theirs overlap in having all been misplaced. Yet I also know that everywhere, just outside of legal frameworks, a swift economy of actual prison artifacts and battlefield trophies persists. All collectors—melancholic patriots, history buffs, or amoral perverts—believe in the power of an object to coagulate legacies, marshal energies, and instigate actions. Golem-like, these collectors pursue affective hyper-objects, but to what end? With or without referent, is one of these lost phalli buried in someone's rectum? Is another playfully mouthed by a subservient fascist? Unfired, does it melt in the beta male mouth?

Confronting trench art can be a way for civilians to face our imbrication with arms dealers, politicians, and generals. Another approach would be to decorate an architectural environment, such as newly a built condominium unit, with trench art handicraft. Such a fictive request would collapse emotional distance, but also demand that, for example, US citizens test the limits of personal accountability by managing their own war waste. As of February 2025, there are "forty million tons of rubble, containing human remains, asbestos and … unexploded ordinance" in Gaza.[14] Sixty-nine percent of the weapons used by the State of Israel to generate this war waste originated in the United States.[15] How might the US extract and reabsorb 69 percent of the forty million tons of war waste produced by the arms the US government provided? How many Airbnbs decked out in trench art handicraft would it take to accommodate this volume of matter? Who would craft this unholy amalgam? Who would sieve from the waste the enormous number of humans denied burial?

By imagining the citizen body as an archive or repository for holding a portion of the trench art produced by war, the hope is to tip the public towards active peace. What public would accept funding battles and their gory aftermath if they had to make space in their homes for the material remains of wars, present and future? What public would be prepared to architecturally and corporeally host these objects thrumming with grief? My war-criminal dildos, and this reductive thought experiment, occupy a category of uselessness similar to the *Guernica* so often evoked during conflict.[16] Depictions of carnage have ceased to spur a population to actively stop its government from waging war.[17] Instead, amongst over forty million tons of war waste, we might realize another kind of end: a collective burial in trench art, like the farmer sucked into his silo, drowning in his own grain.



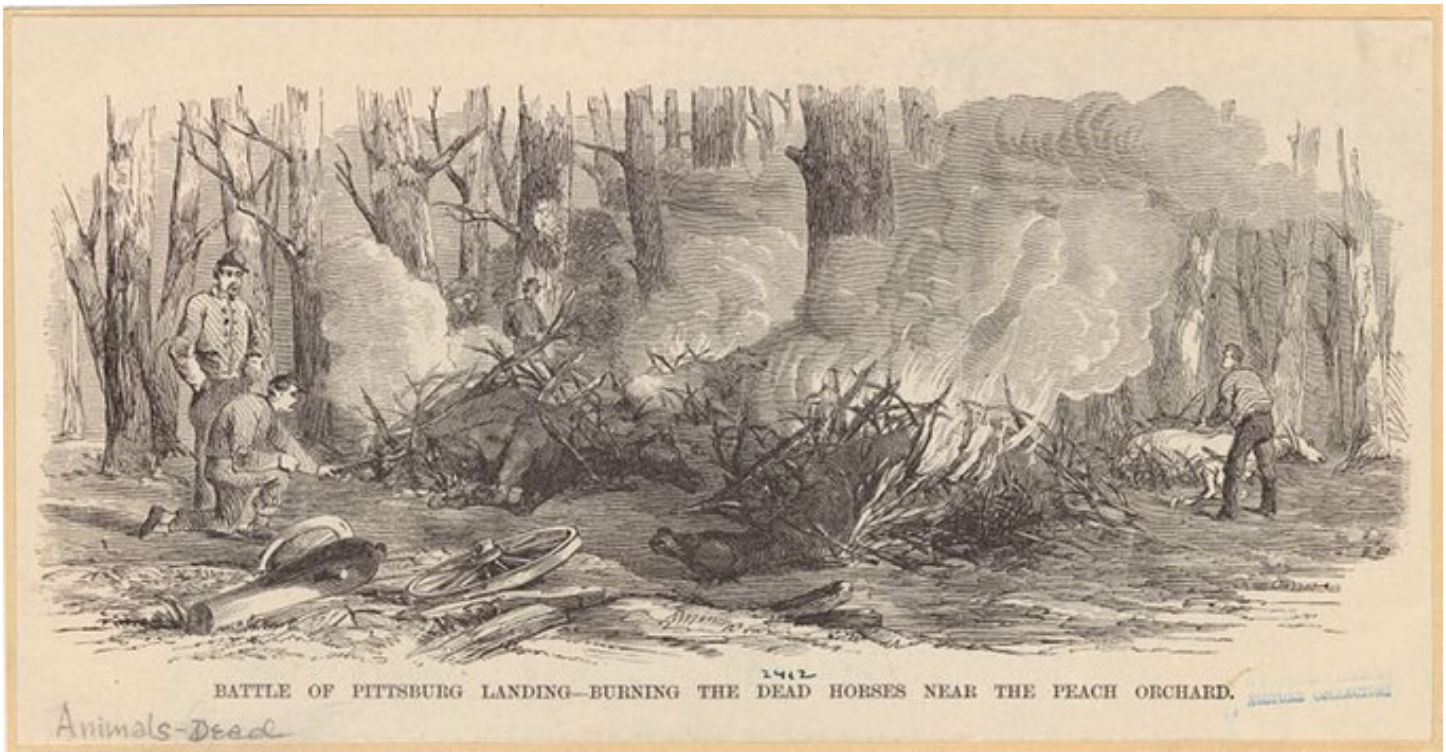
Author's watercolor of Russian drone fragment.

4. The Peach Pit, a Carving

A US Civil War soldier in a battlefield trench eats a peach; the pit in his *mouth-trench*; his body in the *trenches.*[18] This is before the seed dries in his pocket and before, in downtime, she carves it into a pocket sculpture.[19] In war and in love, seeds and humans morph. They are commanded to carve up other people, as soldiers and surgeons, or carve the fruit in the gaps, between battles. The soldier as artist and lover and eater can only reach the pit after all the fruit's flesh has been devoured. Peach juice drenches the soldier's chin and chest. Fruit, soil, and bone are shattered in sequence and the formlessness of blood and mud and juice is salvaged when the living recover the pit.

The carved pit was freighted with more than simply being a proxy for a kiss or a miniature urn. It is a secular *hostia*, transubstantiation as the Vatican unbound.

The lover's mouth is a sculptural tool but also the serving implement, what transfers the sacred matter of fruiting trees to the pedestal of the recipient's mouth. A mouth is a wet atrium, a site on the verge of US *stateside* consecration . Today a vigilante in a holding tank thinks he can suck his secular and portable USB drive clean.[21] But what is "stateside" in a civil war? How can sex, or anything for that matter, purify a sniper's bod, a soldier's necklace of teeth? Both operate in the aftermath, the pause before the roar (of war) and the end (of peace).



Burning the Dead Horses Near the Peach Orchard (1862) initially appeared in Leslie's Weekly, a nineteenth-century US news magazine. After the Civil War, perhaps because ripe fruit hung from the branches on the site of this battle, veterans purchased dried or canned peaches when returning to the site. Today, reenactors perform combat amongst sterile ornamental peach trees, planted and tended by the National Park Service. Counter to this illustration, a historian of orchards, William Kerrigan, writes that after troops withdrew, "forty-eight dead horses remained strewn about the orchard, swelling and decomposing in the summer heat."

The carved pit is an art object, sometimes categorized as trench art.[20] It can be trafficked from one mouth (the soldier-carver) to another mouth (the lover's). As a kiss made material, or a caress to be transferred, the carving passes across siege and into civilian hands. Alone, does the recipient—the homebound lover—pop the pit, or rather insert the sculpture into their mouth, letting the carving rattle against their teeth, their tongue seeking out the smoothed ridges and the grooves in the wood, to taste this heart-clit proxy or unloosen a spirit wedged?

Stark reportage of war crimes yields little change and this reporter gives way to oblique communiqué:

That a mouth is a trench.
It is hard to believe this when you are young and frenching—trench to trench—tongue in training.
T(f)renching—we can barely breathe and so begin to breathe together, re-servicing our holes for communal means.
It isn't sustainable for more than a couple inhalations. Puff.

Puff. We must come apart.
The pocket sculpture comes to the lover because they are apart if not blown apart.

original recipient's possession.

Without context or provenance, the object is without history or activation. I text a picture to my friend, an

Carved peach pits and walnut shells (circa 1861–65). During the US Civil War, these may have been carved in the trenches or they may have been carved in prisoner-of-war encampments. Incarcerated as a prisoner of war in the Confederate Libby Prison from December 1862 through January 1863, a northern shoemaker, held with over a thousand others in a converted tobacco warehouse, carved small baskets from peach pits. Later in the year, at the Battle of Gettysburg, amongst fruiting peach orchards, he lost his right arm.

Trench art charms include miniature stone bibles, hewn bullet chessmen, fragile wooden chains, and whittled walnut shells and peach seeds.[22] When the peach pit dried, if the carver was not already carved by shrapnel or bullets, the pit was shaped into homely and fantastic forms: a basket for a hummingbird's egg; a teacup with a miniscule chipmunk perched on the rim, its tail serving as a handle. These trench art carvings stud the digital collections of regional Civil War museums or scatter throughout online auctions. Within or without a museum, trench art seed carvings deaccession when leaving the

abstract painter. She asks me if I drank from the little cup, identifying a vessel and its use when I had only imagined tasting the wood dry. Drank what? To revive the deaccessioned? A carver-soldier might operate in another imaginary, visualizing surviving Shiloh and returning to her home on the edge of Kennebunk, Concord, or the Gungywamp.[23] At reunion, her homebound lover repeatedly dips the little carved mug in the cyprin to slake her soldier's thirst and her own.[24]

As I write this text, my child looks up from a book and asks:

"Are you an animist?" The question might refer to the 160-plus-year-old peach pit carvings on the windowsill beside me. With the sensitivity of younger animals, the kid may have subliminally tuned in to the thrum of the Civil War trench art. I concede, "Yes." Later, I recall that my child strips the trench art of its trench. My child is always tuning out of that sprawling form of active grief and tuning into small pleasures matching the scale of a child body: tying intricate knots, identifying minute parasitoid wasps, eating pántáo (sweeter, oblate peaches). I was the kid that always grafted fresh horror onto old grief, but my child cannot ascertain sorrow's use. The therapeutic core of trench art as emotional processing swaps for the salve of utility—to reengineer trench waste instead of exposing raw *feelings* when the protective covering may never be restored.

5. Peach Ask

Some trace the cultivation of the first North American peach trees to 1571, when Franciscan monks transported saplings across the ocean to the barrier islands, off the coast of today's state of Georgia.[25] Prolific and desired, the peach reached Indigenous communities before the undesirable white soldiers and settlers arrived. Over time, and within the greater psyche of American pop culture, the actual and fetishized notion of the peach as ancient Asian symbol of immortality was successively supplanted, whether by T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" ("do I dare to eat a peach?"), a swimsuit the color of white peach flesh (sported by Alabaman belle and author-to-be Zelda Fitzgerald), or by Jane "The Georgia Peach" Anderson, whose Nazi propaganda dispatches were broadcast via shortwave radio in the early 1940s. As for the symbolic order of the peach, by the twentieth century the USA compulsively hoped that immortality was commensurate with an infinite fuck.

My paternal family equates the peach with the human ass. In the early 1930s, my teenage grandmother was ascending the stairs at a fancy-dress ball. Suddenly, something gnawed her backside and she whirled around. It was an elderly military general in full uniform: "Sorry! I couldn't help myself! It resembled a peach and I had to take a bite!" He had sunken his teeth into her buttocks. We, the family hearing the story, clutch our own asses in disgust and vulnerability, but also some pride at how the butt flares and pops, and the surface flushes, peach-colored.

Violations aside, is the peach a cumulatively charged object today or more of an average flavor choice for a pie or a gummy? Were the aged medals secured to the ass-biting general's chest a celebration of his work to annex Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or the Panama Canal? Or was it more internal, commanding the troops suppressing the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee or after, in the Apache Campaign, the Ojibwe Uprising, the Creek Revolt, the silver miner's strike in Idaho, a rail strike in Chicago? Bleeding from her ass, can my grandmother sew the general's medals directly into his skin? If space and time fuse, smelting future and past, it happens and it's a happening. If war is always happening, what can we harvest, and how? Does one can a rotting peach?

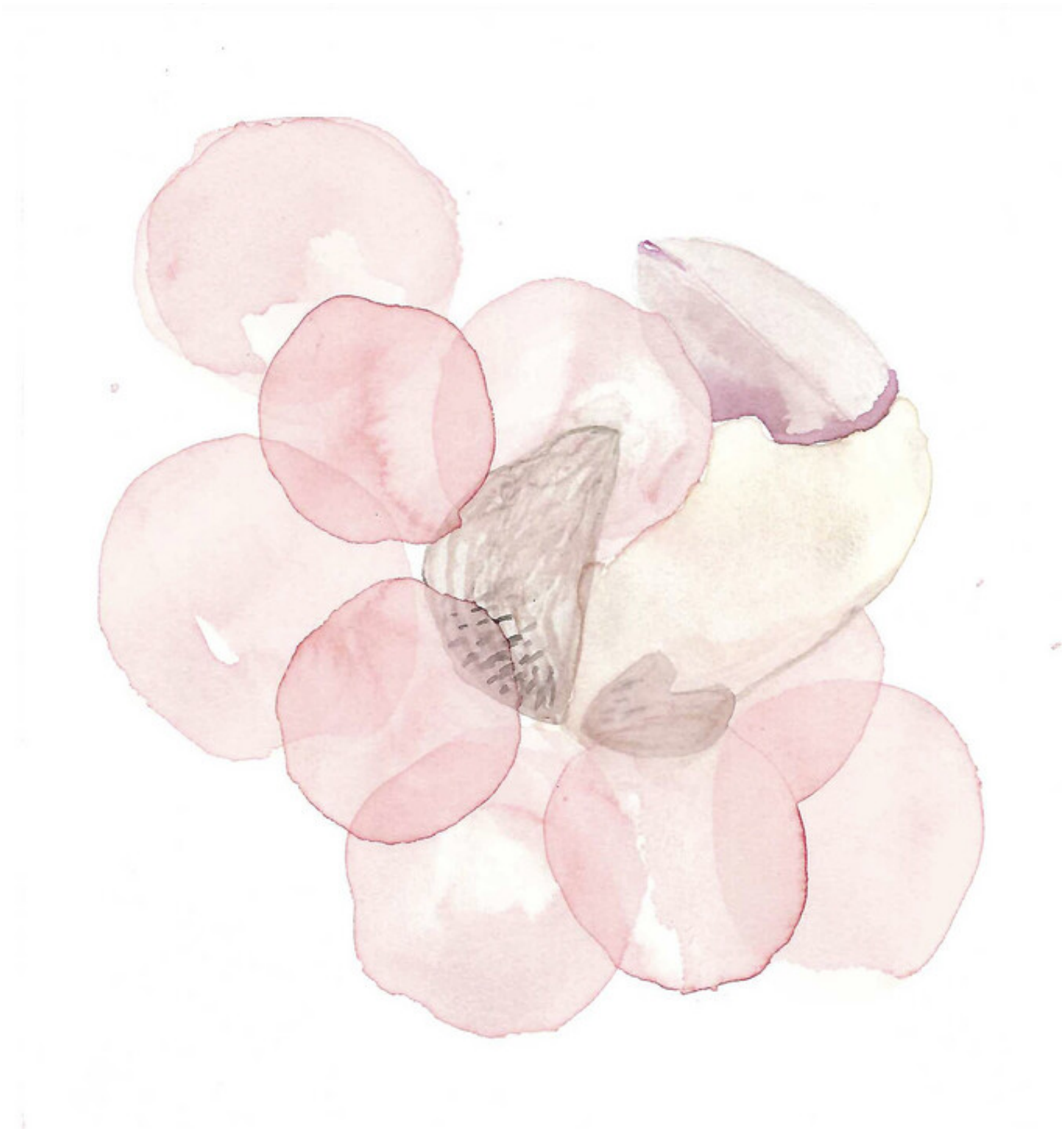
6. After Peach: Foxglove Days

These days the trench we once knew has come apart. The material use of a defensive channel cut into the earth is no longer viable. When munitions are administered by agile drone, the trench cannot shield the wedged human from aerial bombardment, nor protect a living body from an electronic communication device exploding in hand or pocket. I listen to a broadcaster explain the Israeli deployment of their pager technology the same week I read an early Hervé Guibert novel, *Arthur's Whims* (*Les Lubies d'Arthur*). Guibert's protagonist squeezes the chest of a wild bird stuffed into his pocket until its heart pops. The senselessness is devastating. The entire book is a blitzkrieg of birds and boys, white settlers (without settlements) demonic at their own shore, imploding without any state war. But imperial wars did not cease in the early 1980s when *Arthur's Whims* was penned. On the contrary, France was participating in Argentina's Dirty War, the Western Sahara War, the Angolan Civil War, Shaba II in Zaire, the Chadian-Libyan conflict, the Corsican conflict, and the Basque conflict. The novel cannot digest. The sublimation of state warfare solicits an immersion into a murderous, lush, local surreal. But smothered in both—in the *terroir* and the terror—this reader jumbles current events, hoping for a personal recovery from brutal reading, whether novel or newspaper. But melted electronics coat the underside of the internet. The wild bird transmogrifies into hacked pager. Squeeze *something* until its heart pops.

Almost a decade later, after HIV gives way to AIDS, Hervé Guibert attempts to squeeze and stop his heart with a compound derived from the digitalis plant (also known as the foxglove or fingerhut). He does this for French television in his 1992 video diary *Modesty and Shame* (*La Pudeur ou l'Impudeur*). By then France is involved in the Rwandan Civil War, the Djiboutian Civil War, and the Bosnian War. *Modesty and Shame* doubles up, a cul-de-sac for both plague and trench art.

At some other point before or after the video, but always in war, Guibert writes about a poison that enters with a kiss, flowing from one mouth to another. An open-mouthed make-out session ends with one mouth delivering a foxglove blossom to the other mouth.

Stairwell of the Haus des Rundfunks (Broadcasting House) commissioned by the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft and designed by Hans Poelzig (1929–31). Here, anti-communist, pro-fascist Jane "The Georgia Peach" Anderson went on air for the first time on April 14, 1941 to campaign against the "Red Anti-Christ" and detail the "dynamic life of the Reich." All of her broadcasts concluded with strains of the Benny Goodman Orchestra tune "Scatterbrain."



Author's watercolor. I tried to locate a photo by Herve Guibert featuring a blossoming fingerhut but I couldn't. "I would have liked to photograph his prick surrounded by fragrant, pale-pink peonies," writes Guibert. But he didn't.

X

Mary Walling Blackburn was born in Orange, California. Artist and writer Walling Blackburn's work engages a wide spectrum of materials that probe and intensify the historic, ecological, and class-born brutalities of North American life. Publications include *Quaestiones Perversas* (Pioneer

Works, 2017) cowritten with Beatriz E. Balanta, and *Cream Psychosis*, a forthcoming book of collected writings (Sterberg Press and e-flux journal, 2025).

1
Was Shamai helping to enforce the Absentee Property Law of 1950, a legal instrument that the State of Israel used to confiscate Palestinian property vacated due to Israel's own aggression? Was Shamai quelling the monthlong protests set off by the Wadi Salib Riots, a series of events where Mizrahim objected to the comprehensive Ashkenazi oppression of Jewish-Arab immigrants? Was Shamai guarding the supposed "textile factory" where Israel was attempting to develop nuclear weapons with heavy water imported from Norway? What was Shamai being thanked for?

2
Clearly, neither Shamai nor his family desire this object or are willing to maintain tribute.

3
Presently, the Down Barracks site serves as an industrial park. Other vestigial cultural fragments are the local baseball team, known as the Blackhorses, and a thoroughfare, Black-Horse-Straße. Moreover, Eurodance is a globally recognizable outgrowth of Cold War–era US military bases and can be traced back to the Fulda Gap; the development of this percussion- and rhythm-driven music genre emerges just prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Milli Vanilli, the production phenomenon organized by Frank Farian in 1988, included three backup singers who had been raised on the edges of the Fulda Gap because their fathers were soldiers on base. What political insight is rendered by considering Milli Vanilli as Cold War trench art?

4
Talking to *BFBS Forces News*, military historian Lt. Col. Dan Snedeker dispels an oft-repeated myth about how the 11th Armored Cavalry got the appellation "Blackhorse Regiment." Legend has it that the name comes from a 1924 California oil fire battle that left the cavalry's white horses covered in soot. But Snedeker instead claims that the nickname probably comes from when the regiment was stationed on the border of Mexico and California to enforce the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. On their off time, the troops played extras in Hollywood films, where they were asked, for cinematic effect, to only ride black horses. Why subsequent generations of soldiers insisted on an alternate history might be rooted in white attachment to supremacist aesthetics, particularly blackface and its uncanny application to service animals. See https://www.forcesnews.com/feature/debunking-legend-behind-11th-armored-cavalry-regiments-nickname-blackhorse-regiment .

5
For a checklist that includes all bird species presently found in Fulda, see https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/checklist.jsp?region=DEhefl . During the Cold War, local birders reporting from the edges of the fencing noted the presence of endangered birds not found elsewhere.

6
The joke not only hinges on how brief the soldier's agency might be, but on the near impossibility of the bodily stretch. Few could contort themselves enough to kiss their own ass; even a whiff of the perineum is the stuff of fantasy. We, the powerless, glean pleasure in at least sharing that we are wise to the nature of our subjugation.

7
The British Museum's secretum of phallocentric artefacts, now dismantled, provides a precedent for another possible use of the middle finger.

8
A pacifist archivist on an ego trip, possessed by a dream that their own comprehensive cataloging would render peace, might pause to conjure what cannot be collected: that which has been atomized.

9
Here smoking functions as a spatial device that clears the ground for thinking. It is toxic to be sure, but hardly registers in comparison to nuclear annihilation.

10
One WWII helmet, while still incorporating a rather standard symbol of liberty, gets complicated. It features two cartoonish statues in dresses celebrating, one waving a torch in the air and the other a sword. These revelers are New York City's own copper giantess, the Statue of Liberty, and Kiev's taller titanium colossus, Mother Ukraine. Mother Ukraine was erected by the Soviets in 1979 and was initially named "Mother Motherland." She was intended to be a personification of Russia. The statue-chimera has since been modified to represent Ukraine, but with Russia's invasion, could it be recycled yet again? Here too, material from

one war is refashioned for the sale of propaganda for another war. This particular business was a woodshop before the invasion, and its shift in merchandise is central to its economic survival.

11
As of February 12, 2025.

12
The drone fragment ready-mades fall short of the parameters of therapeutic trench art: there is little material reflection of the seller's shell shock, which reveals the conditions of this particular seller's monetization. I will stop short of calling it a conceptual line.

13
See https://www.etsy.com/listing/1689383515/souvenir-from-frontline-original . Last accessed February 12, 2025.

14
Fred Pearce, "As War Halts, the Environmental Devastation in Gaza Runs Deep," *Yale Environment 360* , February 6, 2025 https://e360.yale.edu/features/gaza-war-environment .

15
Zain Hussain, "How Top Arms Exporters Have Responded to the War in Gaza," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, October 3, 2024 https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2024/how-top-arms-exporters-have-responded-war-gaza .

16
Hannah Ryggen's 1935 tapestry *Etiopia* was featured in the same 1937 Paris exhibition as Picasso's *Guernica*. Ryggen's depiction of Mussolini's skewered head was censored but *Guernica* was displayed in full.

17
Artists invested in stopping war often feel obliged to generate graphics for campaigns that are bureaucratic and that *feel* incredibly dull—like a boycott, or a phone bank. They might have to conjure luminous images of war tax resistance, whether made of clay, video, wool, or oil. It is hard to "go dull"—to resist seeing something like Hannah Ryggen's anti-fascist tapestries as a better solution. But what is measurably instigated these days by works that fall squarely into the realm of protest art—that are eventually shipped across an ocean, and strung up in a museum, and maybe reviewed? I wish to be surprised.

18
In order to avoid sharpshooters, soldiers burrowed into the sides of their trenches, where they could maintain a certain level of stillness, even while carving.

19
This flip-flop of pronouns is not just about gender expansion; it cleaves more closely to the pressure of material facts: from the Revolutionary War through the US Civil War, a smattering of females passing in male uniform fought alongside male soldiers; both ate and smoked and whittled in between successive carnage. Within the subset who lived beyond the war, some veterans reconstructed a femme surface and others remained as men, undetected within their masculine frame.

20
Although the trench is attributed to WWI, its European iterations can be traced back several hundred years prior. For example, see Sébastien Le Prestre, Marquis of Vauban's use in 1673. However, this European application of the trench was borrowed from detailed reports of Ottoman trenches at the siege of Candia (Crete, 1648–69). Vauban simplified the Turkish structure. Further siege-craft genealogies of the trench stretch back even further to, for example, the Siege of Medina, 1053–54.

21
How many images in a vigilante's USB will be harvested by contemporary artists? Hito Steyerl establishes the wired mainstream and contemporary art economy's tendencies towards the poor image, and we see the resulting gallery mutations, sourced from the relentlessly casual Abu Ghraib torture pics to bacchanalian January 6 video feeds. See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal*, no. 10 (November 2009) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ .

22
The stone bibles are not so much a lover's token. A series of stone bibles were carved by a Confederate soldier while in detention at a POW prison and appear to have been commissioned by fellow detainees. Wooden chains, also produced by prisoners of war, symbolically flex between literal imprisonment and the hackneyed "chains of love."

23
The Gungywamp is an archeological complex in the woods of Groton, Connecticut rife with competing archeological and folk narratives of stone structures ritually based or agrarian, Indigenous, or colonial. All is overlaid with supernatural tales and wandering Irish monk fantasies. Pricey tours of the private site are conducted by the local nature center.

24
Vaginal transudation is sometimes referred to as "cyprin." It differs from vaginal fluid in that transudation is specifically generated by sexual arousal—increased blood flow and pressure instigates the passage of the fluid, consisting of water and proteins, through membrane, onto vaginal walls.

25
Scroll to the second paragraph https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/peaches/ .

Yuk Hui

An Introduction to Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking

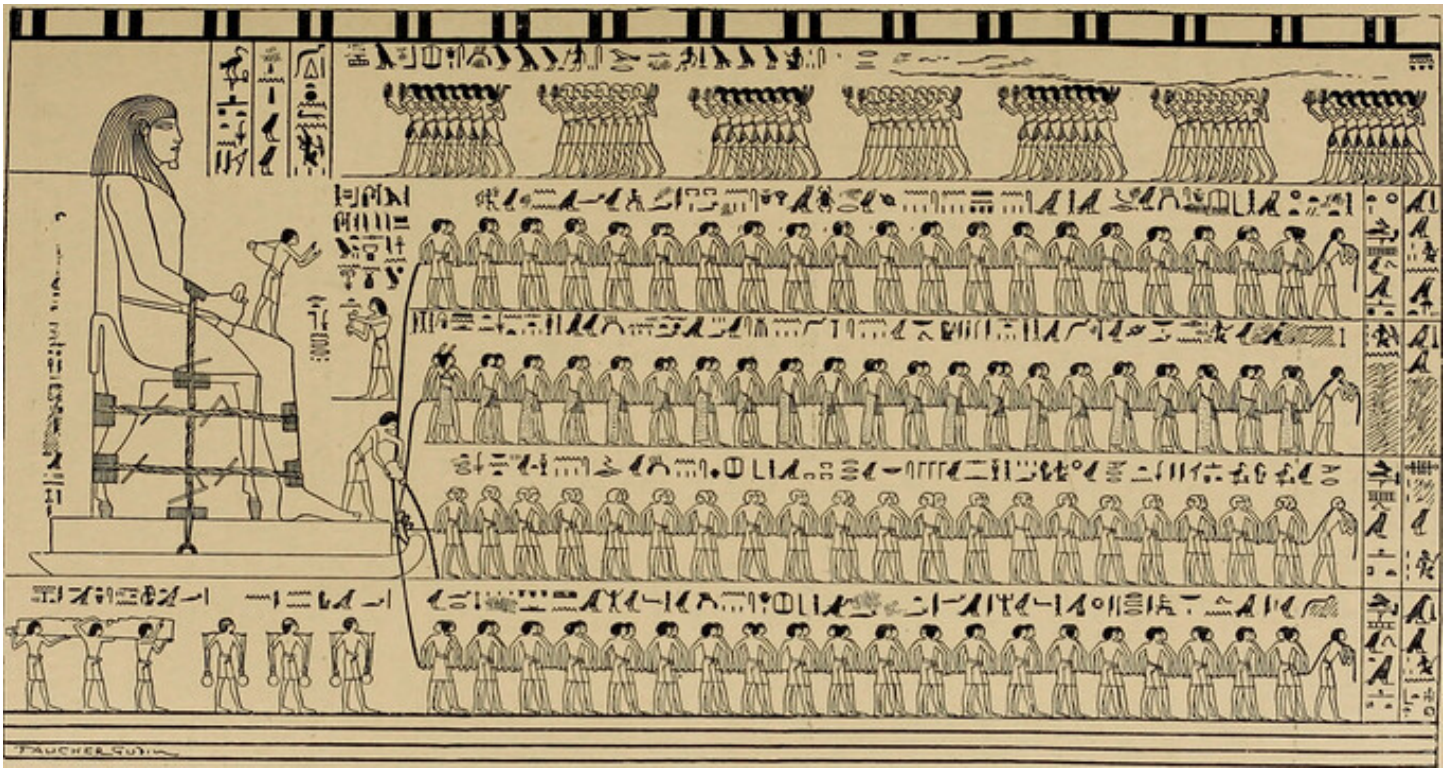
The current work immodestly calls for a planetary thinking—a thinking that Kostas Axelos already announced in view of the domination of planetary technology and the threshold of a new epoch to come during the 1960s. The rationale behind this call is simple: we do not yet think planetarily and must learn to think planetarily, even though this may well take a considerable amount of time to come. The planetary is viewed as such, but it remains the unthought.[1] To think planetarily doesn't necessarily mean proclaiming or defining the sovereignty of outer space, or delving into terraforming and geoengineering, even though such topics might be anticipated in a book dedicated to planetary thinking. To think planetarily, first of all, means thinking beyond the configuration of modern nation-states, which have not been able to move away from vicious economic and military competition; second, it means formulating a language of coexistence that will allow diverse people and species to live on the same planet; and third, it means developing a new framework that will enable us to go beyond the question of territory, respond to the current ecological crisis, and reverse the accelerated entropic process of the Anthropocene. The task of planetary thinking resonates with the idea of perpetual peace as proposed by Abbé de Saint-Pierre and then later by Kant, Fichte, and others. One must note that when these authors were writing, modern nation-states were still young in Europe, and thus the nation-state could be considered the most appropriate political form. Industrial capitalism was still in its infancy, and the damage of planetarization was not yet foreseeable.[2] Organic nature, captured by two key concepts, community and reciprocity, stands as the model for perpetual peace because different parts constitute the whole, and every part will be conditioned by each other and the whole. Therefore, Kant enthusiastically claims that perpetual peace will be "guaranteed by an equilibrium of forces and a most vigorous rivalry" between the states.[3] This is why, instead of looking at the world from the lens of the nation-state and nature, we demand a new framework for the planetary. Considering there have been many excellent studies on the planetary from philosophers,[4] historians, designers, and Marxist scholars,[5] we propose to take a different path to carry out this inquiry.

Following my previous works, this treatise will attempt to bring technology to the forefront of political thought. For planetary thinking to be possible, we cannot avoid and ignore the long tradition of political philosophy, but we must likewise read the history of political thought through a new lens: the question of technology. We might again, immodestly, call this attempt a search for a *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus.* A *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus* means that our inquiry no longer sees politics and technology as separate spheres; instead, we have a rather urgent task before us: bringing technology to the centrality of political philosophy, or, in other words, to ground a political philosophy in technology. This underlines our intention of reading

Project Cybersyn was a Chilean project from 1971 to 1973 during the presidency of Salvador Allende aimed at constructing a distributed decision support system to aid in the management of the national economy. The project consisted of 4 modules: an economic simulator, custom software to check factory performance, an operations room, and a national network of telex machines that were linked to one mainframe computer. License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

political thought and its history. However, this task is both trivial and enormous. It is trivial because one could hardly fail to recognize that today technology is the main battlefield where different nation-states enter into conflict. Indeed, military offenses have now been transformed into information warfare. It is an enormous philosophical task because to achieve it successfully, one must laboriously retrieve the concept and the role of technology from Plato to contemporary political philosophers, as was the task of deconstruction, especially Jacques Derrida's and Bernard Stiegler's work. Deconstruction shows that philosophy, since the beginning, repressed (*verdrängt*)—in the Freudian sense—the question of technology. Therefore, it is necessary to make visible the *centrality* of technology in philosophy as the unthought that is, nonetheless, indispensable to thinking. Therefore, from the point of view of deconstruction, a political philosophy that ignores technology is defective and has to be rethought anew through the lens of technology. A *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus* would be necessary for political philosophy if we follow the school of deconstruction.

However, what does it mean to say that technology is central to political thought? Do we mean that technology is a necessary tool of governance or that politics must respond to any technological development that brings new dynamics to communities? Or do we need an ethics of technology for every apparatus or application—for example, to make Amazon Alexa's way of addressing children more ethical? This way of posing the question still takes technology and politics as two spheres: one sphere acts or reacts to another. A *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus* suggests that the political and the technical are not two separate spheres. *Nomos* is, first of all, a technical activity before being jurisprudential. Moreover, one could conceive the political as a technological phenomenon—a phenomenon in the sense that political forms such as the polis, empire, the modern state, and the *Großraum* are particular manifestations of technological progress *and* its imagination while, at the same time, technology is contained and constrained by these different political forms. These forms are manifestations of what Lewis Mumford called *megamachines.* The first megamachine emerged from the end of the fourth millennium, which we see in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China, and Peru, where various components—political, economic, military, bureaucratic, and royal—assembled into a gigantic machine according to the division of labor.[6] Mumford provided us with a grand history of the megamachine, passing by absolute monarchy, which, in his view, aligns with the megamachine sustained by a mechanistic epistemology. With the idea of a *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus* in mind, we start our journey.



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§1. On the Planetary Condition

Technology has brought about a new human condition that exceeds Hannah Arendt's observation from 1958, when the launch of Sputnik struck the political theorist with a new form of alienation of man from Earth. On the first page of *The Human Condition,* Arendt wrote that the launch of Sputnik was "second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom."[7] We should also remind ourselves of the shock that Heidegger received when he saw the image of the Earth taken from the moon in 1966, which confirmed his analysis in the lecture "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) and led to his lament of a technological catastrophe in the interview "Only a God Can Save Us" (1966).[8] The Earth being grasped as an image of the globe symbolizes the zeitgeist of the second half of the twentieth century. One could consider it a *spatial revolution* in various senses; first, it constitutes the first time that the Earth was observed from outer space, not the other way around, and before human beings even observed it. This observation of observation, so to speak, reverses how outer space was perceived in everyday experience: the Earth is no longer the ground upon which we stand and look into the sky since now it exists in the form of an artifact available for manipulation. It resonates with what Marshall McLuhan said about Sputnik during an interview in the 1970s: "Sputnik created a new environment for the planet. … Nature ended, and Ecology was born. 'Ecological' thinking became inevitable as soon as the planet moved up into the status of a work of art."[9] Nature disappears since it is no longer enchanted and mysterious but only part of a much larger artifact. This artifact is not static. Instead, it is understood as a dynamic system. *Ecology*, a term coined by the biologist and zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) to describe "the entire science of the relationships of the organism to its surrounding external world," hence acquired a technological and political meaning.[10]

Space is no longer a geometrical representation; instead, space, thus conceived, is now a dynamic system in which different forces and factors reciprocally act on each other. James Lovelock was one of the first to have studied the dynamic between the geosphere, biosphere, and atmosphere. His early Gaia theory (before the collaboration with Lynn Margulis) tells us that the Earth is a cybernetic system capable of homeostatic functions.[11] One of the most provocative caricatures of the Earth as a machine comes from Richard Buckminster Fuller's description of it as a spaceship. Earth is a spaceship, and we, the Earth's inhabitants, are only its passengers. This image of the spaceship was illuminated in the novella *The Wandering Earth* written by the science-fiction writer Liu Cixin, which was made into a film in 2019, the sequel of which, in 2022, was infiltrated with a "patriotic cosmopolitanism."[12] The passengers must anticipate the wreckage one day in the future. For a few decades now, we have already heard the alarm of climate change and ecological crisis, and this alarm is getting louder and more frequent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change constantly warned us about the necessity of immediate action: it's "now or never!"[13] In response, entrepreneurs

Technician working on Sputnik 1, 1957. Photo: Sovfoto.

such as Elon Musk have been exploring the possibility of emigrating to Mars or escaping to another galaxy—although in the name of humanity and its dream of "being among the stars"; of course, this would be only for the ultrarich who could afford it. Besides Plan B, that is, to escape to the other planets, Plan A is to steer the spacecraft to a safer place. If the Earth is a spaceship, this also means that one can modify its structure, improve its speed, and energize it. *Terraforming* is a manifestation of the power of modern technologies capable of engineering the planet's atmosphere, biosphere, and geosphere. Similar voices are also heard, for example, in the "Ecomodernist Manifesto" signed by people such as Stewart Brand and his colleagues from the Breakthrough Institute, who claim that more advanced technologies can repair the damage caused by technology on Earth. As such, the key to the survival of planet Earth is the further advancement of technology. The same wish can be seen at work for the transhumanists who see the possibility of endless enhancement of the human body and intelligence in technology. Eco-modernism, transhumanism, and Prometheanism join hand in hand in this technological epoch, where anthropocentrism has surged to a historical height. Both Plan A and B are an objectification of the Earth as artifact, as something subject to engineering and design. These forms of planetarization are a consequence of modernity, yet they are not the planetary thinking that we are aspiring to.

Retrospectively we could identify the process of planetarization with that of technological globalization—in the sense that modern Western technology becomes a global phenomenon and the common aim of human development. That is to say, science and technology have detached themselves from the scientific community of the West and become the foundation of global communities consisting of researchers from everywhere. This resonates with Heidegger's 1964 article "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in which he famously indicates two meanings of the end of philosophy. First, it means "the triumph of the manipulable arrangement [*steuerbare Einrichtung*] of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world"—in other words, society will be grasped as a cybernetic model because the term *steuerbare Einrichtung* refers explicitly to cybernetics. Second, the "beginning of the world-civilization will be based on Western European thinking."[14] Heidegger did not mean that Western European thinking is superior than other forms of thinking and that, as such, it will become the base of world civilization. What he means is that Western European thinking finds its completion in cybernetics, and that cybernetics, the synonym of modern technology for him, will be a planetary phenomenon. Therefore, it is because of and through cybernetics that the progress of the world civilization is now based on Western European thinking. This verdict of Heidegger's became even more evident after the fall of the Berlin Wall

and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when a thermodynamic ideology started ruling the globe. By *thermodynamic ideology* we mean an epistemology that originated from physics and then penetrated the economic and political sphere, becoming its operating principle.[15] A thermodynamic ideology is closely associated with the free market, open society, economic freedom, and so forth. It also indicates a new form of individualism whose freedom is defined by the market. An open system is often described in neoliberal principles and a closed system as authoritarian communist regimes. The East lost any resistance in the face of the demand for an open society and a free market. Today the East has returned with fierce technological competition and, most significantly, an ideological war.

Yet, we must ask, what could non-Western thought's role in the planetarization process be? The contest between the West and East brought about reactionary and nationalist politics in the past century and will continue to grow. However, what remains to be asked is if non-Western thought could contribute something more and even negate such an ideological manipulation. Searching for a ready-made theory of the planetary in various philosophical traditions would end in vain since no one in history has already anticipated our current situation. Thinking is epochal in that it belongs to a particular epoch, and even when a system of thought is passed to us, it can only gain its relevance through radical reinterpretation. Therefore, it is not my aim to claim that Western thinking failed and Eastern thinking will triumph, because such opposition is merely ideological and against thinking itself. While postcolonialism has been trying to pin down the relation between planetarization and colonization—that is to say, the relation between colonization and capitalism that exploited the planet to its extreme in the form of farming, mining, hunting, and fishing, etc.—it has almost always been silent on the issue of technology and the possibility of non-Western thought's contribution to a planetary thinking of technology and politics given the coming global catastrophes. On the other hand, Marxism tends to reduce all causes to capitalism, for capitalism is the synonym for the economic activities that exhaust the planet and create consecutive ecological mutations associated with climate change and the Anthropocene. However, today's crisis is economic, technological, and political. Therefore, postcolonialism and Marxism should also be reevaluated in the development of a planetary thinking. Before directly addressing planetary thinking, let us look into the phenomenon of planetarization to understand its essence.

Planetarization as a modern project is, first of all, the synchronization of time. First, through the convergence of transportation and communication technology, it can create a synchronicity between different geographical territories and machines;[16] second, through the advancement of science and technology, it constitutes a global time axis, a common mode of existence of humanity. *Nomos,* as Carl Schmitt claims in *The* Nomos *of the Earth,* is "the measure by which the ground and soil of the earth [*Grund und Boden der Erde*] in a particular order is divided and situated; it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this process."[17] In Schmitt's thought, we see that the history of the *nomos* of the earth is fundamentally a history of the revolution of space—that is, the constant conquest of space, or what he calls the *elements* (land, sea, and air), via technological means. Ultimately, we see that the conquest of the elementary form of space finally arrives at a qualitative change: the suppression of space and its conversion to time. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the global financial industry and logistics functioned according to a synchronicity that ensured the circulation of money and goods. This does not mean that space is without importance; on the contrary, borders still function regularly, but territories are made into smooth planes via global logistics, the standardization of commodities, and the artificialization of food (such as animal farming and greenhouse agriculture), which allow these products to be detachable from any fixed locality. During the pandemic, the smooth plane was suspended, and suddenly, the experience of time was no longer the same as it was. Regarding global logistics, one now expects a longer wait time for mail and goods to arrive. In the summer of 2021, I sent a postcard from Berlin to Japan, which took more than two months to arrive. This is longer than it took for Mori Ōgai to send mail from Berlin to Tokyo more than a century ago. The interruption of global logistics reveals the true meaning of globalization: an increase in synchronicity that constantly compresses space to the shortest distance. This synchronicity is fragile because it depends on machinery, which relies on the energy market and is also vulnerable to state power's intervention into the spatial order.

This synchronicity also expresses itself in the synchronization of history; that is to say, it is only through technology that humanity could be said to follow a linearity that goes from *Homo faber* to *Homo deus* via *Homo sapiens.* The human is, first of all, a technical being, and therefore the evolution of the human has to be conceived as the continuation of technical activities. In anthropology of technology, André Leroi-Gourhan affirms the fundamental role of technics in the process of evolution. He rejects the commonsense saying that human beings descend from apes because, for him, this claim ignores the fact that the invention and use of tools conditions human evolution. Leroi-Gourhan and his contemporaries, such as Édouard Le Roy and Henri Bergson, accepted that there is a discontinuity between *Homo faber* and *Homo sapiens.*[18] Like Georges Bataille, who in *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art* (1955) associates the birth of art with *Homo sapiens*,[19] Leroi-Gourhan considers that there is a break between the technical, which characterizes *Homo faber,* and the intellect, which characterizes *Homo sapiens.* The former is associated with the hand and the latter with the brain. However, this assumed rupture is

problematic or even contradictory because, if the human is first of all *Homo faber,* then that which defines it—namely, technology—became nonessential for *Homo sapiens*.[20] And if technology is nonessential, then we have difficulty in understanding the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. As Leroi-Gourhan defines it in *Gesture and Speech* and other works, technics could be understood as an anthropological universal, namely, the externalization of memory and the liberation of organs. The flints used in ancient times should be understood as the crystallization of body gestures, which was only possible after a long process of biological evolution when complex motor nervous systems were developed. Or, as per the example of Lascaux, these paintings are the externalization of the memory and imagination of *Homo sapiens,* which we inherit today and represent in various technical means. That is to say, the intellect is not separable from technics. On the contrary, the technical is at the same time its externalization and its support. Thus, the criticism that Bernard Stiegler levied against Leroi-Gourhan in his *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* concerned the emphasis that was put on the opposition between the technical and the intellect, arguing that it is merely a repetition of Bataille's thesis and, as such, risks being self-contradictory.[21] This rejection of the rupture between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo faber* in terms of the separation of the intellect from technics also refuses the infamous fall that Jean-Jacques Rousseau described in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755).

Thus, we can understand that anthropogenesis is grounded on technical activities and that the human is, thus, no longer the master who creates technology but rather the human who is made possible *by* technology; in other words, the human is a technological phenomenon. The anthropological understanding of technology unifies the history of the human species, and civilizations are synchronized to the same global axis of time by technological convergence—a world history is present to us at the same time as a history of the anthropogenetic excess, namely, technology, or more precisely Western technology. Thus, as was claimed earlier, the second meaning of synchronicity completes human history that moves from *Homo faber* to the highly evolved *Homo sapiens* and now toward a new possibility. This possibility is exploited by science fiction as the *Homo deus,* the realization of the human as God. It is also the end of Feuerbach's famous critique of God as the projection of human desire because *Homo deus* is no longer a projection but the realization of such a projection. Science fiction reigns in this epoch of planetarization and takes philosophy to the *Schwärmerei,* where everyone could be called a philosopher of technology.

§2. Planetary Thinking as Political Epistemologies

The objectification of the planet in the twentieth century on all levels ranging from abstract representation to scientific exploration, including mining, earth system science, automated agriculture, hydroengineering, and geoengineering, as well as to the preparation for space war, has presented us in the twenty-first century with an urgent task to conceive a new political form, one that allows us to imagine a future for peace and coexistence between different peoples, between humans and nonhumans. Planetary thinking will have to firmly grasp the process of planetarization and develop a *language of coexistence.* Planetary thinking here has to be strictly distinguished from global thinking. Globalization started during the Age of Exploration toward the end of the fifteenth century, together with colonization; culminated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, celebrating the thermodynamic ideology; and while debatable, is claimed to have ended with the Covid-19 pandemic. In this sense, globalization is planetarization. Planetary thinking should be oriented toward the future with a new conceptual framework. The obstacle is that today we still think primarily from the perspective of the nation-state and its economic and military interests. The planetary should not be confused with a new configuration of power between the states, such as a bipolar or multipolar configuration, because this does not change the nature of politics. For this would be the mere continuation of the politics of the nation-state; the difference would only be related to who has more power and more control over resources and the world market.

It is also the objectivation of the planet that urges us to take it as a subject and think planetarily. This is also why Bruno Latour suggests formulating his planetary agenda on two premises. The first premise claims that all humans confront the same ecological mutations. Because these mutations are planetary, and we are this planet's habitants, we must think planetarily. This premise might remind us of Kant's premise of the *Weltbürgertum* from his "Perpetual Peace," where Kant states that the surface of the Earth is communally possessed by everyone (*das Recht des gemeinschaftlichen Besitzes der Oberfläche der Erde*) and that it follows that the right of visiting a foreign country should be recognized as a natural law because borders are only artificial.[22] Therefore, the planet as a common object everyone shares is imperative to imagine, constituting a collectivity beyond artificial boundaries. The second premise of Latour's project states that since Europeans have never been modern, Europeans and non-Europeans should, therefore, find a way to collaborate to overcome the impasse of modernity.[23] It is an impasse because the system of knowledge that originates from European modernity has spread its wings through new transportation and communication technologies, pervading the world and at times seeming irreversible—this was a subject closely examined in *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (2016). The title of Latour's exhibition at

Healthcare workers conducting mass COVID-19 testing in Hong Kong, 2021. License: CC BY 2.0.

the Taipei Biennale 2020, "You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet," concisely summarizes his effort to think planetarily. Latour hence calls for a new diplomacy; in response, we will endeavor to address it as an epistemological diplomacy. Therefore, we will have to understand planetary thinking historically, that is to say, to reconstruct planetary thinking to expose its limits and conceive of other possible political forms. Planetary thinking means more than just developing thinking capable of dealing with larger scales and sizes. There is no doubt that scale is an important element, but at the same time, when the scale is too large, one ignores the question of locality, which is equally essential to a planetary thinking. Hence, our objective here is not to propose a grand politics of dividing and transforming the planet Earth. Instead, we seek to revisit the fundamental question of technology and its implications for the twenty-first century.

Kojin Karatani, in his book *The Structure of World History,* suggests that the current political form, which he formulates in terms of the trinity of capital-nation-state, must be surpassed or sublated since it has already attained its limit. Even though the work critiques Marx and the Marxians, who reduce economy to its modes of production, the inspiration is Kantian since he is attracted to Kant's notion of the "world republic" as the political form that might transcend the nation-state. His main target is, thus, Hegel. Because Hegel, instead of Marx, is the philosopher who truly grasped the unity of capital-nation-state. Marxians still consider the nation and the state as superstructures separated from the economic base. Instead of the mode of production, Karatani analyzes world history from the perspective of modes of exchange. World history is conceived in terms of three dominant modes of exchange: the exchange of gifts, state-enforced distribution, and the world market, each corresponding to three dominant modes of power: the gift, the state, and money. Karatani thus proposed to conceive a mode D that would sublate the nation-state; Mode D is the return of Mode A (the gift economy) in a higher form.

Karatani sees very clearly that to carry out the task of overcoming the nation-state, it is necessary to develop a thorough critique of Hegel's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right.*[24] However, instead of further pursuing Karatani's analysis of the history of the economy, I wish to start with the notion of unity in what Karatani calls the "unity of

capital-nation-state." Karatani, through his reading of Kant, compares the capitalist economy with the sensibility, the state with the understanding, and the nation with the imagination. If, in Kant, it is the imagination that synthesizes the sensibility and the understanding, then likewise, the nation synthesizes capital and the state. Therefore, Karatani claims, "The capitalist economy (sensibility) and state (understanding) are held together by the nation (imagination). Together they form Borromean rings, where the whole collapses if any of the three rings is removed."[25] We contend that this unity cannot be grasped topologically by Borromean rings—this also differentiates our reading of Kant and Hegel from Karatani's. Karatani also recognizes that Hegel's dialectics is key to understanding the unity, as he writes, "This Borromean knot cannot be grasped through a one-dimensional approach: this was why Hegel adopted the dialectical explanation."[26] However, this grasp remains too underdeveloped.

This unity has to be approached from the perspective of a political epistemology instead of a Borromean diagram. By *political epistemology,* I mean the epistemology transposed from science to politics, economy, and technology, which consequently constitutes a new paradigmatic shift in the modes of knowing, organization, and operation of society. Or in other words, there is such an epistemology behind every megamachine. We do not see only one megamachine and one epistemology, but rather the evolution of the megamachine alongside epistemologies that adequately justify its existence and specific forms of organization. The history of planetary thinking could then be studied through an examination of various political epistemologies. This book will depart from two major epistemologies, mechanism and organism. The organism, or its analytically and mathematically deduced model, *organicism,* presents an epistemology radically distinguished from the mechanism that fashioned the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The culmination of mechanism could be read in correlation with the emergence of political absolutism and regimentation, which Mumford endeavored to evidence in his reading of Descartes and Hobbes in the second volume of *The Myth of the Machine.* The shift from mechanism to organism characterizes a crucial epistemological rupture toward the end of the eighteenth century. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* stands out as the major work that placed organism at the top of philosophy in Germany and constitutes one of the most profound treatises on organism understood as a proto-model of the philosophical system.[27] We could even claim that Kant imposed the organic condition of philosophizing, which has continued until our time—notably, the last chapter of Mumford's *The Myth of the Machine* is titled "The New Organum." It is dedicated to the "organic world view" seen as the antidote to the "mechanical world view" that has dominated since the seventeenth century. This analysis of the history of organicism was one of the main tasks undertaken in *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019) and *Art and Cosmotechnics* (2021), and we will continue in the current work by extending it to political philosophy.

Importantly, a critique of the nation-state does not mean that the state is the opposite of planetary thinking. Instead, we have to recognize the state as a stage in the history of such thinking, that which has yet to be rendered explicit, and we will attempt to do so in the current work. This unfolding of a planetary thinking will start with a critique of Hegel's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right,* focusing on the concept of the organic form. What makes Hegel's political philosophy significant is his justification of the modern state as the culmination of reason and the political form under which freedom and the ethical life are possible.[28] Hegel's justification (*Berechtigung*) is logically deduced from his dialectical method. Dialectics will arrive at an organic form, which is also its principle. Thus, the political form of the modern state is organic, in contrast to the state machine that was seriously criticized for its positive and mechanistic nature in his earlier writings, such as the "German Constitution."[29] The organism of the state in Hegel's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* points to an *imaginary organic machine*.[30] That is to say, it is not yet an organism because an organism is already organized (or already concrete in the sense of Simondon), it is a fact; for the state, it is a goal[31] because the state is a form of organization that assimilates the organism under the principle of *reason* and *effectiveness.*

The projection of an emerging epistemology into politics often encounters problems because it remains speculative and, therefore, always ahead of its time. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* the young Marx challenged Hegel's organic state, asking what the difference would be between the organism of the state and the organism of the animal. Marx criticized Hegel, arguing that he could not explain the specificity of the organic state, and as such, his theorization remained only formal and empty. This criticism is important, however, not because Marx was right (Marx nonetheless recognized Hegel's theorization as a "great advance") but because Marx did not manage to comprehend its central role in Hegel's philosophy.[32] The opposition between materialism and idealism, which the Marxians employed against Hegel, comes from an intended misreading of Hegel, and it fails to see that the genesis of the spirit already implies a becoming organic that cannot do without a history of externalization. That is why a nuanced reading of Hegel's political philosophy is fundamental to a *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus,* and why earlier we called the Hegelian state an imaginary organic machine. The question that concerns us is what the limit might be of Hegel's political epistemology as a planetary thinking, and what succeeded it in the twentieth century.

Two limits have pushed us to develop a planetary thinking further. First, Hegel only applied organicity to the interiority of the state, never pushing it toward its exteriority. To put it plainly, Hegel refuses what Kant did to

conceive of an organicity of international relations and stops at a straightforward friend–enemy relation, which echoes that of Carl Schmitt. Second, the imaginary machine that Hegel conceptualized seems to have been realized by cybernetics, as Hegel scholar Gotthard Günther famously argues in his *The Unconsciousness of Machines: A Metaphysics of Cybernetics.*[33] Günther's conclusion comes from his dedicated studies on Hegel's logic and his turn toward cybernetics after immigrating to the United States. Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, had already announced that cybernetics overcomes the dichotomy between vitalism and mechanism because, through the notion of feedback, cybernetic machines are capable of assimilating the behavior of organisms. Retrospectively, we can also understand why Heidegger claims that cybernetics marks the completion or the end of philosophy. Today, when we look at the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning, we cannot ignore their origin in cybernetics, no matter how fast they have evolved in the past decades. This organic machine could be identified as belonging to various domains other than technology—for example, economy, ecology, and the earth sciences. Continuing this line of investigation, we might want to ask if the completion of philosophy in cybernetics also means the completion of Hegel's philosophy of right? Or does this completion also transcend the first limit mentioned above that the cybernetic system can extend from the interiority of the nation-state toward the exteriority, forming a gigantic organic machine that marks the milestone of the World Spirit in the coming centuries in the name of the "omega point" (Teilhard de Chardin) or the singularity (Kurzweil)? These questions, as speculative as they are, are nonetheless important for us to reflect on a political form adequate to future planetary thinking.

§3. Search for a Planetary Politics beyond the Nation-State

Is the state still relevant today? There have been many rumors that the state is dead and that the sovereign has already been dissolved by global capitalism.[34] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's trilogy could be considered the most systematic exposition on the lost cause of the nation-state and the guidebook for the new revolutionary subject, the *multitude.* According to the authors, as an empire, global capitalism has "taken sovereignty out of the way" because the sovereign has weakened its ability to decide on monetary and military matters.[35] In other words, globalization has incorporated every outside into its inside.[36] However, during a debate in 2016, Roberto Esposito challenged Negri that the opposite was, in fact, true because, in the past decade, due to the global financial crisis, it was in the end the national governments that saved the banks.[37] To borrow Esposito's words, "The *nomos* of the earth (to use Carl Schmitt's formula), along with production and distribution, goes back to being a kind of sharing out in a new geopolitical order of the world."[38]

Negri retorted that what Esposito's thinking lacks is precisely political.[39] Our task is not here to defend Esposito, the political immunologist, against Negri, the Marxist revolutionary. However, since the pandemic, it might be clear that the state was never withering away. Indeed, the trinity of nation-state-capital has become more exposed; fascism and nationalism have prevailed in many countries, including Italy, and all announcements of the end of sovereignty and capitalism are simply misdiagnoses that take the immediate as the ultimate truth. In hindsight, the discourse of the multitude gained momentum during the antiglobalization movements towards the end of the millennium. However, over the past decade, the antiglobalization movement has become relatively quiet. Instead, we observe seemingly perplexing anarchist gestures, exemplified by figures such as the conservative anarchist Audrey Tang (the minister of digital affairs of the Taiwan government), the utopian anarchist Elon Musk (as he claimed on X), and the ultimate anarchist Donald Trump (named by the *New Statesman*[40]).

There are other more profound challenges to project onto political epistemology, which were outlined earlier: the reading of modern political thought through the lens of the opposition between mechanism and organism, as well as the framework of the nation-state. Carl Schmitt's work should be carefully studied in this context. Carl Schmitt, a professor of constitutional and international law and a legal theorist of the Third Reich, stands out as one of the most profound thinkers of planetary thinking after Hegel. Schmitt is not Hegelian; instead, what we find in Schmitt's writings concerning Hegel is a mix of admiration and discontent. Schmitt distinguished three types of legal thought specific to his time: decisionism, normativism, and "concrete order and form thinking [*konkretes Ordnungs- und Gestaltungsdenken*]." We can understand the normativism Schmitt speaks of as corresponding to the mechanism, or the positivism of Hans Kelsen (notably, Schmitt's intellectual rival), and the "concrete order and form thinking" as corresponding to organism, which is exemplified in the political thought of Hegel since Hegel's state is "the concrete order of orders, the institution of institutions."[41] Schmitt's position, as we all know, is decisionism, which we will formulate as a political vitalism.

The political, according to Schmitt, is based neither on mechanism nor organism but rather on decisionism. In his *Political Theology,* Schmitt concisely defined the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception."[42] This power to decide on the exception and the friend-enemy distinction gives soul to the nation-state. The word *soul* here is not merely to be understood in its literal sense. Indeed, we can find in Schmitt's treatise on Hobbes a comparison of Hobbes's mechanization of the state with Descartes's mechanization of the human.[43] Schmitt's characterization of the sovereign as the power to declare the state of exception returns us not to an absolute power but rather to a legal framework that allows the sovereign

Map of the Netherlands in the shape of a lion (Leo Belgicus), Claes Janszoon Visscher II, Joannes van Doetecum I, 1650. License: Public Domain.

to override all legalities, for the sovereign is the ultimate ground of legitimacy.

This definition partially resolves the ontological problem of sovereignty. But the most puzzling question remains: What exactly is sovereignty? We are still looking for a satisfactory answer in both positive and natural law traditions. Positive law returns us to a presupposed *basic norm,* while natural law has been ceaselessly challenged by historicism in the past centuries, arguing that its foundation is only historically valid.[44] Schmitt's vitalism may be intrinsically a liberalism, as Martin Heidegger remarked in his seminars on Hegel's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right,* where we read, "Carl Schmitt thinks liberally: 1. because politics is 'also' a sphere; 2. because he thinks in terms of the individual and his bearing."[45] This comment may sound ironic because Carl Schmitt ceaselessly criticized liberalism as the seed of the collapse of the sovereign, which he finds in Hobbes and modern liberal democracy.

This political vitalism pushes Schmitt to reflect on the future of sovereignty given the world wars and the new international order that emerged due to these new dynamics. Schmitt saw the limit of the nation-state and its decline in light of American imperialism (after the distortion of the Monroe Doctrine) and the collapse of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum,* which once defined the global order. In other words, when the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* reigned over the global spatial order, it was intrinsically Eurocentric; its obsolescence suggests a new global spatial order that ought to appear, which, however, insists on the independence of sovereigns.

Schmitt's development of the *nomos* of the Earth attempts to provide a new political form after the nation-state and a *history of planetary thinking.* This history is equally a history of space conquests and spatial revolutions. Schmitt develops an elemental philosophy of geopolitics by neatly, and probably too neatly, plotting a trajectory from the *nomos* of the land to that of the sea and finally to the air. What is fundamental in Schmitt's rationale, though he only implicitly acknowledged it, is the question of technology. Again, this is how we could read Schmitt's political thought as a *Tractatus Politico-Technologicus.* In his "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" (1929), Schmitt already suggests that one shouldn't understand technology as anything neutral in the twentieth century. Spatial revolutions would not be possible without technological advancement. The development of sea power would not be possible without the Industrial Revolution, without which there would not be an opposition between the Behemoth (Continental Europe) and the Leviathan (England). The same goes for air power, which was only possible with the invention of aircraft, making it possible to fly across several sovereignties within a couple of hours.

In "The New *Nomos* of the Earth" (1955), Schmitt proposed three scenarios to conceive future planetary politics.[46] First, the configuration based on individual nation-states remains unchanged; second, the unification between the West and the East (in the East, he includes the Soviet Union and China). However, Schmitt does not see unification as necessarily desirable; thus the third scenario, the development into a new political form, which he calls the *Großraum,* or the big space. The *Großraum* is that which Schmitt wants to justify, as Hegel did with his political state. The *Großraum*—a term that, according to Schmitt, has its origin in the "technological-industrial-economical-organizational domain [*Bereich*]" during the turn of the century when energy and electricity supply unified the *Kleinräume* into a *Großraum-wirtschaft*.[47] More precisely, it is an imagination enabled by the spatial revolution brought about by air succeeding land and sea. The geographers Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, in their book *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future,* suggest that climate change will lead to the emergence of planetary sovereignty, which they call the *climate Leviathan.* The planetary sovereignty will decide on the state of emergency for the sake of the security of lives on Earth.[48] Though referring to Schmitt, they do not seem to have grasped that Schmitt might be the exact person who would immediately reject such a planetary sovereignty because he is precisely skeptical of any political institutions speaking in the name of humanity. If there is an "advancement" of planetary thinking in Schmitt, it is not a planetary sovereignty but the *Großraum.*

The *Großraum* is that which aims to resist the universalism of American imperialism. Universalism here should mean *universalization,* the promotion and homogenization of a set of values and knowledge regarded as the exclusive truth. Could the political vitalism and the *Großraum* of Schmitt succeed Hegel's organism and the nation-state, becoming the blueprint of future planetary politics? It is, nonetheless, necessary to bear in mind Schmitt's involvement in National Socialism and his justification of the Third Reich. However, one should not discredit all of his thought, rejecting it outright, as many so-called intellectuals do today with Heidegger and others. Like Schmitt, Heidegger wanted to justify National Socialism as a philosophical project, and Alexander Dugin, the right-wing and traditionalist thinker, who picked up Schmitt's *Großraum,* integrated it into his Eurasian project—which has subsequently been used to justify the "special military operation" in Ukraine. This does not mean that any discussion on Schmitt can only appear as a depreciation of his thought, which occupies the moral high ground. This is for sure politically correct, but it is philosophically insufficient. Instead, we should expose the limit of Schmitt's theory and, through this exhaustion, shed new light on a planetary thinking that defends both democracy and freedom. Again, we want to ask what the limits of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and the *Großraum* might be in view of the new challenge of the ecological crisis and the intensified competition of digital technologies.

X

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1
Kostas Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire: Le devenir-pensée du monde et le devenir-monde de la pensée* (Minuit, 1964)*,* 19. Toward the end of the introduction, Axelos states clearly an impasse: "Y aurait-il des *nouveautés* possibles, plus ou moins radicales? Pour le moment, aucun prophétisme, aucune rêverie et aucune utopie ne parviennent à dépasser cet état mouvant des choses. Ils restent muets et creux" (42). Axelos thinks that we are perhaps marching toward a planetary thinking that will be a retake (*reprise*) of the past and a preparation of the future.

2
For Heidegger, writing in the 1930s, planetarization implies a planetary lack of sensemaking (*Besinnungslosigkeit*), which is not limited to Europe but is also, for example, applicable to the United States and Japan. This lack of sensemaking is even more obvious today. Even if European philosophy completely reinvents itself, disruptive technologies will continue throughout the globe; see Martin Heidegger, *GA66 Besinnung (1938/39)* (Vittorio Klo stermann, 1997), 74.

3
Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in *Political Writings,* ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 114.

4
Bruno Latour's effort is the most remarkable in the past decade. Latour achieved this not only via writings but also through exhibitions and workshops.

5
Among all the outstanding works, just to mention a few, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Verso, 2015); William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Duke University Press, 2017); Sam Mickey, *Whole Earth Thinking and Planetary Coexistence: Ecological Wisdom at the Intersection of Religion, Ecology, and Philosophy* (Routledge, 2015); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

6
Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* , vol. 1, *Technics and Human Development* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 188.

7
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1; Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford University Press, 2009).

8
Howard Caygill, "Heidegger and the Automatic Earth Image," *Philosophy Today* 65, no. 2 (2021).

9
Marshall McLuhan, "At the Moment of Sputnik the Planet Became a Global Theatre in Which There Are No Spectators but Only Actors," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (1974): 49.

10
Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Georg Reimer, 1866), vol. 2, 286–87; also quoted by Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 8, footnote 28.

11
James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

12
The film, on the one hand, has a strong emphasis on national pride and, on the other hand, sets a cosmopolitan mission to save the whole of humanity.

13
United Nations, "UN Climate Report: It's 'Now or Never' to Limit Global Warming to 1.5 Degrees" https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115452 .

14
Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being,* trans. Johan Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1972), 59.

15
For elaboration on thermodynamic ideology and its relation to postmodern discourse, see Yuk Hui, "Lyotard after Us," in *Lyotard and Critical Practice* , ed. Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz (Bloomsbury, 2022).

16
Before the synchronization in modern logistics, we saw already the synchronizing effect of clocks used in production. As Marx correctly observed in a letter to Engels, "the clock is the first automatic machine applied to practical purpose; the whole theory of production and regular motion was developed through it." Quoted by Mumford, *Myth of the Machine* , vol. 1, 286.

17
Carl Schmitt, *The* Nomos *of the Earth in the International Law of the* Jus Publicum Europaeum, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Telos, 2006), 70.

18
Philippe Soulier, *André Leroi-Gourhan: Une Vie (1911–1986)* (CNRS, 2018), 287–88.

19
Georges Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art* (L'Atelier Contemporain, 2021).

20
André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* , trans. Anna Bostock Berger (MIT Press, 1993).

21
Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* , trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford University Press, 1998), 159. "Neglecting the crucial nature of these questions, Leroi-Gourhan reintroduces the very metaphysical notion of *Homo faber,* in a movement that can be found again, for example, in George Bataille … a notion opposed to that of *Homo sapiens.* This opposition between technicity and intellect is, however, contradicted by the role given later to writing, as technics, in the constitution of thought."

22
Kant, *Political Writings*, 106.

23
Bruno Latour and his team worked on this project for many years until his death in 2022. I had the occasion to participate in Latour's project in Shanghai in 2018, and to act as an advisor to the Taipei Biennial 2020, which Latour curated.

24
Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History* , trans. Michael K. Boudaghs (Duke University Press, 2014), 1. In a very different vein, Axelos also considers Hegel as the philosopher who systematized and historicized the becoming thinking of the world and the becoming world of thinking in the nineteenth century. Axelos therefore declares that Hegel's thinking remains unsurpassed: "sa logique n'est pas même comprise et sa philosophie de l'historie qui en découle n'aura qu'à se radicaliser et se généraliser advantage." Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire,* 35.

25
Karatani, *Structure of World History,* 220.

26
Karatani, *Structure of World History* , 224.

27
See Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist,* trans Arthur Goldhammer (Zone Books, 2000), 82.

28
G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* , trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 2008).

29
G. W. F. Hegel, "The German Constitution," in *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

30
This concept of the "organic machine" is taken from Claude Bernard, who distinguishes a mechanical machine from an organic machine that is animal. See Canguilhem, *Vital Rationalist*, 86. This imaginary organic machine could also be identified in Adam Smith's concept of the market and its invisible hand. Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner compared Adam Smith's invisible hand with Hegel's cunning of reason, but it might be more appropriate to say that they were both influenced by the political epistemology of the organism. For Kittsteiner's comment, see Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, *Listen der Vernunft: Motive geschichtsphilosophischen Denkens* (Fischer, 1998).

31
Canguilhem, *Vital Rationalist*, 302.

32
Karl Marx, "Kritik der Hegelschen Staatsrechts," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *MEW / Marx-Engels-Werke Band 1 1839–1844* (Karl Dietz Verlag, 2017), 206.

33
Gotthard Günther, *Das Bewußtsein der Maschinen: Eine Metaphysik der Kybernetik* (Agis-Verlag, 1963).

34
For a summary of these statements and criticism of them, see Quentin Skinner, "The Sovereign State: A Genealogy," in *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept* , ed. Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

35
Antonio Negri, *The End of Sovereignty* , trans. Ed Emery (Polity, 2022), 79.

36
Negri, *End of Sovereignty,* 72; this summary was pronounced by Roberto Esposito and not Negri himself.

37
Esposito responds by saying, "My impression is that the processes triggered in America, Europe, and Asia in the early years of the new century have been going in the opposite direction, as all the latest events have shown most manifestly." Negri, *End of Sovereignty,* 72.

38
Negri, *End of Sovereignty*, 73.

39
Negri, *End of Sovereignty*, 83.

40
Melissa Lane, "Why Donald Trump Was the Ultimate Anarchist," *New Statesman,* February 8, 2021 https://www.newstatesman.com/world/americas/north-america/us/2021/02/why-donald-trump-was-ultimate-anarchist .

41
Carl Schmitt, *Die drei Arten recht swissenschaftlichen Denkens* (Duncker & Humblot, 1993), 46–47.

42
Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* , trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

43
Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 99.

44
Leo Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

45
Martin Heidegger, *On Hegel's Philosophy of Right* , trans. Andrew Mitchell (Bloomsbury, 2014), 186.

46
Schmitt, Nomos *of the Earth,* 351–55.

47
Carl Schmitt, *Staat, Großraum, Nomos: Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916–1969* (Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 235–36.

48
Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (Verso, 2018) . "Climate Leviathan is a direct descendant from Hobbes' original to Schmitt's sovereign: when it comes to climate, Leviathan will decide and is constituted precisely in the act of decision. It expresses a desire for, and the recognition of, the necessity of a planetary sovereign to seize command, declare an emergency, and bring order to the Earth, all in the name of saving life." This also seems to be something that preoccupies Axelos and which remains problematic if not overstated when he says in *Vers la pensée planétaire* , 302, that "la souveraineté n'est plus celle d'une cité, d'un empire, d'une nation, d'une classe: la souveraineté atteint son caractère suprême, sa pleine puissance, en cessant d'être souveraineté particulière et en devenant puissance et autorité suprême, pouvoir mondial déferlant sur les—plus qu'échouant aux—citoyens du cosmos dans leur totalité. Aucune personne et aucune institution ne portent plus ce pouvoir."

Anton Vidokle

The Martian

I first met Boris Groys in Mexico City in 2004, during a conference on contemporary art ambitiously titled "Resistance." I had never participated in a large-scale international conference or even spoken in public before and it was a truly intimidating experience: I was so nervous that I couldn't sleep the night before, then drank so much coffee in the morning that my body was literally shaking to the point that my speech became unintelligible. The simultaneous translator basically gave up because she couldn't make out what I was saying, and I was speaking way too fast anyhow. It was an excruciating experience, and I couldn't wait for it to end. After I had finally finished and left the stage, the organizers introduced me to Boris Groys. What first struck me about him was his incredible, almost supernatural calm. He seemed like the calmest person I have ever met in my life—not by way of indifference or disinterest, but by way of a certain philosophical tranquility that I had read about but not yet encountered in a person.

I was already familiar with Mexico City, having spent plenty of time there in previous years, so the conference organizers asked me to take Boris sightseeing. We went to the famous Museum of Anthropology and then to the house of Leon Trotsky. In the garden of Trotsky's house Boris noticed a simple cement tombstone marking Trotsky's grave, which struck me as a faint reflection of the spectacular and luxurious mausoleum where Lenin lies mummified in Moscow's Red Square. I remember Boris saying ironically that at least Trotsky got his own mausoleum—his nemesis Stalin was evicted from Lenin's mausoleum. I also remember how the staff at Trotsky's house seemed suspicious of us. Perhaps the memory of Stalin's agents' past infiltrations and the assassination still linger.

I don't remember if Boris and I spoke in Russian or in English this first time we met. At the time it was a bit challenging for me to converse in Russian. I left the USSR with my parents in 1981, at the age of thirteen, and did all my studies in English in the US. While I could hold a simple conversation about basic things, speaking about art or theory in Russian was difficult. Boris was very patient and supportive of my gradually becoming more fluent. I suspect one of the reasons I eventually regained the language was due to his encouragement. By coincidence he also left the USSR in 1981, although in very different circumstances—while my family voluntarily emigrated to the US, he was forced to leave the country. I remember the story well: following the publication of his essays on Moscow conceptualism in a Parisian Russian-language journal called *А - Я*, the KGB asked him to come in for an "interview." He recalled that the agents seemed quite tired or uninterested, as though after many decades of ideological zeal, they were finally burned out. They were very interested in his sweater for some reason, which made him think they might have expected a bribe. But he didn't want to part with his sweater. The interrogators also requested that he publicly repudiate his published texts,

Boris Groys, press tour of "Art Without Death," HKW, Berlin, 2017. Photo: Laura Fiorio.

which he refused to do. So they suggested two options: leave the country or go to jail. Boris chose the former and left for Germany.

Boris had actually been born in Berlin, in 1947. His father was a prominent Soviet electrical engineer who restored electricity to East Berlin following the end of the war. I remember some of my German acquaintances being very impressed by his command of the German language. With Nabokov among the few exceptions, it's rather unusual for a Russian writer to write in other languages, perhaps due to the particularities of Russian. But Boris writes equally well in Russian, German, and English.

Following our initial meeting in Mexico, we met for lunch in New York. Boris kindly gave me his *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* book, in English, and it totally blew me away. Unlike most Western art historians who espouse the narrative of a certain disruption and amnesia separating a more utopian, early avant-garde from postwar artistic practices, Boris sees the avant-garde in the USSR as a continuous arc that, in a sense, engulfs and devours society, and

A-Я magazine was compiled and edited in the Soviet Union, and published in Paris in Russian, from 1979 to 1986.

which even includes the radical state policies of the Stalin period. It's a very provocative proposal that nevertheless

A-Я magazine was compiled and edited in the Soviet Union, and published in Paris in Russian, from 1979 to 1986.

rings true to me.

Previously, in New York, I had studied with some of the Marxist art historians who came to prominence in 1980s, like Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and others who belonged to the *October* journal circle of writers. While their work and ideas were very much grounded in and made use of the Soviet avant-garde, it seems that none of them learned Russian in order to read primary texts, artists' writings, and so forth. So, I think they constructed a narrative of what that period was in the USSR as an idealized view from the West, in many ways oversimplified and much flatter in comparison to the paradoxical complexity of that era and its artistic practices, ideologies, and the beliefs of its protagonists. This, in turn, led to a kind of a misunderstanding of what this art was. Boris mentioned to me that when he first started to meet some of his colleagues in the West, it made him feel like a Martian. Imagine a whole industry of academics writing books about canals on Mars. Suddenly, a Martian arrives on earth and says: Sorry, but there are no canals on Mars! And so, in a polite yet sinister way, all these colleagues would ask Boris when he planned to go home—which he couldn't do even if he wanted to.

Around this same time, I was invited to cocurate Manifesta, a biennial of contemporary art meant to take place in Nicosia in 2006. Our proposal was a bit radical: we planned to replace an exhibition of art with an experimental art school, and to make it a fully discursive project rather than an exhibition. I invited Boris to be a part of a core group of artists and theorists who would develop the curriculum for this school, and he came up with an incredible seminar called "After the Red Square." At the time he was finishing his book *The Communist Postscript* and this seminar was in some ways a condensation of his ideas on the postcommunist condition. Then the biennial was abruptly cancelled: the Greek-Cypriot government, the official host of Manifesta, decided that it was not in their political interests to host an international project that included Turkish-Cypriots in a meaningful way. I spoke with Boris and other participants, and we decided to realize our project independently in Berlin.

We rented a small cement building adjacent to a supermarket in a part of East Berlin formerly called Leninplatz, renamed after Unification to United Nations Plaza. It used to have a gigantic nineteen-meter-tall statue of Lenin. In the mid-nineties the statue was removed and buried in a garbage dump. Boris's seminar ran for two weeks and included artists and thinkers from Lebanon to China and other countries with a significant history of communist movements. At a certain point we had an emergency. There is a Russian artist who is notorious for physically assaulting other artists, curators, and philosophers as a sort of "performance," and we learned that he had arrived in Berlin with a plan to disrupt the seminar. Boris had had an unfortunate encounter with him in the past, and while he was not scared, this artist nevertheless had very troubling ideas: he believed that there were only two people whom it would be appropriate to murder as a "work of art"—one being Kazimir Malevich, who was already dead, and the other being Boris Groys. Some years earlier, he attacked and defaced a Malevich painting at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and spent a few years in a Dutch prison. Understandably, we were very concerned and hired security guards for the seminar, which looked extremely strange. We gave them photographs of this artist with instructions to deny him entry, but he still somehow got in. I remember noticing him in the audience and asking Boris if we should cancel, but he wanted to continue. A couple of students who were not intimidated by physical violence moved closer to this artist in case he tried something. In the end it was more of a sputter than an explosion: he did try to disrupt the talk by cursing, accusing everyone in the room of being hypocrites, and spitting on the floor around him, but no more than that. And when he tried to move closer to the speakers, we escorted him out of the building. He did not return, and the seminar continued.

Perhaps the most important intellectual gift I received from Boris was an introduction to the philosophy of cosmism. At first, I couldn't believe it was true. Sometime around 2012 I met Boris for dinner, and he started telling me about some strange events that occurred in Moscow in the mid-1920s: there was a mysterious, government-mandated Institute of Blood Transfusion where researchers tried to find a cure for aging and death by exchanging blood between older and younger people; there had been a plan to open blood banks throughout the Soviet Union so that, through these blood exchanges, a kind of literal "brotherhood" would be achieved across the diverse populations of the USSR; Malevich's *Architectons* were in fact not models for terrestrial architecture but designs for spaceships and orbiting cemeteries in which the corpses of the dead would be preserved in the zero gravity and absolute cold of the cosmos until a technology

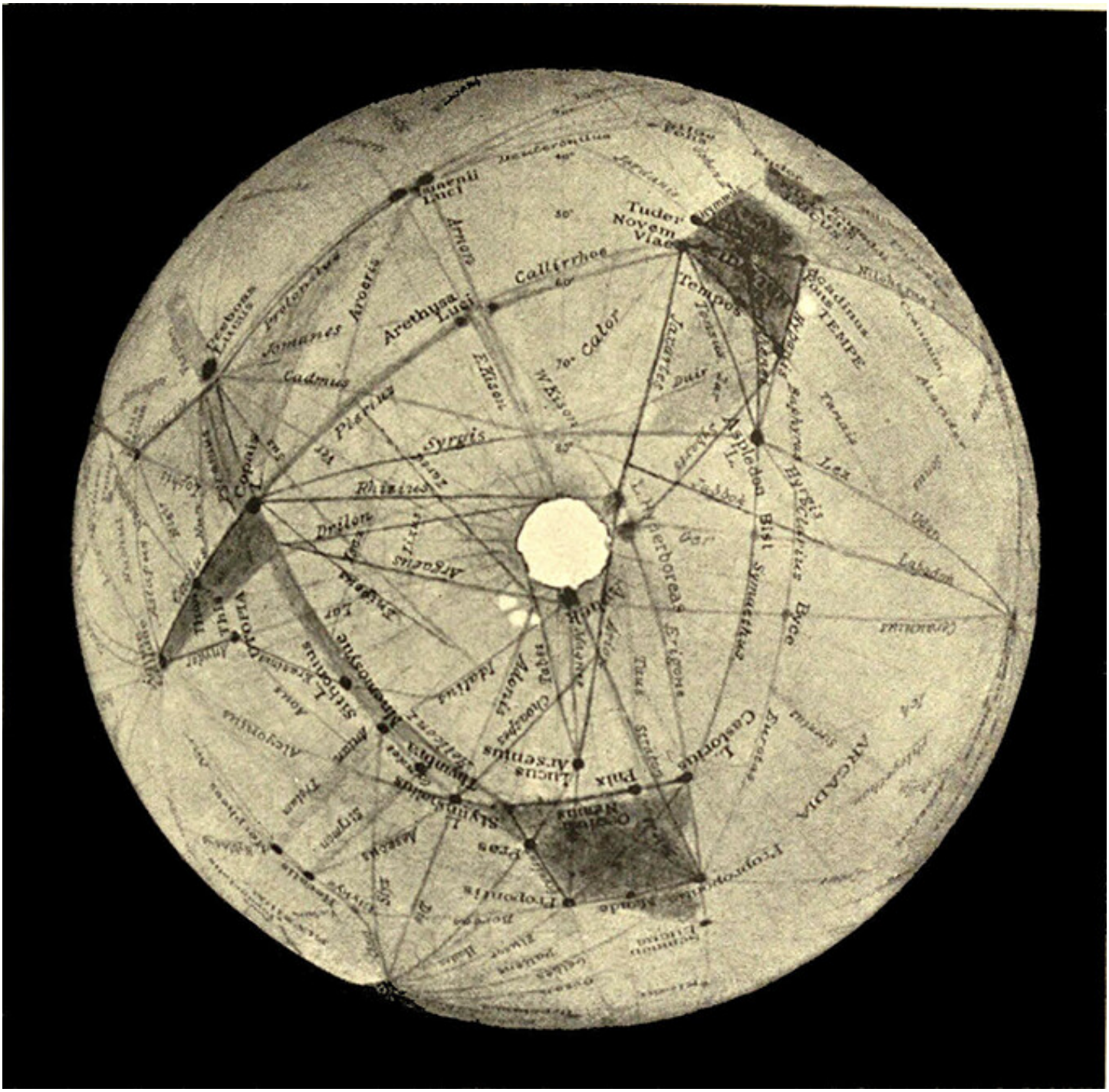


Illustration for Mars and Its Canals by Percival Lovell, 1906.

of resurrection could be invented. And other such things.

To be honest, I thought he was making it all up: it sounded more like dark, vampiric science fiction than historical fact. However, a few months later I was asked to do an interview with Ilya Kabakov, who unexpectedly told me similar things. It made me very curious, and when I investigated further, I came across a collection of writings by Nikolai Fedorov, the nineteenth-century librarian from Moscow credited with originating the philosophy of cosmism. The book, called *The Common Task*, was a complete revelation to me. The ideas were incredible and very far ahead of their time, envisioning life and society as a fully planetary, regulated phenomenon in which violence, private property, capital accumulation, exploitation, and alienation are replaced by the universal task of preserving and restoring life through technological means. In short, the main idea of cosmism is deceptively

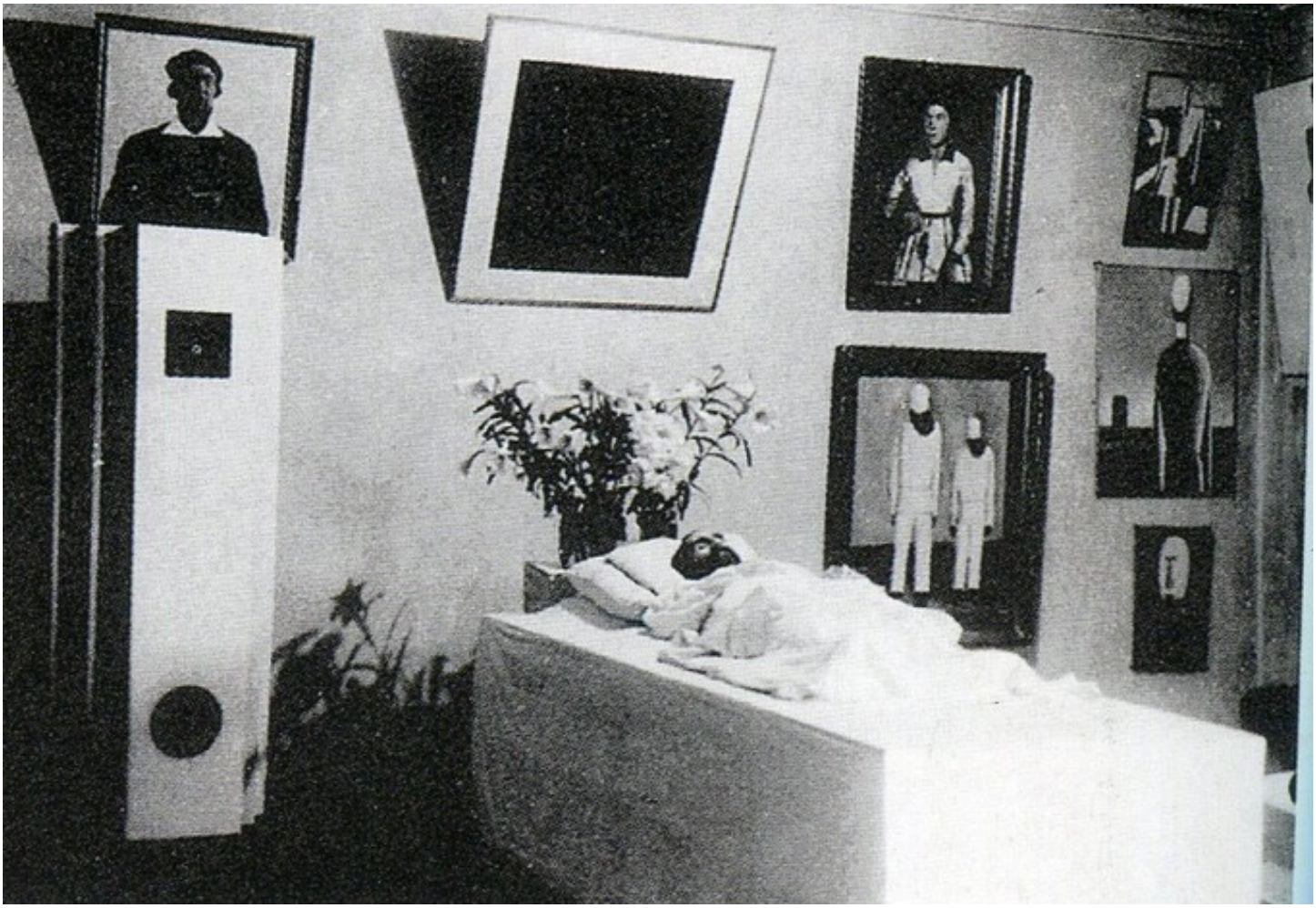
Workers dismantle an outsized sculpture of Lenin by Nikolai Tomsky in Berlin, November 13, 1991. Photo: Andreas Altwein

simple: evolution is incomplete because we are mortal and we should focus all of the productive, intellectual, and organizational forces of society on a single task: to defeat death, resurrect all our ancestors, and learn to live in the cosmos (because our planet is too small to support a massive population of resurrected, immortal people).

While Fedorov was a deeply religious person and far from a socialist thinker, his ideas, articulated around the 1860s, are similar to communism in many ways, albeit with one important difference: as Boris points out, communism demands infinite sacrifice from the generations of people who are to struggle towards achieving it. These sacrificial generations will get nothing for themselves in return, except the dream that future generations will live in justice and utopia. Cosmism, on the other hand, offers a promise of material resurrection and thus physical participation in the immortal society of the future for everyone who has ever lived. In this way, each one of us has a personal, tangible incentive to participate in the project of cosmism.

Although Fedorov didn't publish his writings during his lifetime and didn't teach formally in a public institution, his ideas did somehow circulate and spread. He had some correspondence with Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy used to visit him at the library to discuss his ideas. Seemingly, these fantastical ideas managed to enter the work of a whole generation of artists, writers, scientists and other thinkers, to the extent that even without any direct link, one can still sense the imprint of Fedorov's ideas on the thinking of so many advanced practitioners from that period. Following the October Revolution, cosmist ideas became particularly resonant, probably because their radical materialism dovetailed with aspects of Marxism, and maybe because in a radicalized, revolutionary society that had suddenly abolished private property, nothing seemed to be impossible or out of reach—not even space travel and immortality.

From 1917 onwards we see the emergence of biocosmism-immortalism, essentially a continuation of Fedorov's thinking without its religious dimension. Propagated by such figures as the anarcho-futurist poets Alexander Svyatogor and Alexander Yaroslavsky, biocosmism even produced a small political party that advocated for a universal right to rejuvenation and freedom of transportation in cosmic space. Cosmism of this period also included a roster of amazing scientists such as Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the self-taught mathematician credited with founding the science of rocketry; Alexander Chizhevsky, the inventor of space biophysics, best known for his study of the physiological and psychological effects of solar cycles on human history and society; Vladimir Vernadsky, the originator of radio-geology, who wrote eloquently on the "noosphere," a sphere of human reason encompassing our planet; and many others.



Deathbed of Kazimir Malevich, 1935, Leningrad, USSR.

The work of nearly all advanced practitioners of the artistic avant-garde, from Malevich and Rodchenko to Eisenstein and Meyerhold, can be perceived through a cosmist lens. A particularly interesting, lesser-known figure is Vassily Chekhrygin, a painter and writer who died very young but left a vast legacy of artworks and writings quite literally illustrating Fedorov's ideas of resurrection, immortality, and the cosmos. Most of these works and texts have never been translated into English, or even published in Russian, in part because these ideas were suppressed in the USSR following Stalin's purges of the 1930s. One important project I did jointly with Boris was a large-scale exhibition related to cosmism at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2017, along with a companion anthology Boris edited of translated texts by key cosmist artists and authors, including many mentioned above, that MIT Press published in 2018.

Over the past decade or so, I've made seven films based on cosmist ideas. I always think of Boris as the primary viewer for these films, and in a sense, as their most important audience. This is not only because of his deep knowledge of cosmist philosophy, but also because of his keen understanding and appreciation of art. Many scholars, theorists, and philosophers I know have a slightly oblivious or even condescending relationship to art. Most acknowledge its social or historical importance, but I have a nagging feeling that, maybe because they deal primarily with ideas rather than things or images, they perceive art as a more basic or even base practice compared to "pure thought." Consequently, most of them don't really see or understand art.

Recently I attended a talk by a German scholar who has spent his entire professional life researching cosmism. He is now in his seventies, and has been preoccupied with cosmism for nearly half a century, since his student days. He is a "cosmism skeptic"—adamant that there is no such philosophical or intellectual movement because, according to him, all its various protagonists contradict each other in paradoxical ways and no consistency of ideas gives it coherency. For him, it's a kind of a hoax. But I realized it's actually a very tragic situation for a person to give cosmism so much of his life's time and energy, really struggling with it, only to now doubt its very existence—mainly because he is unable to see the beauty

According to Vsevolod Meyerhold, biomechanics teaches the ability to turn chaos into well-ordered cosmos.

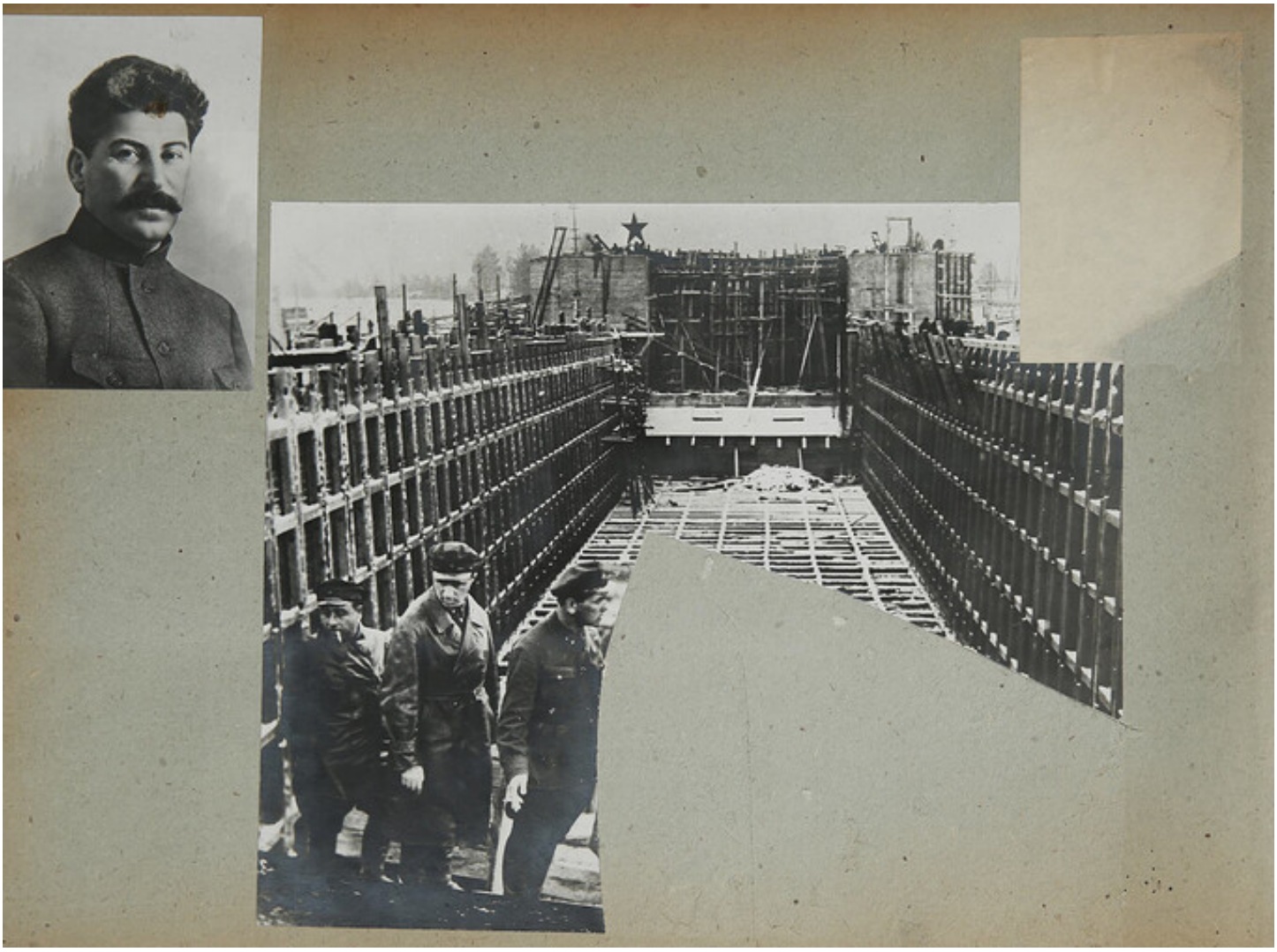
of its reflection in art, cinema, poetry, music, literature, theater, architecture, and so forth.

Boris has been very close to artists ever since his student days and, while I hesitate to think of him as an art historian or a curator, his insight into art and its practitioners is unprecedented for a theoretician. Maybe this is why the *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* book he gave me years ago was so important for me in seeing the relationship between the incredibly complex trajectory of the Soviet avant-garde and the brutal velocity of dictatorial power: the total work of art that the USSR briefly embodied, and where I came from.

A couple of years ago Boris shared an unusual text with me, a kind of script for a film or TV series based on cosmism that some Hollywood producer convinced him to write. It's not so much a developed script with scenes and dialogue as a rough, conceptual treatment: a story, or even a kind of meta-story. It is set in a future in which the senior curator of the struggling State Museum of Immortality, Ilya Gordon, entrusted with the most important task of preserving and resurrecting the dead, is approached by a mysterious, wealthy patron through his beautiful female associate, who proposes a public-private partnership. Here is how Boris describes the museum:

> The museum system was totally restructured, and all the museums and archives were turned into immortality museums. After a person died, his or her body was cryogenized and put into a special container. The container was installed in a room designed to look as if this person still lived in it. The room contained photos and other documentation that were related to the dead inhabitant of the room. The body was preserved, with the goal of its eventual repair and resurrection. The documentation and the general aesthetics of the room were used to restore the personality and individual identity of the deceased: his or her taste, way of life, and familiar environment. In other words, the Museums of Immortality functioned as a democratized version of Egyptian pyramids.[1]

As the story progresses, it becomes darker and more



Alexander Rodchenko, Agitkost album, Belomor Canal, 1934. The canal was built with the forced labor of political prisoners, more than twenty-five thousand of whom died during its construction.

sinister: the public-private partnership opens the Museum of Immortality to sexual orgies, various satanic rituals, blood sacrifices, and eventually cannibalism: they eat the corpses they were entrusted to preserve and resurrect.

I have often wondered why Boris wrote this script. One of the very important literary works in the cosmist oeuvre is a science-fiction novel published by the Marxist theorist and scientist Alexander Bogdanov called *Red Star* (1908). The title refers to the planet Mars rather than the communist red star, although it is often described as "the first Bolshevik utopia" because Bogdanov also happened to be the cofounder of the Bolshevik faction of the Communist Party in Russia. Personally, I would not describe it as a utopia: in the novel, the Martians, who have already reached a high level of socialism on their planet, kidnap an earthling and lure him to Mars, where he learns that despite their advanced society and the superior technology by which they attained near immortality, their planet is actually dying and they plan to colonize earth and subjugate humans. While there are no specific overlaps in plot or narrative between Bogdanov and Groys, I feel a similar texture in these works. I also think that what has always mattered in Boris's work is something shared with Bogdanov (and Malevich, Bely, even Kabakov), which is the possibility to go outside his own time and way of seeing. This becomes a method by which he is able to transcend his era, his situation, his existence.

I once asked Boris if he would allow me to make this film, but he demurred: apparently at the time they were negotiating producing it as a serial for a streaming platform, or something like that. As far as I'm aware that didn't happen, so maybe there's still a chance it could become one of my films. I really hope so, and there's plenty of time: eternity. Immortality and Resurrection for All!

X

A version of this essay will be included in a forthcoming edited book on Boris Groys titled *Total Art, Total Theory: Essays on Boris Groys*.

Anton Vidokle is an artist and editor of *e-flux journal*.

1
Boris Groys, "Becoming Immortal," *Cosmic Bulletin*, 2020 https://cosmos.art/cosmic-bulletin/2020/becoming-immortal .

Jasper Bernes

The Test of Communism

As "thoroughly expansive" forms whose potential remained unactualized, the Commune of 1871 and the workers' councils of 1917–23 hail from the future. When Rosa Luxemburg, Jan Appel, or Grandizo Munis call for the establishment of workers' councils from the midst of a revolutionary sequence they still rate capable of succeeding, they look to an immediate or slightly more distant past and see in it a form able to open the doors to the future. This has the effect of making the theory of the commune both retrospective and prospective at once. For what the partisans of council or commune see in the past is not an actuality but a potential—not a program to be realized but a series of logical requirements and concomitants to be navigated.

The commune and the council show us what is eternal about revolutionary struggle against capitalism—what will always remain true insofar as capitalism and its problems persist. It remains as true today as it was in 1871 that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." Likewise, it remains true that "Paris could resist only because, in consequence of the siege, it had got rid of the army, and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men." What Marx describes as the "first decree" of the Commune—"the suppression of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people"—is actually a precondition of any revolution, realized by the precipitating events of 1871 and ratified after the fact. Only where war, chaos, or crisis has rendered the army intractable to state power do we see the real possibility of communist revolution. This doesn't mean that all aspects of revolution can be deduced logically, but an understanding of what is contingent in revolution requires an understanding of what is not.

At stake here is as much a method for reading history as for reading Marx. Key parts of the history of past revolutions as well as the pages of Marx's *Capital*—and much other revolutionary theory—are illegible except by the light of a communism seen as inevitable, both historically and logically certain. This has the effect of making Marx appear most grandiose where he is in fact most modest. In 1868, he writes of the just-published *Capital*, his critique of political economy, that it is "without question the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie."[1] "Heads," here, confines his work to the field of discourse. Marx could devote himself to critique, in other words, to sinking the supply ships of bourgeois economics, precisely because he did not think such work determinative in matters of class war. He would hurl books at the heads of the bourgeoisie while the proletarian movement took out their legs. Take, for example, his letter to his longtime friend and supporter Louis Kugelmann, who wrote to Marx immediately after the original publication of *Capital* in German to report that readers familiar with economic theory were struggling with Marx's theory of value. Marx responds:

Munkácsy Mihály, Strike, 1895. License: Public Domain.

> The vulgar economist has not the faintest idea that the actual everyday exchange relations need not be identical with the magnitudes of value. The point of bourgeois society consists precisely in this, that *a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production. The reasonable and the necessary in nature asserts itself only as a blindly working average.[2]

The bourgeoisie and its intellectual representatives are therefore forced to treat as "great discovery" the fact that "in appearance things look different." They have no need for Marx's "science" and in fact their standpoint in society will make it difficult to comprehend very simple matters: "The nonsense about the necessity of proving the concept of value arises from complete ignorance both of the subject dealt with and the method of science. Every child knows that a country which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but for a few weeks, would die." The problem in other words is not so much that Marx is very smart but that bourgeois economists are particularly stupid—their reaction "shows what these priests of the bourgeoisie have come to, when workers and even manufacturers and merchants understand my book and find their way about in it." Notice the emphasis: *even* manufacturers and merchants can understand it, but workers do so more naturally. If his critique of political economy is a missile lobbed at the heads of the bourgeoisie, it is not undertaken to explain capitalism *to them* through the percussion of intellectual missiles—it is a critique on behalf of the working class, who pushes the attack on other fronts.

It is not because workers are better educated about the principles of economics that they intuitively understand Marx's work. Rather it is because the experience of exploitation and oppression daily reminds them of the coherence and correctness of Marx's critique, the necessity of revolution. What he says of "every child" is likely not true of bourgeois children, for whom the products of labor appear as if by magic; but proletarian children, who begin work young and watch their families work, do understand such basic matters. At stake is more than experience, however, but also attitude, standpoint—Marx's *Capital* is always illuminated by a future communism. Once the "inner connection" between value magnitudes and exchange relations "is grasped," he tells Kugelmann, "all belief in the permanent necessity of existing conditions breaks down before their practical collapse." This first collapse, the critical collapse, is neither cause nor precondition of the practical collapse in

Fire at The Hôtel de Ville, the headquarters of the Commune, attacked by the Versailles Army and burned by the National Guard byLéon Sabatier, 1873. License: Public Domain.

crisis or revolution. Marx does not believe that by proving capitalism impermanent he will induce the bourgeoisie to simply quit the field. Indeed, he has noted they will find it constitutively difficult to descry their doom in the fog of the business cycle. Marx in 1865 is tribune of a workers' movement that has already announced its historical mission: to abolish capitalism. It is not that Marx can kill capitalism with his ideas, but that he has expressed in ideas a movement already underway, one which seemed certain to usher in a practical collapse. The point of the critique of political economy is not so much ideology critique as it is an illumination of existing conditions in light of their practical collapse, on behalf of and for the movement that will precipitate it.

Marx wrote a book entitled *Capital*, not one entitled *Communism* or *The Proletariat*, because the workers' movement did not need its ends articulated, did not need an explicit description of classless society, that common horizon. It needed better weapons, a clarification of means. At stake here is less a claim about Marx's method than one about the methods which communists should use to read Marx. We can no doubt treat *Capital* as a grand analysis without presuppositions, an immanent critique, a science, a research project, but certain key aspects will remain inscrutable, written in invisible ink that only the heat of communism can bring to the surface. I think this is the case for important parts of Marx's theory of value. As Marx notes in the letter, the bourgeoisie need hardly bother with the concept of value. They can make do with appearances. If proletarians understand the concept of value more readily it is because value names for Marx the inner coherence of that monster which proletarians recognize as their enemy. Value names the *differentia specifica* of the capitalist mode of production, the one element that presupposes all the others, the ring that

binds together, the other rings of money and wages, profit and price, property and the police, the state and the banking system, world markets and international conflict. The concept of value is as much a descriptive concept as a revolutionary hieroglyphic, a critical heuristic designed to focus those who would overthrow capitalism on the essential.

These objectives are clearer in Marx's first attempts at critique of political economy, where Marx generally had very particular political interlocutors in mind. Early anti-capitalists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and his disciple Alfred Darimon, on the one hand, and the "Ricardian Socialists" like John Francis Bray, John Gray, and Thomas Hodgskin, on the other, frequently proposed to right the wrongs of capitalism through reform of the money system and banking.[3] Marx recognized the incoherence and impracticability of these reforms—which mostly consisted of proposals to replace national and bank money with "labor money"—and it was in developing concepts adequate to these critiques, first in the *Grundrisse* and then in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that Marx struck on key aspects of his theory of value.[4]

Labor money was in many respects a derivation from the labor theory of value developed by Adam Smith and then David Ricardo. In the 1820s and 1830s in Britain, as resistance to early capitalism took shape in the form of trade unions and cooperatives, social reformers associated with Robert Owen and then Chartism developed the labor theory of value (LTV) into a theory of exploitation depending on natural rights and natural prices, cast in absolutist moral terms.[5] Once it had been demonstrated that labor is the source and measure of all wealth, it required only a simple step further to propose to right the injustices of capitalism by denominating goods in terms of their "real" or natural value. With the prices of goods labeled in terms of labor hours and labor minutes, rather than dollars and pennies, it would be nearly impossible to swindle workers and not give them the full value of their product, according to proponents of the theory. The LTV thus offered both a critique of capitalism and a way to improve it, subordinating money and capital to the benefit of laborers and, in turn, the nation. Every monetary exchange could be made equal and transparent, with its real value for a producer written right there on its face.

Marx eventually refuted this by demonstrating that such a notion of fair exchange was self-contradictory: the very idea of equal exchange presupposes inequality, as he shows, because the value of *labor* (the output of a worker) is never the same as the value of *labor power* (the reproduction requirement of that worker, and therefore the price of its use by a capitalist). From this distinction, Marx develops one even more fundamental, between concrete labor and abstract labor, the core of his mature theory of value. His main achievement in this arena was not, as is sometimes supposed, a theory of surplus value or a proof of exploitation—versions of such a theory were already available, as he would summarize in the manuscript entitled *Theories of Surplus Value*. As Diane Elson formulates it elegantly in her seminal essay "Value: The Representation of Labor in Capitalism," summarizing debates on the topic in the Conference of Socialist Economists in the 1970s, Marx's theory of value had been radically misunderstood by those who saw in it a method to calculate the magnitudes of exploitation: "It is not a matter of seeking an explanation of why prices are what they are and finding it in labor. But rather of seeking an understanding of why labor takes the forms it does, and what the political consequences are."[6]

Elson worries overtly in her introduction that her corrective reading, distinguishing between Marx's theory of value and the Ricardian LTV, might be depoliticizing. For the Ricardian proof of exploitation, with or without labor money, at least had the virtue of being politically salient and leading to very clear practical objectives. This is because, despite the power of her corrective reading, she does not see how the concept of value is directly connected to the objectives of communism, naming not only a historical process—"why labor takes the form it does"—but a great misfortune, understanding of which will aid in its overcoming. Elson stands at the headwaters of a new way of reading Marx, begun in the 1960s and 1970s, with the publication of Marx's complete works, and sometimes called "value-form theory" or, with respect to German exponents, the "new reading of Marx" (Neue Marx-Lektüre). These Marxological interventions have been enormously clarifying for readers of Marx, making sense of the inner analytic coherence of Marx's work. This clearheaded way of reading Marx has, however, come at the expense of a certain political power, I would argue. It is a way of reading Marx for an era that lacks Marx's certainty.

I will suggest another, complementary way of reading *Capital*, in which Marx's masterwork is not only the adequate representation of the capitalist mode of production but an outline in negative of its overcoming by communism. I have come to this way of reading Marx by a long and winding route, over terrain that will be mapped thoroughly, though its origins lie in the programmatic method of Amadeo Bordiga, for whom, to use Gilles Dauvé's helpful paraphrase, "the whole of Marx's work was a description of communism."[7] Bordiga is supremely attentive to those moments in Marx's mature writing, surprisingly abundant if you know what to look for, where in order to illuminate some feature of capitalism, Marx finds that he must, in fact, compare it with a fictitious communism. "Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common and expending their many different forms of labor power as one single social labor force."[8] This is offered as ultimate contrast with capitalism, where the fetishism of commodities induces a

Stanisław Lentz, Strike, 1910. National Museum in Warsaw. License: Public Domain.

Socialists in Union Square, NYC, 1 May 1912, by Bain Coll. Collection: Library of Congress. License: Public Domain.

complicated situation in which humans become mannequins puppeted and ventriloquized by sarcastic commodities, both unfree and deluded about the sources of their unfreedom. The purpose of such contrast is to bring out key features of the capitalist mode of production and class society more generally, otherwise untheorizable. It is only in the light of communism that we come to see the misprisions of the commodity form for what they are: "The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e., the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control." Marx therefore offers more than a description of capitalism, but one in which key predicates of communism become visible.

At stake here is less a claim about Marx's method than the method that communists should apply to the reading of Marx. For communists, the science of capitalism is the theory of the rules of a game they hope to consign to the dustbin. The goal for us is neither just to enumerate those rules nor to learn to play the game better, but to develop from them an understanding of how the game itself might be overcome. If it is anything for communists in the twenty-first century, it is an applied science, the science of destroying capitalism, whose descriptions of capitalism and predictions about class struggle and its unfolding have their meaning in action, in class struggle itself. And here our concern should be less about what Marx intended—science of capitalism? weapon against it?—than what we, as communists, need. We need to *know* what capitalism is, but not in order to wonder at it and enumerate its sublimities. The concept of value is nothing, for communists, if not a crosshair that flashes red when we need to smash something.

There is also in Marx a *tendential* theory alongside the heuristic theory. The light of communism revealed for Marx a directionality to capitalist production, one that pointed toward its ruin but also its overcoming by communism. The tendencies identified are numerous and complexly entangled: mass proletarianization, immiseration, and increase in superfluous populations, concentration and centralization of capital, globalization of trade, rising organic composition of capital, falling rate of profit, depletion of the soil, colonization, and imperialism. Chief among all these tendencies, however, was the tendency for capitalism to produce its own gravediggers in the rising, militant proletariat. The tendencies are also, it should now seem needless to say, illuminated by a future

communism. This is because, first, the rising proletariat is already practically oriented toward communism and, second, tendencies within capitalism lead inexorably toward communism. Tendencies are directional, and directions are not neutral but stained with the dye of class struggle, progressive and reactive.

Some of Marx's tendential theory has not held up, at least if read strictly, and in a few instances, it must be admitted, Marx was badly wrong. But the fact that any of it has held up, even though the communist revolution has not occurred and capitalism soldiers on long after Marx could have thought such a thing imaginable, counts as no small feat. None of his contemporaries fare better. The tendential theory must, in any case, always return to the facts of the world, of class struggle, for confirmation. But it also must know what it's looking for, where it hopes history will lead. Here again Marx can appear most grandiose when he is in fact being most modest. He need not proselytize and inveigh, draw up battle plans and programs, for the tendencies of capitalism are already doing the work of forming a resistance adequate to it. The tendential analysis is not prescriptive but diagnostic, highlighting limits and opportunities. But these are opportunities that, for Marx, the working class must come to understand one way or another. It is class struggle itself which brings these opportunities to mind for Marx—his work is to clarify and refine political tendencies, the communist movement principally, already in the process of formation.

Seen in this new historical light, Marx concludes not only that the proponents of labor money were wrong but also that their proposals would by necessity be rejected, and were indeed already being rejected, by the new proletarian movements sweeping across Europe and the world. Labor money assumes, in its theory of exploitation, an underclass consisting not so much of wage laborers as artisans who own (or borrow) their means of production and sell their output on the market. Such petty producers were exploited by merchants and bankers offering them increasingly miserable terms, threatening them with bankruptcy and, in turn, loss of the means of production, ultimately reducing them to mere proletarians. A reform of the market, offering "fair terms" or a restoration of precapitalist conventions of natural right, appeals to artisans because the market is the locus of their exploitation. Proletarians, on the other hand, are more likely to see their oppression as originating from production itself. As such, Marx wasn't rejecting labor money only on the plane of ideas, as practically unworkable, but also as resting on a pragmatic class basis which made its moral theories of natural right and price inapposite. The labor monetarists thought the way they did, then, according to the theory Marx develops, because of a social division of labor and a historical process (the formation of a strictly propertyless proletariat) which duped them into thinking their own ideas causes when in fact they were simply effects.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels caricatured their post-romantic contemporaries, "the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany," as being like the proverbial fellow who thought that "men were drowned in water only because they were possessed of the *idea of gravity*."[9] John Gray and Alfred Darimon were thus cut from the same mold as the reactionary, bourgeois, and utopian socialists Marx and Engels took to task in *The Communist Manifesto*, and the various post-Hegelians they savaged in their other writings. Against this, uniquely in the history of radical thought up until then, Marx and Engels developed an account of history which placed class struggle and proletarian self-activity at the center of any meaningful project to overcome capitalism. It was no longer simply a matter of ideas, though ideas were very much at stake, since the matter had to be hashed out in the pages of books. What mattered was class struggle, collective action, social practice.

Once the moral underpinnings of labor money are made apparent, the political implications of Marx's turn to economics and the critique of political economy in the 1850s make perfect sense, coming as it does after the thoroughgoing critique of the moral, religious, and idealist presuppositions of his fellow socialists and communists that he had developed in the 1840s. Diane Elson need not be so worried, then, about losing political salience by casting off the Ricardian fetters of Marxist pseudo-orthodoxy. It's not so much that value analysis renews critical thought or denaturalizes the economy, though it does all this. Rather Marx's value theory offers a method by which certain socialist proposals can be put to the test. This is prediction, but only of a certain sort. It does not tell you what will happen but what must, or what can't. The test of value is a logical test—it works from the definition of capitalism, its basic logical structure, in order to clarify what it would mean to overcome it. Here, however, it must be said from the start that the dialectic has betrayed many a traveler to this region, leading some to believe that the abolition of value, the sine qua non of capitalism, is itself the sufficient condition for communism when it is in fact merely a necessary one. Communism *cannot* be derived logically from the presuppositions of capitalism. There is a missing moment, an absent positive, to the inversion of value. Indeed, that missing moment is what is fundamentally missing from life not just in capitalism but in all class society.

Parade of the May 1 demonstrations, Ion Chibzii, 1970s, Chisinau, Moldova. License: Public Domain.

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Excerpted from *The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising* by Jasper Bernes, out next month from Verso.

Jasper Bernes lives in Oakland and teaches in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley. A regular contributor to the Field Notes section of the *Brooklyn Rail*, he is the author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* and two books of poetry, *We Are Nothing and So Can You* and *Starsdown*.

1
Karl Marx, “Letter to Johann Philipp Becker,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42 (Lawrence & Wishart, 1994), 358–59.

2
“Marx to Kugelmann in Hanover,” July 11, 1868, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 43 (Lawrence & Wishart, 1994), 68.

3
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E. K. Hunt, “The Relation of the Ricardian Socialists to Ricardo and Marx,” *Science and Society* 44, no. 2 (1980).

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8
Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin, 1992), 171.

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Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa

ECHO — LOCATION: On Properties, Bass, Bounty, Sunshine State, and Exodus

> Consider what it is to be concerned with the florescence and efflorescence of this generation's self-defensive care, its prefatory counterpleasures, which reveal the public intramural resources of our undercommon senses, where flavorful touch is all bound up with falling into the general antagonistic embrace of inhabited decoration, autonomous choreography, amplified music, of which what happens in the yard, or at the club, or on the record are only instances, unless the yard is everybody's and the club is everywhere, and everything is a recording.
>
> —Fred Moten[1]

In *Alex Wheatle*, the fourth film in Steve McQueen's five-part cycle of films entitled *Small Axe* (2020), the eponymous character enters the diegetic scene of his life's narration by walking through a poured concrete volume shaped by antiseptic floors, bordered by institutional walls, regulated by a tempo that rings to the slick echoes of imprisoned bodies laboring at a fraught precipice between self-preservation and "self-actualization."[2] Their resonant sounds in the background of that scene's unfolding constitute a faint but palpable echo within the great basement hall in Beacon, New York, where McQueen's infratones pulse urgently directly beneath Cameron Rowland's *Underproduction* (2024),[3] a work whose artful occlusion and inversion mark a threshold between perceptibility and the position of the unthought.[4]

Rowland's "sculpture"[5] indexes ongoing emanations of Black futurity in an object whose historical emplacement protected the inchoate soundings of study, unfolding in Black interiors. Their cantankerous pan literally overturns audibility as a praxis of the enslaved, by way of an object echoing a series of acts aimed at nurturing undercommon narrations that secreted the end of slavery back into its fetid presents. In McQueen's film, Wheatle's silence—his stolid, wordless withdrawal from the scripture of his forced narration—tracks his horizontal movement through the scene's opening frames, so that the camera figures Wheatle's embodiment as an interstitial silence, an intermission coursing along diegesis's teleological line, continuously syncopating the prison's Taylorist rhythms.[6] Wheatle survives a terrible tempo. His biography is narrated atop his worldlessness as an erasure entered in the logic of institutional inscription. Like much of Black history, Wheatle's life attains legibility through its iteration in the ledger.[7] His life recursively begins in the film as a writing out—a literal de-scription—and it is only in song, in his discovery of reggae and dub, that Wheatle finds his own choral echoing articulation. I hope to listen for such echoes in what follows.

A litany of texts converge at this small postindustrial corner of western New York, at a juncture in Dia Beacon's

Steve McQueen, Bass, 2024. Installation view, Dia Beacon, New York, May 12, 2024–April 14, 2025. © Steve McQueen. Image: Dan Wolfe.

galleries that resonates with the neighboring awfully harmonic geometries of Melvin Edwards's haunted chords, his cascading wire riffs resonating their correlated displacements and expansive reiterations as Rowlands's anti-propertizing art now enters the precincts of Dia.

Something complicated is afoot here. In *Bass*'s (2024)[8] sonic emanations, we are given the cyclical iterative rhythms of an insistent tone pulsing under a gridded cascade of oscillating depthless lights—lights that in their near total diffusion and dispersal of the body's shadow shift the historicity of this postindustrial space. Upstairs, above ground, within the theater of Rowland's installation, the restrictive rhythms of covenant now resound in Dia's galleries, and thanks to McQueen, so too does *Bass*'s dissonant, syncopated enunciation—its musics of muffled speech, and their digressive departure from a point without origin.[9]

Bass emits a somnolence from its basement space that sprawls with expansive plasticity beneath the wooden floors that bear one third of Rowland's exhibition "Properties" (2024). Between Senga Nengudi's pendant vessels, Edwards's barbed strings, and Rowland's and McQueen's installations, Dia's Beacon galleries are now collectively marked by these distending transformations of the regularizing, racializing frequencies of American industry.

In McQueen's *Bass*, the bass itself instrumentalizes its audience *as* medium, *as* vector of its own fluvial movements. To enter into *Bass*'s aural field is to earth and disperse its itinerant vibration. Wherever we hear it, we bear and share its enunciations *bodily*. Moreover, *Bass*'s capacity to incorporate its audience as vectors of communicability enlists it in an ongoing act of (re)production, of labor without contract. Within this dematerializing structure, *Bass* rehearses a blackened condition of sudden availability to conscription into involuntary labor under conditions of (light) prescription, and it does this without imposing upon its audience the corollary and hereditary unfreedoms that echo in the work's solicitation and imaging of the hold.[10] In this, it is a *non-* sequitur.[11]

Bass is a resonance one might more easily pass than parse, share than plot, feel than name. It is what Tina Campt describes as "infrasound"—a fugitive, resistant murmuration "often only *felt* in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body."[12] In its irresistible communicability, *Bass* enacts affectability as a discourse of blackened sociality; it produces a machinic and mellifluous instantiation of miscegenation as a mode of fashioning, of weaving meanings that exceed the strictures of proper naming. *Bass* performs what Anthony Huberman calls "banging on a can," in a Motinian echo of a mode of creative response that thinks the material and symbolic dimensions of life *musically*—a mode of

intellection that reads worldliness in and as song.

That very act of banging on a can summons the friendly ghost of David Hammons squarely into the scene of Dia's ongoing expansion and reiteration of its artistic program, effected here through these newly orchestrated installations of Edwards, Rowland, and McQueen. If the 2017 Met Breuer exhibition "The Body Politic" showed an affinity between the artistic practices of Hammons, McQueen, Arthur Jafa, and Mika Rottenberg, it was that rattling digressive can in Hammons's *Phat Phree* (1995–99) that articulated a rhythm of improvisatory wandering, an invisible architecture of spontaneous combustion, which threads through *Bass*, just as *Bass*'s blue tones echo both Hammon's *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002) and McQueen's earlier *Blues Before Sunrise* (2012).[13]

Bass emerges in a season in which Dia has welcomed, in linear sequence, the dual interventions of McQueen (at both its Beacon and Chelsea locations), the subtly inimical interpretive engagements with Bruce Nauman offered by Paul Pfeiffer in its ongoing Artists on Artists series,[14] and now the inauguration of an installation by Cameron Rowland. In other words, *Bass* murmurs its rhythms in a season in which non-white speech has again assumed a position of prominent articulation at the core of Dia's platform.[15] Notably, where both Hammons and Nauman enact their repetitively aggressive bangs in such works, the modality of articulation common to Pfeiffer, McQueen, Rowland, and Nengudi could more aptly be described as a sinuous infiltration. Perhaps we might think this broader symbolic and racial moment in Dia's art history with an eye squarely focused on the inattention so artfully and potently situated in Moten's trenchant text "The Case of Blackness,"[16] and perhaps we might consider the distinctive inflections of this set of practices—figuring them together with the weaves of Edwards and the vessels of Nengudi—within the undulating parameter of Renee Gladman's iterative, recursively entangled, and infinitely wending lines:

> I began the day wanting to bring into convergence three activities of being—what I'd seen, what I'd read, and what I'd drawn—and to say about these acts how they made lines in the world that ran alongside other lines, and how all these lines together made environments of the earth, where I could put my body and you could put yours, and these would be lines always entwined because there was little if anything you could say or make without calling forth other lines, and this was how you knew you were where you were and the ground was worth cultivating and that there was life beneath the ground.[17]

Rowland's entire practice is testament to this last irreducible line: "there was/is/has been/will forever be life beneath the ground": this is their *Plot* (2024),[18] their tripartite intervention within the precincts of the Dia Art Foundation, and within its Beacon grounds.[19] If we can approach Rowland's work *actively* grappling with our ongoing imbrication in the irremissible debts of native dispossession, if we can arrive at such work freighted with a sense of the weight of racial slavery's indispensable role in the formation of modernity, if we can reckon with what Kathryn Yusoff incisively describes as "this conversion of earth through the grammars of geology" into profit, into property, through a confluence of material and epistemic violences that "enacted a world-building and world-shattering" project whose ravages have been of an alarmingly consistent extremity, yielding to white supremacy an immense megastructure of racial capital continuous within our present *after* life of slavery,[20] then we might grasp the terrible beauty of Rowland's plot.[21] Here, again, Gladman's fractal lines course umbilically through McQueen's fluvial sound, Edwards's stringed instruments, Nengudi's flavorful bodies, and Rowland's upturned pan:

> ... where all at once the lines in the world head for the periphery, and each departure is violent and each exploding site is a center with a micro-architecture inside that pulses like all centers pulse, responding "to the megastructures of the previous layers," each center being a book burning at the core of the earth.[22]

In Rowland's recourse to the contract,[23] to the rubric and stricture of the ledger, there is also an awful, beautifully inverted line drawing together, in utter involution, the categorical distinctions between earth, edifice, institution, and the afterlife of slavery.[24] Through these documentary interventions, Rowland fathoms a set of "languages having to break in order for [enslaved] words to appear, to flow like they're searching for something, illuminated from within," to borrow from Gladman. In consonance with Marina Vishmidt, we might think this as infrastructural, and not institutional, critique, attending to the ways in which Rowlands's mode of operation moves from "a standpoint which takes the institution as its horizon, to one which takes the institution as a historical and contingent nexus of material conditions amenable to re-arrangement through struggle."[25] We might consider the implications of this practice's braiding together—through both contract and extant matter, through abstraction and concretion—the instance of the institution with the longue durée of slavery's worldmaking aftermaths, a move that enables Rowland's work to "transversally connect with and through [Black Radical] movements elsewhere, and to materialize those movements within the space of art as a concrete rather than gestural politics."[26]

Easement boundary line of Cameron Rowland, Plot, 2024, photographed November 2, 2024, Dia Beacon, NY. (See caption in footnote 18.)

To borrow still further down that line from Ciarán Finlayson, it is a function of Rowland's insistence on the docket, the jurisprudential precisions of the written contract, that links post-Emancipatory racial logics to their roots in pre–Civil War orders of slavery, as was materialized in Rowland's pathbreaking debut exhibition "91020000" at Artist's Space in 2016. Thus, in Dia's instance, Rowland's *Increase* (2024)[27] sounds the awful consonance of Black infant mortality's comparable rate of death in the present to that obtaining under chattel slavery:

> Black infants in America are now more than twice as likely to die as white infants—11.3 per 1,000 black babies, compared with 4.9 per 1,000 white babies, according to the most recent government data—a racial disparity that is actually wider than in 1850, 15 years before the end of slavery, when most black women were considered chattel.[28]

Finlayson observes of this consonance that Rowland's works "bear witness to abolition as the emancipation of *capital* and testify to the purported freedom on the far side of Jubilee as the dominion of what DuBois would call 'dictatorship of property.'"[29] So just as McQueen's operative mechanism in *Bass* conscripts, so Rowland's contractually architected relationship between extant object (or, more colloquially, ready-made) and art institution collapses aesthetic autonomy (and its values) into a structure and scene of contracted labor wherein personhood, propriety, and property are indivisible from white supremacy's submarine architectures of enclosure and expropriation, wherein that which has been "purchased," rented, or otherwise obtained and redeployed as art is committed to a program of derelict use, to a mutually agreed upon contractual promise of depreciation, degradation, deprecation of *value*, "raising the question as to what it might mean for these objects, completely unadorned, to be works of contemporary art *only* insofar as they are straightforwardly useful objects or historical artifacts."[30] To follow Finlayson, we might say: these "works" *work*. This simple fact enacts a kind of contagion consonant with McQueen's bass-driven drift, since it extends to every object existent under the edifice of racial slavery's ongoing aftermath … *This* is the nature of our (un)common (under)common entanglement, and it describes a space with no wholly separable straight lines.

***

"Properties" begins multiply. It begins with *Estate*—sited at the museum's ticket desk—listing an inventory of literal properties, enumerating Schlumberger's foundational contribution of oil wealth's returns to the erection of an institution with canonical influence over common conceptions of the anti-normative possibilities of conceptual art. It equally begins with Rowland's plot, which we might venture to say brings "exhibition" *online*: wherein Rowland's work triggers the institution's *need* to show what cannot be held, what cannot be owned, such need thus engendering commitment to the successive depreciation of its value(s). "Properties" does this in an institution whose single unit of measure—the day—is relentlessly interminably assailed by the ecological and neo-imperial depredations of an industry that bequeaths to the Dia Foundation its ground, its common forms of access, its public face. Here, there is echo of Gladman (2018) in Moten (2013):

> There is an ethics of the cut, of contestation, that I have tried to honor and illuminate because it instantiates and articulates another way of living in the world, a black way of living together in the other world we are constantly making in and out of this world, in the alternative planetarity that the intramural, internally differentiated presence—the (sur)real presence—of blackness serially brings online as persistent aeration, the incessant turning over of the ground beneath our feet that is the indispensable preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under.[31]

Can we perhaps now hear Rowland's underproduction and McQueen's infratones in a certain synchrony?

The first sight line in "Properties" is of/toward this *Plot*—a distant contract, but simultaneously a verb, a noun, an activity, a structure, a plan, the inner logic of a (melo)drama, the hydraulic[32] mechanism that enables whiteness to metabolize its violence and regulate itself. To reach this plot one must first pass through a voided white vestibular space in which Rowland's short publication stands in stacks as an open invitation to study. In pondering this invitation to reckon with one's imbrication in this scene, this str(ict/u)ture, this plot, I am moved to ask: Can an upturned pan speak history's scouring back into an emptied space? Can the sequence of five scythes that constitute *Commissary* (2024)[33] sing in an interminable round loudly enough that we might sense their volatility? Can these rusted scimitar blades speak to the silence that surrounds them—can they cut industry and its initiating iniquities together in a necrotic embrace, one that sounds the threshed textures of this harvest that counterposes *Increase* and *Commissary* as two poles within Rowland's magnetic field, in a gallery where their four works are arrayed at points north, south, east, and west—marking the totality of its and our social field?

Can we reckon with the integration of these

Cameron Rowland, "Properties," 2024, Dia Beacon. Installation view.

objects—objects which issued from the regularizing and repressive architectures of slavery and its aftermath—as *precedent* to the industrial modernity that gave us ceramic fountains and specific objects as matter for thought of the notion of transcendence? Can we attend to the manner in which their exhumation orients us toward a horizon *beyond* art (and its many precincts),[34] and toward the structures of a world that invents leisure[35] to manage the necropolitical eviscerations that its malignant lifeworlds depend upon?

It would be my contention that these questions concern *us* so much more than they do these objects on display. Given that for those myriad subaltern communities marked as structurally disposable, as incapable of (democratic) rights and the (responsible) exercise of freedom, "the fascism which liberal modernity and civil society have always required has never abided by this order's mendacious separation of the political from the aesthetic,"[36] how could one expect an art keyed to the operation of these structures, or grounded in the historical praxis of these communities, to conform to the artifice of such notionally separable strictures as those that divide aesthetics from politics, form from content, present from past, living from dead?[37]

If we even *provisionally* understand, as so many of those engaged in Black studies do, that "genocide, now as before, is an aesthetic project," and that therefore the luster, integrity, probity, and solicitousness of culture serves precisely to veil and abet its perpetual practice of genocide as economic rationale, as engine of state formation, as regeneration of "growth," then which aesthetic act can be materially uncoupled from the political arrangements of subjection that underwrite artistic "freedom"? Or, better still, in the words of Rizvana Bradley, "how do we survive the aesthetic regime that carves and encloses the very shape of our question?"[38] Renee Gladman again:

> I was looking into the moss growing between the bricks laid out in front of the door, looking into the moss as its own space, its doing beyond making a border, and the green coming back after such a long winter, bright but also mourning—the sun bearing down on it, the clouds blocking the sun, the human eyes glaring—and found, within, spaces that bordered

some infinite writing about process and thought, some unending burrowing, some endless death and reach, some constant holding in place, Kristin Prevallet's "the poem is a state both of mind and landscape," and our books burrowing inside our drawings, the lines holding the brick unyielding.[39]

If I might follow their lead, and depart momentarily from the order of propriety, it seems to me that in McQueen's *Sunshine State* (2022), the twinned and inverted two-channel structure of simultaneous erasures of Al Jolson's skin enacted in the film, whether into shadow under the glistening gleam of boot black, or into the irradiating halations of white "in the negative," hail back not merely to the hydraulics of anti-Blackness, and to its generative negrophiliac dimensions, but forward to Cindy Sherman's untitled and aborted "self-portrait" in blackface, and to Bruce Nauman's "self-erasure" in his own

Steve McQueen, Bass (detail), 2024. © Steve McQueen. Photo: Don Stahl.

Faced with the impulse to break *out* of this bind, perhaps we might return to McQueen's *Exodus* (1992–97), freshly on display at Dia Chelsea, a looped Super 8 film transferred to digital video and sited at the center of the first of his two galleries. It is a film in which, following the line of Tavia Nyong'o, "the blackness *interpolated* between cinema's vaunted 'twenty-four frames a second'" can be read between the weaving motion of these two Black men, echoing back *Bass*'s errant and digressive iterations as another order of blackened motion that brings dissonant difference into simultaneous articulation.[40]

self-assigned experiment with racial abnegation in *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (1968), an action resurfaced obliquely in Pfeiffer's Artists on Artists talk in October of last year.

In the involuted echo of these "experimental" iterations of artistic freedom, McQueen's *Sunshine State* unearths an antinomy of drastic disequilibrium in which opposition (of black to white, front to back) and equality (in the simultaneous identity of twin frames) are discomposed by the desirous depths of a whiteness that *cannot* separate

the violence of consumption from the practice of affiliation that always incorporates, destroys, disfigures the difference it ostensibly seeks to celebrate.[41]

Sunshine State shows that within this twinned figure lurks the law of the singular, and its perpetual order of exception. Whiteness *must* first confront the reality of this need, this profound desire for possessive mastery before learning to *desire*, to move, to *want otherwise*. It must want *Exodus* as leave-taking beyond every register of possession. McQueen's incantations of the work's title in *Sunshine State* seem to articulate this training in the recursive structure of a chant that stages repetition as a programmatic transformation of the self's relationship to meaning, through the iterations of memory.

In the neighboring gallery, *Exodus*'s concentric loop of surveilled entry and Black motion sits at the core of a panoply of photographic prints displaying luminous buds, flowers, stalks, fronds, leaves, stems, meshed webs, and tendrilled networks of rhizomatic Grenadian plant life that animates McQueen's concentric array in a pallid gallery. The prints' alternating assembly of longitudinal and vertical frames already figures seriality's constitutive and repressed dependence on the irregular as an eruption that calls for the brutal impositions of order. We might recall here a short line from Moten's 2015 lecture "Blackness and Nonperformance": "Forms are reclaimed by the informality that precedes them."[42]

McQueen's prints describe a chromatic fullness of rusted reds and ebullient pinks, ringing the mute tones of the gallery with magenta-tinged depths, submarine greens, and deep black shades, which together fashion a filmic strip of hues that wend a musical structure across the patinaed walls and against the starched parchment of the gallery's grey floor. The bricked enclosures of Dia's arches mirror the flat plane of its grey floors and walls, making of the photographs a sinuous weave of Grenadian plant life that articulates a protuberant efflorescence, measured and restrained only by the white enclosures of the picture's frames. Perhaps this is the (ef)florescence with which Moten was concerned in our epigrammatic opening?

In *Exodus*, McQueen's twin Black men march the antenna-shaped fronds of their two potted plants through the bustling Brownian motion of London streets at a rhythm of two-by-two-by-two-by-two, their upright and elegant peregrinations beneath the nodding brims of porkpie hats and macintoshed coats rhyming, and bending white patrician codes to insistently queer Caribbean rhythms. They weave, they thread, they warp and bend—they *miscegenate*:

> And I had found in reading a way to draw lines from the earth and make an outline around my sitting at this table or walking the streets of any place, any large or small city, any countryside, any emptied forgotten place, any place transitioning, taking on multiple identities, blaring them at once, and this was all architecture, all the reading I had done. Lyn Hejinian's "the open mouths of people," her "weather and air drawn to us," to say, "landscape is a moment in time." I'd found in my walking the expanse of several places through which I stopped repeatedly, I stopped in time and without time, I stood at the thresholds of doors, at the throats of caves; I pulled windows from collapsed walls, and grabbed a book to hold up the city, the barn, the balcony, and this was reading … Reading aggregated layers, with luminous lines running between, and each line was a moment in someone, where the body stood up and walked into a book, a drawing, a squat structure of doors, a tower perched on a hill, into the water, and each line was the writing back of language, its response, its figurations, and all this queering at the corners, putting corners everywhere, even on top of one another. And I found in my narrative these other narratives that opened under water, that glowed in deepest night, that you could read without alarm, that were blown-out geometries, maps, that were textiles hanging from the ceiling, calendula underground, always having something to do with bodies, moving through other bodies.[43]

Steve McQueen, Bass *, on view at Dia Beacon until May 26, 2025. Cameron Rowland, "Properties," on view at Dia Beacon until October 20, 2025. Steve McQueen, "Steve McQueen," on view at Dia Chelsea until July 19, 2025.*

X

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Turns" at the International Center of Photography, New York (2021). A new photobook, *INDEX 2025*, is forthcoming with Roma Publications in spring 2025.

1
Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance," lecture, Museum of Modern Art, September 25, 2015, YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByIIg&ab_channel=TheMuseumofModernArt .

2
The writing in this essay has been deeply informed and influenced by Anthony Huberman's Cooper Union IDS lecture "Bang on a Can," February 8, 2022 https://cooper.edu/events-and-exhibitions/events/anthony-huberman-bang-can ; and, in turn, by the work of Fred Moten. Neither party bears responsibility for any of the many flaws that follow. With sincere thanks to Leslie Hewitt and Omar Berrada for organizing such a rich and inspirational series of convenings over the years.

3
Underproduction (2024). Overturned pot, 18 × 21 × 16 inches. Slaves outnumbered owners on the plantation. Slaves were an inherent risk to the plantation. Owners banned slaves from meeting with one another. Slaves met anyway. An overturned pot placed at the door of the meeting blocked the sound of the gathering. The overturned pot protected meetings from the slave patrol. The meetings were negations of the plantation logic of production.

4
Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2003).

5
Marina Vishmidt, "A Self-Relating Negativity: Where Infrastructure and Critique Meet," in *Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetics and Critique* ed. Martin Beck et al. (Spector Books, 2022), 40.

6
See Caitlin C. Rosenthal, "How Slavery Inspired Modern Business Management," *Boston Review* , August 20, 2018 https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/caitlin-c-rosenthal-accounting-slavery-excerpt/ .

7
See Saidiya Hartman, "A Note on Method," in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* : *Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W. W. Norton, 2019).

8
Bass features the performances of Steve McQueen as director, and Marcus Miller, Aston Barrett Jr., Mamadou Kouyaté, and Laura-Simone Martin on the bass.

9
"On the ground, under it, in the break between deferred advent and premature closure, natality's differential presence and afterlife's profligate singularities, social vision, blurred with the enthusiasm of surreal presence and unreal time, anticipates and discomposes the harsh glare of clear-eyed, supposedly impossibly originary correction, where enlightenment and darkness, blindness and insight, invisibility and hypervisibility converge in the open obscurity of a field of study and a line of flight." Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance."

10
See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," in "On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," special issue, *small axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008).

11
See Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," in "Black Women's Labor: Economics, Culture, and Politics," special issue, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18, no. 1 (January–March 2016).

12
Tina Campt, "Introduction: Listening to Images—An Exercise in Counterintuition," in *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

13
"The Body Politic: Video from The Met Collection" https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/body-politic ; David Hammons, *Phat Free* (excerpt) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyWqmc8aQ18 .

14
Note the subtle interanimation and syncopation of Pfeiffer's multiple shadows with Bruce Nauman's rhythmic, pathological cascade of falls in *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1* (1968) https://www.vdb.org/titles/bouncing-corner-no-1 , a work made in the same year that Nauman assumed blackface in *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (1968) https://www.vdb.org/titles/flesh-white-black-flesh . See "Paul Pfeiffer on Bruce Nauman," YouTube video, posted October 9, 2024, by Dia Art Foundation https://youtu.be/0gzoR-9FXrE?t=2334 .

15
See “Leslie Hewitt,” June 24, 2022–June 4, 2023, Dia Bridgehampton; “Tony Cokes,” June 23, 2023–May 27, 2024, Dia Bridgehampton; “Delcy Morelos: El abrazo,” October 5, 2023–July 20, 2024, Dia Chelsea; “stanley brouwn,” April 15, 2023–2025, Dia Beacon; “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” April 5, 2024–Spring 2025, Dia Beacon; “On Kawara,” long-term view, Dia Beacon; “Senga Nengudi,” long-term view, Dia Beacon.

16
“Reinhardt reads blackness at sight, as held merely within the play of absence and presence. He is blind to the articulated combination of absence and presence in black that is in his face, as his work, his own production, as well as in the particular form of Taylor. Mad, in a self-imposed absence of (his own) work, Reinhardt gets read a lecture he must never have forgotten, though, alas, he was only to survive so short a time.” Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 190 https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Moten_Case.pdf .

17
Renee Gladman, “Untitled (Environments),” *e-flux journal*, no. 92 (June 2018) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/203283/untitled-environments/ .

18
Plot (2024). Easement, one acre in Beacon, New York. Black people were prohibited from being buried in cemeteries. These prohibitions were applied to both free and enslaved Black people, in both the North and the South. They were meant to make the degradation of Blackness permanent. Black people were buried in unmarked slave plots and unregistered Black burial grounds. For many Black people these Black mass graves were extensions of Black life. As Sylvia Wynter describes, Black mass graves were a point of connection to the “permanent future” and the “historical life of the group.” As Wynter writes of the provision grounds where slaves grew their own food, the burial plot was also “an area of experience which reinvented and therefore perpetuated an alternative world view, an alternative consciousness to that of the plantation. This world view was marginalized by the plantation but never destroyed. In relation to the plot, the slave lived in a society partly created as an adjunct to the market, partly as an end in itself.” Black people used funerals and burial grounds to plot escape and rebellion. In response, laws banning slave funerals and grave markers were passed throughout the Caribbean and the North American colonies. As former slave John Bates said, masters who prohibited slave funerals would “jes’ bury dem like a cow or a hoss, jes’ dig de hole and roll ’em in it and cover ’em up.” Unmarked Black burials are frequently disinterred during real estate development. This has been the case for numerous burial grounds in New York State and throughout the country. Construction frequently continues despite these “discoveries.” In 1790, the US Census recorded nearly as many slaves in New York State as in Georgia. The land that Dia Art Foundation currently owns in Beacon, New York was owned by slave owners and slave traders from 1683 until the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827. The easement between Dia Art Foundation and Plot Inc. conveys the rights to a one-acre section of the institution’s property to Plot Inc. for the purpose of protecting the graves of enslaved people who may have been buried there. This burial ground easement runs with the land and requires Dia and all future owners to relinquish the rights to use, disturb, or develop this section of the property. The plot will remain unmarked. It will degrade the value of the institution’s property. It challenges the assumed absence of Black burials on sites of enslavement by assuming their presence. See https://www.diaart.org/media/_file/brochures/properties.pdf .

19
This mooted trio comprises both *Plot* as contract framed on the wall, *Plot* as easement sited in degenerative growth on Dia’s grounds, and *Estate* (2024). Per the artist: “ *Estate* (2024): Dia Art Foundation Real Estate, 1974–2024. Books, $10 each. Schlumberger Limited, established in 1926, is the largest oilfield services company in the world. Descendants of founder Conrad Schlumberger used their shares in the company to create the Dia Art Foundation. Schlumberger Limited was the primary source of funds for the first decade of the institution. During this period, Dia purchased the majority of the fifty-nine real estate properties it has owned during the past fifty years. The properties were purchased for artists, for artworks, for offices, for exhibition spaces, and as rentals. Many of these properties were given away. Many were sold at a high rate of return. A number continue to function as rental properties, which generate over one million dollars of annual income for the institution. Dia does not retain information on the history of these properties prior to the twentieth century.”

20
“If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.” Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007), 7.

21
See Kathryn Yusoff, “Mine as Paradigm,” *e-flux Architecture*, June 2021 https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/survivance/381867/mine-as-paradigm/ .

22
Gladman, “Untitled (Environments).”

23
The intricacies of this dimension of Rowland’s practice, and the deeper analytical, political, and artistic implications of them, are substantive and wide-reaching, deserving of a greater level of sustained attention than this register of response can realistically or ethically accommodate. See Eric Golo Stone, “Legal Implications: Cameron Rowland’s Rental Contract,” *October*, no. 164 (Spring 2018); and Zoé Samudzi, “Rethinking Reparations,” *Art in A merica* , Fall 2023.

24
See also Jack Whitten, *Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant* (2014). Acrylic on canvas, eight panels, overall 124 ½ × 248 ½ inches https://www.moma.org/collection/works/214864 .

25
Vishmidt, “A Self-Relating Negativity,” 30.

26
Vishmidt, “A Self-Relating Negativity,” 31–32.

27
Increase (2024). Bed frame, 46 × 42 × 78 inches. Under slave law, *partus sequitur ventrem* stipulated that the “child follows the belly.” When slave owners bought Black women, they also purchased the rights to what owners termed “all her future increase.” Saidiya Hartman describes the centrality of this principle to the system of racial slavery: “The work of sex and procreation was the chief motor for reproducing the material, social, and symbolic relations of slavery. The value accrued through reproductive labor was brutally apparent to the enslaved who protested bitterly against being bred like cattle and oxen.” This status was constructed to last forever. What Jennifer Morgan names as “the value of a reproducing labor force” has ordered the continuity of this sexual violence. Domestic work has been a principal vector for its preservation. Live-in workers have been made perpetually available to their employers. Refusals of this availability are criminalized. Christina Sharpe makes clear that “living in/the wake of slavery is living ‘the afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children.” Non/being constitutes a position whose modalities of life and death are simultaneously structured by and unrecognizable to the capture of ownership. As Hartman writes, “The forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it. These labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive. They enable those ‘who were never meant to survive’ to sometimes do just that.” This fugitivity is an inherent threat to the value of increase. See https://www.diaart.org/media/_file/brochures/properties.pdf .

28
Linda Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis," *New York Times Magazine* , April 11, 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html .

29
Ciarán Finlayson, "Perpetual Slavery," *Parse Journal*, 2019 https://parsejournal.com/article/perpetual-slavery/ . Emphasis mine. See also Ciarán Finlayson, *Perpetual Slavery* (Floating Opera Press, 2023).

30
Finlayson, "Perpetual Slavery."

31
Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism in the Flesh," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 778–79.

32
See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010).

33
Commissary (2024). Scythes 59.5 × 52 × 16 inches. Rental Sharecropping was debt peonage. It was instituted to replace slave labor. It operated in explicit violation of the Thirteenth Amendment's stated ban on involuntary servitude. Sharecropping contracts were designed to keep Black people bound to the land, which their labor made valuable. Violations of the contract included leaving the plantation without permission; being loud, disorderly, drunk, or disobedient; having an "offensive weapon"; and misusing the tools. Violations were grounds for dismissal, eviction, and forfeiture of the share. In addition to cultivating the land, these contracts could include obligations to do the washing "and all other necessary house work" for the landlord's family. Sharecroppers were forced to buy food, clothes, tools, and other necessities on credit from the landlord's general store, also called the commissary. The commissary charged up to 70 percent interest. Debts were deducted from the cropper's share. The contract and the commissary kept sharecroppers in perpetual debt. W. E. B. Du Bois describes the terms of this labor as "a wage approximating as nearly as possible slavery conditions, in order to restore capital lost in the war." Many sharecroppers were former slaves. Many sharecroppers were the children of former slaves. Slaves used scythes as tools of rebellion in Henrico County, Virginia, in 1800; in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831; and in Coffeeville, Mississippi, in 1858. In violation of their contracts, croppers armed themselves as well. The tools of perpetual debt were also the tools of Black riot.

34
See Stefano Harney's remarks as part of Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Hussein's panel "Strike MoMA: A Conversation with Sandy Grande, Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Jasbir Puar, and Dylan Rodriguez," beginning at forty-three minutes in the following video, and note in particular his deployment of the term "precinct" at 43:28 https://youtu.be/V2vzhwnjy4s?t=2580 .

35
See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

36
Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Four Theses on Aesthetics," *e-flux journal*, no. 120 (September 2021) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/416146/four-theses-on-aesthetics/ .

37
Rizvana Bradley, "The Difficulty of Black Women (A Response)," *Artforum* , December 20, 2022 https://www.artforum.com/columns/the-difficulty-of-black-women-a-response-252389/ . See also Rizvana Bradley, "The Black Residuum, or That Which Remains," chap. 4 in *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

38
Bradley and da Silva, "Four Theses on Aesthetics."

39
Gladman, "Untitled (Environments)."

40
Tavia Nyongo'o, "Habeas Ficta: Fictive Ethnicity, Affecting Representations, and Slaves on Screen," in *Migrating the Black Body* , ed. Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (University of Washington Press, 2017), 288.

41
We would do well to think of the Palestinian people here, and of the forcible suppression of Arab speech at the US Democratic National Convention in August 2024.

42
Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance."

43
Gladman, "Untitled (Environments)."