e-flux journal

issue #102

09 /2019

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

For further information, contact **journal@e-flux.com**

www.e-flux.com/journal

Editorial

Federica showed up for her appointment with the person who had agreed to purchase her soul. Thus begins Franco "Bifo" Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci's novel *Morte ai Vecchi* (Death to the old), in which a device called KapSoul delivers "waves of empathic excitement" to young people before they descend into orgiastic violence against the elderly. The first serial installment of the translated novel is published in this issue of *e-flux journal*, with further installments coming in the near future.

Also in this issue, Jonas Staal illuminates the Martian designs of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, with their unabashedly extractive colonial ambitions. But Staal also reminds us of radical visions, sketched by authors like Alexander Bogdanov and Octavia Butler, of deep nonhuman comradeship on the red planet.

Against the backdrop of the fires engulfing the Amazon rainforest, Teresa Castro outlines the importance of queer kinship with vegetal and other forms of life, which have much to teach us. Warning against anthropomorphizing the rainforest as "the lungs of the earth," Castro reminds us that this is ultimately part of a colonizing view that frames "nature" as something we own—as something that works for us. Castro also traces the history of plants on film; this history reveals our limited imagination when it comes to vegetal life, but also includes magical moments of other-than-human autonomy and subjectivity.

Samer Frangie makes sense of his own generation in post–civil war Beirut, one that rushed into the future in the absence of a past, seeing itself as the product of a historical rupture. Frangie writes that Beirut's late-nineties generation became the "vanguard by default." Taught by the previous, prewar generation to distrust presentism, they had no time but the present, and no ground but the reconstructed one, on which to center themselves.

Claire Fontaine responds to this year's Venice Biennale, where visitors are faced with an acute contradiction. Fontaine writes that the displaying of such a massive, incoherent volume of "experimental gestures" from all over the world drains the works of the very value that drew the curators — and maybe even the artists themselves — to them in the first place.

Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber also use this year's Venice Biennale as a springboard to detail how the art world has come to "operate simultaneously as a dream of liberation, and a structure of exclusion." Can there be — or has there perhaps always been — another art world serving utopian ends? Dubrovsky and Graeber examine art's paradoxical conceptions of value and its corresponding ability to either reproduce or potentially

overturn the dominant social structure. According to Malevich, they remind us, artists were to be prophets and founders of a new communal world where everyone creates, free from political threats and from the possibility of their work being turned into clichéd commodities.

In McKenzie Wark's exploration of prettiness as an aesthetic in trans art—especially in the recent film *So Pretty* by Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli—she asks: If the utopian is to be more than a momentary illumination, how do we organize love? In "Femme as in Fuck You," Wark explores the potential for a glimmer of utopia in the pretty, if it can be something with agency—something other than the traditional lasso for men's desires. The pretty can be utopian to the extent that it keeps certain types of violence at bay. Wark also asks what a utopian cinema might look like, and whether *So Pretty* falls into this category.

Ways and categories of thinking, as Yuk Hui urges in his interview with Geert Lovink, must also be reorganized in the face of current existential threats and emergent technologies. Academic disciplines need to speak to one another, insists Hui, while also admitting that the chasms between them can't be mended, "since when you attempt to bridge a gap, this gap is at the same time maintained." Hui offers a different possibility: "to create a new discipline in which this gap no longer exists."

—Editors

X

Franco “Bifo” Berardi and
Massimiliano Geraci

Killing Swarm, Part 1

We would like to present some excerpts from our novel KS, translated from the Italian Morte ai Vecchi *(Baldini & Castoldi, 2016), that will soon be published in a full English translation.*

It is the story of a killing swarm that emerges from the collective unconscious of a multitude of youngsters—an ecstatic frenzy that results in a worldwide wave of murders of old people. But it is also a gnostic and psychedelic history of the relations between code and author, the creation and destruction of worlds, and a reflection on the generative power of writing.

Café Vishnu

Federica showed up for her appointment with the person who had agreed to purchase her soul. She walked into the dimly lit Café Vishnu. There was a guy putting oranges into the mammoth juice press and she asked him politely, “Do you happen to know Mr. Mehta?”

He jerked his chin toward the other side of the room, and Federica felt faint. She was tempted to flee. Under a lamp, in the cavernous dark of the café, she thought she recognized Isidoro in profile. She held her breath and froze for a moment, but before she could leave, he turned around. He got up and walked over to her, hand extended.

“You must be Miss Federica Vitale. We’ve never met, but I feel as though I’ve always known you.” Federica relaxed. He had a much deeper voice than her father’s high, tremulous one. The color of his hair and the shape of his nose were different, as was his height. Isidoro was a few centimeters taller than Simon, but Simon was more brawny and masculine.

“I’m familiar with your résumé, Miss,” he said to her as he sat down. Federica sat across from him, worried. “I know that you’ve studied some very interesting things, and you’ve written things I’d like to know more about. I know a lot about you. Not to worry, I’m not a spy. But you do possess the characteristics we’re looking for.”

Curled up under Simon’s chair—or rather, stretched out in all its gleaming blackness—was an animal more wolf than dog, who was watching the new arrival. Federica only noticed it at that moment, and its gaze staring at her through the darkness scared her.

Simon stretched a hand out to stroke the glossy back of the animal. He asked with concern, “Are you afraid of dogs?”

Federica shook her head. “Just the opposite. I love them.”

“Minos knows how to be a real gentleman, if that puts you at ease. But we can also lock him in the basement.”

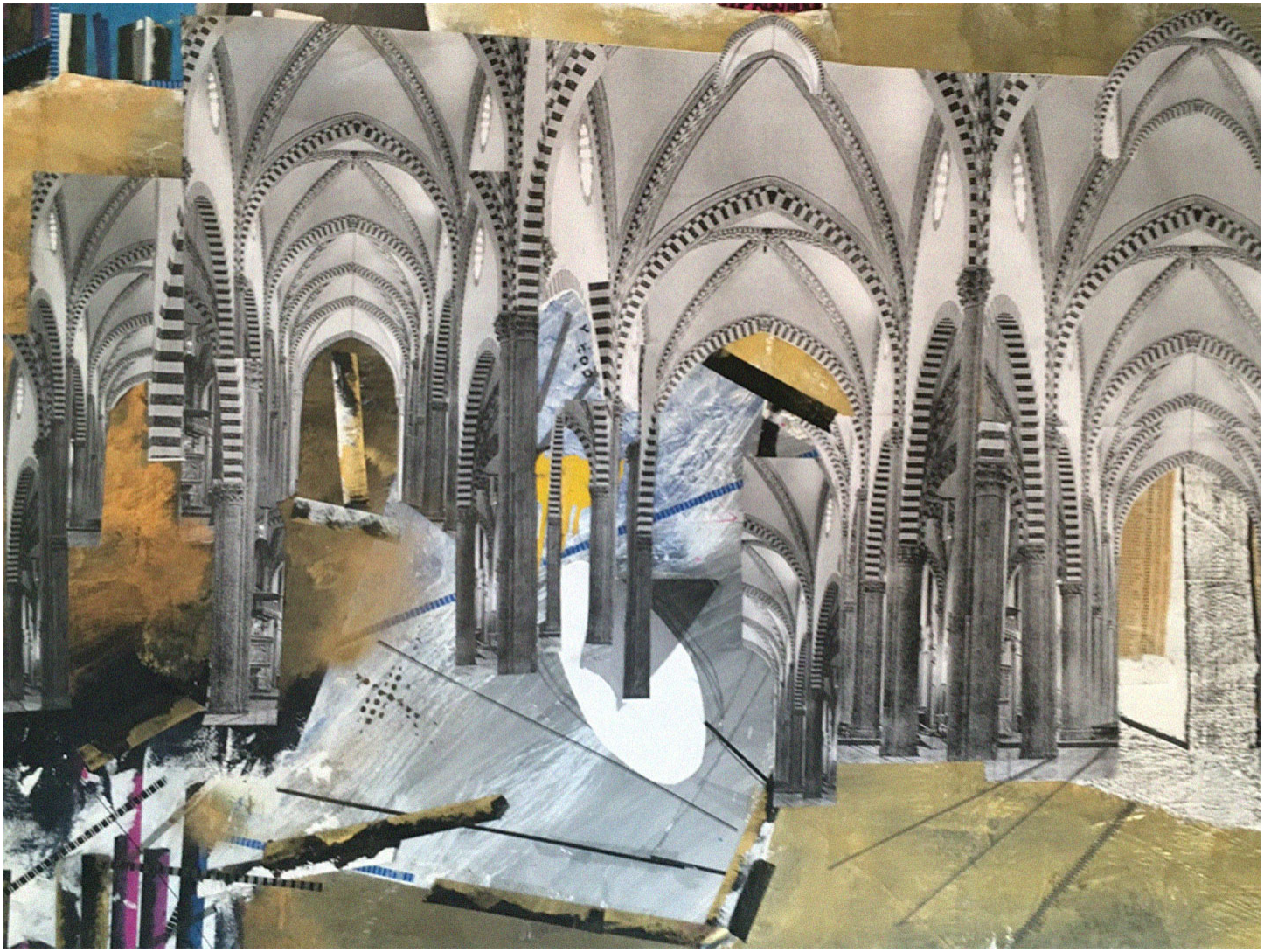


Photo: Istubalz

Minos smiled gruesomely and growled.

Simon Mehta looked up with an obsequious smile, caressing his top lip with his index finger. “Back to us, Miss. I’ve brought the documents for the transfer of your soul, as we had arranged. Do you mind if I smoke?”

He lit a cigarillo that gave off an intense woodsy smell, then took a sheet of paper from the bag lying on the table.

“This is the contract. Please read it carefully.”

He handed her a pen. Federica held it in midair while she read clauses that she couldn’t make heads or tails of. The man exuded an intensely sweet scent. His green eyes were circled with black.

Federica signed after reading that the Mehta Agency was acquiring all the rights to her soul, for the duration of three non-renewable months, by mutual agreement. She handed back the pen, trying to keep her eyes fixed on his.

“And now?” she asked after signing.

“Now what?”

“Now what am I supposed to do?”

Mehta shrugged his shoulders and stretched out his hands. “Nothing. Do what you want, Miss. We have reserved a sunny room for you here in our residence. We’re not asking you to do anything. Your signature is enough.”

He poured some green liqueur into two glasses. Federica drank.

She closed her eyes and sighed deeply, like the moment when Vishnu falls asleep, and the world takes shape while he is unconscious.

Rizatriptan

Isidoro Vitale awoke with a terrible headache. He'd had them for decades, but recently the attacks were becoming more frequent. He would wake up with an intense pain in his temples that almost kept him from breathing. Luckily, that morning he could stay in bed.

Unlike most other days, he didn't need to wake up in a hurry to rush to school and get mixed up in that strange, clamorous swarm. He stayed stretched out, immobile, eyes half-closed, trying to breathe deeply in the hope the pain might flow down out of his temples and behind his ears, down his neck, and melt away, slowly, slowly. He needed to close his eyes, inhale and exhale in a regular rhythm, swallow a rizatriptan tablet, and wait for the pain to ease. He waited a long time until the drug took effect, until the pressure on his temples diminished. With his eyes closed, he inspected the deepest recesses of his circulation, all the way to the suffering places in his brain, and he silently took part in the slow work of their decongesting. He imagined molecules of rizatriptan furtively tunneling into his veins and staging a graceful dance to convince his neurons to relax.

The Interference

The official launch of KapSoul had been set for April. Six months before the program launched, there was a pilot phase. A few thousand devices were circulated to a select group. For a time, they had demonstrated the anticipated effect: waves of empathic excitement, and collective dances in which the laws of gravity seemed temporarily suspended.

Then, just after Federica's death, the wave became menacing, suddenly turning into an inexplicable orgy of violence. The wave of violence involved growing numbers of adolescents, and not only those who were using the KapSoul test chips. It was as though the psychoelectric impulse had stimulated hidden energies, long repressed, which were now liberated in a contagious way. April had passed, and the official launch had been suspended.

The program needed a patch. They needed to find the malfunction, the error, the interference.

"Interference" was the most appropriate word to use, according to Luca.

Something was interfering with the empathic wave, turning it claustrophobic, aggressive, murderous.

Something was interfering... but what? They needed to hurry up and answer the question, resolve the problem, fix the disaster, so that the product could be launched on the market and the shareholders could recoup their

Illustration: Barbara Gaddi

investment. Luca knew these things well. He was in a hurry. He suspected that the interference hinged on Federica, but he hadn't spoken about this to anyone. Not even with Walanski, the short engineer, who had been in charge of the implementation phase.

Luca would have liked to say to him, "Dear Walanski, in order to solve the problem I need to get in touch with Federica, urgently." But Walanski would have thought he was nuts for saying it.

"You are aware that Federica is dead?"

This was why Luca needed to speak to Isidoro. He knew well that Federica and her father had had such a deep emotional bond that perhaps, by analyzing the psychic structure of one, it might be possible to rebuild the essential elements of the other.

He wasn't sure Isidoro would be useful to him, but he had to make every effort to deactivate the process that was leading his project to failure.

Failure? It was worse than that. His work had involuntarily unleashed a global catastrophe. It was an outlandish hypothesis, that the murderous deviation of KapSoul was

being caused by Federica's influence in the final phase of the program's creation. But it was one entirely worth testing. It was the only one he had. So, he decided to go out and look for Isidoro once again, by going to his house in person. He mounted his cycle and rode through sunny streets to the area where Federica's father lived, near the the Borgosano mall.

All of the windows of the building were closed. The front door was open. He climbed to the second floor, where Professor Vitale's apartment was. Stuck to the door with a thumbtack was a folded note with the name Luca written on it in large letters.

He took it down nervously and read it.

"I'd prefer not to see you. I won't be writing to the address you left me. I'm leaving. I don't want to know anything about this. Let me be.

Isidoro Vitale."

Mel

After an unfocused day, whose details blurred together with those of the previous day, the preceding months, and the ones still to come, Mel finished his ritual and got in bed, gaming to bring on sleep.

A keen premonition
A slow season
An abyss aflame
A deserted bone
An absent-minded flight
A twin wing

Luca, whom he had met online a few months earlier, taught him that words are marvelous toys to play around with, that they are the clay with which you build a world, or building blocks you can use to provoke your very own god. He never got tired of repeating to him that once you add a new poem to it, the world is no longer the same.

In spite of the boy's insistence, they never met in person.

Luca had taught him how poetry can speak about shipwrecks, about a current under the sea that picks bones in whispers, of unskilled actors and of trains that puff across a landscape of lemons, of high schooners in a sky heavy with foreboding, and about nothing—yes, the nothingness that dwells inside an almond.

An indecipherable face
An upended street
An eternal caress
A blurry greeting
An indestructible intertwining
A heart that opens to the world
A white eruption
An exhausted chain
A miraculous aperture

He usually needed to keep at this for hours before falling asleep. Or else he took half a Minias, or a Halcion, depending on whether he wanted a yellow or a light blue pill.

Nine complete sweeps of the hour hand and he awoke. It was late morning—almost lunch time, from what his internal clock could make out. He heard Martina talking in the kitchen (he couldn't stand his grandmother's stupid, chatty exuberance), and there was also a man's voice he didn't recognize. He heard her call him "Isidro, Isidro sweetie," and he imagined her twirling around as she said the name.

Without getting out from under the covers, he grabbed the remote and flooded the plasma screen with pictures. Its flat surface seemed to ripple with an evening breeze. There was an undulating lake of images he wanted to disappear into.

He saw streams of ink climb like branches onto the walls and stretch out lazily in clumps of mallow-scented petals.

He saw an outline of the sun, a corolla with the radiant force of a lion and two ancient samurai facing off in an ultra-pop Japanese Ukiyo-e print.

And the man with the unsmiling mask found himself in the middle of a cold, square, silver slab made of liquid that was pouring into the surrounding void. Then he popped up on a black beach and had a keyhole in the middle of his forehead into which he put the key, turned it twice to the left, and the planets around his head began to rotate in harmony.

There were other thirteen year olds with their faces painted white. *Push the button. My penguin is on the button, so push the button. Do it, your skill is your skin and I want to take it...*

Now that he was completely awake, he turned off the monitor and started one of the playlists his neo-hippie mom had bequeathed to him.

Some prayers never reach the sky Some wounds never heal.

A Beer Drinker

A deserted road, silence and sun. There was an abandoned warehouse nearby. An old man sat on the steps at the entrance, a bottle of beer in his hand and a straw hat tipped forward on his head. He was dozing.

When Alex passed by, the old man startled awake and toasted him in greeting, bringing the bottle to his lips. Alex kept going another hundred meters and had rounded a corner when he heard a burst of electronic drumbeats like machine-gun fire at the end of the alley, ripping apart the quiet afternoon. Then children's voices quickly drew near.

He turned back to see what was happening and saw a dozen half-naked young boys with silver crowns around their temples wearing transparent plastic coveralls with shiny blue appliqués. They were dancing chaotically, jumping up and turning pirouettes in mid-air. The old man had woken up and looked gape-mouthed at the small crowd rapidly approaching.

Alex hid behind a wall and had a premonition. He wanted to see without being seen.

And so he saw. He saw a boy of maybe thirteen who had a light blue streak painted on his face approach the old beer drinker with quick steps and launch a small metal ball bearing at him. It was attached to the boy's hand with an elastic strap and returned to his hand almost instantly.

The ball hit the old man right in the face, and when it withdrew to the boy's hand, that face was no longer a face. The old man's beard was a reddish shrub, and the beer bottle rolled on the ground without breaking. Then the boy dashed forward on a skateboard and started hitting him with the deck. It was decorated with an image of Dalek's Space Monkey, which had a bloodied axe in one hand, and the usual toxic discharge coming from his ass. Alex's eyes were wide open and he was filled with terror.

The boy smashed his deck on the nape of the old drunk. Three girls, seeming to come straight out of the pages of *Gothic & Lolita Bible* in their Victorian lace dresses, surrounded him, alternating wails with coarse laughter. Another one approached with quick dance steps wearing the long black wings of an avenging angel on her shoulders. She gazed contentedly at the bloody pulp. Finally, a pair of ultrathin dancers, wrapped in a tangle of white gauze held together by luminescent pins, stopped in front of the old lifeless man and with the long pins they pierced him through, as though he were a butterfly they were pinning to a wall—a butterfly unaware of both its guilt and its fate. Off to the side, immobile, the hologram of a girl observed the scene, or at least in the violent sunlight of the afternoon, this is how it looked to Alex. He couldn't see it clearly, but it seemed to be made from the same material as rays of moonlight.

Then, with the same incomprehensible, harmonic elegance with which they had arrived, in shared ecstasy, the kids scattered in various directions. It did not feel like a crime scene. It seemed more like a parlor game, or a Dadaist dance performance. The sky was clear and the light so bright that it seemed like a movie shot with a digital camera. The music, the voices, and the wind combined in a deafening rhythmic jumble, and Alex suddenly felt joy internally, as though they were inserting needles under his skin in a prolonged electrocution, live and in real time, within the universal flow of excitement. Hiding and typing quickly on his handheld, he wrote words that were impossible to understand, even for himself:

> *When the brain is reduced to a sponge because it is congested with images that you can't make heads or tails of, you can only make sense of it via a compulsive repetition of stimuli at high speed. Everything has already happened and nothing is exciting. The future takes shape in a hazy way, and you will experience everything without amazement. Here we have souls detached from bodies that are twirling around, unconscious and perfect in their movements, as though a super-individual conscience were guiding them from within. They cannot tolerate hairy bodies with smallpox vaccine scars on their arms like cows for the slaughter. They cannot tolerate heaviness. They have a certain way of being in space and time, and they have their own rhythm, unintelligible to us human beings. And that rhythm seizes them with compelling force and takes them to heights from which they can see matter dissolve, matter that was once thought to be eternal. A rhythm that pervades the galvanic plasma they swim in, an information soup that stimulates their antennae, dragging them into the oblivious dance...*

> *It's like the memory of a dream that leaves illegible traces—like something that I know but cannot manage to think of in words.*

He felt excited, so as soon as he could come out from behind the wall, he rushed to the newsroom and showed his notes to his editor Biagetti, who squinted at him.

"This isn't some kind of sci-fi or philosophy magazine. It's clear you know how to write but stop blathering. Our readers can't swallow this kind of stuff!"

Maybe Biagetti was right. Perhaps he'd let his emotions and fantasy carry him too far.

"But what I saw... I saw it, for real," he thought, trying to find the right tone for an article that could be understood by the readers of the newspaper.

He was looking for the right words to say what he had seen, without letting his imagination get the best of him. At the same time, he thought about the situation he was in.

He knew well that this was a conventional two-bit paper,

and he needed to resign himself to writing for readers who had no interest in flights of fancy. The editor in chief was a good person, but he didn't like to stray too far from general opinion. Even Biagetti, like everyone else, accepted the predominant explanation for these episodes of gerontomachy which were multiplying across the globe. Like everyone else, he also believed there was some sort of international terrorist army going after moribund baby boomers, in order to get them out of the way as quickly as possible.

Like everyone, he thought the motive was political—the very young rising up against the excessive power of the old, opposing the greed of the most privileged generation of all time, consuming all available resources. Sociological trivialities.

But a bird in flight has no idea of the shape of its flock. The idea of a flock emerges from creatures that are completely unaware of their collective form, of its size and formation. A bird that joins a flock is blind to the grace and cohesiveness of the geometries of flight. After their flash action, those kids return to their daily activities. They do their homework and curl up in front of the TV to watch a reality show. The brain of a bee can remember things for six days, but the beehive as a whole has a memory of three months, which is twice the average life span of a bee. Ah, I forgot—producing a single spoonful of honey takes the entire life span of twelve bees. Think of that the next time you spread honey on a piece of toast. Think of it, my friend. It is for these reasons that Alex had written all of this in his notes, but unfortunately Biagetti didn't appreciate it.

"Try again," he said. "Try to be more objective."

In the four months he spent as a beekeeper, Alex had sometimes risked his hand to transfer entire colonies out of the trees they'd nested in. Once, when he had to move a hive, he took a saw and made gashes in an old fallen tree. The poor tree was gangrenous and the hollow core filled with hives. The more he cut into the core of the tree, the more bees he found. They filled a cavity that was almost as big as he was. It was a cloudy day and all the bees were home and stressed out by the surgical intervention. Finally, Alex plunged his hand in that agglomeration of honeycomb. It was very hot. Crowded with a hundred thousand cold-blooded insects, the hive had become a warm-blooded organism. The warm honey flowed like dense blood. It felt as though he had plunged his hand into the cavity of a dying animal.

Doses

Professor Forza got up with a movement that was slow and powerful, pushing himself up on the armrests of his chair and turning to the back of his office, where there was a mysterious alcove in the dark, a fetid lair barely concealed by a screen.

Illustration: Barbara Gaddi

"Come, come—this is where I keep my personal pharmacy," he said to Isidoro Vitale. "What did you think I was really doing when you knocked on my door, working on lesson plans? No, my dear friend. Lesson plans can go fuck themselves as far as I'm concerned. I was calculating. I was calculating the amount of selegiline in my blood. It counteracts neurodegenerative processes and the inexorable death of dopamine neurons. You also have to keep track of serotonin, and stimulate its synthesis in your intestinal cells—by the way, did you know that we practically have a second brain, which leads directly to our assholes? You must give the organism the building block of serotonin, tryptophan, and then inhibit the neurons that reuptake serotonin, so its levels stay high in the brain. It's a complex alchemical procedure, don't you think? Weeding out the dark moods and following the twisted path from darkness to light. *Nigredo* and *albedo*, like you taught me. But times have changed, Professor Vitale. Today it does not do to disturb the purifying flames. Every answer

can be found in chemistry, the most metaphysical of the exact sciences. The supreme art to be learned is that of dosage, of equilibrium. I've been studying it for years. Don't trust doctors. They speak of synergistic interactions and deploy their molecules in ineffectual ways, over or underdosing, superimposing drug vectors that bust out in the same direction, as though it somehow made sense to prefer sedation or excitement, memory or forgetting. The secret is the old *coniunctio oppositorum*, the unity of opposites. You see here, in the same glass, forty drops of tapentadol, a synthetic opioid, and six hundred milligrams of modafinil, which are two antagonists, you might say. All of this accompanied by a healthy gram of oxiracetam, so as not to 'keep your clarity in your underpants,' as that reviled, anarchist bard[1] you surely remember used to sing. Follow this diet and just like me, you will be able to distill for yourself moments of absolute clarity. Follow me, Professor Vitale, please follow me."

It was the first time the headmaster had admitted him to his *sancta sanctorum*, that cave he had heard so many tales about, during the long empty hours in the teachers' lounge. Back there, in the half-light, he saw a couch covered with boxes of all shapes and colors. On the floor nearby, there were vials, bottles, envelopes, doses, double doses, syringes, blister packs, celluloid envelopes, samples not for commercial sale, free samples. The headmaster towered over that expanse of medicine, and said with triumphant self-confidence to Isidoro, who was contemplating the pharmacopeia with his jaw dropped, "I'm sure this will help you." And he bent down, confidently inserting his hand in the pile, and extracted a mysterious box.

He held it out with paternal firmness to Professor Vitale and said, "Take this, take it, my friend... it is just the thing for cases of stress like yours. As far as your decision to come back to work, you could come back tomorrow. I won't say no... But first, I'd like to discuss a few things with you. Let's sit."

He showed poor Isidoro, who was now starting to feel uneasy, his way to the couch, sweeping aside a few boxes of Zoloft, a pile of boxes of Jumex, and a mysterious brown glass jug with Chinese characters on the label. Once Isidoro was seated, sunken into the cushions and the boxes, the big man stood facing him, put his hands on his sides and stuck his belly out, and hissed with an insinuating voice, "You didn't happen to recognize any of the kids from Section C among the attackers of our poor custodians the other evening?"

Isidoro's eyes popped open all of a sudden. How had he failed to consider it? He reviewed the scene he had witnessed, and followed on the very low-definition screen of his mind the excited bouncing, the spasmodic dancing, and finally the amoeba-like movement with which those boys and girls had slithered over Rosso and Nerina, devouring them, and he realized that he hadn't focused on anyone's face in particular.

"No, now that I think about it, I don't think so, Sir," he replied after a lame moment of contemplation. "You know, the police interrogated me, but they didn't seem too interested in discovering anything. As you know, it's not the first time something like this has happened. Actually they're saying that there's some kind of War of the Pig[2] thing happening, that's what I've heard the cops calling it. But that officer, zilch. He didn't give a crap. Naturally now I'll have to speak with a judge about it. I expect I'll be called in the next few days, and I'll have to talk about it again. But now that you asked me this question, I realize that I wasn't able to remember even one of their faces." Isidoro's tone of voice lowered, and now he was almost mumbling.

Professor Forza was absent-minded for a moment, his mouth contorted with disgust. He added, "I wasn't there and I didn't see anything, so I can't know more than you do. But I've started making inquiries around here... and I have some hypotheses and some convictions. I'm watching them from the school gate, these individuals who come in every morning looking sleepy. I'm watching them under a microscope..." Professor Forza was speaking in an agitated way, as though he were in pursuit of a truth discovered just a moment ago, that escaped when he tried to pin it down with words. There was no way Isidoro could know that in the early hours of that morning, Forza had taken a massive dose of Z-14, the new molecule that unblocks inhibitors and turns you into a flooding river, an unconscious machine of unstoppable production, a sort of sequence of automatic conversation, a *cadavre exquis*.

Forza bent his knees under the weight of momentary surrender and let himself fall on the other side of the couch, provoking a landslide of pharmaceuticals.

"Now I really must go," said Isidoro, seeing that the situation might become embarrassing.

"Yes, yes, please go, Professor Vitale. But before you leave, allow me to say what I think about the young boys we are paid to educate. And the girls too, it goes without saying. You see, in olden times, humans thought of themselves, from one generation to the next, as dwarves who sat on the shoulders of giants. We are small, they said, but from this position, we are able to see far off—even farther than the giants who preceded us. This story has now ended. Do you understand? The generation born after Hiroshima thought it could topple tradition. We are giants on the shoulders of dwarves, yelled our younger siblings, the ones who are now fifty years old and groveling for a position in the Research Department of a Corporation that sucks out the brains of children. We're giants, hah! Do you get it? Those bastards of '68 went around saying 'we're the right ones, the beautiful ones, nothing at all like our fathers, those pigs.' Think about fathers and sons in Germany, in '68. What a mess. 'Dad, did you torture

Communists? Did you take a Jew's teeth out with pliers?' they'd ask at Easter dinner. 'Dad, did you torture someone when you were a boy?' They said those things. And now they run a newspaper or a prime time talk show, and zap! They remove tongues with big old scissors, and they don't want to talk about torture anymore. They don't care about it at all. Of course, today's torturers are more photogenic, or at least they try to be. They were giants on the shoulders of dwarves, and now? Well, let's leave it be. Let's drop it. Because I know that you, Professor Vitale, also had the generation of '68 cause some problems in your own family..."

Isidoro was stunned but remained sunken into the couch listening.

"At the beginning of the 90s in America, a movement took hold called the Thirteenth Generation. This is a way to label those born after the Vietnam defeat, the thirteenth generation of American history, and they are the first generation in history that must realistically expect a decline in consumption, in life spans, and most of all, a decline in quality of life. So, some time ago I read a manifesto written by these illuminated spirits of the Thirteenth Generation—even their name is bad luck—a manifesto in which they accused their baby boomer parents of squandering their future, of consuming everything that was consumable, of having wasted their time with libertarian political experiments that produced the current decline. Do you see where we stand?" He gave him a superior look, while Isidoro tried and failed to wipe from his face the idiotic smile he'd worn while listening.

"Either way," continued the uncontrollable headmaster, "either way, now there is nothing left but dwarves. *Dwarves*, get it? Dwarves and fathers, dwarves and sons. Sure, the human race has gained a few centimeters in height, after Hiroshima, thanks to the vitamins and other pharmaceuticals that enabled the dwarves to grow tall and strong. And then you may discover that the kid in the third row who's asking you a question about the history syllabus happens to be one of the murderers of our poor custodians. Don't get me wrong, I'm saying it just to say it. That kid in the third row or even the fourth or the back row, or that daydreaming young lady who's thinking about love."

"I'll think about it," said Isidoro in a small voice, struggling through the cushions and trying to stand. Finally, when he had gotten back on two feet, he stumbled towards the door, opened it, turned, and added, "So I'll be back at work tomorrow. I'll be here at 9:40."

But Professor Forza, from the dimness in which he remained sunken, ushered him out with one last mysterious word: "Let's talk about this again soon, Professor Vitale. I have something to tell you that may interest you. We are preparing a reaction... it's still possible to do something. Very soon, we will have a chance to speak about this again, and God willing, progress toward action."

Isidoro paid no mind to the headmaster's ravings. He gave a sort of bow, opened the door, and disappeared.

"Smoke? No thanks," enjoined an enormous poster on the wall. At the bottom of the poster, scrawled in pencil, was a phrase that Isidoro had learned by heart: "I had to choose between the good and the bad and I chose the bad and until now everything has been fine." The hallway was empty. The custodians were hiding, crouched in their forts. The knowledge transmission machine diligently buzzed along behind classroom doors.

Dangerous Games

Harmony is emotional connection—the free flow of energies without will. Luca and Federica called this Co-sensibility. In order to translate this principle into something effective, replicable, and communicable, they needed computer code and access to the human psychomotor system. Federica explained to Luca that mirror neurons activate when an action is completed or even just imagined among the many possible actions that an environment allows.

Luca was programming an associative machine, the subroutine of a broader artificial intelligence that could instantly create chains of elements in a continuously expanding superorganism. The new chains would integrate themselves in the system and become available simultaneously to brains exposed to its radiation.

Psychotropic substances only deactivate the filters that limit our associative capacities. They permit us to veer off the safe, logico-deductive tracks of sequential thought, and execute reckless fuzzy leaps. You find the boundary when you must cross the plane of expression. The entheogenic satori is inexpressible. Distinctions lose all meaning; the theater of the ego falls to pieces. The spermatic ocean is unnavigable and the only way to understand it is to dissolve yourself in it. The universal mind lattice runs off holes in language—not even poetic language can contain it, nebulous and polysemous as it is, nor knitting it tightly together to push its possibilities of condensation to the max. Language imposes continual decisions, and projects an order over apparent disorder. Its representations of chaos are simple simulations. Even delusion has a certain grammar, albeit an unpredictable one. On the other hand, the simultaneous is not orderable or decidable. But, in the end, a drugged brain makes its own decisions. You can follow more streams of thought, but not very long ones, and never all of them. And so? You quiet all the voices in your head. Renounce speech and open yourself to silence. This is what Federica taught Luca, when she disappeared without a word, pouring into him that river of silence. But the associative machine could

not be stopped at that point. There were still no transfer interfaces that could talk to the living matter in its own language. They needed a supersymmetry that could propagate in the chain of electronic devices and living matter. Once the wave is activated, it continues to reproduce in unpredictable parts of the psycho-electric ocean.

X

Excerpted from *Morte ai Vecchi* (Baldini & Castoldi, 2016). This excerpt is translated from the Italian by Deborah Wassertzug.

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

Massimiliano Geraci is an anti-prohibition activist, expert in psychedelia, poetry, visionary art, and pop surrealism, and has edited the art books *True Visions* (2006) and *Mutant Kiddies* (2003).

1
Translator's note: lyrics from Léo Ferré's "La Solitude" (1971).

2
Translator's note: Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Diary of the War of the Pig* (1969).

Jonas Staal

Comrades in Deep Future

1. Literary Social Experiment

Various organizations are competing to ensure that within the next two decades humans will become an interplanetary species by establishing a presence on Mars. Elon Musk's SpaceX is among the most visible competitors working to achieve this goal, as Musk argues that either "we stay on Earth forever and then there will be an inevitable extinction event," or "become a spacefaring civilization, and a multi-planetary species."[1]

The first two seasons of the television series *Mars* (2016–present), produced by National Geographic, can be read as a docu-fiction infomercial for Musk's company. Its documentary component shows SpaceX's present-day tests of reusable rockets, aiming to enable travels back and forth to Mars, while its science-fictional Hollywood-styled segments visualize Musk's year-by-year plan to build a sustainable human presence on the planet.

SpaceX imagines that humanity's transition from planetary to interplanetary species will transpire through extractivist pursuits. The planned Martian settlement includes spaces to sleep, laboratories for studies and experiments, agricultural areas to grow plants, and in time, a bar. The corporate components of the mission, intended to finance its scientific pursuits, propose to mine the planet's resources: first water, and in the long term nickel, copper, iron, titanium, and platinum. But the plan includes no physical political or cultural infrastructures to speak of, or any meaningful discourse on future forms of governance: there is no parliament or space of common decision-making, or cultural spaces (besides the bar) for that matter. These absences are indicative of a particular *state idea*, namely that of the neocolonial, extractivist, corporatist state, following Bob Jessop's notion of the "state idea" as a fourth component to Max Weber's three-elements approach to state theory.[2]

Martian underground settlements featured in SpaceX timelines and designs. Film still from National Geographic's documentary Mars (2016).

This state idea is shared by figures such as Jeff Bezos,

Experimental biosphere assembling neo-constructivist ammonites, meteorites, and proletarian plantae in the underground former nuclear facility Reaktorhallen, Stockholm. Jonas Staal, Interplanetary Species Society, 2019. Photo: Ricard Estay. Part of "Choreographies of the Social," produced by Public Art Agency Sweden.

founder of the trillion-dollar company Amazon, whose business model is based on structural tax evasion and the extreme exploitation and precaritization of its workers. This has enriched Bezos to such a degree that he has been able to create his own company for space exploration, Blue Origin.

As a radical historical counterpoint to the way this state idea has come to structure our interplanetary future imaginary, I propose to return to the Martian vision put forth by Russian philosopher and revolutionary Alexander Bogdanov, set out in his 1908 novel *Red Star*. In Bogdanov's book, comrade Leonid is visited by a Martian revolutionary just after the failed Moscow uprising of 1905. Leonid then travels to the red planet and discovers that on Mars the communist revolution has already taken place. Factory labor is voluntary and workers do not commit to one craft or another, but circulate continuously between occupations; in the children's colony, different generations of young comrades educate one another and live collectively without their biological parents; and public monuments and art displays are conceived of as collective achievements rather than individual masterpieces: "In pre-socialist times the Martians erected monuments to their great people. Now they dedicate them only to important events."[3] Despite these emancipatory egalitarian achievements, Leonid discovers that Martian communist society harbors a great dilemma. Due to overpopulation and excessive resource extraction, a debate has ensued about whether communist Mars should colonize capitalist earth.[4]

Bogdanov's interplanetary speculations explore the potentials of communist society in terms of a fundamental reorganization of labor as well as social, cultural, and sex and gender relations. He even goes as far as to script the ecological dilemmas inherent to mass industrialization that we are confronted with today. In contrast, contemporary neocolonial, extractivist, and corporatist interplanetary objectives are blatantly clear, and as space law was drafted for and by nation-states, multinational companies like SpaceX and Blue Origin face only limited juridical hurdles in their objectives.[5] Today, the agents of this state idea speak shamelessly of Mars "colonization,"

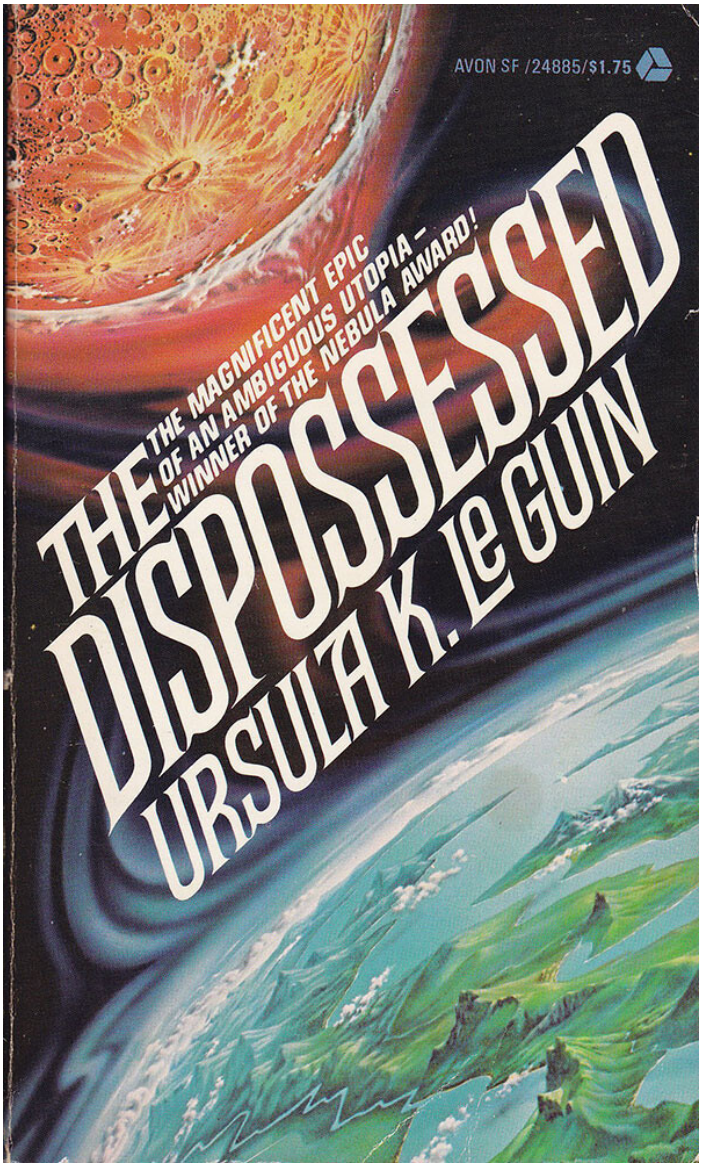
and the humans engaged in these missions as "pioneers" to terraform a "dead planet." Such discourse reproduces and exports the worst of colonial and imperialist histories, mimicking the claim of "terra nullius" (nobody's land) that has been used to legitimize the erasure of indigenous histories and lives.[6]

How can our heritage of emancipatory science and cosmic fictions counter the dominance of this trajectory of interplanetarianism—one that now also includes Trump's declaration of a new "Space Force" as a sixth branch of government, essentially forging a form of space nationalism?[7] While in a time of devastating ecological catastrophe it makes sense to claim "Earth First," emancipatory science and cosmic fiction has always aimed to use interplanetary perspectives to enable new intra-planetary engagements. These are the very conditions and models through which we form a terrestrial community "bound to the earth and land."[8] The catastrophes about to be exported into outer space replicate earthbound exploitation, but in emancipatory science and cosmic fiction it works the other way around: interplanetary imaginaries become ways of expanding our understanding and practice of terrestrial life.

In her landmark 1974 novel from the Hainish Cycle titled *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, Ursula K. Le Guin describes life on the anarcho-syndicalist planet Anarres. Similar to the Mars society portrayed in *Red Star*, on Anarres labor tasks are continuously rotated, but in this case among syndicates, as opposed to the centralized systems of communist Mars. Protagonist Shevek explains that on Anarres "we do not govern persons" but "administer production."[9] And while Anarres simultaneously operates as a mining colony for the capitalist-authoritarian planet Urras, it has nonetheless succeeded in eradicating what the anarcho-syndicalists term "egoizing terminology": in language and daily practice, material, intellectual, and affective property has been eradicated. The notion of "dispossession" in the title has a liberatory significance—a "change of mentality," as the Kurdish women's movement phrases it—in which statelessness and being without property is the precondition for genuine freedom.[10] As Shevek explains to protestors on the capitalist-authoritarian planet:

> If it is Anarres you want, if it is the future you seek, then I tell you that you must come to it with empty hands. You must come to it alone, and naked, as the child comes into the world, into this future, without any past, without any property, wholly dependent on other people for his life ... You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the revolution. You can only be the Revolution.[11]

In Le Guin's novel, the idea of interplanetarianism



The cover of the first paperback edition of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed (1974) displays its ideological planetarium.

presents a planetarium of ideologies.[12] It allows her to speculatively test an anarcho-syndicalist model applied to an entire planet, rather than in autonomist zones as is presently possible on earth, for example in the courageous coalition of farmers, libertarian socialists, anarchists, and radical ecologists of the Zone à Défendre (ZAD) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France.[13] By scaling autonomism to a planetary level, the outer consequences of its propositions and its contradictions are explored. As such, Le Guin's novel is—similar to Bogdanov's—a *social experiment* in literary form.

Now, in the face of the dominance of the corporatist state idea, the challenge is to translate these literary social experiments into new cultural narratives through which we can articulate our becoming interplanetary, and to

create the material infrastructures that would enable new inter- and intra-planetary forms of living—forms of life.

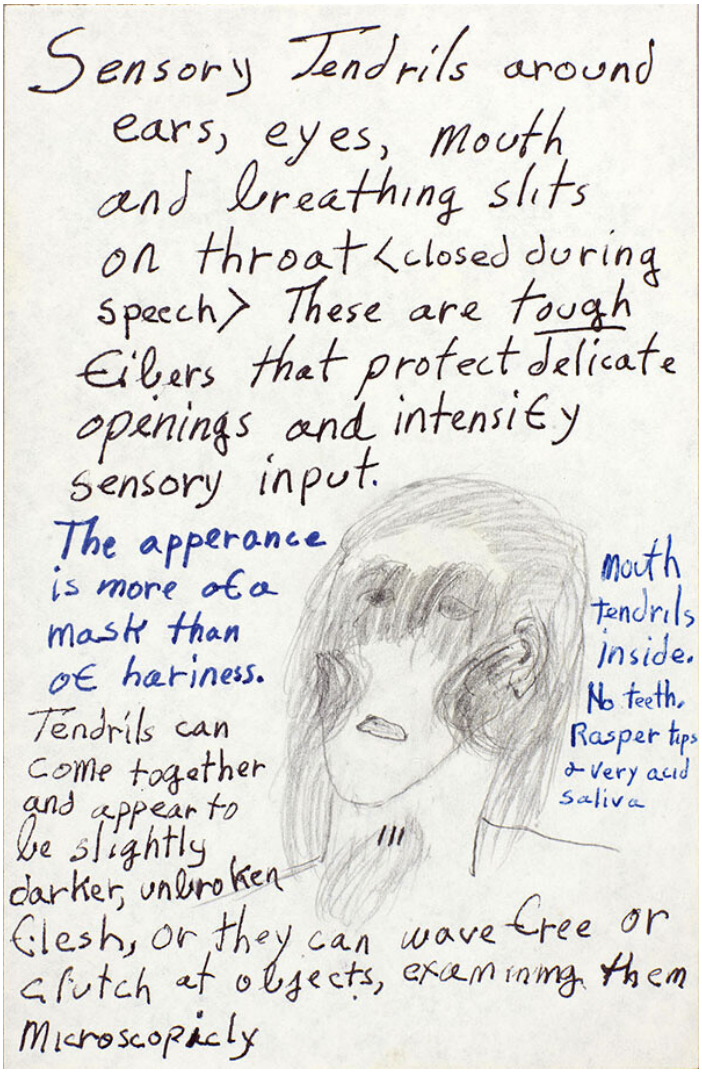
2. The Art of Hyperempathy

Literary experimentation with the social dimensions of interplanetary life might have gained some of its most radical forms in the work of Octavia E. Butler. Throughout her various works, Butler insisted that human transformation would be interdependent with interplanetary cultural and biological mutation. In her *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (1987–89), this happens through the encounter of the human species with the "gene-trader" species Oankali, that can genetically mutate what it considers the "human contradiction," namely the combination of "intelligence and hierarchical behavior."[14] As a result, new interdependent "construct" families emerge with both Oankali and human members, which the Otolith Group has described as "experiments in thought" that enable "alien intimacy."[15] In this literary social experiment, becoming interplanetary means becoming other-than-human in the first place. Undoing the human contradiction is the precondition for moving beyond earthbound existence: no space exploration before mutation!

In Butler's diptych *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), such a modification to counter the human contradiction emerges not as an interplanetary influence, but as a planetary affliction called "hyperempathy syndrome," which brings one to feel the physical pain of others who are in direct proximity.[16] We follow the main protagonist of the novel, hyperempath Lauren Olamina, as she attempts to build a new secular-religious "Earthseed" community in a future United States that is plagued by ecological collapse, corporate authoritarianism, and evangelical extremism. Despite utter planetary devastation and perpetual civil war, Olamina insists that her planned Earthseed communities are not to remain autonomist egalitarian islands, but must work towards a new form of planetary governance and, from that moment onwards, aim to transform humans into an interplanetary species to engage other "living worlds."[17] As Olamina notes in her book of scripture, *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*:

> Earthseed is the dawning adulthood of the human species. It offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths. The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, and there, again, to grow, to learn, and to fly.[18]

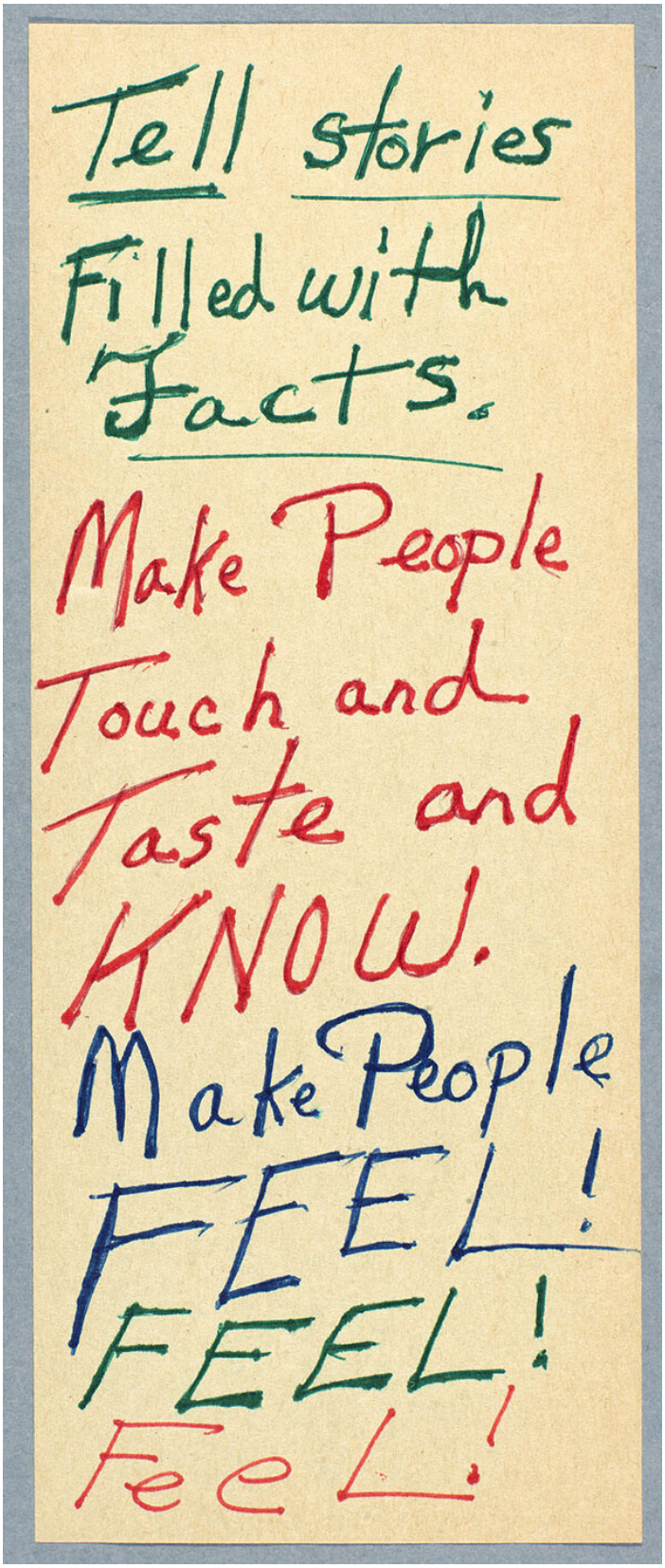
What we encounter in Bogdanov, Le Guin, and Butler is the question of what conditions and models define our



Octavia E. Butler, Notes on the Oankali, ca. 1985. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

engagement with other living worlds, both interplanetary and terrestrial. A politics of hyperempathy, as Butler proposes in her literary social experiment, is inherently egalitarian: what I do to you I will feel *equally* myself. Muskian notions of the Mars "colony" and the human "pioneer," which are agents of aggression, could then be rearticulated into hyperempathic models such as *interplanetary cooperation* and *interplanetary guesting*.[19] The fact that Musk is not capable of recognizing Martian agency, simply because it does not mimic what he is willing to consider "life," mirrors the undoing of our own terrestrial existence, given the similar negation of ancient ice caps and forests on earth. A politics of hyperempathy would not terraform the Other, but demand the transformation of the collective self to enable expanded terrestrial and interplanetary comradeship. As Shevek said, "You can only be the Revolution."

While Butler insisted, outside of her novels as well, that



Octavia E. Butler's notes on writing, ca. 1970–95: "Tell stories filled with facts ..." The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

"the best thing we can do for the species is to go out into space" in order to "mature," her work always starts with challenging our intra-planetary relationships.[20] In other words, interplanetarianism as a field of emancipatory politics would only become possible through an enabling and deepening of intra-planetary relationships. And that means engaging hyperempathic assemblies—practices that Judith Butler has termed "performative assembly"—in which new "construct" families can emerge that counter the human-centric extractivist mentality.[21]

In Donna Haraway's words, this demands a form of "sympoiesis," meaning a practice of "making-with," in accordance with her argument that "nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing."[22] Rejecting the terms "Anthropocene" and "Capitalocene," Haraway has proposed "Chthulucene" as a term for the geological era of "intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus."[23] It is in such a multispecies intersectionality, Haraway argues, that one makes "kin" as "something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy."[24] But how, in a time that is beginning to meet the criteria of the uninhabitable world that Octavia Butler described so aptly in her *Parable* diptych, do we propagate such simultaneous inter- and intra-planetary assemblies? What, in other words, would be our art of hyperempathy? On this, Haraway notes:

> I don't work by simplification and I am rarely drawn by art that works by reduction. And I am a polemicist. An ideologue. I think doing really good propaganda is something we really got to figure out how to get better at. I'm really interested in propaganda as a form that need not be full of alt-anything, that can be a practice of collecting each other up and telling important truths with certain kinds of tonalities.[25]

3. Nonhuman Comradeship

Speculating on a "propaganda art" of hyperempathy, it might seem counterintuitive to reference the constructivist and productivist artists that emerged through the Russian Revolution, given their embrace of mass industrialization. But the theory and artistic practice that Lyubov Popova, Varvana Stepanova, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin developed, based on what they termed the "object as comrade," actually foreshadows certain discourses on post-humanism and radical ecology today.[26] For them, the task was not simply to liberate the object from the capitalist regime of commodification and alienation, but to unleash the potential of the revolutionary object as a subjectivity in its own right: a fellow agent—a comrade—in the construction of communist society. Comradeship is thus not merely defined by what a human might consider to be alive;

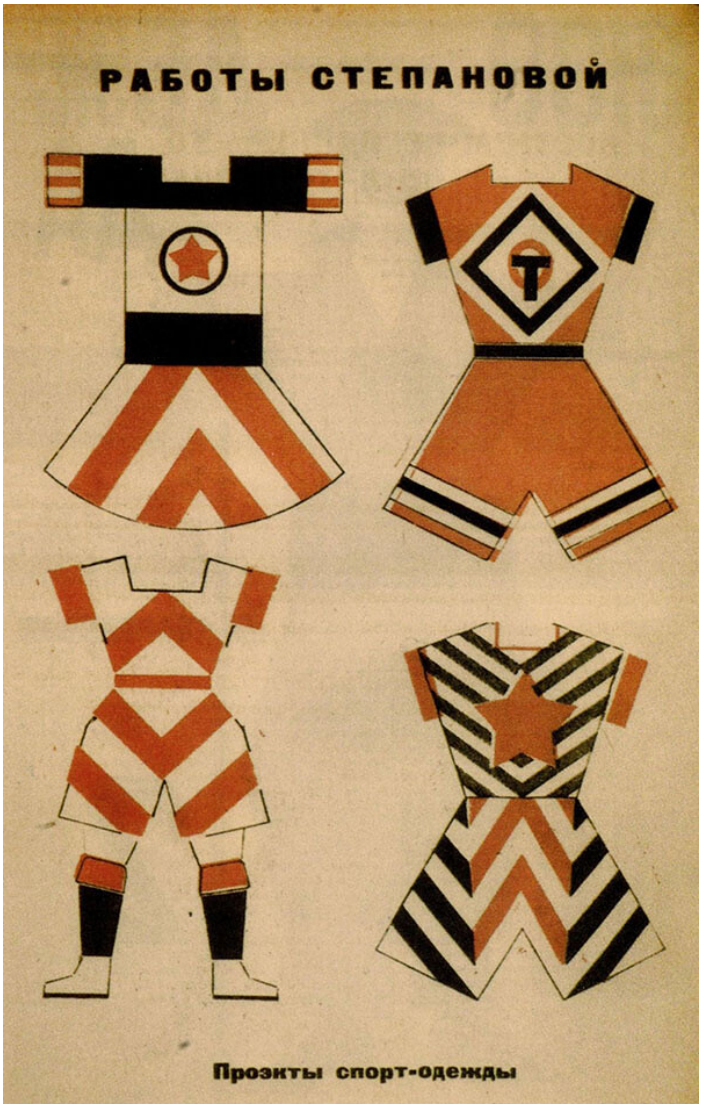
hyperempathy goes beyond the question of mere identification—it is, in the constructivist/productivist case, about the concrete, material changes that comradely relations are able to bring about in order to ensure radical egalitarianism.

As Christina Kiaer lays out, the object-as-comrade in constructivism and productivism was manifested in Rodchenko's Workers' Clubs, Tatlin's stoves, and Popova and Stepanova's textile patterns and non-gendered clothing designs. Kiaer argues that such "socialist objects" aimed to be "active and emotionally affective" in their endeavor to "heroically beat down capitalist commodities."[27] The comradely object enabled a new assembly, a construct family, of humans and objects alike. This reasoning indicates that, by definition, objects have agency, but that within a capitalist regime they are instrumentalized to maintain a culture of oppression, whereas in a revolutionary context they are enabled to become revolutionaries in their own right.

In the comradely relation between the revolutionary human and the revolutionary constructivist/productivist object, neither would remain the same, as their sympoietic relationship would synthesize into a new shared subjectivity, the outcome of which was yet to be known. This Bolshevik heritage, as Jodi Dean observes, "link[s] comradeship to a future characterized by equality and belonging, by a love and respect between equals so great that it can't be contained in human relations but spans to include insects and galaxies (bees and stars) and objects themselves."[28] For a propaganda art of hyperempathy, there are no "dead planets," but living worlds of comradely constellations and construct families yet to be embraced. Or, as Zdenka Badonivac phrases it: "in the end, comradeship must include everyone."[29]

Octavia Butler drafted a possible art of hyperempathy in relation to objecthood in her *Patternist* series. In *Mind of My Mind* (1977), a member of the telepathic Patternist society named Jan develops the ability to channel the accumulation of human experiences tied to objects. An ancient fragment from a jar made 6,500 years ago in a Neolithic village can evoke, through Jan, the experience of the life of the woman who made it.[30] Through the nonhuman jar, past human subjectivities remain part of a living world. In *Patternmaster* (1976), this telepathic art is refined even further, as artist-Patternists have gained the ability to lift impressions from objects and transfer them to other objects, creating new forms of human-object mutation and coexistence through space and time.[31]

Hyperempathic practices of nonhuman comradeship also play a key role in the history and present-day practices of cosmism. Originating from the work of Nikolai Federov at the end of the nineteenth century, cosmism combined socialist theory and its technological and scientific potentials with metaphysical religious components, including those of the Russian Orthodox Church.[32] Cosmists redefined earth as a spaceship, researched the



Varvara Stepanova, designs for sports clothes, 1923.

influence of the sun on leftist uprisings, and demanded the resurrection of the dead: life on earth was to be understood as part of a larger cosmic assembly. As Boris Groys writes: "The communist society of immortals will also be 'interplanetary,' that is, it will occupy the entire space of the cosmos."[33] Whereas constructivism and productivism approached nonhuman comradeship and interplanetarianism through a radical and total rejection of the past, cosmism emphasized the radical and total inclusion and equality of timescales: from deep past to deep future.

Although cosmism, like many other revolutionary cultural movements in Russia, was crushed in the Stalinist era, contemporary artists like Anton Vidokle have placed its heritage in a contemporary context. In his 2019 film *Citizens of the Cosmos*, Vidokle translates the writings on bioscosmism by Alexander Svyatogor from 1922—"Biocosmist society encompasses the whole world and is interplanetary"[34]—into a series of choreographies,

Assembly of neo-constructivist ammonites in Jonas Staal, Interplanetary Species Society, 2019. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Anton Vidokle, Citizens of the Cosmos, 2019. Film still. In the video, tombstones operate as nonhuman comrades to assemble the living and the dead.

in which humans assemble in shrines, forests, and industrial gas plants in preparation for eternal life and interplanetary citizenship. While the demand for eternal life would have to be enabled by technological means, in Vidokle's film nonhuman comrades form crucial enablers as well: tombstones are not merely markers of commemoration but form communicative tools with the dead, and bamboo forests are the sites of preparatory resurrection. Driven by a hyperempathic demand against the exclusion of those that lived before us— *without the dead resurrected, communism can never be completed* —various nonhuman comrades become implicated in defining the cosmist polity.

4. Emancipatory Biospheres

Earlier I referenced Haraway's proposal for a propaganda practice that, in her words, aims at "collecting each other up." In the art of hyperempathy, it is the comradely object that "collects up" the human to remain a constitutive part of the world. Haraway further proposes a propaganda that tells truths with "certain kinds of tonalities." In the case of the comradely object, these tonalities are the resonances that move through such objects across deep time. The literary social experiment, or the cinematic one in the case of Vidokle's work, enables imaginative models for more-than-human comradeship across coexisting scales of time and space, from interplanetarianism to intra-planetarianism.

Through these extremely diverse landmarks of emancipatory science and cosmic fiction, the beginnings of a propaganda art of hyperempathy can be articulated. We could describe these experiments as "emancipatory biospheres," for they are sketches of models and infrastructures that allow us to imagine new forms of organizing, shaping, and recognizing life. These are not the corporatist and nationalist biospheres of occupation and extraction exemplified by alt-right propagandist Steve Bannon's directorship over the Biosphere 2 facility in Arizona—an exercise in world-building correlated with the terrifying alt-right biosphere in which we find ourselves today.[35] Instead, they are emancipatory biospheres conceived through a propaganda art of hyperempathy, aiming to imagine and train expanded practices of comradeship that go beyond, but that are also deeply rooted in, the terrestrial—from proletarian object to proletarian plant.

It is no coincidence that many central figures occupying alternative biospheres in various emancipatory fictions have been gardeners. The gardener not only cares for nonhuman subjectivities, but in doing so performs comradeship through reciprocity. In Douglas Trumbull's 1972 film *Silent Running*, botanist Freeman Lowell cares for a variety of plants placed in geodesic domes attached

A "construct" family of comradely plants with robot and human gardeners in Douglas Trumbull's movie Silent Running (1972).

to the spaceship *Valley Forge*. When he receives an order to destroy the biospheres, he asks the robots he has befriended on the ship for help in ridding himself of his human crewmates and protecting his comradely nonhuman plants. Ultimately, Lowell sacrifices his own life to save the biosphere, which remains in the care of his comrade, robot Louie.

Gardener Tcherny becomes comrade by turning compost in Claire Denis's movie High Life (2018).

In Kim Stanley Robinson's 1992 book *Red Mars*, biologist Hiroko Ai uses the garden aboard the spaceship Ares to pre-organize an alternative autonomist community to lead a future revolution for the independence of Mars, free from political and corporate interference from earth. And in Claire Denis's film *High Life* (2018), gardener Tcherny—one of several inmates sent on a deadly mission to explore black holes—buries himself alive in the earth of the spaceship's biosphere. In the first example, Lowell engages in comradely sacrifice in solidarity with the robot-plant construct family that will continue the collective work of reciprocal care in outer space. In the second, Hiroko turns the biosphere into a training ground of a future comradeship that will self-govern Mars. Finally, Tcherny literally disintegrates his living body into living soil, becoming comrade by turning compost.

The word "propaganda" originates from biology, literally referring to the reproduction and duplication—the propagation—of plants and animals.[36] In this time of catastrophe on earth and corporate and nationalist schemes to export that very same catastrophe to other living worlds, Haraway's rethinking of propaganda offers a precondition for collective survival and the perseverance of new socialist forms of living. Neo-constructivist, cosmist, and assemblist training camps and biospheres: these are the terms for a morphological vocabulary of a hyperempathic propaganda art that makes living worlds of comradeship in deep past, deep present, and deep future imaginable and realizable.

X

An earlier version of this essay was presented during the conference "Life Choreographies: Infrastructures for a Livable Life #1," on June 4, 2019 at the Public Art Agency in Stockholm. I thank iLiana Fokianaki and Elvia Wilk for their editorial support in writing this essay, and Edi Muka for our collaborative work on the alternative biosphere in the context of his "Choreographies of the Social." And of course, thank you to Sven Lütticken for our Athens dialogues on the emancipatory biosphere, as well as the contributors to the "Interplanetary Species Society Assembly" that took place on August 24, 2019 in Stockholm.

Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. His most recent book is *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019).

1
Nicky Woolf, "SpaceX founder Elon Musk plans to get humans to Mars in six years," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/27/elon-musk-spacex-mars-colony .

2
Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present, Future* (Polity Press, 2016), 49.

3
Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia* , trans. Charles Rougle (Indiana University Press, 1984), 77.

4
Kim Stanley Robinson famously picks up on *Red Star* in the first part of his *Mars Trilogy*, in which a descendent of Bogdanov—Arkady Bogdanov—joins a mission to establish permanent human presence on Mars, and inspires an independent movement known as "Bogdanovism," structured on socio-architectural theories for communalist living. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (Harper Voyager, 2009).

5
Frans von der Dunk, "Van wie is de maan?," in Bik van der Pol, *NG-1991-4-25* (Sternberg Press, 2007), 129–34.

6
As Eva Díaz points out in her overview of what she calls the artistic "alt-sciences" (not to be confused with the alt-right), "New Spacers like Musk and Bezos treat outer space, ostensibly free of indigenous peoples, as a new frontier exempt from the exploitation that characterized earlier colonial projects." Eva Díaz, "We Are All Aliens," *e-flux journal* no. 91 (May 2018) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/91/197883/we-are-all-aliens/ .

7
For a historical view of US space imperialism and its critics leading up to Trump's declaration of Space Force, see Felicity D. Scott, "Self-Government on the High Frontier," in *Futurity Report*, eds. Eric C. H. de Bruyn and Sven Lütticken (Sternberg Press, 2019), 133–50.

8
Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Polity, 2018), 54.

9
Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (Harper Voyager, 2011), 76.

10
New World Academy Reader #5: Stateless Democracy , eds. Dilar Dirik Jonas Staal (BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015).

11
Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 301.

12
See Bruno Latour's lecture "A Tale of Seven Planets – An Exercise in Gaiapolitics," Senior Loeb Scholar Lecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, October 16, 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UjXgbuBo_Q .

13
John Jordan, "For the Love of Winning: An Open Letter to Extinction Rebellion," *ZAD FOR EVER* , May 3, 2019 https://zadforever.blog/2019/05/03/for-the-love-of-winning-an-open-letter-to-extinction-rebellion/ .

14
Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith's Brood* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 442. See also Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility," *e-flux journal* no. 77, November 2016 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76322/the-incomputable-and-instrumental-possibility/ .

15
From the opening statements of Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun at their exhibition "Xenogenesis," Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, May 25, 2019. See also *Xenogenesis,* ed. Teresa Cos Rebollo (Van Abbemuseum, 2019).

16
Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 11-12.

17
Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 222.

18
Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 325.

19
I take the verb "guesting" from iLiana Fokianaki's assembly "On Guesting," Roaming Assembly #15, Dutch Art Institute (DAI), Arnhem, September 23, 2018.

20
Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler, 1988," in *Conversations with Octavia Butler* , ed. Consuela Francis (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 26.

21
Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015). See also my essay "Assemblism," *e-flux journal* no. 80, March 2017 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/ .

22
Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

23
Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* , 101.

24
Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* , 102–03.

25
Transcribed from a lecture by Donna Haraway, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, March 25, 2017 https://vimeo.com/210430116 .

26
Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (MIT Press, 2005), 34.

27
Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 46.

28
Jodi Dean, "Four Theses on the Comrade," *e-flux journal* no. 86, November 2017 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/160585/four-theses-on-the-comrade/ .

29
To which Dean would probably add, *everyone* on the *same side*. Zdenka Badonivac, *Comradeship: Curating, Art, And Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (Independent Curators International, 2019), 34.

30
Octavia E. Butler, *Seed to Harvest* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 410.

31
Butler, *Seed to Harvest*, 641.

32
See "Russian Cosmism," special issue, *e-flux journal* no. 88, February 2019 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/88/ , which followed the exhibition and conference program "Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism" at HKW, Berlin, September 1–October 3, 2017.

33
Russian Cosmism , ed. Boris Groys (e-flux and MIT Press, 2018), 9.

34
Alexander Svyatogor, "The Doctrine of the Fathers and Anarchism-Biocosmism," in *Russian Cosmism* , 77.

35
Bannon was CEO of the Biosphere 2 Earth System Science Research Facility in Oracle, Arizona, from 1993-95. The futuristic architecture spanned 1.27 hectares and is the largest closed ecological system ever created. Bannon would further pursue his fascination with closed-system technologies through the massive multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft. See Jonas Staal, *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018).

36
Erwin W. Fellows, "Propaganda: History of a Word," *American Speech* 34, no. 3 (October 1959), 182.

Teresa Castro

The Mediated Plant

> A surprising animism is being reborn. We know now that we are surrounded by inhuman existences.
> —Jean Epstein[1]
>
> Free up your mind … Help us re-imagine the world in richer terms that will allow us to find ourselves in dialogue with and limited by other species' needs, other kinds of minds … The struggle to think differently, to remake our reductionist culture, is a basic survival project in our present context. I hope you will join it.
> —Val Plumwood[2]

When I was a child, I was offered a book on forests. The book was filled with colorful illustrations: some were very intriguing, departing from the customary depiction of tree silhouettes and leaf shapes in which I otherwise reveled. Two images in particular caught my wandering eye. The first starred a houseplant resembling in every manner the philodendra that my mother had smartly arranged in our jungle-like living room. But instead of sitting quietly next to a velvet armchair, the book's philodendron was connected to a strange-looking machine by two bulky electrodes. As the machine scribbled jagged lines on a strip of scrolling paper, a woman hiding a pair of scissors behind her back appeared to watch the plant closely. A second illustration depicted what appeared to my juvenile eyes as the cruelest of experiences: next to another potted plant, a man threw a sorrowful crayfish into boiling water. A *living* crayfish! According to the book's author, those strange experiments proved that plants could both "experience fear" and "feel pain."

Many years later, nurtured by a lifelong passion for both film and all things vegetal, I realized that the image of that leafy philodendron plugged into a lie detector accounted for much more than a wealth of wild, but incredibly popular, theses on the extrasensory perception of plants. At a time when our understanding of plant life and the vegetal world is being consistently and dramatically reshaped, when we've learned that orchids get jet lag too, the image of that wired plant begged both for a history of what I call the "mediated plant" and for *a queering of botanics*.[3] As the crazy 1970s—with their foliage-heavy plants dropping from macramé hangers and plant-music vinyl records—have safely receded into the distant past, speaking of plant "awareness," "thinking," "consciousness," or "intelligence" (nonequivalent but equally exhilarating terms for those engaged with post-humanism) no longer smacks of pseudoscience. The "sensitive," "sentient," or "intelligent" plant of our current time is necessarily *a post-natural mediated plant*, a plant interposed by visual and other technologies that make their awareness and in-tuneness with other plants and their surroundings discernible to the rationalist eye. These are technologies that invite us to conceive the plant-other

Filmstill from Max Reichmann's movie The Miracle of Flowers (1926).

in intentional and overtly *queer* terms; technologies, such as film, whose ultimate, paradoxical power has been, from its very beginning, the ability to re-enchant a disenchanted world, to enhance our perceptual possibilities and suggest alternative, counter-hegemonic ways of thinking about the world. That this decisive re-imaging of vegetal life has taken place beyond the respectful limits of serious science, in the dubious, murky waters of visual and popular culture, where the reality-producing dimensions of images and imagination run amok, should not come as a surprise. Albeit discontinuously, implicitly, or sometimes in frankly unusual manners, such images introduce imaginative fissures into the normative, Western narrative around human and nonhuman identities.

Such post-natural mediated plants are our *queer kin,* inviting us to abandon centuries-old conceptions of life and the living. As the mediated plant pushes us forward in this urgent "struggle to think differently" that Val Plumwood called us to join, mobilizing queerness means following a slightly defamiliarizing path. Indebted to ecofeminism and queer ecocriticism, this path will take us beyond the analytical category of gender and the battles of identity politics usually associated with queer theory. These battles, however, are not forgotten: as large swathes of the Amazon forest continue to burn (and as severe forest fires still rage in Siberia), *queering nature* and *queering botanics* represent a means of taking a political stance and of articulating our common struggles, which intersect now more than ever. The predatory industries that have declared war on the earth—razing and torching its forests, depleting its soils, killing its rivers, suffocating its oceans, factory-farming its animals, and exploiting its most deprived peoples—now form the economic rationality of right-wing populism and its hatred towards all minorities. As of today, nowhere is this more visible than in Brazil, where the agribusiness attack on the forest goes hand in hand with the brutal assault on indigenous and LGBT rights and where the country's poor and black communities (with women on the front lines)

face unprecedented threats. But extractive capitalism takes its toll everywhere, and environmental breakdown is here to stay. To survive and resist means to adjust, to leave behind reductive stances, and to wrench ourselves loose from our monological, colonizing grip on "nature." Forests are not stocks of natural resources (even if they're sustainably explored), nor are they the "lungs of the earth." Forests are life-forms and forms of life, from whom we must learn and with whom we need to forge alliances. We need to rebel against the deep-rooted, dualistic conceptions that have radically separated us from nature and more-than-human others. Ultimately, we need to rebel against ourselves: maybe the mediated, sentient, intelligent plant can help us to queer ourselves-as-humans, as we either, as Plumwood declared, "go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all."[4]

Sentient, wired plants: An illustration from the children's book Vamos explorar o bosque [Let's Explore the Forest] by Tony Wolf (1977).

Slowly Undoing Anthropocentrism: Seeing Plants Move (and Putting Them to Sleep)

Since at least the 1980s, the animal turn, propelled by the animal rights movement, has systematically put the question of animal difference, agency, conscience, and subjectivity on the agendas of the humanities and social sciences.[5] Now a "plant turn" seems to be sweeping different fields of knowledge and creation. As the human species sleepwalks into a greenhouse fever of its own making, plants and their singular life forms, long relegated to the margins of conceptual thinking about life itself, finally jut out of the leafy, decorative setting in which they had been "backgrounded," in order to be better acted upon.[6] Books on the "hidden life of trees" become worldwide best sellers and pioneering countries buck the general deforestation trend by granting legal personhood to forests.[7] As botanists and geneticists lose their exclusive grip on the puzzles of vegetal life, philosophers invite us to think *about* and *with* plants, reclaiming a noninstrumental approach to plant life and taking plants' relational and nonhierarchical mode of being as an ethical and political model.[8] In the meantime, artists dream of chlorophyll–blood hybrids and bio-hack genetically engineered carnations.[9] Anthropology decenters itself, opening up to the joys of sylvan thought and to the foraging of rare mushrooms.[10] On biology's side, if the idea of a "plant neurobiology" continues to raise eyebrows (plants don't have brains or neurons), the notion that plants are complex, sensate, aware beings capable of communicating and of feeling for others has gradually imposed itself on the view that plants are less complex life forms, in particular when compared to "superior animals."[11] If most scientists will still refute the notion of plant *intelligence*, contemporary biology seems to have opened up to the idea that plants (and more generally "nature") evince at least a "capacity to know," which anthropologist Jeremy Narby equates with the Japanese notion of *chi-sei*, a "knowing-ness," a "recognizing-ness."[12]

In a way, the extremely different approaches that I've crudely sketched echo, without necessary epitomizing, a much larger, urgent enterprise: that of sidestepping the tenants of modern thought and of challenging the exclusiveness of both knowing and feeling as human attributes. Whether or not their contributors acknowledge it (or even desire it), current debates on plant life border on what Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has called the "decolonization of thought," on the undermining (and, one hopes, eventual overturning) of old conceptual and metaphysical schemes (nature and culture, human and nonhuman, subject and object, etc.). Writing on Amazonian thought (whose relation to plants and the living world is radically different from ours[13]), Viveiros de Castro makes it clear that to *de* colonize means here a "permanent" effort to challenge and to destabilize the hierarchical relationships between "our"

thought and "other's thoughts." In this sense, "there can be no definitive decolonization, because thinking itself is a sort of colonization."[14] In any case, to acknowledge the richness and complexity of plant life (to put it mildly) means here to withdraw (albeit slowly) from a anthropocentric, colonizing reason that has not only separated humans from "nature" in order to justify its domination, situating human life outside and above it, but which has also organized the world according to gender and racial hierarchies, equating women, indigenous, and nonwhite people with the "primitive."

In this flourishing context, the study of plant motion continues to progress, thanks to "new *in vivo* imaging techniques."[15] Beyond the stories of cyborgish houseplants posting info regarding their "state of mind" on blogs,[16] the mediated plant shows itself in all its negotiated glory when we look into historical research on plant movement and sensitivity. As plants' apparent immobility was a favored old Aristotelian argument against the worth of their (inferior, vegetative) souls, the proliferation of studies on plant motion and plant physiology during the second half of the nineteenth century mark a significant turn toward the retrospectively surprising troubling of one of modernity's sacred cows: human exceptionalism. Obviously, it had been known for centuries that plants move, and not only under the influence of the wind, or due to growing and seasonal cycles. The spectacular examples of the *Mimosa pudica* (also known as the "sensitive" plant, or "touch-me-not"), whose leaves quickly fold inwards at the slightest shock (and which seems to *remember* and to organize learned behavioral responses[17], or of the legendary *Dionaea muscipula*, the uncanny and animalesque "Venus flytrap" whose carnivorous appetite defied Linnaeus's taxonomy, demonstrated this well. Indeed, such plants haunted the botanical imagination of the time. Despite this, the sheer amplitude of plant movements remained largely unknown then, as well as their links to a multitude of external stimuli (light, temperature, gravity, mechanical pressure, etc.). Moreover, Western botanical science remained arrogantly ignorant of much more ancient, indigenous bodies of knowledge on plant life and more-than-human sentience—a liability since settled by several indigenous, female scientists such as Wendy Djinn Geniusz and Robin Wall Kimmerer.[18]

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, scientists started using a plethora of motion analysis devices, such as graphic tracing techniques and eventually time-lapse cinematography, in order to demonstrate that apparently inert plants could move, "sleep," and were sensitive. Before cinema brought its own spectacular answers to the study of plant motion, manipulating scale and reconciling the dissonant temporalities of human and vegetal beings, revealing the full extent of "the non-conscious intentionality of vegetal life,"[19] it was the graphic method, more than photography, which confirmed that plants are indeed the active agents of their own fate. Taking part in the unprecedented broadening of the visible world in which photographic technologies were to excel, the graphic method, from which lie detectors developed, detected what positivist science regarded as "truths about nature": the laws governing physiological processes, from blood (or sap) flows to human (or animal and plant) movements. According to the positivist credo, translating these "laws" and "truths" into a fantasized, nonverbal, iconic language—the language of diagrams and mathematical formulas—via "self-recording instruments" allowed for the understanding and, ultimately, the (relative) control of plant movements.

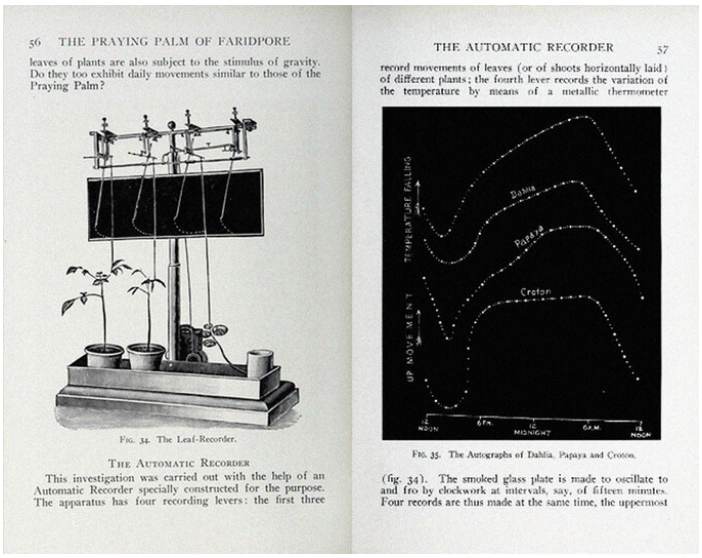


Fig. 34. The Leaf-Recorder.

THE AUTOMATIC RECORDER

This investigation was carried out with the help of an Automatic Recorder specially constructed for the purpose. The apparatus has four recording levers: the first three

Fig. 35. The Autographs of Dahlia, Papaya and Croton.

(fig. 34). The smoked glass plate is made to oscillate to and fro by clockwork at intervals, say, of fifteen minutes. Four records are thus made at the same time, the uppermost

Plants write themselves: Spread from the book Plant Autographs and their Revelations by Jagadish Chandra Bose (1927).

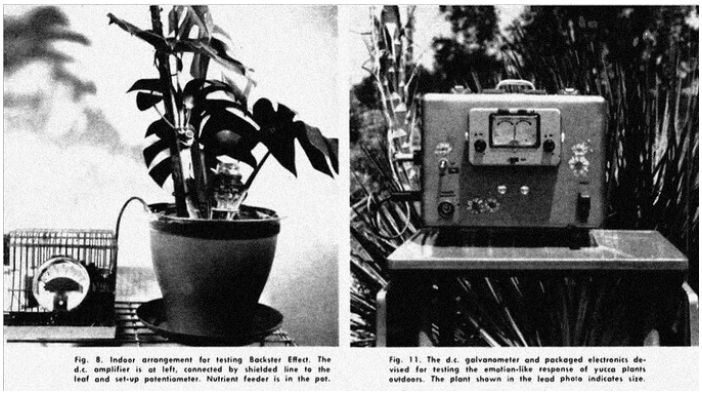


Fig. 8. Indoor arrangement for testing Backster Effect. The d.c. amplifier is at left, connected by shielded line to the leaf and set-up potentiometer. Nutrient feeder is in the pot.

Fig. 11. The d.c. galvanometer and packaged electronics devised for testing the emotion-like response of yucca plants outdoors. The plant shown in the lead photo indicates size.

More wired plants: Illustration from L. George Lawrence, "Electronics and the Living Plant," Electronics World (October 1969), p. 25-28.

As expected from any good physiologist of the time, the

French doctor Paul Bert illustrated his 1867 work on the *Mimosa pudica* with graphs that render the sensitive oscillation of movements both visible and measurable—in particular when Bert thrillingly puts the plant "to sleep," using a sponge soaked in ether.[20] All over Europe, men of science rushed to chloroform and to administrate various narcotics to plants, musing on their "nerves" and "irritability."[21] For the highly influential *The Power of Movement in Plants*, Charles and his son Francis Darwin generated a plethora of images, conceived with ingenious devices involving smoked glass plates and beads of wax on glass needles. In short, the graphic method, famously promoted by Etienne-Jules Marey, was put at the service of botany. Darwin was so impressed by the results that he concluded in his book that the tip of a plant's radicle resembled an animal brain, opening the door for plant–animal analogies and igniting the debate on plant intelligence.[22] From Bert's and Darwin's tracings to Jagadish Chandra Bose's plant autographs, these images potentially effected (despite the original agendas of some of their makers) variable shades of biocentrism, paving the way for a new consideration of plant life. This cue was initially followed by a number of (neo)vitalist philosophers and biologists who, in particular in Central Europe, adamantly opposed dominant mechanistic views throughout the early twentieth century. These philosophers and biologists included Raoul Heinrich Francé (see below), Max Scheler, and Ludwig Klages.[23]

Beyond its documentary use, the images produced according to the graphic method—quickly backed by film[24]—have a heuristic power, anticipating novel ideas through and thanks to images.[25] Among these, what we could call the plants' "becoming subject" is perhaps the most striking, in particular when it comes to film. As a matter of course, these images negotiate a transition from the statute of object to that of *subject*—what is more, an *intentional* subject. Again, this is particularly evident when it comes to film, with cinema providing a surprisingly generous framework for the other-than-human. Film is able to overturn the basic subject–object dualism, rearranging the frontiers of the living, extending intentionality to a multitude of nonhuman subjects, sensing other sentience, and exposing (and suggesting) different modes of being alive. This is all the more astonishing as moving pictures were presented as the celebrated champions of "mechanical objectivity," the ultimate means of capturing and possessing the world. But as film critics and theoreticians remarked very early on, cinema seemed to be "animism's chief apostle."[26] Indeed, it's as if film images reawakened other ways of seeing. Instead of disenchanting the world, cinema "re-enchanted" it, by imputing interiorities to animals, plants, objects, weather phenomena, machines. Moreover, and this was another topos of film theory and criticism between the 1910s and the 1950s, cinema invites the spectator, a modern subject par excellence, to connect with "other ways of thinking." In other words, cinema might be the child of scientific and technological modernity, but it reminds us that we have never been totally modern.

Among the champions of cinema's animism, French filmmaker Jean Epstein draws some of the more interesting conclusions. As he writes in 1935, with regards to time-lapse cinematography, "Slow motion and fast motion reveal a world where the kingdoms of nature know no boundaries. Everything lives." And, he adds:

> A surprising animism is being reborn. We know now, because we have seen them, that we are surrounded by inhuman existences … The cinematographer extends the range of our senses, making perceptible to our sight and to our hearing individuals that we considered invisible and inaudible.[27]

Evoking a documentary film on the life and death of a plant, a picture condensing one year of growth and withering into a few minutes, he suggestively remarks that such film "accomplishes for us the most extraordinary journey, *the most difficult escape that man has yet attempted*"[28]—an escape from our own (human-)centrism. The stakes of this escape evoke Plumwood's call to distance ourselves from the self-enclosing centrisms proper to Cartesianism as we "go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all." Obviously, Epstein did not have the ecological crisis of reason in mind when he wrote this: he hints convincingly at film's capacity to suggest an alternative framework to anthropocentrism, in particular when the mediated plant is involved. In Epstein's time, the apparent risk was to fall prey to a disregarded, romantic form of neovitalism, illustrated, among others things, by the texts of Austro-Hungarian botanist and philosopher Raoul Heinrich Francé. As Francé writes in *Das Sinnesleben der Pflanzen* (The Sensory Life of Plants, 1907):

> The modern naturalist can no longer narrowly limit himself to the study of plants or animals, because life, in its many aspects, solves the problem in a practical way, however varied it may be, and refutes our artificial separations and our classifications between plants, animals and men.[29]

Even worse, filmic images indulge in that regressive, animistic vice that zoomorphizes and anthropomorphizes plants, forever doomed to the lower echelons of life. Because of their suggestiveness, of their hold over primitive and childlike spectators in front of the film screen (as many authors believed in the early twentieth century),

they were much more dangerous than the sober graphs and charts of the graphic method. As French writer Colette wrote in 1924, making evident cinema's perilous *empathetic, emotional* powers:

> A time-lapse film documented the germination of a bean … At the revelation of the intentional and intelligent movement of the plant, I saw children get up, imitate the extraordinary ascent of the plant climbing in a spiral, avoiding an obstacle, groping over its trellis: "It's looking for something! It's looking for something!" cried a little boy, profoundly affected. He dreamt of a plant that night, and so did I.[30]

But don't time-lapse films on plant motion simply illustrate a way of anthropomorphizing nature and plants? Doesn't all this culminate, film-wise, in Disney's "Silly Symphonies"— playful but definite misrepresentations of other-than-human beings? When a voice-over in a British Pathé production from the "Secrets of Nature" series cheekily proclaims that "some plants are born-criminals" and that the dodder in the film has "no intention of earning a respectable living," aren't we right to ask this question?[31] Don't these pictures exemplify a misguided and insufficiently critical reasoning, a thought that attributes human predicates to other-than-human subjects? Isn't their undermining of anthropocentrism fundamentally flawed by anthropomorphism?

Uncritical anthropomorphism: Filmstill from the animated Walt Disney movie Flowers and Trees (1932).

The answer is not simple. We should first distinguish anthropocentrism from anthropomorphism. That the gradual reversal of the first relies, sometimes, on a form of anthropomorphism is not, in itself, a contradiction, as the "policeman for reductive materialism" would like us to believe, whose mission is to enforce "polarised and segregated vocabularies for human and nonhuman."[32] Indeed, as philosophers, etiologists, and anthropologists have repeatedly pointed out, the rejection of anthropomorphism, conceived as a vice of reason since the Enlightenment, stems from an ontological assumption peculiar to modern thought. It was the radical separation between "Man" and "Nature" that banished anthropomorphism to the barely accepted limits of reason and reduced it to a cognition problem common to children and "primitive peoples." Understood as a form of "generous sociality" (and otherwise unknown to Neanderthals), it was anthropomorphism, however, "that made us humans," at least according to French ethnologists Aude Michelet and Charles Stépanoff.[33]

In our current context, we should be wary of all forms of anthropocentrism, as in our Western context they seem to promote human remoteness from the living world, holding an aloof, escapist "anthropos" in his crumbling ivory tower. But as we endorse more caring, communicative, and attentive attitudes towards the earth and our other-than-human counterparts, maybe a critical and creative anthropomorphism is not only possible, but desirable, as a necessary step. As opposed to a "patronising and difference-denying"[34] anthropomorphism, this creative anthropomorphism can be a way of apprehending the diversity and alterity of life and the living, and a means of becoming otherly human. In many ways, to undo anthropocentrism is to decolonize thought: although again, as Viveiros de Castro reminds us, we cannot totally fulfill this mission. Maybe animistic anthropomorphism is a reasonable price to pay: "People tend to think that animism is a narcissistic, anthropomorphic, anthropocentric fantasy of primitive people, children, and madmen," says Viveiros de Castro, "when actually animism is exactly the opposite. If you say that everything is human, then you also must say that humans aren't special, because everything is like us."[35] It turns out that film (albeit not *The Strangler*, Disney's *Flowers and Trees*, or even the Swamp Thing—"a plant that thinks it's human"[36]) is sometimes the place where this critical anthropomorphism, envisaged as an invitation addressed by images to their human spectators, can take place. As anthropologist Natasha Myers justly observes, we need to reconsider animism (among other things an essential feature of film) and anthropomorphism since,

> the very taboos against [them] are grounded in colonial imaginations of nature and culture, and … this disavowal of nonhuman sentience is intimately bound up in colonial projects that have taken shape under the guise of the ecological sciences.[37]

In other words: free your mind.

Filmstill from Max Reichmann's movie The Miracle of Flowers (1926).

The Filmic Life of Plants

In 1966, a polygraph expert working for the CIA hooked up one of his machines to the leaf of a dracaena. As Michael Pollan writes, "To his astonishment, Cleve Backster found that simply by imagining the plant being set on fire he could make it rouse the needle of a polygraph machine, registering a surge of electrical activity suggesting that the plant felt stress."[38] In the years to come, Backster and his collaborators multiplied the experiments, plugging dozens of plants and vegetables into lie detectors and concluding that lettuce, onions, and a multitude of inconspicuous houseplants could perceive and respond to human thoughts and emotions. In 1979, when a botanist and physiologist painstakingly attempted to explain, in the pages of *American Scientist*, that Backster's experiments were anything but serious science, the damage was already done: the thesis on plants' extrasensory perception and their astounding emotional capacities had quickly spread worldwide.[39]

In 1973, Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird's bestseller, *The Secret Life of Plants*, mainstreamed Backster's findings and rediscovered a number of forgotten "plant-intelligence" champions, such as the Bengali biologist and polymath Jagadish Chandra Bose, and the African-American agronomist, experimenter, and pioneering environmentalist George Washington Carver. Leaving a considerable imprint on both popular and visual culture, *The Secret Life of Plants*—along with Dorothy Retallack's *The Sound of Music and Plants* (1973)[40] —made it normal to play classical music to houseplants and inspired a number of records, films, and writings, including my childhood book on forests. Taking advantage of the volume's worldwide success, Paramount adapted it for the screen in 1978: directed by Walon Green, *The Secret Life of Plants* included an original soundtrack by none other than Stevie Wonder. Released a year later as a double LP, *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* constitutes an original addition to the list of records professing that plants react favorably to music ; it's also the only record I know that includes a song on the skepticism raised by botanical scientific discoveries.[41] As for cinema, the allusions to Tompkins and Bird's bestseller pop up here and there, as in Philipp Kaufmann's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1979), where not only space invaders resemble unemotional vegetal pods, but where plants are played classical music in a mud-bath parlor by an attentive carer. The same year, a thriller directed by Jonathan Sarno, *The Kirlian Witness* (rereleased recently under the title *The Plants are Watching*), goes a step further, telling the story of a woman who attempts to telepathically communicate with a plant in order to find out who murdered her plant-loving sister.

As *The Secret Life of Plants* makes an expected comeback today, two things come to mind with regard to the plant madness that struck the 1970s.[42] Firstly, the historical context in which these theses circulated and spread was significant; among other things, it included the rise of New Age thinking, which was rooted in the American counterculture of the sixties, and which became, in the seventies, more and more oriented toward a form of "mystical ecology." Secondly, when *The Secret Life of Plants* came out, Cold War hysteria had not yet ended (did it ever?). As a matter of course—and this should also be kept in mind when considering a number of sci-fi films from the fifties and sixties where plants assume uncanny contours (turning out most of the time to be carnivorous and to take great pleasure in gobbling women's flesh[43])—the ideological conflict that opposed the US to the USSR (and with it the rest of the world) also took place in research labs. Scientific teams devoted themselves to the study of strange phenomena, ranging, in the case of plant science, from the feasibility of growing plants without sunlight to the possibility of "biological communication"[44] between humans–animals–plants in order to "cybernetically ... direct all the physiological processes of plants."[45] Backster's theses were taken seriously on the other side of the Iron Curtain: as Tomkins and Bird recall in their book, the Soviets had a well-established research tradition concerning plant communication, as evidenced by two soviet documentaries promoting the breakthroughs of Communist science: *The Voice of Plants* (1968) and *Do Plants Feel?* (1970).

Indeed, images played an essential and versatile role in the mainstreaming of the plant sentience hypothesis. Even the images produced by Backster's polygraph have a heuristic power. As we can see in *The Secret Life of Plants,* or in *Do Plants Feel?*, regardless of their scientificity the scribbling lines methodically inscribed by tiny needles on strips of scrolling paper open up theoretical horizons concerning plant's potential "agency," "awareness," "conscience," "intelligence," "intentionality,"

"sentience," or "thinking." Moreover, plant sentience and intelligence are now explicitly associated with the mediation of machines. Again, the sentient plant is a mediated plant: a plant mediated by polygraphs and their electrode cables; a plant mediated by Kirlian or "aura" photography (the collection of photographic techniques which inspired Sarno's thriller); a plant mediated by the apparatus that Mr. Hashimoto conceived so that one could hear the voice of a cactus to whom his wife, Mrs. Hashimoto, had taught the Japanese alphabet[46]; a plant mediated, again and again, by time-lapse cinematography, which exposes, according to the voice-over in Paramount's film adaptation of *The Secret Life of Plants*, "the pain and the joy" expressed by and in plant motion. In fact, the sentient plant of the 1970s is still a plant that can be seen to move.

In the early twentieth century, critics and filmmakers marveled before scientific (and other) films that were capable of exposing, by virtue of cinema's expressive resources (time lapse, the close-up, editing, etc.), the secret life of plants. Tender shoots pierced the ground in seconds, stems feverishly burst toward the light, and flowers bloomed in the blink of an eye. The bindweed danced, the passionflower moved, and the *medeola virginiana* twirled: in other words, plants had become animated, joining the army of inhuman existences that Epstein recognized on screen. These films, from *Die Seele der Pflanze* (The Soul of Plants, unknown filmmaker, 1921) to *The Movement of Plants* (Jean Comandon, 1929), seemed to resuscitate what botanical herbaria dried and flattened between their yellowish sheets of paper. They escaped the taxidermic paradigm that characterized ethnographic and wildlife films from the early twentieth century, in their murderous conservationist impulse.[47] Whether in France or in Germany, the wonderful spectacle of these films appeared as a revelation, confirming the heuristic capacities of filmic images. These disclosed not only the autonomous movements of plants, but also their *expressiveness*, which some, like botanist Raoul Heinrich Francé, believed to constitute the manifestation of a primitive intelligence. One film in particular, *The Miracle of Flowers* (1926), elevated plant motion to the status of expressive gesture.

Shot in Germany by Max Reichmann, this singular feature film was sponsored by the chemical corporation BASF in order to promote nitrate fertilizers—fertilizers using the same nitrogen compounds that were massively used during the First World War to produce bombs and bullets, that turned Chile's Atacama desert into a desolate battleground, and that are now an authorized method of execution in three American states.[48]

The Miracle of Flowers tells the story of a fairy named Flora who, having surprised a group of children carelessly plucking "innocent" living beings (i.e., flowers), acquaints them, thanks to time-lapse images documenting the growth and withering of seventy-eight plant species, with the "sorrows" and "struggles" of plants, "the rhythm of their movements," their "feelings." The film's originality lies in the images that Reichmann intercuts with the time-lapse sequences: expressionist dance scenes, where human dancers interpret and mimic the gestures of plants. The performers in question belong to the Berlin State Ballet: directed by choreographer Max Terpin, they illustrate the guiding principles of *Ausdruckstanz*, the expressionist dance movement that developed in Germany from 1910 onwards. As Matthew Vollgraff recalls, the film made a strong impression in Germany, touching film critics and philosophers alike, including Theodor Lessing and Max Scheler; the latter observes in a personal letter that he had seen "flowers breathe, bloom and die. The idea that plants had no soul disappeared completely."[49]

Perhaps *The Miracle of Flowers* is yet another example of cinema's shameless but inventive anthropomorphism: the attribution of human motivation, characteristics, and behavior to inanimate objects, animals, plants, and natural phenomena. In this sense, the film would not challenge but instead reinforce an anthropocentric vision of the world, whereby every form of life is modeled on human selves and personhoods and submitted to anthropocentric measures and perspectives. It is true that *The Miracle of Flowers,* like most time-lapse plant films from its time, falls prey to anthropomorphic analogies; still, the picture's treatment of temporal scale also introduces some interesting shifts. This is most evident when Flora, after explaining to the children that they "don't notice their [the flowers'] sorrows and struggles, because the rhythm of their movement operates under a different time measurement, and yet like you they flower and fade," grabs a girl's wrist to take her pulse. The film cuts to micro-cinematographic images of human blood, which render the human body surprisingly uncanny. As an intertitle explains, a pulse beat equals a human second; soon after, a mechanical clock starts to race, disrupting human rhythms and compressing four years of growth into one hour of screen time. In other words, the technological wonder of time lapse accomplishes the miracle of relativizing human life-rhythms. By making other rhythms of life visible, film— *through the mediation of a machinic, other-than-human subject, the camera*—is potentially allowing the human spectator to recalibrate her anthropocentric perspective and to open herself to other-than-human subjectivities—such as that of the camera, or those of plants.

Queering Botanics

The mediated, sentient, and intelligent plant potentially invites us to think about nature, plants, technology, and ourselves-as-humans in different ways. As plants in particular are revealed as agentic, intentional beings, the mediated plant potentially invites us to develop more

Uncritical anthropomorphism: Filmstill from the DC Comic TV series Swamp Thing (2019).

caring, attentive, and communicative attitudes toward the vegetal. In this way, the mediated plant can push us forward in the urgent "struggle to think differently" that Plumwood called us to join. Perhaps the mediated, sentient, intelligent plant can help us to queer nature, to queer botanics, to queer ourselves-as-humans as we "go onwards in a different mode of humanity."[50] But why *to queer*? Why not "simply" to "decolonize"?

Because queer has never been only human. Because queer can be a way to reimagine what it means to be "human" in the age of man-made ecological catastrophe, as we estrange ourselves from dualistic identities and an oppressive mode of being human. Because queer is a means to push forward the boundaries of our thinking about ourselves in relation to all the meaningful others who share the world with us. Because queer is about identity and inclusion.

Much in the manner of feminist theory, whose hermeneutic tradition goes far beyond the category of "gender," queer theory can be shifted (and has been shifted, as queer ecocriticism demonstrates) to the grounds where the human and the other-than-human encounter and experience one another. Engaging with queer theory in this context means putting an accent on problems of boundary formation and negotiation pertaining to the "human as norm." Haunted by the regulatory notions of "natural" and unnatural," queer theory has constantly wrestled with the culturally constructed dimension of what we understand the "natural" and "nature" to be. Queer theory can help us to radically rethink identities, who and what we are, who and what we can become.

To uncenter "gender" doesn't mean to ignore it. As imagined by our naturalist ontology, nature is all about gender. The science of botany in particular provides us with an excellent example of the overwhelming strength of binary thought, as plant sexuality became, from the eighteenth century onwards, a battleground over the gendering of nature, knowledge, and the social order. As artist Pedro Neves Marques rightfully recalls in *Linnaeus and the Terminator Seed*, a 2017 film-essay connecting modern botany to contemporary transgenics, Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus "made gender and sex the founding principles of nature." Having established "maleness" and "femaleness" as the basis of the classification of plants, Linnaeus not only turned the sexualization of nature into the basis of his *Systema Naturae* (1735), therefore conflating vegetal and human reproduction, but he *gendered nature*, metamorphosing plants into green homunculi trapped inside a highly patriarchal structure. Using the number of (male) stamens and (female) pistils in a given plant to determine the class and the order to which it belonged, Linnaeus went on to categorize the vegetal kingdom according to the "public" or "clandestine marriages" of its subjects (i.e., the visible

or less visible arrangement of sexual organs in the flower). His imaginative descriptions are filled with what many decried as licentious, obscene metaphors: "marriages" implying sometimes more than twenty "husbands" (male stamens) sharing the same "bed" or "house," the female pistils caught up in such devious arrangements being described as *meretrices* or *concubinae*. Transgression was kept within close heteronormative boundaries: the hermaphroditic self-fertilization of plants was conceived as yet another form of heterosexual conjugality.

Beyond gender(ing), to queer botanics is to recognize plant nature is queer nature. A queer nature made of peculiar, twofold bodies: an aerial body that grows upwards and reaches for the light, and a subterranean body that pushes through the soil and recedes into the darkness. It is a nature based on autotroph lifestyles: unlike fungi, animals, or humans, plants do not (usually) feed on others. They produce their own nourishment, trapping energy from sunlight, processing carbon dioxide and water; even carnivorous plants can live and grow without digesting insects. Plants are not only mediated: they are the great mediators of our world, transforming solar energy into living matter, producing an oxygen-rich atmosphere. Even when rooted in contaminated soils, growing in human-disturbed environments, or when genetically modified, plants make our world possible. As philosopher Emanuele Coccia would put it: plants are our gardeners.

Beyond gender(ing), to queer ourselves-as-humans is to make a step toward becoming other. Not to become plant, but to become otherly human, as the post-natural mediated plant is otherly plant.

X

1
Jean Epstein, "Photogénie de l'impondérable" (1935), in *Écrits sur le cinéma* , vol. 1 (Seghers, 1974), 250.

2
Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," *Australian Humanities Review* , no. 46 (2009): 127–28.

3
I warmly thank Margarida Mendes: it was during one of our many discussions on plant life that the notion of the "mediated plant" appeared to me. The exhibition *Plant Revolution!*, curated by Mendes, opens at Centro Internacional das Artes José Guimarães on October 19, 2019.

4
Val Plumwood, "Review of Deborah Bird Rose's Reports from a Wild Country," *Australian Humanities Review* , no. 42 (2007): 1.

5
See, among others, Harriet Ritvo, "On the Animal Turn," *Daedalus* 136, no. 4 (2007); and Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (Columbia University Press, 2012). See also the "Animal Turn Collection" at Michigan State University Press.

6
See Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002) for an instructive comment on the environment's backgrounding and denial as a major rationalist strategy.

7
I'm thinking of Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* (Greystone Books, 2016); and of New Zealand's 2014 move to grant legal personhood to the Te Urewera forest, which now owns itself. Countries such as India and Colombia have granted rights to rivers, and in 2008 Ecuador conferred rights upon nature in its constitution.

8
See, among others, Mathew Hall's *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (SUNY Press, 2011); Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013); and Emanuele Coccia's *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Polity Press, 2018). Marder rejects the idea of a "formal plant-intelligence," preferring to envisage the "non-conscious life of plants" as a "kind of 'thinking before thinking'" (p. 154). For an ethical and political discussion of the forest, see Jean-Baptiste Vidalou, *Être-forêt: Habiter des territoires en lutte* (Editions la Découverte, 2017).

9
On chlorophyll transfusions, see the Spanish collective Quimera Rosa's performance "May the Chlorophyll Be With/In You" https://quimerarosa.net/transplant/index.php/2018/08/04/may-the-chlorophyll-be-within-you/ . Austrian artist Georg Tremmel and Japanese artist Shiho Fukuhara reverse engineered a genetically modified variety of a carnation, the blue Moondust, designed by Japanese brewing company Suntory (*The Common Flowers Project* , 2009).

10
See Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013), whose title refers to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's classical *How Natives Think* (1910); and Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

11
"Plant neurobiology" is associated with the work of Italian biologist Stefano Mancuso, who currently runs the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology in Florence, founded in 2005. See, among others, his book with Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Insland Press, 2015). On the idea of plant "awareness," see Daniel Chamovitz's *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). The author prefers the notion of "awareness" to "intelligence," which he considers a "loaded term"—which British biologist Anthony Trewavas embraces in *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and which French biologist Francis Hallé comments on in the more conventional *In Praise of Plants* (Timber Press, 2002). In French, see also Jacques Tassin, *À quoi pensent les plantes?* (Odile Jacob, 2016).

12
Jeremy Narby, *Intelligence in Nature: An Inquiry into Knowledge* (Penguin, 2005).

13
As Davi Kopenawa's words on the forest perfectly show—see Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Belknap Press, 2013).

14
Peter Skafish, "The Metaphysic of Extra-Moderns: On the Decolonization of Thought—A Conversation with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro," *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (September 2016), 412.

15
Catherine Lenne, Olivier Boudeau, and Bruno Moulia, "Percevoir et bouger: les plantes aussi," *Pour la Science*, no. 438 (April 2014), 47.

16
In 2008, a restaurant in Kamakura, Japan, hooked a sweetheart plant called Midori-san to sensors recording the plant's temperature and levels of light and moisture received throughout the day. An algorithm then translated the information into sentences posted on a blog. See http://pinktentacle.com/2008/10/midori-san-the-blogging-houseplant/ .

17
See Monica Gagliano, Michael Renton, Martial Depczynski, et al., "Experience Teaches Plants to Learn Faster and Forget Slower in Environments Where It Matters," *Oecologia* 175, no. 1 (2014): 63 . Chamovitz also discusses "plant memory" in his *What a Plant Knows.*

18
Wendy Djin Geniusz, *Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings* (Syracuse University Press, 2009); and Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2015).

19
Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 153–62.

20
Paul Bert, *Recherches sur le mouvement de la Sensitive (Mimosa Pudica, Linn.)* (Baillère et Fils, 1867).

21
Women, whose upper-class representatives were eventually allowed to study botany during the nineteenth century after endless debates on the appropriateness of Linnaeus's highly sexual classification system to the decorum of the "female mind," were generally limited to the collection, preparation, and drawing of botanical specimens, with British botanist Henderina Victoria Scott providing at least one example of a female scientific film pioneer.

22
Charles Darwin, *The Power of Movement in Plants* (John Murray, 1880), 573.

23
See *Biocentrism and Modernism*, eds. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche, (Routledge, 2011).

24
The German plant physiologist Wilhelm Pfeffer made four time-lapse films between 1898 and 1900, corroborating some of Darwin's contested ideas on plant sensitivity and irritability. The films are viewable at https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1hp9q .

25
As Oliver Gaycken puts it with regards to early time-lapse cinematography on plant motion, "The revelation of seeing plant movement accelerated to the point of visibility via a technical device opened up new pathways for thinking about the relationship between plants and animals, and thus provided evidence for an argument for a kinship previously posited but never before apprehended." Oliver Gaycken, "The Secret Life of Plants: Visualizing Vegetative Movement 1880–1903," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10, no. 1 (February 2012): 58.

26
Boris Bilinsky, "Le costume," in *L'Art Cinématographique* (Félix Alcan, 1929), 56.

27
Epstein, "Photogénie de l'impondérable," 251.

28
Jean Epstein, "Intelligence d'une machine" (1946), in *Écrits sur le cinéma* , vol. 2 (Seghers, 1974), 285.

29
Raoul Heinrich Francé, *Les Sens de la plante* (1911) (Adyar, 2003), 93.

30
Colette, "Cinéma (Magie des films d'enseignement)" (1924), in *Colette et le cinéma* (Fayard, 2004), 369.

31
The film, entitled *The Strangler* (1930), can be watched here: https://www.britishpathe.com/video/secrets-of-nature-the-strangler .

32
Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," 127.

33
Aude Michelet and Charles Stépanoff, "Comment l'anthropomorphisme nous a rendus humains: L'anthropomorphisation des animaux et des nourrissons et ses impacts dans l'évolution," *Persona: Étrangement humain* , ed. Aude Gros de Beler (Actes Sud / Musée du quai Branly, 2015), 45–46.

34
Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* , 59.

35
Skafish, "Conversation with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro," 410.

36
I'm referring to the recent DC Comics web television adaptation of *The Swamp Thing* saga. The Swamp Thing is a vegetal monstrous body, whose shape resembles a male human body. It can communicate with "the Green," a sort of vegetable consciousness connecting all plant life in the universe.

37
Natasha Myers, "Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000 year-old NaturalCultural Happening," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 3, no. 2 (2017): 7.

38
Michael Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2013 →.

39
Arthur W. Galston and Clifford L. Slayman, "The Not-So-Secret Life of Plants," *American Scientist* 67, no 3 (May–June 1979), 337–44.

40
Retallack mentions in her book having been intrigued by Franklin Loehr's *The Power of Prayer on Plants* (1959).

41
Listen to "Same Old Story" here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcjX3txEkWA .

42
Among other places, this comeback is evident in the contemporary art scene, as illustrated by two different group exhibitions inspired by the book/film/Stevie Wonder record: "The Secret Life of Plants," held at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, in 2009 https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3268/the-secret-life-of-plants/ ; and "The Secret Life of Plants," held at Freight + Volume, New York, in 2017 http://www.freightandvolume.com/exhibitions/the-secret-life-of-plants?view=slider#6 . British artist Will J. Robinson has also conceived an installation inspired by Backster: "The Backster Experiment."

43
On films such as *The Thing From Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951), *It Came from Outer Space* (Jack Arnold, 1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), *From Hell It Came* (Dan Milner, 1957), *The Little Shop of Horrors* (Roger Corman, 1960), *The Day of the Triffids* (Steve Sekely, 1963), etc., see Adam Knee, "Vegetable Discourses in 1950s Science Fiction Film," in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* , eds. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); and Joni Adamson and Catriona Sandilands, "Thinking Plant Politics with *The Day of the Triffids* ," in *The Language of Plants* , eds. Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). To my knowledge, an essay focusing on the caricatured gender dimensions of some of these films has yet to be written …

44
This expression was preferred over "extrasensory perception" by "communist scientists," according to a CIA report on Soviet and Czechoslovakian parapsychology research, dated April 15, 1975 https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000600350001-3.pdf . See also *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* , a 1970 c ompilation of weird stuff by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (Prentice Hall).

45
Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants* (Avon Books, 1974), 81.

46
The experience is documented in Walon Green's film. It's interesting to compare Mrs. Hashimoto experiment with John Baldessari's 1972 video piece *Teaching the Alphabet to a Plant* (an exercise in futility and the absurd). See also Elise Florenty and Marcel Türkowsky's 2017 film *Conversation with a Cactus*.

47
See Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984).

48
See Denise Grady and Jan Hoffmann, "States Turn to an Unproven Method of Execution: Nitrogen Gas," *New York Times*, May 7, 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/07/health/death-penalty-nitrogen-executions.html . With regard to Chile's nitrate fields, see Daniel A. Gross, "Caliche: The Conflict Mineral That Fuelled the First World War," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/science/the-h-word/2014/jun/02/caliche-great-war-first-world-war-conflict-mineral .

49
Matthew Vollgraff, "Vegetal Gestures: Cinema and the Knowledge of Life in Weimar Germany," *Grey Room*, no. 72 (Summer 2018). On *The Miracle of Flowers* see also Janelle Blankenship, "'Film-Symphonie von Leben und Sterben der Blumen': Plant Rhythm and Time-Lapse Vision in *Das Blumen wunder* ," *Intermédialités*, no. 16 (2010).

50
Plumwood, "Review of Deborah Bird Rose," 1.

> My relationship to who I was is tenuous. Is this true of all people? This is why it seems important to me that all people create, make art, practice their imaginations, exercise beauty. When we fill the world with artifacts of what we dreamed we begin to learn from who we wanted to be, an imagined people who might know enough to stop making the same mistakes.
>
> —T Fleischmann, *Time Is the Thing a body Moves Through*, 2019

McKenzie Wark

Femme as in Fuck You

I don't exactly know how I heard about Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli's film *So Pretty*.[1] It was probably through Twitter. Jessie and I became mutuals there, and traded a few messages, before I even saw it. And after. And then we became friends. And then Jessie adopted me as one of her trans "daughters."[2] In both her art and life I saw a glimpse not just of the trans woman I wanted to be, but of a shared world to which such a trans woman might want to belong. I'm too old to ever become a pretty woman, but I might still want to believe and work, and play, in a pretty world.

Before I met Jessie, I saw her, at the New York premier of *So Pretty*. She was rather fetching, in a black see-through sheath dress over simple black underpants, her breasts bare, her slender frame pedestaled on giant platform shoes, which I would discover soon enough were her trademark. It might seem, let's say, problematic, to be discussing how a woman looked rather than what she said about her film, or the film itself. But maybe one of things at stake, for some trans women and femmes at least, is the right to claim to appear in our beauty at all. A beauty the cis world hardly knows how to acknowledge.

Maybe pretty is a better word that beautiful. *So Pretty* is adapted from a Ronald M. Schernikau novel, known as *So Schön*.[3] One might translate that as *So Beautiful*, but here as elsewhere Rovinelli transforms the source into something of her own. The pretty might be one of what Sianne Ngai calls the minor aesthetic categories: equivocal, diffuse, although I want to propose that one can still justify the pretty as an aesthetic, and that it can, in a low-key way, connect to a kind of action in the world.[4] Making things pretty might, in a low-key way, hint at the utopian.

Here is the story, such as it is: Tonia arrives in New York and reunites with her lover Franz, and is introduced to Franz's circle. She meets Paul and Erika, who are also sort of a couple. They hang out, they go dancing. In the end, Tonia will be with Erika, and Franz with Paul. Along the way, we meet Paul's mother, Gera, a curious and caring older onlooker. And we meet Helmut, who involves them in a political demonstration, where Paul will get arrested and injured. Meanwhile, Paul makes photos, Erika makes

Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli, So Pretty, 2019. Filmstill from movie. Courtesy of the artist.

music, and Tonia makes a staged reading of the Schernikau book in which they have all become characters, including herself as Tonia, rather than Tonio, as it is in the book.

Rovinelli reimagines Schernikau's world as inhabited by trans people. Schernikau's was a world of gay men, in the eighties, in Berlin, and yet a world with a lot of femininity in it—gay male life can have its femme side. A world I know a little about: had he lived, Schernikau would be my age now. For a while I tried to inhabit that femininity that was sometimes present and often disavowed in that eighties gay world.[5] To take the femme latent there as trans can be controversial in a gay world, but for we transsexuals, it's a reclaiming of some of our own pasts, lives, culture.

Except Helmut, who reads to me as a trans man, all of the characters are femme in some sense. Tonia and Erika are trans women. We learn near the end of the film of Tonia's transition; if you are trans you might clock a vial of injectable estrogen in Erika's room. Paul and Franz read to me as cis men with a femme side to their style and movement. On the way to a demo, Tonia will say that she used to think of herself as someone who could survive getting arrested, but not anymore. Helmut replies that while in principle he thinks Tonia should go to a women's prison, he does not particularly want to end up in the men's. Transition has changed the relation of their bodies to political possibility. To be trans is to flee a particular kind of violence, but to put oneself in the path of several others.

Everyone in *So Pretty* is so pretty. I'd like to say that even Helmut is pretty although it is not a thing one would say to a trans man. The time has long passed when one could call men as well as women "pretty." It's a word with German roots, with Dutch and English derivatives, that used to mean brisk and clever, maybe a bit tricky. Over centuries, it became more gendered. The tricky quality is related to a lack of strength, smallness, to getting by with one's wits, but then also with crafted and crafty appearances. The pretty may have elements of beauty but is perhaps not beauty in its pure or intrinsic form. It isn't a classical harmony of form and content. It may have elements of attractive form that hide a content that doesn't quite match appearances.

The word "pretty" is pretty trans. The sense of the pretty as duplicitous connects to a particularly hostile attitude to trans women: that we are traps. That our pretty faces and bodies might hide dick. (The full Freudian catastrophe.) But what if this sense of the pretty was reversible? Perhaps what is pretty is not trying to hide anything. Perhaps what is pretty is instead displacing this whole idea of appearances as a cover for some essence.[6] Perhaps what is pretty need not be seen as hiding something, as damaged goods, but as a gift, as offering the possibility of stepping outside of exchange value.

Let's risk the idea that the changing valence of the pretty

has an historical connection to the rise to dominance of a commodity economy: Before, a pretty man might be tricky, but need not be diminished by that association. It's an active quality, for one thing. But when the commodity displaces chivalrous codes of honor, the commodity itself becomes what is pretty, and it is not so much tricky as a trick, or a trap. Its pretty form hides its calculating essence. It lies in wait, in the market, in all apparent passivity, to hook the buyer with its charms. The pretty commodity is feminine; the pretty becomes feminine, and exchangeable—and suspicious.

Perhaps there's a shiny glint of the utopian in the pretty, even so. If only the pretty could be something other than a trap for men's desires, snaring their thirst for possession, for things that they might buy, own, abuse. Things that inevitably disappoint those desires, when put under close scrutiny. What if those pretty objects really did have agency, and danced?[7] The pretty might then be a bit utopian, but only to the extent that certain kinds of violence could be kept at bay. And only when they dance together.

After some texting went back and forth, Jessie and I met for coffee on the Upper West Side, in a café that flew the pride flag but which still felt like it was in enemy territory. It was a long conversation. One memorable thing was when Jessie said she had read Sianne Ngai's book on minor aesthetic categories. The most memorable was when Jessie declared that she thought all cinema is based on rape, and that she wanted to make a cinema that precluded the possibility of rape. That caught my attention.

The film business is rape culture. There's ways in which this is literally true. The #MeToo movement against rape culture partly started there.[8] But there's a way in which it is true in another sense, in terms of film form, film narrative, what the camera does and doesn't do. One thing it does a lot in the more rapey cinema is that it pries. It might begin by setting up for the viewer a fascinated gaze, at pretty things, at pretty women—but it must investigate! Like a buyer in the market; like a man on Tinder.

Sometimes, when the camera looks at a woman, there's a gap between what it shows in a longer shot of her pretty figure and what it shows when it comes in for the close-up on her wrought face. The edit cuts away her body, reducing it to a face, and the face is supposed to betray some inner turmoil, some feeling that is hidden inside, to prove there's a heart there, or something. You could call it the male gaze. But sometimes also it's the cis gaze: checking to see that what's advertised as woman is female all the way through.

There might even be a cinema that's almost aware that it's doing this, but does it anyway. Let's call it meta-rape cinema: Antonioni's *Blow-Up* comes to mind, as does Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* or Brian De Palma's *Body Double*, or Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuck*. These are all films in which there is a double of the filmmaker within the film, whose work-practices we see. These are films that are fascinated with their own fascination with penetrating the mystery of the female body, with the pry and cut that reveals, beneath the vivacious surface, the dead thing.

I asked Facebook friends to suggest movies that might fit in a meta-rape genre. The four I chose here as examples are winnowed from a very long list. The rapey quality of cinema is abundant. While the thread was going, I sent a link to the *So Pretty* trailer to Adrian Martin, who sent me this Facebook message. "Sounds fascinating! btw Jacques Rivette said of his film *Amour Fou* in 1967 that 'cinema is necessarily fascination and rape'—and that is also a film-within-the-film, documenting theatre psychodrama. When I put that quote in my last book, an anonymous reader for Amsterdam Uni Press strongly requested that it be removed, for being so offensive in 2018!"

So Pretty attempts to invert the genre of the meta-rape film. Tonia comes to town to make a project. One assumes it's the staged reading in the park of *So Schön*, which recurs throughout the film. We see her in the milieu of Franz and his friends, but also directing them. It is different to meta-rape cinema. She is not investigating, exposing, revealing. What is she doing? What is involved in the production of the image of what is pretty out of the milieu in which it arises? It can't help but be contradictory. A film is still a commodity, and all that. A director still directs others, requests, requires, or persuades other people to do things, even in a cinema committed to a practice of consent. Tonia, like pretty much every filmmaker I know, is a social top.

Once Tonia joins the world of Franz and Erika and Paul and their friends, the camera tends to move sideways, tracking across rooms. It isn't interested in prying into any discrepancies between these pretty bodies and their hidden souls. It's not interested in isolating them as individuals with their separate "journeys." It is interested in how their bodies connect, or not, to each other, to the surfaces of the rooms where they flourish, to the objects and art and books in those spaces. Those spaces are filled

with artifacts through which to dream, and practice, another habitation for another life.

This is a utopian cinema, then. To the extent that this is possible. The first principle of utopia as a genre is the exclusion of violence.[9] That means that the violence is contained and neutralized, but still there. This is a place or a time, a constructed situation, where it is kept at bay, so something else might flower. In this situation, what can come into being is something femme, something trans, and something queer. Maybe it's so pretty because it brings together those three different but overlapping sensibilities, all of which might be pretty in different ways, different from each other and from the more conventional suspicion of the pretty as a trap.

It's a question of the viewer in relation to the point of view of the camera. It isn't controlling or exposing. The camera does not assert itself as the primary agent in the scene, nor do scenes appear to be staged to please the camera. It's as if the camera was just another point of view among a group, rather than the most (self-)important person in the room. This camera is not terribly interested in, or interesting for, the "male gaze." It doesn't much care for what one might call the straight gaze either. I suppose one ought, as a matter of manners, to describe the intimacy of Tonia with Franz, or of Erika with Paul, as heterosexual. (Trans women are women; trans women dating men of any kind are in hetero relations.) Then Paul ends up with Franz; Tonia with Erika. Gender is neither here nor there. They are all, in some sense, femme. Call it queer cinema if you like, but I don't think that exhausts what may be attractive in it.

I would not want to reduce *So Pretty* to being a trans film or Rovinelli to being a trans filmmaker. It's so much more than that. But it was what drew me to it. And that drew me back into a love of the cinema I thought I had lost, forever. The cinema I once loved was where you see and hear and feel things that are the gestures you want to draw into your own body, so as not to keep making the same mistakes.

It's not the usual trans film, though, as most of those seem not to break too much with what one might now have to call cis-cinema. Trans films still tend to be fascinated with transition itself. That's not of much interest here. The trans characters simply are. Their world simply is. Rovinelli asks what trans films usually don't: What if what had to transition was the world? It's a pretty image, delicately colored, of a little world as what could be.

Trans art sometimes has a problem with genre. Our lives are formatted into narratives whose genre is romance or tragedy, where we get characters with whom to identify who are heroes or victims. Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager suggest satire instead, a genre without political optimism, that sees a world that is always less than itself.[10] Torrey Peters suggests the fantastic, as a form which hesitates between the uncanny and the marvelous, highlighting rather than poo-pooing the marvel of the world. Being trans is to not quite know whether gender is as cis people think it is, or something altogether more strange.[11] Or, a third genre option: Grace Lavery brings together Janet Mock's realness as accepting the truth about oneself with psychoanalysis and the genre of literary realism to suggest the possibility of a trans art of self-care that moderates "beautiful fantasy."[12]

The satiric and the fantastic are two poles: the art which shows the reality we think we know to be less than it seems; and the art which shows that reality as being suspended in unknowability. Perhaps realism is on an axis that crosses that one. It's an art of knowing which cuts fantasy down to the size of the world. Perhaps it needs its complimentary pole, the utopian: the art of editing together a world as expansive as our dreams. Within that matrix, *So Pretty* is a utopian film.

If the utopian is to be more than a momentary illumination, it has to be organized.[13] How to organize love? We see Erika read from Tonia's translation of *So Schön*. This is the problem the reading sets up. The love of these characters is already organized in the couple form. Any utopian project, of reorganizing love beyond it, finds its internal limit in the persistence of the couple, in the violence of its exclusivity. Like a lot of cinema, *So Pretty* pictures the problems of the individual and the couple, but it nests those problems, as an internal tension, within a utopian possibility.

Tonia talks to Franz about a translation question hinging on the slippage between the sense of togetherness and the sense of two-ness. They are on their way to go dancing. Tonia and Franz are arm in arm. So are Paul and Erika. But Tonia is looking at Erika. Later, the camera shows us Tonia and Erika, cuddling in an armchair. It lingers just for a beat, and then tracks sideways, across the room, and shows us Paul, Helmut, Franz, and Gera playing rock-paper-scissors. The couple form lives in tension with a polyamorous one. It's not resolved, but neither is the latter torn open, pried into, to show the inevitability of the couple.

It's early morning. We see Tonia, in a black skirt, big black boots, at the Forest Avenue elevated M train subway stop, in Ridgewood, Queens. The setting for *So Pretty* is mostly a kind of imaginary double of Bushwick in Brooklyn and the adjacent Ridgewood section of Queens. However compromised—by precarity, by race, by the rent being too damn high—it wants to suggest that there could be another city for another life, to be glimpsed in moments, in this one.

One could say it is a privileged milieu. One imagines some of these characters as educated: Franz makes a protest sign that says "This art historian kills fascists." Helmut, on the other hand, is a bit of a chancer. *So Schön* took as its milieu those who worked in the incidental trades of the German postwar consumer economy. *So Pretty* seems more to evoke the milieu of those who work in incidental capacities in the information economy, but would rather make their own art. In psychogeographic terms, this is Brooklyn, including that part of "Brooklyn" that is actually in Queens.

Manhattan appears only as a site of protest and police. We glimpse the brand names of some Fifth Avenue stores, selling coercively normative designer beauty.[14] There probably cannot be a counter-economy of the beautiful, for the beautiful in this world can only be expensive, exclusive, and driven by envy: fascist fashion. But perhaps there can be a counter-economy of the pretty. In its utopian form, the pretty leaves the subtle violence of normativity behind. It isn't interested in norms at all. To be pretty is to offer a gift of the specificity of one's art of the self, gratis, to all. Of course, the pretty isn't egalitarian, as it has to remain rare. And it's still connected to youth, eroticism, and the fleeting— *So Pretty* abounds in flower motifs.

Flowers are one of the gifts offered, by Franz to Tonia, when he comes calling. She makes a salad for him, which he picks at while she makes it, before she shoos him away. He takes a pickle from the fridge instead. He made a gift of his bed to her at the start of the film, but now there's no reciprocity between them. The thing about gifts is that they can't really be returned, or can't be returned in the same form, or can only be offered on to someone else. *So Pretty* is full of gifts, of sharing, but this utopia is always incomplete, always changing, there is always some gift unreturned.

What makes the utopian side of the pretty possible is an at least partial escape from the commodity. In *So Schön*, Franz comes to the shop where a friend works to steal with his complicity. In *So Pretty*, Franz gets Paul to let him into the cinema where Paul works for free. Later, Franz calmly tells Paul an extraordinary story about being present in the grocery store when it is robbed, admiring the style of the robber, and himself making off with a loaf of bread. It's a scene that gestures to a tension in utopia's relation to violence. Violating the violence of property might be what enables utopia's distance from all other forms of violence. The utopia of the gift occupies exactly the same space as the commodity economy and depends on it. It just keeps twisting it into little situations were something pretty might arise.

When the utopian holds violence at bay, even momentarily, the utopian can then become a situation in which to explore other tensions, between what has to be specific and what could become, let's say, generic, a shared quality. From Schernikau, the film takes the simple gesture of making coffee as a kind of metonym for shared life, for care. And yet when Tonia offers Erika water rather than coffee, it's a flirtation, an invitation to couple, rather than to commune. The same tension runs through sexuality: while

Helmut whips the asses of Franz and then Tonia for fun, Paul takes pictures, while Erika is distracted by her phone. The group never succeeds in subsuming everyone into it.

Not even politics unites them. Helmut organizes the group for an anti-fascist demonstration; Erika complains to Paul that they've been sucked into some white bullshit. Race, among other things, cuts across utopian promise. When Franz declares his love for Paul, Paul responds: "You can't love me. I'm a corpse." It's hard not to read it in terms of black social death.[15]

The group makes signs for a demo, but Erika does not come. Tonia's says: FEMME AS IN FUCK YOU. And yet it is not so much opposition, to fascism, to whatever, that binds them. At another demo, Paul and Erika kiss, then Helmut and Erika kiss. There's a tension between being unified through negation, because they fight fascism together, and when they can be connected, partially, serially, by affirming something else.

The tension between the specific and the generic passes through aesthetics as well. Paul is a photographer; Erika is a musician. Their art seems solitary; removed from, or even taking from, the group. Writing might also be solitary too, but Tonia takes Schernikau's text and embeds it into what is shared. She directs a group performance of her version of the text.

Here this viewer steps out of the film and into a tension between the film and the world of which it is the utopian double. Rachika, who plays Erika—I met her at a party—like her film double also makes music and rides a motor bike. I went to a rave with Phoebe, who plays Helmut. They are gender nonconforming rather than a trans man. Jessie's friend Razor, who appears in a kitchen scene in the film, lives in the house that served as the main filming location, and gives their real name in one scene. And so on. The performers are choreographed into their scenes, together with the movement of the camera. They are not exactly acting, as they are themselves but not themselves.

Writing is a rather solitary art. It's good for those of us who lack qualities, who are not the life of the party. Films, like love, are organized. Organizing takes qualities. But which ones? Rather than qualities, one could also say gifts. Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli is listed as the writer, director, editor, colorist, and coproducer of *So Pretty*, as well as playing the role of Tonia. She layers herself into this work, giving herself up to it, and yet at the same time, taking herself. To return to the whipping scene: Tonia is both the whipped and whipper in this scene. It reminds us of what can be consented to, and by whom. The flinching of those girls' asses under the whip—is real.

Once, when I got to the point at which hormone therapy was destabilizing my emotions and making it all but impossible for me to write, I reached out to Jessie in her capacity as my trans "mom." She told me she was in something like that tenuous state when she made *So Pretty*. So to the list of tasks she is undertaking, in *So Pretty*, one can add the transformation of her own body. It was such a gift for me to know this: Well if you can do all that through the turbulent phase of hormones, I can pull it together enough to just write. This essay on *So Pretty* isn't a critique—as if I could be a universal unmarked subject, making aesthetic judgements on par with those of others of my unmarked kind. It's not disinterested, its motivated. It's a little gift for a pretty friend.

Transition doesn't come up much in *So Pretty* at all. But it does in the third-to-last scene. Tonia sits next to Helmut on a park bench. She talks about her feelings for Franz. She says that when she looked at herself, in the mirror, "I was so unclear on what I was seeing and what was looking back at me." Franz was her anchor, a constant in the world. "And as my body changed, I could at least compare that body to him. That someone would keep seeing me through different bodies. Now that I feel that's probably gone, I feel really—lost. I feel like I'm losing track of my body and I feel like I'm losing track of the way people see me." She rests her head on Helmut's shoulder.

This, to me, is the feeling of becoming a woman. Maybe it is for others who have tried it too. I honestly don't understand why cis people imagine they know something about gender when they have only ever been one of them.

The feelings, through transition, well—sometimes they are not pretty. Here they are not hidden. Nor are they sublimated into an aggressive demand to show and know, as in so much cinema the cis make about us. Even at its most interesting: Fassbinder's *In a Year With 13 Moons*, Almodovar's *Bad Education*—cinema wants to fuck us. Well, fuck you.

A cinema without rape is probably impossible. Maybe even an illusion. But that doesn't mean cinema has to be made by rapists. Perhaps it could be organized by those who are pretty, meaning also those who are rape-able—to exclude it. Even if rape remains present in the form of its exclusion. Even if it remains in the world. What is so pretty in art, like what is so pretty in others, or even in oneself, even on a good day, is an illusion. And yet it is glorious to believe, not in the illusion, but in the possibility it augurs.

X

All film stills from Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli's *So Pretty* (Aspect Ratio Films, 2019).

McKenzie Wark (she/her) teaches at The New School and is the author, most recently, of *Love and Money, Sex and Death* (Verso, 2023), *Raving* (Duke, 2023), and *Philosophy for Spiders* (Duke, 2021).

1
So Pretty , directed by Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli (Aspect Ratio Films, 2019). Here is the trailer https://vimeo.com/350369453 .

2
Not to be confused with house *mothers* (and fathers) in the culture of queer and trans people of color. In this instance, a mom, also sometimes called a big sister, is someone older in trans years with whom someone earlier in transition can meet, to talk about practicalities and emotions associated with transition, among other things. This is perhaps also a good place to mention that trans culture is as segregated as the rest of American culture, and that the categories of gender as we now endure them are a product of an intertwined history with categories of race and practices of racial violence. See C. Rily Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and: Whitney Terrell and V. V. Ganeshananthan, "C. Riley Snorton and T. Fleischmann Talk Gender, Freedom, and Transitivity," *Lithub*, March 7, 2019 https://lithub.com/c-riley-snorton-and-t-fleischmann-talk-gender-freedom-and-transitivity/ .

3
So Pretty is (freely) adapted from *So Schön* (Verbrecher Verlag, 2012). Originally published in 1982, the full title of this small work is: *und als der prinz mit dem kutscher tanzte, waren si so schön, daß der ganze hof in ohnmacht fiel: ein utopischer film* . Schernikau is not much known in English. Here's an introduction to his life and work, with links to extracts of an earlier work in translation: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/i-embrace-you-all-ronald-m-schernikau-and-the-queer-left/ .

4
Adam Jasper, "Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai," *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 43 (Fall 2011) http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php . See also Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

5
See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009). A book I cherish and to which this essay is indebted, but whose handling of the femme element in queer culture this femme does not find congenial.

6
Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (Palgrave, 1991). While one might leave some of its quaint ideas about gender behind, there's an idea in this text about the connection between the femme, the pretty, and the seductive that refuses to be held accountable to being penetrated down to a supposedly more real essence.

7
Just playing here with a famous image by Marx about the commodity: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm .

8
See *Where Freedom Starts: Sex, Power, Violence, #MeToo* (Verso, 2018) https://www.versobooks.com/books/2773-where-freedom-starts-sex-power-violence-metoo .

9
On the "Utopian Enclave," see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (Verso, 2005). I'm gently dissenting from some of its theses.

10
Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *Trans Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (February 2019).

11
T Fleischmann and Torrey Peters, "On Trans Essays," *Essay Daily*, January 4, 2016 https://www.essaydaily.org/2016/01/t-clutch-fleischmann-and-torrey-peters.html .

12
Grace Lavery, "Trans Realism, Psychoanalytic Practice, and the Rhetoric of Technique," *Critical Inquiry,* forthcoming.

13
To me, this is the enduring relevance of Charles Fourier. See McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso, 2013).

14
See Otto von Busch, "Ways to Make Fashion Work For Us," *Our World* , July 8, 2018 https://www.ow-ourworld.nl/ways-to-make-fashion-work-for-us/ .

15
Frank B. Wilderson III, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption," *Humanities Futures*, Franklin Humanities Institute, October 20, 2015 https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/ .

Samer Frangie

The Little White Dog and the Postwar Promise

"Speak Into The Mic, Please" is an essay series that will be published serially in e-flux journal *throughout 2019. Samer Frangie's "The Little White Dog and the Postwar Promise" is the second text in the series, for which I have the honor of serving as guest editor, and follows Khaled Saghieh's "1990s Beirut: Al-Mulhaq, Memory, and the Defeat," which appeared in issue 97.*

The title of the series comes from Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué's performance Biokhraphia *(2002), in which Majdalanie speaks to a recorded version of herself that is constantly reminding her to speak into the mic in order for the audience to hear her better.*

In a similar move of speaking to the self in front of an audience, the commissioned texts in this series will attempt to look at the conditions of production surrounding the contemporary art scene in Beirut since the 1990s, taking into account the backdrop of a major reconstruction project in the city, international finance, and political oppression, whether under the Syrian regime or under hegemonic NGO discourses.

The various texts will examine the interconnections between the economic bubbles and the political and cultural discourses that formed in Lebanon between the 1990s and 2015. During this period, a number of private art institutions, galleries, and museums popped up in the capital, while the city was buried under garbage due to years of political mismanagement and corruption.

This apocalyptic image—institutionalization paralleling ecological catastrophe—is historically framed around two periods in Lebanon when attempts to construct "optimism" in the country failed: the 1950s, which was the period of nation-state building that followed independence; and the 1990s, which was the period of post–civil war reconstruction, privatization, and "neoliberal optimism."

The year 2015 also marked roughly twenty years of building the contemporary cultural scene in Beirut. This scene began with artists' initiatives, public art exhibitions, and a critical discourse that was informed by, among other things, the migration of leftist thought and traditions into the cultural realm at the end of the so-called cold war, when the Lebanese left's political project was defeated. Where do we stand today in relation to these politics and discourses?

Samer Frangie's "The Little White Dog and the Postwar Promise" describes the generation in Beirut that grew up during the civil war (1975–1990) and came into adolescence as it suddenly ended. He writes: "We rushed into the future because we had no past, at least no past that could provide us with a sense of belonging, meaning, or continuity with what had come before. We were the product of a rupture, and we became the vanguard by

"Baladi, Baldati, Balidiyyati" (My Country, My Locality, My Municipality) was a slogan of the Lebanese National Campaign for Municipal Elections, 1997. Photo courtesy of the author.

default." Tracking the generation's libidinal desires for their present alongside their need to redeem the past, Frangie endeavors to describe the period leading up to the 1998 elections, when in his words, "a certain age of political innocence ended" and the civil war generation became adults.

The origin of this essay series traces back to a project initiated by the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in 2016. Titled "WDW25+," the project was an attempt by Witte de With to formalize its archive and to historicize its activities as an arts center. I was invited by Defne Ayas (then director of WDW) and Natasha Hoare (curator) to engage with the institution's archival holdings related to "Contemporary Arab Representations," a curatorial project initiated in 2002 by the center's former director Catherine David. The project involved researching and exhibiting the work of cultural and aesthetic practitioners from various Arab cities, including Beirut.

With this essay series, I do not intend to focus on a specific geographical area, as Catherine David did at Witte de With. Rather, I want the series to serve as a launching pad to tackle broader mechanisms of contemporary art. In addition, my aim is to go beyond the discourses that mystified cultural and artistic projects in the 1990s, shedding light on and undoing certain (liberal) ideologies that shaped that period and its remnants today.

I would like to thank Natasha Hoare, Defne Ayas, Ghalya Saadawi, Tony Chakar, Hanan Toukan, Hisham Ashkar, and Walid Raad—all of whom participated, directly or indirectly, in the conversations surrounding my Witte de With project, and some of whom will also contribute a text to this series.

—Marwa Arsanios

We did not realize it at the time. But in hindsight, the nineties ended in 1998.

We did smell something of that end in June of that year when the first municipal elections after the Lebanese Civil War (1975–89) took place. The campaign calling for the organization of these elections was one of the high points of civil society activism in the nineties, fueled by the hope

that local elections would provide a more transparent form of political representation, one that expressed the true will of the "people." Emerging from the destructive civil war, the hopes were that its wounded citizens, having lived through the madness of sectarian violence and its ideological follies, could form the basis for a democratic, civil, and peaceful political society. Municipal elections appeared as the best crucible for the rebirth of this promised citizen, and civil society actors latched onto it. The elections we called for took place, but the results were disappointing. The postwar elites reproduced themselves at the local level, the supposedly more transparent level, subverting our hard work of advocacy. We did not expect revolutionary change, but it was still a disappointment, and we sensed that the problem was not in the particularities of our forms of political representation or in their techniques, but in what was being represented. The wounded citizen was too wounded to form any credible political force. We could smell that the promise of a movement of popular discontent was faltering.

The hot and humid Lebanese summer has its own share of smells, and we quickly forgot the particular smell of that electoral disappointment, until November of that same year. The election of president Emile Lahoud was a political turning point for the country, setting it on a path of growing strife and violence. But for us, it had a different and more personal taste. It represented the shattering of our unified oppositional stance. Lahoud came to power on an anti-corruption platform, backed by the Syrian regime and the growing security apparatus in Lebanon. His political platform was opposed to the economic project of the late prime minister Rafiq Hariri (in office from 1992 to 1998), the chaperone of the neoliberal restructuring of postwar Lebanon. Cracks started appearing in what seemed a unified system of rule based on an alliance between an authoritarian wing and a neoliberal one—cracks that took the form of a choice we were forced to make: to stand with anti-corruption authoritarianism and its explicit violence or neoliberalism and its more implicit violence. The fiction that we could oppose a "regime" from a position of exteriority ended, and with it the idea that we could redeem from the past a coherent and consistent program of opposition, one that could be an alternative to the postwar regime.

All that remained from that prior position of assumed exteriority began to normalize that year. The critical discourses that emerged in the postwar moment were slowly becoming institutionalized, sanitized, depoliticized, and were losing their critical edge. The "memory discourse," or discourse about the civil war and the mode of remembering it, started to form its own institutions, funders, entrepreneurs, and rituals. The emerging local scene of contemporary art was discovered by the global art market and shifted its gaze toward the outside world. The hesitant yet potent network of nonstate organizations became NGOs, and started their descent into the solipsistic world of budgets, proposals, and funding. The position of exteriority was now professionalized, normalized—in other words, depoliticized.

A certain age of political innocence ended in November 1998. We became adults.

***

We were not always adults, even if it often felt so.

We were a generation, born roughly between 1975 and 1980, conceived in the beginning of the civil war. Our childhood unfolded with it. The war was all that we knew, and, like children anywhere, we made the best out of it. It is hard to say whether it was fun or not, but the exceptionality of life in a war-torn country marked us. At some point during the nineties, when gonadotropin-releasing hormones were triggering our pituitary glands, the war ended suddenly, after some of its most violent episodes. Fueled by estrogen and testosterone, we welcomed the nineties and their promises, as they corresponded to our libidinal changes. There was an uncanny synchronicity between our internal transformations and the world around us. We were entering new phases in our lives, and so was the country around us.

But we did not have time to enjoy this synchronicity; or to be more precise, this synchronicity imbued our teenage years with a gravity that was too much to handle for our hormonal changes. We were suddenly rebranded as the postwar generation, the first after the cataclysm. In a span of a few months we became "victims of the war," our childhoods described as traumatic, our past an evil against which the present had to inoculate itself. At the exact moment that the war ended, we had to relinquish our youth, now tarnished by war's memory. But we were not simply teenagers without a childhood. We became the generation that should redeem the past of violence in a future to come. We became the human embodiment of the postwar temporality, a temporality for which the present was nothing but a laboratory that could transform a remembered past into a different future. We were the perfect guinea pigs for the postwar promise.

We were not alone waiting to inherit the earth and its present. The war was a rupture, a break in the lives of all those who lived through it, a rupture that called for its suturing. The nineties became an intense moment of intergenerational transference between a prewar and a postwar generation. But generations are loose categories; maybe a better way of putting it would be to say that it was an intense moment of transmission between a prewar sensibility and a postwar one, brought together by the shared yet different experience of the war. It was also a moment of competition as to what experience was to be redeemed: that of an older generation of intellectuals, artists, and militants, who drew the contours of what the

postwar promise would be. Displaced by the war and its violence, having undergone a process of self-criticism for the ideological follies of their youth, this generation saw the postwar era as the moment in which their narrative of self-redemption would become the "official" story of the war, their experience the resolution of its drama. Like our parents, they suffered through the war, made sure we survived it, and had reached the stage when their efforts were to be rewarded. We looked at the unfolding postwar present neither with the shame of the perpetrator nor the innocence of the victims, but rather with the guilt of the surviving child. We inherited that entire generation as additional parents and we succumbed to the guilt that came with such a displacement. We learned to swap our acquired memories for their appropriated ones. The present would have to wait until their past was redeemed. We were coming of age in the nineties, but we were coming into their age.

***

Back to 1998.

At first, we felt it as a temporal tremor, caused by the loss of the "future" as a category. For the postwar period was not merely an era defined by its state of coming after the war. It was a promise, one that may have only lasted a few years, but a simple promise nonetheless that the future would be different from the past of war. It seems strange today to say that we fell for a promise of the future. After all, the nineties, despite all its optimism, was a post-ideological moment, one whose global mantra was that "there is no alternative." It was a time hardly conducive to a utopian imagination, and we were suspicious of any claims made in the name of the future. But when it collapsed in 1998, and the bareness of the future reappeared, we realized that we did fall for this promise.

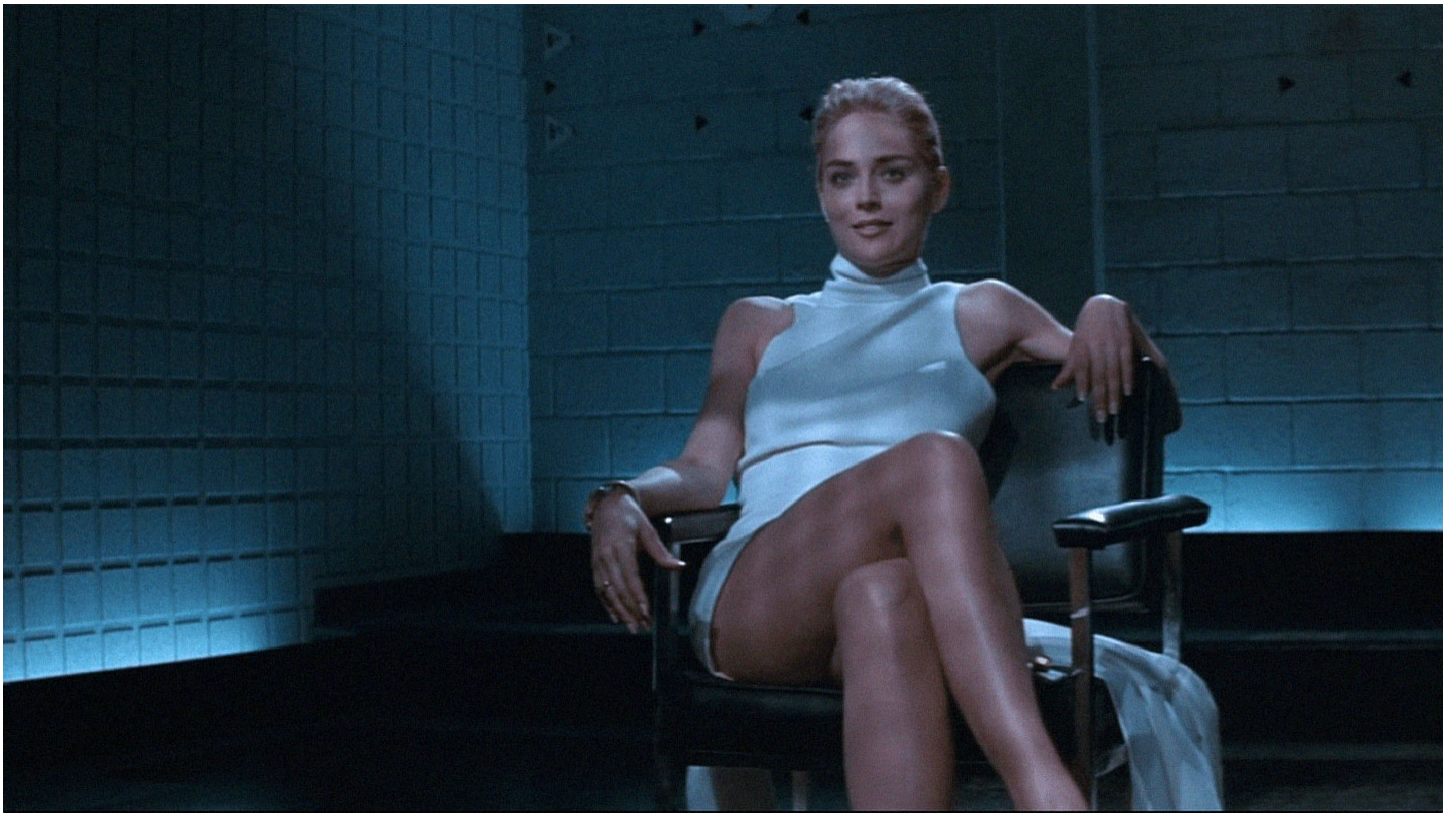
It may be a cliché to say that the past, from the perspective of the present, looks like a field of ruins for the historian to excavate. But our past, then, was literally a field of ruins, not for excavation, but for reconstruction and pillaging. We emerged from the civil war into a violent reconstruction process, governed by a postwar settlement that was characterized by "state-sponsored amnesia," and a genuine desire to forget past horrors. We rushed into the future because we had no past, at least no past that could provide us with a sense of belonging, meaning, or continuity with what had come before. We were the product of a rupture, and we became the vanguard by default.

We had no past in the sense of historical continuity, but instead had much salient discourse on the need to keep its memory alive. The past was no longer a stretch of time to be overcome, but rather a narrative field through which an alternative future could be reached, or at least imagined. Different organizations and campaigns made sure that by the end of the nineties, memory had become the hegemonic theme in the postwar cultural sphere. The polyvalence of the concept of memory allowed it to unite the various critiques of the postwar regime on a unified plane, replacing previous concepts as the organizing principle of political action, such as revolution for example. Against the tendency of the present to erase its past, or what was seen as the amnesia of the present, the capacity to remember became the political gesture par excellence during the nineties in Lebanon. Witnessing, remembering, excavating, archiving, commemorating, resisting erasure—these constituted the toolkit of our militancy. It was the antidote against the violence of the past, and the plane on which the sectarian divisions could be resolved. It was also an ethical and political imperative, one that opposed the postwar amnesty in the name of the innocent victims and bystanders of the civil war. But it also provided the cornerstone of the opposition to the reconstruction project, seen as the urban manifestation of the politics of amnesia. And in a global order bent on erasing the struggles of the past, it became the mode through which solidarity was to be expressed.

It was the past's redemptive force that was at stake. The slogan of the real-estate company Solidere, tasked with the reconstruction of Beirut, was " *Beirut Madina 'Ariqa lil-Mustaqbal*" (Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future), which captured this interplay between past and future. But this interplay was not limited to the imagination of professional marketing consultants. A landmark conference on the memory of the Lebanese Civil War, held in Beirut in 2000, was entitled " *Zakira lil-Mustaqbal*" (Memory for the Future). With the rupture of the war behind us, political positions were staked on a similar plane, that of the past as future.

In 1998, the past was losing its redemptive power, with the future being the first category to fall. The liberal synthesis of the post–Cold War moment, the ideology that was supposed to subsume all previous ideologies, was held together in our post–civil war context by this temporal promise. The democratic citizen was the citizen who learned the lessons of the civil war. The critical intellectual was the intellectual who survived the war through their ideological self-criticism. The desired political system was that which broke the cycle of violence of civil war. This liberal synthesis, which recoded political causes in a normative language, was the political translation of the temporal orientation of memory. The civil war was to be the past of a liberalism in search of a history.

All we had left was the present. But we had been raised to despise presentism, or the tendency to prioritize the unfolding present over its historical determination or future realization. The present was to be suspended in the name of promised economic growth, the reconstruction managers told us. The present was to be suspended until we got our history right, replied the critical intellectuals.



Still from the movie Basic Instinct (1992).

***

But the nineties were not always like that, at least for us, especially during the influx of gonadotropin-releasing hormones. The decade started for us when Sharon Stone uncrossed her legs in *Basic Instinct*, offering us a fleeting glimpse of the promised pleasures of the new world. The year was 1992, the civil war had ended two years earlier. We drove for over an hour to Jounieh, a seedy Christian area outside of Beirut, to watch the uncensored version of the film. At that time, the Christians, despite having lost the war, were still the guarantors of a laxer policing of sexuality. We did not realize then that the movie prefigured our binary temporality, a buildup and a resolution around a fleeting scene, a fleeting present. The scene, despite its evanescent and ephemeral feel, was important, it was the reason why we drove for an hour. And it was the reason why the movie was censored, a decision that made this now absent scene more titillating, more concrete, its dangerous appeal now guaranteed by the real power of the censors and the postwar state's changing moral apparatus. In a way, the nineties were akin to the censored version of *Basic Instinct*, a past buildup and a future resolution around a missing present.

In 1992, we were slowly discovering the interplay between these libidinal pleasures and the structure of censorship and transgression. Three years later, a blurry homemade sex tape, involving the former Miss Lebanon, Nicole Ballan, was leaked and widely circulated among the public. The two protagonists, according to the prosecutor, "displayed their sexual organs without any clothes or shame." The prosecutor must have had a better version of the tape than us, for we had to try to decipher this absence of shame from the blurred and grainy copies we could get ahold of. Absence is very hard to spot on a poor-quality VHS tape.

It was not what was displayed that shocked the prosecutor, but the act of display itself: the taping and consumption of sex for visual pleasure. The Ballan tape was not simply about sex, its documentation or registration in the public sphere. It was a tentative assembling of different processes that were at work in this postwar period, from the reconfiguration of the technological and visual landscape to the transformation of the underlying sexual and moral order. The tape challenged us, in our structure of pleasures, our desire to see, our need to transgress. It pointed to the imbrication of technology, law, and power in the formation of selves, and it highlighted an emerging dimension of the present. It was not simply the tape that interpellated us; it was also the underlying transformations in the moral order. We could witness the city changing, new practices emerging, new subjectivities developing—the tape in a way was all of that. This was a present that was unfolding, a present that had a thickness that could not fit into the emerging ideological discourse of the postwar period, a thickness

that we seemed to access only through our libidinal pleasures.

The prosecutor saw all of these questions, but we did not. Or we could see them, but we could not yet make sense of them. All we could see was a small white dog who wandered casually into the frame, who the newly reorganized media assured us "was not involved in the sexual choreography," though he was at home in this unfolding present. We saw the dog but we could not *really* see it. Instead, we were inhabited by the vision of imagined hordes of wild dogs rumored to have haunted the streets of war-torn Beirut. The present was a small white dog, more at home in a sex tape than in the ravaged downtown of the capital. We looked at the tape, but quickly turned our gaze from it. We had a war to remember. Or that's what we were told.

***

We could have followed the little white dog wandering into the frame, instead of remembering the packs of dogs roaming the streets outside. But we did not, and from the perspective of these wild dogs, the postwar present did not make sense; it was out of joint, as the saying goes. For a temporality structured by the imperative to remember, the present could not be grasped, should not be allowed its thickness and reality. For the intellectuals of the postwar period, the members of this older generation, the present was experienced as alienating, absurd, unreal. The suddenly imposed peace made no sense, old rivalries turned into new political alliances, ideological oppositions softened and were replaced by pragmatic rhetoric. The ambitious reconstruction project added to the reigning sense of alienation from the new.

The disjointed character of the present was only salient for those who previously believed in a certain joint-ness of time, only to be violently disillusioned by the war, left to roam the streets of Beirut without any ideological guidance. In other words, it was out of joint for the postwar cultural intelligentsia, which had largely emerged from the leftist experience of the sixties and seventies. The defeat of these leftist forces had driven many among this intelligentsia into a state of epistemological crisis. The present was alienating to them because their past was one of disillusionment. Hence the present called for redemption, for a future that would redeem this disillusionment. With redemption came austerity; there was something austere in this critique of the present, a critique that understood its affective basis in terms of gestures of withholding, resisting, sacrificing, and foregoing. The danger was succumbing—losing this position of self-imposed exile, seeing the present for what it is.

The cultural discourse of this intelligentsia became centered around a new figure, the outsider: the exilic individual who returns after the war, the alienated subject who cannot make sense of things, the silent observer who tries to document the unfolding present. The outsider, always a man, replaced the militiaman as the figure exemplifying his time, a move that paralleled the passage from war to postwar Lebanon. Marginality was redefined as epistemological; it was a question of understanding, or its lack, rather than of justice or belonging. Outside critics could not understand the present; their simple, yet false, naivete was the guarantee of their sanity amidst this absurd time. The politically committed intellectual gave way to the epistemologically alienated one.

Epistemological alienation, weak liberalism, and a temporality structured by memory formed the basis of this postwar critique. Its history was provided by a certain history of the Lebanese left, one that was recoded through the liberal prism of memory, to become the history of the victims of the civil war. The left was imagined to be the secular other of the sectarian war, its modern residue; it was the cause of the civil war and its casualty, the misguided perpetrator and the innocent victim, the rebellious son of the system and its inheritor, the marginal political player yet dominant cultural pole, the critic of liberalism and the crucible for the emergence of the modern citizen. It was not a left of the present, but a left waiting to be redeemed in this present.

We started the nineties libidinally attracted to the present, viscerally welcoming its transformations and, as teenagers, yearning for our own self-transformation. But we learned to withhold and not to succumb to such impulses. The white dog was not compelling enough, was not serious enough. It could not resist the guilt that came with the postwar critique and its desire for redemption. It could not resist the guilt of the surviving child when faced with the desire of their wounded parents for redemption. Propelled by this guilt, we succumbed to a nostalgic yearning for an old Beirut we never knew, to see our present as a bad repetition of theirs, to see the future as their repetition. The memory of the civil war became a trap akin to a catch-22: The past was the golden age but the past brought the war. Their generation was the greatest generation but it could not resist becoming a victim. And before decoding this uncrackable riddle, we could not see Ballan's tape nor the new realities it brought forth. The little white dog had no chance against the horde of roaming wild dogs.

***

And then, one day in 1998, while we were busy remembering, the postwar ended just as suddenly as the war had eight years before. We did not realize it then; we persisted in our mission to archive the past. But something had ended. And we gradually began realizing that our newly acquired political vocabulary was becoming quaint and irrelevant, its concepts sounded hollow, floating without any grip on the present. We were no longer the postwar generation that would redeem the past, but

merely the last generation to be defined by this event, subsumed by it, exhausted by its memory. Others came after us, for whom the war was a distant past. Others came and looked at us as refugees from history, the last generation that remembered what gunshots sounded like. From a vanguard, we became a generation of mourners, the last generation to mourn the twentieth century.

With time, we also realized that what we were trying to redeem was not simply a prior generation, but their hubris, the hubris of those who spoke of marginality but never stopped seeing themselves at the center. We were the last ones to labor with a form of critique that shied away from "otherness," that could still ignore "otherness," content with reducing all differences to the secular other. Ballan's tape invited us to explore the manifold instantiations of power, its capillary reach, its affective subterraneous structures. But we, like our forbearers, preferred the battle for the center, still believing in the redemptive character of power, still attached to the fiction of a counter-hegemonic project that considered marginality a temporary location from which the battle for the center would be waged. We maintained the fiction of an oppositional stance, which with time started looking more and more like a form of blackmail, the blackmail of the male Arab intellectual.

I often wonder what would have happened if we had followed the little white dog back in 1995. Maybe if we had, we would now be able to look back at the postwar period as the past to today's present, instead of seeing it as the overflow of a historical period that has long ended. Maybe if we accepted then that our connection to the present is mediated through different affects than those of guilt and melancholia, we could have had a richer connection to it, one that would have questioned the centrality of this experience of alienation. And maybe then, we could have understood intergenerational transmission according to a different model than that of the inheritance of loss and the reproduction of intergenerational guilt. We would certainly not have been at a loss as how to think critique differently, struggling with the question of its immanence.

Instead, we find ourselves writing to end this period, fighting battles with our forbearers to put an end to that chain of transmission, to allow for something new—that does not include us—to emerge from the weight of the past. Facing this new, we stand in silence; we are not part of it, we belong to a period that has now ended. And we face this intergenerational transmission without guilt. The guilt of the surviving child cannot be bequeathed. We have nothing to bequeath. Rather, we are still inheriting, now from those who came after us. We are inheriting their present, sometimes intruding on their present, to rediscover our past, a different past, the past that we could have had. It is not guilt that moves us, but rather a certain gratitude for the passing of time and generations, one that can lay to rest all the hordes of wild dogs.

X

I wish to express my gratitude to Marwa Arsanios, Zeina Halabi, Sara Mourad, Andreas Petrossiants, and Khaled Saghieh for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Samer Frangie is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut and a senior editor at *megaphone.news*.

Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber

Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity

We would like to offer some initial thoughts on exactly how the art world can operate simultaneously as a dream of liberation, and a structure of exclusion; how its guiding principle is both that everyone should really be an artist, and that this is absolutely and irrevocably not the case. The art world is still founded on Romantic principles; these have never gone away; but the Romantic legacy contains two notions, one, a kind of democratic notion of genius as an essential aspect of any human being, even if it can only be realized in some collective way, and another, that those things that really matter are always the product of some individual heroic genius. The art world, essentially, dangles the ghost of one so as to ultimately, aggressively, insist on the other.

In May 2019, just married a week before, we arrived at the Venice Biennale. It wasn't exactly a honeymoon; or if it was, it was more a working honeymoon: we had the idea to make the Biennale the basis of our first joint writing project, though we weren't sure precisely what that project was going to be.

We spent much of our first day in the Arsenale—a nearly thousand-year-old structure reputed to have once held one of the world's first arms factories—trying to get past the guards. Apparently there were levels and degrees of press access, and it was necessary to negotiate our way through a complex system of authorization numbers, bar codes, and color-coded passes, encountering a variety of security personnel with different badges and uniforms and means of communication manning physical and conceptual barriers. Scores of well-dressed participants stood dutifully in line, argued in a dozen languages, shuffled from room to room, recuperated in specially provided cafe bookshops while strategizing over dinner invitations or borrowed ID cards, or assessing the relative importance of the parties they'd be attending later in the day. There was an extraordinary lack of humor about the whole business. People were flustered, stoic, self-righteous, intent; almost no one, in this cathedral of irony, seemed bemused.

The seriousness! It seemed important to establish that something of great consequence was happening here. It was not clear why. Just as there was no obvious reason to proliferate multiple degrees of advanced access in the first place, there was no reason for everyone else to feel so invested in the consequences. It only really made sense if exclusion was itself one of the main objects being produced: it was not just that everyone was playing a game whose rules were shifting and opaque, it seemed important that all players, even the haughtiest oligarch or most consummate broker, stood at least occasionally in danger of being foiled and humiliated. Or at the very least flustered and annoyed.

The art world, for all the importance of its museums, institutes, foundations, university departments, and the like, is still organized primarily around the art market. The

A selection of Venice Biennale Press and VIP cards. The image was originally captioned "The Biennale Card is a new initiative for art lovers" here.
Copyright: La Biennale di Venezia

art market in turn is driven by finance capital. Being the world's least regulated market among shady businesses, tax shelters, scams, money laundering, etc., the art world might be said to represent a kind of experimental ground for the hammering-out of a certain ideal of freedom appropriate to the current rule of finance capital.

A case can certainly be made that contemporary art is in effect an extension of global finance (which is itself, of course, closely tied to empire). Artsy neighborhoods tend to cluster around the financial districts of major cities. Artistic investment follows the same logic as financial speculation. Still—if contemporary art were simply an extension of finance capital, works designed to look good in banks, or in bankers' homes, why should we even care? It's not as if cultural critics spend a lot of time debating the latest design trends in luxury yachts. Why should changing trends in decorative objects that the owners of such yachts like to place in their sitting rooms be considered relevant, in any way, to the lives or aspirations of bus drivers, maids, bauxite miners, telemarketers, or pretty much anyone outside the charmed circle of the "art world" itself?

There are two traditional ways to answer to this question and they pull in opposite directions.

1. Contemporary art defines the very pinnacle of a much larger structure of aesthetic value, which ultimately encompasses all forms of meaning-making and cultural expression, and therefore plays a key role in reproducing the larger structure of social relations which ensure drivers, maids, miners, and telemarketers will continue to be told their lives and concerns are uninteresting and unimportant, and relegate the aesthetic forms and cultural expressions that speak to their hearts to second- or third-tier status.

2. While co-opted by the rich, as well as public and private managers and bureaucrats, contemporary art still embodies, or is even the primary embodiment, of alternative conceptions of value that have the potential to explode that larger structure of social relations, and that are either unavailable, or not nearly so readily available, anywhere else.

Obviously both of these things probably can be and are true at the same time. It might even be said that the revolutionary potential of art is a large part of what makes it so effective as a principle of control. Even children of ragpickers, sweatshop labourers, and refugees, after all, are mostly sent to school, where they are exposed to the works of Da Vinci and Picasso, play with paints, learn that art and culture are the highest achievements of humanity and perhaps the most obvious justification for humanity's continued existence on the planet (despite all the damage we inflict); they are taught to aspire to lead lives where their children can live in comfort so that their children's children can pursue forms of creative expression. And for the most part, since that is the game everyone is playing, they do aspire to such things. The world's cities are full of young people who do see a life of expression as the ultimate form of freedom, and even those who dream of becoming soap opera stars or hip-hop video producers

recognize that as things are currently organized, the "art world" is the crowning height of that larger domain of "arts," and as such, its regulatory principle, that which holds the elaborate ranks and hierarchies of genres and forms of art—so strangely reminiscent of earlier ranks and hierarchies of angels—in their proper place. This remains true even for those who have nothing but bemused contempt for the very idea of contemporary art, or are entirely unaware of it, insofar as they exist within a world where those who produce the forms of artistic expression they do appreciate, or their children, insofar as they aspire to move up in the world, will necessarily have to exist in a world where contemporary art is seen as the purest expression of human creativity—and creativity as the ultimate value.

The easiest way to measure the stubborn centrality of such structures, perhaps, is to consider how difficult it is to get rid of them. Attempts are always being made. There always seems to be someone in the art world trying to create participatory programs, explode the boundaries between high and low genres, include members of marginalized groups as producers or audiences or even patrons. Sometimes, they draw a lot of attention. Always in the end they fade away and die, leaving things more or less exactly as they were before. In the 1970s and '80s, for example, there was a concerted effort in America to challenge the border between high art and popular music, even to the point where a few of the artists (Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Laurie Anderson, Jeffrey Lohn) actually did create work that hit the charts, and played to sold-out theaters full of young people who had never heard of Hugo Ball or Robert Rauschenberg. Critics declared that the very idea of high and low genres was quickly dissolving away. But it wasn't true. In a few years, it was all just another forgotten musical trend, an odd sidebar in the history of rock 'n' roll.

Hardly surprising perhaps, since the art market, and the music industry, always operated on entirely different economic principles: the one mainly financed by rich collectors and governments, the other by mass marketing to the general public. Still, if there was a real challenge to the logic of exclusion anywhere in the arts, during the twentieth century, it was precisely in the domain of music, where a defiant tradition from folk to rock and punk and hip-hop actually came closest to realizing the old avant-garde dream that everyone could be an artist—though one can, of course, debate precisely how close this really came. At the very least, it established the idea that creativity is a product of small collectives as easily as individual auteurs. All this happened, significantly, at a certain distance from actual self-proclaimed artistic avant-gardes; and it is telling that the brief mutual flirtation with the art world in the eighties was a prelude to a backlash that left music far more corporatized, individualized, and with far fewer spaces for experimentation than it had since at least the 1950s.

Any market of course must necessarily operate on a principle of scarcity. In a way, the art market and the music industry face similar problems: materials are mostly cheap and talent is widespread; therefore, for profits to be made, scarcity has to be produced. Of course, in the art world, this is what the critical apparatus is largely about: the production of scarcity; which is, in turn, why even the most sincerely radical anti-capitalist critics, curators, and gallerists will tend to draw the line at the possibility that everyone really could be an artist, even in the most diffuse possible sense. The art world remains overwhelmingly a world of heroic individuals, even when it claims to echo the logic of movements and collectives—even when the ostensible aim of those collectives is to annihilate the distinction between art and life. Even the Dadaists and Surrealists are remembered today as a handful of romantic geniuses, whatever they might have claimed to be about.

It is also noteworthy that the only time a significant number of people believed that structures of exclusion really were dissolving, that a society in which everyone could become an artist was actually conceivable, occurred in the midst of social revolutions when it was genuinely believed that capitalism was in its death spirals, and markets themselves were about to become a thing of the past. Many of
these trends, unsurprisingly, emerge directly from Russia, where the period from the revolution of 1905 to the avant-garde heyday
of the 1920s saw an almost brutal efflorescence of new ideas of what artistic communism might be like.

Art Communism

> In a Commune everyone is a creator. Every Man should be an artist, everything can become fine art.
> —Osip Brik

Consider the case of Kazimir Malevich, who arrived in Moscow in 1904 from the hinterland of Ukraine to become one of the most influential theorists of twentieth-century art. In his 1920 essay "The Question of Imitative Art" he asserts: "We are moving towards a world where everyone will create … We must set creativity's path in such a way that all the masses will take part in the development of every creative thought that appears, without turning it into mechanized production or cliché."

The new, revolutionary art, he insists, was to be based on creativity as "the human essence …" "as the aim of life, and as the perfection of oneself."[1]

For Malevich—and he was hardly alone—artists were not only the prophets of this new world, but they were to

become the foundation of it, its model. As we all know, such ideas were largely stifled with the suppression of the avant-garde under Stalin. Though as Tzvetan Todorov and Boris Groys have both recently pointed out, what happened is a little more complicated. The main reason avant-garde painters, designers, and sculptors had to be killed or brought under heel was because the political avant-garde, ultimately adopted a version of the most radically exclusionary form of that exact same tradition, where Stalin himself—much like Mussolini and Hitler—became the individual heroic genius reshaping life itself according to a single aesthetic vision.

Todorov argues that in the twentieth century at least, this is what always happens in revolutionary moments. Artists start to demand not just new rights to create and distribute their artworks; above all they demand to preside over a transformation of social reality and the ways culture reproduces itself. But in the end they invariably fail. To achieve their dreams they are obliged to rely on politicians, who have no intention of sharing power with them; therefore, after a short creative surge, almost always coinciding with an opening of political horizons (Malevich himself published his first essays in a journal called, simply, *Anarchy*), a deep and harsh reaction ensues, and the politicians, inspired to carve out their own aesthetic visions on the flesh and sinews of humanity, end up doing absolutely terrible things.

Conservatives have always insisted that this will inevitably happen—in fact, this is the essential definition of what conservativism is, the assertion that applying anyone's aesthetic vision to the public sphere must always end in disaster—and in this sense, at least, conservative impulses reign. We are taught to consider figures like Malevich terrifying in their naıveté. But what did his vision of true communism actually consist of? It's not just one of a future society in which everyone would be free from the struggle for survival (this, just about everyone was anticipating at the time). It was also a vision in which the "pursuit of happiness" would mean that everyone was able to pursue some sort of artistic or scientific project. This of course was founded on the assumption that people had both the capacity and the inclination, even if it just meant puttering about trying to create a perpetual motion device or perfecting a stand-up comedy routine. Malevich's vision implied that curiosity and a desire for self-expression are essential components of whatever it is we are defining as "humanity"—or perhaps all life (some Russian avant-gardists were also interested in the liberation of cows)—and that therefore freedom is more a matter of removing impediments than fundamentally reshaping human nature. This is why Malevich could argue that the basis of a new artistic world would have to be economic—though like so many other revolutionaries, he was also interested in the creation of a new universal aesthetic language. Malevich himself came from the national outskirts; he was a Pole who grew up in a Ukrainian village, and who never mastered literary Russian or received a "proper" art education. His squares and triangles were a way of transcending all that. In a similar way, the Russian avant-garde project was also educational, designed not to create the "new man" (as the Stalinists later put it) but to include those previously most excluded—the poor and provincials, the inhabitants of the national suburbs—to give them the minimal tools they would need to join in the collective project of creating a new society, in which they would, in turn, create absolutely anything they liked.

Did Malevich's vision definitively fail? It might seem that things could not have possibly gone more wrong. Millions died in the civil war and under Stalin, and even afterwards, the dream of communism was indefinitely postponed. Still, there was a side of Soviet society—and state socialist society more generally—that we rarely acknowledge. It was almost impossible to get fired from one's job. As a result it was quite possible to work three or four hours a day, or even two or three days a week, and thus to concentrate one's energies on other projects, or, for that matter, on not much of anything at all. There was plenty of time to "think and walk," and since capitalist-style consumer pleasures were not widely available, and cultural resources like libraries, free lectures and lessons, and so forth, were, the Brezhnev years in particular saw whole generations of "watchmen and street-sweepers," as they were called—people who intentionally found undemanding jobs, managed to live whole lives on the small bits of money guaranteed by the state, and used their free time to write poetry, make pictures, and argue about the meaning of life.

All this obviously was under the watchful eye of the totalitarian state, but one could well argue that this is precisely why those running the state felt it had to remain totalitarian. The revolution had produced a society where almost everyone was in a position to become a thinker or artist, to plot and scheme, to question everything. So they had to be directly suppressed. In the capitalist West, most people simply didn't have the time to do any of these things.

We are taught to dismiss the revolutionary avant-gardists as romantics. It's not clear if all of them would have refused the designation. The revolutionary tradition—Marx included—in many ways traces back directly to Romanticism, and while nowadays this is generally seen to be precisely what was wrong with it, it seems to us that the real history is decidedly more complicated.

Let us then proceed step by step to explain why we believe this to be the case.

Merchandise featuring Malevich's artwork.

The Confusing Legacy of Romanticism

Romanticism in general has come into very bad color nowadays; it is seen as silly and possibly dangerous. "Romanticizing" has become a term for sentimental idealization, whether of nature, peasants, noble savages, the poor, or imagined creative geniuses. The political embrace of Romanticism is seen as leading most naturally to some kind of authoritarian nationalism, or at worst, the Third Reich. But the avant-garde tradition is similarly almost entirely rooted in Romanticism.

Part of the problem is that nowadays, few are aware of what early Romantic thinkers actually said—though to be fair, they often didn't help things much by writing contradictory things in a deliberately obscure and difficult style. Still, certain consistent strains can be unraveled, and they are not what we commonly imagine them to be.

As an example, consider the endless modernist fascination with comparing art produced by what Hal Foster famously labeled "the privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane." What did these three really seem to have in common? In the twentieth century, the usual assumption was that the collapse of the cultural authority of the Church had left Europeans without a common visual language, and that by studying the similarities between savages, lunatics, and children, it might be possible to recover some kind of pure, pre-social, and therefore universal visual language on which a new one could be built. As we've seen, revolutionary avant-gardes could sometimes take up a version of these ideas as well. But the original Romantic conception was far more radical. It was in fact closely tied to the concept of culture—itself originally an invention of German Romanticism. The idea that the language, folklore, manners, myths, sensibilities, and even forms of happiness typical of a nation or social group all form a kind of expressive unity, products of some kind of "popular genius," was rooted in the assumption that everyone was, in a sense, already engaged in artistic expression. In this view of culture, our very perceptions of the world around us are given meaning and emotional color by generations of ancestral creativity. "We see through hearing," Herder wrote, because the myths and poetry of our childhood define what we actually see when we look at a mountain, forest, or another human being. But the creation of culture is ongoing. As the German poet and philosopher Novalis famously wrote, "Every person is meant to be an artist." Artistic genius was simply "an exemplification and intensification of what human beings always do."

The problem, Romantics insisted, was that bourgeois society had created social pressures and expectations so stifling and atrocious that very few make it to adulthood with their humanity and freedom intact. Bourgeois

Commemorative Novalis silver medal by Werner Godec, 1993.

education had the effect of murdering the imagination. What children and unschooled "primitives" were really thought to have in common, then, was simply that they had not (or not yet) been crushed. In a pathological society such as our own, in contrast, those individuals who do somehow manage to preserve that inborn artistic "genius" with which all children begin their lives, do so at tremendous personal cost; they are typically driven half mad by the experience. German Romantic novels, like those of E. T. A. Hoffmann, typically counterpose some half-mad artistic or spiritual loner and a monotonously monstrous set of provincial types—the doctor, mayor, mayor's wife, and mistress—united against him, since they perceive his very existence as an attack on their petty and hypocritical reality.

True, the early, democratic phase of German Romanticism gradually descended into conservative nationalism. But those core ideas fundamentally reshaped all subsequent thinking about both politics and art.

This is in particular evident in the legacy of the French Revolution. On the face of it, most of the French revolutionaries, with their cult of Reason, might seem about as far as one could get from the tradition of German Romanticism. True, Rousseau embraced some Romantic ideas, but for the most part, the language and sensibilities could hardly be more different. Still, one of the most radical Romantic ideas was simply that, if everyone is born a free and ingenious child, then the lack of freedom and genius, or the spread of stupidity, malice, and hypocrisy in that society can only be the product of social conditions. This was considered shocking at the time. French revolutionaries were often so determined to prove it that they sometimes placed aristocratic children with the families of drunks—just to prove that they would turn out to be drunks themselves.

The notion of the avant-garde, however, emerges from the immediate wake of arguments about how that revolution lost its way. (Incidentally, so did modern conservativism, and social science.) Reactionaries argued that the cult of Reason would lead inevitably to the Terror. But so would the cult of Imagination. Attempting to wipe the slate clean and start over would inevitably mean destroying everything that held society together and made life meaningful: community, solidarity, status, authority … basically all those things which have become the themes of social theory ever since. Those who believed social change was good and inevitable nonetheless took such objections very seriously. The notions of the artistic avant-gards and the political vanguard emerged directly from the resultant debates. Originally, in fact, they were assumed to be exactly the same thing.

Here we are obliged to provide a somewhat brutal summary of a very complicated history, but suffice it to say that the debate in France, typified by arguments between the followers of Count Henri de Saint-Simon and those of his one-time secretary Auguste Comte, largely came down to an argument about how to manage the tranisiton from an agrarian feudal social order, to a commercial and industrial civilization. Medieval lords—so the argument went—might have been harsh and often arbitrarily violent; they might in many ways have been little more than so many bands of thieves. But they had the Church, and the Church was capable of mobilizing structures of beauty and meaning to give everyone a sense of precisely where

they stood in the larger social order. This was precisely what they saw as lacking in industrial society. The Church was now useless. But the captains of industry seemed to feel that the material bounty they provided should simply speak for itself. Clearly it didn't. Political chaos and social anomie was thus the direct result of the lack of any new class to fulfill the priestly function. Comteans imagined these to be scientists: hence Comte's eventual creation of the religion of Positivism, in which sociologists would play the role of clerics. Saint-Simon cast about a bit (for a while he focused on engineers) but ultimately settled on artists as the vanguard who would lead the way towards a culture of freedom and equality, one in which the coercive mechanisms, he believed, would ultimately wither away.

For over a century, would-be revolutionary vanguards continued to debate whether they would be more like scientists, or more like artists, while painters and sculptors formed themselves into sects. Revolutionary parties endlessly tried to patch together alliances between the least alienated and most oppressed. The dream of the collapse of the barriers between art and life, which would eventually return us to a society in which Novalis's vision would be realized, was always an inherent part of the revolutionary project. By the twentieth century, many of the best-known avant-garde artists were no longer even producing much in the way of immortal works of art, but instead largely plans on how to share their power and freedom with others. As a result, the supreme twentieth-century avant-garde genre, or at least the most accomplished and original, was not even the collage but the manifesto.

At this point we can return to Russia.

The Russian revolutionary avant-garde was rooted squarely in the tradition we have just described. Its imagined "people of the future" (*Budetlyans*) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity; they would also have the freedom of children. Obviously, no one was so naive as to believe they would live like children in any literal sense, that communism would create a world free from death, betrayal, existential fear, morbid obsession, or unrequited love. Only real children would experience such a paradise. Rather, it would create a world where future people would have the right, duty, and opportunity to reflect on those inevitable, adult, existential problems in startlingly beautiful ways. Communism would be a world no longer divided into mad geniuses and dull, obedient fools—spectators, either uncomprehending or adulatory. Everyone would become both at the same time.

X

To be continued in "Another Art World, Part II: Utopia of Freedom as a Market Value"

Nika Dubrovsky is an artist and writer; **David Graeber** is an anthropologist and writer; they live in London.

1
Kazimir Malevich, “The Question of Imitative Art” (1920). Available here: http://theoria.art-zoo.com/the-question-of-imitative-art-malevich/ .

Claire Fontaine

The Visitor as a Commercial Partner: Notes on the 58th Venice Biennale

> Daniel Birnbaum: Seventy-nine artists is a relatively limited number.
> Ralph Rugoff: How many did you have in yours?
> Daniel Birnbaum: I can't remember.
> — *Artforum*, May 2019[1]

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.
> —F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up,* 1936

In his statement inaugurating the 58th Venice Biennale, Paolo Baratta, its president, felt compelled to address the image of the event. Entitled "The Visitor as a Partner," the statement reads in part:

> A partial vision of the Exhibition might consider it a high-society inauguration followed by a line six months long for "the rest of the world." Others might consider the six-month-long Exhibition the main event and the inauguration a *by-product*. It would be so useful if journalists would come at another moment and not during the "three-day event" of the "society" inauguration, which can only give them a very partial image of the Biennale![2]

It would be useful, indeed, but it won't happen.

"Our visitors have become our main partner," Baratta candidly adds (meaning "commercial partner"), to such an extent that during the overcrowded opening days, many artworks were at risk of being damaged, and basic health and safety standards weren't followed. Everyone entering the Biennale had to display their ID along with their invitation; each one of us was expected and registered. But it wasn't hard to understand that the interminable lines weren't exclusively made up of journalists, to whom the opening days are supposedly dedicated. Other categories of professionals have been able to get ahold of tickets in very large numbers, and we learn from Baratta's statement that it wouldn't be possible to do things otherwise. To justify this decision, Baratta recounts a tale by Aesop involving an old father, his young son, and their donkey going to town:

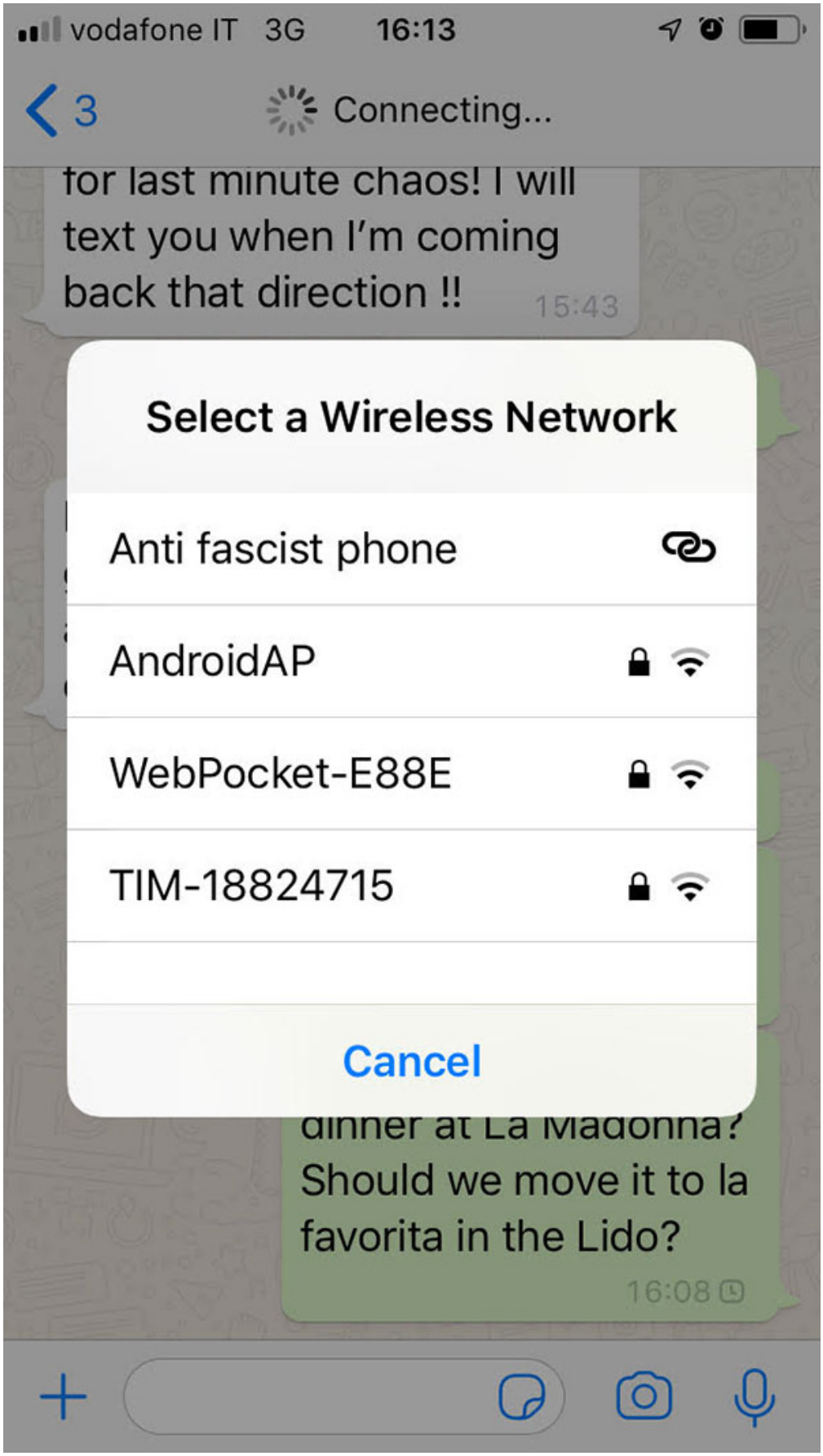
> The old man rides the donkey and the people passing by say "look at that selfish man, he lets the child walk on this horrible path, look at his poor little feet." The father reacts, they switch places, and a new group of passersby say "look at that selfish boy, full of energy

Installation view of artist Laure Prouvost's Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois Ce Bleu Profond Te Fondre (2019) at the French Pavilion, Venice. Photo: Claire Fontaine.

> but he leaves his poor old father the fatigue of walking." They feel a bit humiliated and decide to both ride the donkey together and the comment is "barbarians, that's a true exploitation of animals!" Finally, they decide to both dismount, just in time to hear "look at those two idiots, they have a donkey and they're walking!"[3]

Unsure if we were overburdening a donkey, or walking beside it when we should have been riding it, or occupying the place of the animal ourselves, something felt wrong at the opening of the 58th Venice Biennale—something besides the strangely wintery weather that made the fog in Lara Favaretto's *Thinking Head* (2017–19), streaming from the facade of the Central Pavilion, completely invisible. At the main entrance, and in front of each pavilion, and spiraling around buildings and reappearing around corners, lines manifested a new sort of poverty of the privileged. In the early afternoon of the second day, it took perhaps twenty minutes to access a toilet in the Giardini—and that's a conservative estimate. To get into the Lithuanian, British, and French pavilions, people had to wait over two hours in the chilly rain, making it impossible for them to see the rest. No exhibition can compensate for such suffering; the art often seemed not worth the trouble to see it. This year the format of the Biennale appeared particularly outdated, inhuman, absurdly monumental, and anti-ecological. For one, the national pavilions inside the Giardini were geographically organized according to the usual insulting geopolitical hierarchy that has now contaminated the Arsenale and the whole city of Venice. This year the United Arab Emirates resurfaced at the end of the incongruous escalator of the Corderie, while the Venezuelan Pavilion was left dramatically closed, with no signage or public declaration about it. The Golden Lion–awarded Lithuanian Pavilion, which featured *Sun and Sea (Marina)* by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, and Lina Lapelytė, had to crowdfund just to keep its doors open. It has since run out of money again.[4]

The times we are living in are indeed "interesting," as the title of this edition of the Biennale states: they resonate with a city awaiting the verdict of the forty-third session of the World Heritage Committee, which will likely add Venice to its List of World Heritage in Danger. Venice's livelihood comes precisely from what is killing it (biennials included): if tourism were regulated, the economic survival of the city would be at risk; at the same time, if it continues to impact the environment of Venice the way it does now, the jewel of the lagoon will soon be destroyed.[5] There are other structural problems related to the ethics of giant exhibitions: accumulation, we all confusedly feel, is damaging for art in general and contemporary art in particular. The implicit equivalence that is made when such large amounts of artworks are simultaneously displayed by private and public institutions on the same limited territory is frightening. The very adjective "private," when coupled with money, has become redundant: money



Cell phone screenshot of wifi networks outside the Scottish Pavilion in Venice, 2019. Photo: Claire Fontaine.

belongs, at this stage of capitalism, to who makes it, because the very victory of capitalism lies in the defeat of any system of wealth redistribution. If this isn't news, its effects on contemporary art are more pernicious than we think: displaying square kilometers of experimental gestures that took place at different moments and in different areas of the planet simply deprives them of the value that was given to them when they were selected.

At this year's Biennale one could sketch a political history of fire and its traces as found in the works of Alberto Burri and Jannis Kounellis, from scorch marks to live flames, and then visit the desolate Pino Pascali exhibition (curated by his own foundation), where water is absent from the sculptures: his puddles are dry and empty cavities in the enameled tiles. Painting seems to better "resist" both accumulation and curatorial abuse; it is a "good-natured" form of art that tolerates most company and compensates for its historical gaps with the colorful community of the medium. (But what to do with Helen Frankenthaler's majestic tactile abstraction while observing dozens of Sean Scully's masculine striped canvases on display a short boat ride away? Someone *must* win or lose, especially in an atmosphere of prizes and Golden Lions, even if it's left unspoken and the market prices of artists are no help in deciphering hierarchies.) The illegibility of large exhibitions is planned and not accidental, for this allows for more names to be included, for a more faint curatorial signature, and for an ambiguous political agenda. The truth is that only small and utterly focused exhibitions, in which capriciousness or opportunism don't have a place and curatorial intentions are transparent, would be a faithful mirror of what the art space is, for its insiders and outsiders. Any lack of rigor or historical contextualization is just due to laziness and incompetence. But so far it looks like the contemporary art world has failed to educate its rich lovers. It has learned a lot more from them than they have from it. "May you live in interesting times" is a fake proverb quoted throughout history by countless people; Ralph Rugoff, who curated this year's Biennale and devised the title, picked it as a wish and a curse. But Rugoff actually fears the fake news he seems to mock. "The internet," he writes in his curatorial statement, "initially hailed by optimists as ushering in an era of free access to information, has proven to be an equally powerful tool for circulating both strategic disinformation and simple misinformation."[6] These days, when Assange is imprisoned after enduring years of "white torture"[7] and Robert Mueller delivers a muzzled report, we can't help but feel that there are probably more urgent matters than blaming the unverified content available online: propaganda pales in the face of the armed threats to freedom of speech.

"Books will be your prison, freedom will be your prison," we hear in the deeply disturbing video *Foucault X*, one of the fictional and visionary narratives (other include *Sade X* , *Casanova X*) in Shu Lea Cheang's *3×3×6*, a vast video installation in the Taiwan Pavilion, curated by Paul B. Preciado in the Palazzo delle Prigioni. Joyfully pornographic and subtly disquieting, the work welcomes us with the warning that our images will be collected by two 3-D cameras and preserved by the artist after the show. Repression and the paradoxes of freedom in present times are the axes of investigation of her "trans punk fiction, queer and anti-colonial imagination hacking the operating system of the history of sexual subjection."[8]

Is one's sexuality a wild beast to tame, a desert landscape, a war zone? Is trying to look at one's feelings with distance comparable to flying a drone over a wasteland? The movie by Charlotte Prodger in the Scottish Pavilion seems to give a positive answer to all these questions. Entitled *SaF05*, the movie is named after a lioness in Botswana who grew a mane and was never to be captured by the artist's camera. The screenings are at fixed times, but during the opening days the pitch-black projection room filled up quickly, leaving outside long lines of people hopeful that boredom or a conflicting commitment would free up some space. Inside, the spectators bask in the light of a projector lying flat on the carpeted floor, enjoying the unthreatening nature of the cinematic exercise: white rocks and snowy mountains with no humans to be seen are a very relaxing sight after having been ceaselessly immersed in crowds. This meditation on desire, queerness, and time travel is strongly connected, we are told, to Prodger's previous movies, which unfortunately we haven't seen. (Rather than bookstores filled with gadgets, should each Biennale have a video and book library for viewers, to allow them to research the featured artists for the duration of the exhibition?) Prodger is a Turner Prize winner, like Laure Prouvost, who is representing France this year. In representing Scotland, Prodger succeeds Cathy Wilkes, who took part in the Scottish Pavilion in 2005 and this year occupies the British Pavilion, having also been a Turner Prize–nominated artist in 2008. It's a small world but not an obvious one, because there is in the work of these three women a resolute un-monumental posture. With Wilkes's exhibition we are under the impression that the format has heavily impacted her practice. Her shows are usually sparse, violently feminist, with small works hung at child height, putting the ready-made through a moral trial. Wilkes has a domestic economy to her art-making, and its results are usually moving, surprising, intense. This time the space was too austere, too lit, too martial to be dealt with. Her usual tenderness united with a sharp lucidity was nowhere to be found; the figures were shadows of their own sculptural presence and the paintings in the pseudo-domestic setup were to be read as independent works and parts of a decor. Everything was both a prop and a ready-made, a dead insect and a sculpture, an exhibition and its reluctant refusal, whilst the viewers kept dragging mud and leaves on the pale parquet that Wilkes had chosen as a neutral background for her minimal gestures. Wilkes (Irish by birth) has kept silent about her works. Words, she probably feels, would only hurt. (Some artists cannot "represent a nation," and probably nobody should.)

In the Canadian Pavilion, an Inuit collective finds a brilliant and anti-colonial solution to this dilemma. They are called Isuma, meaning "thoughtfulness" or "to think" in Inuktitut, and consist of Zacharias Kunuk, Norman Cohn, Paul Apak, and Pauloosie Qulitalik. Isuma was founded in 1990 with the goal of preserving Inuit culture, language, and stories. The movie they presented, which plays on several large plasma screens—each subtitled in a different language—is superb. It's shot in a wild location (northern Baffin Island) that's so abstract and icy, it acts as an infinite white cube where the last Inuits not living on a reservation reside. The dialogue revolves around the institutional world of the character "whiteman" (actor Kim Bodnia), who represents the Law, the Canadian state, and colonial power. Entitled *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, the film is a visual experiment whose real protagonist is the violence of translation. The Inuktitut language, which Bodnia doesn't understand, is the ground that the Inuit translator and Piugattuk use to resist his influence. His words are not faithfully repeated to Piugattuk by the interpreter, and vice versa, because translating means showing the forces at work inside a language and not just mechanically relaying meaning from one idiom to an other. "He is always repeating the same thing!" objects the old Inuit man who wishes to continue living like his ancestors and refuses to abide by the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement of 1994. According to Isuma's website, with this contract the "Inuit gave up Aboriginal Title to 83% of their land and 98% of mineral rights, in exchange for the largest indigenous cash settlement in history."[9] In the film, Piugattuk has left his igloo—bringing along family, friends, and dog sleds—because he was out of sugar. Bodnia gives him some, along with other goods, but the metaphorical bitterness that comes from the exchange with the non-native white man infects every gift with the taste of bribery. "Your kids will go to school, you will have money from the government, health care ..." Like an indigenous Bartleby, Piugattuk would prefer not to. The movie's documentary aspect is evident in the scene where Bodnia's face grows red and his nose runs terribly due to the cold: what is an uninhabitable hell for white people is the Inuit's world, a space made of smells, colors, signs, and flavors that we don't recognize. The interior of Piugattuk's igloo is covered with pages from magazines. The decapitated head of a walrus is in the kitchen and there is a small flame to melt ice for tea and keep the place warm. Nobody should have to give this up.

"Imagine a beach—you within it, or better: watching from above ... Then a chorus of songs: everyday songs, songs of worry and of boredom, songs of almost nothing. And below them: the slow creaking of an exhausted Earth, a gasp." So reads the text at the entrance to the celebrated installation- *cum*-performance *Sun and Sea (Marina)* in the Lithuanian Pavilion. After two-and-a-half hours spent waiting, we are eager to look at relaxed people in their swimsuits. The set is an artificial beach reminiscent of the urban ones that grow in the summer on the shores of polluted rivers in cities with no access to the coast—urban beaches from Paris to Berlin. The play that is performed is a tableau vivant and a metaphor, but somehow what we are watching from the balcony above is *truly* happening, the performers are *really* lying down, chatting, reading, walking dogs, and looking at their phones. Kids are playing and we are witnessing this staged leisure during a *real* planetary crisis. The amusing lyrics that they sing revolve around banalities such as stress and relaxation, greasy sunscreen and missed flights. Electric cables occasionally stick out of the thin layer of sand, and through the back windows the green lagoon is visible, adding a layer of complexity to the interior environment, which is artificially lit and kept warm by portable heaters. (When we were there in early May, the temperature in Venice was around 14° Celsius, ten degrees colder than usual.)

Climate change was the invisible actor in the play, and it was also present in many other works all around the Biennale. In Kahlil Joseph's *BLKNWS* we hear Greta Thunberg telling us once again, "I want you to behave like your house is on fire," over images of a flood. In the French Pavilion, Laure Prouvost's *Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois Ce Bleu Profond Te Fondre* welcomes us on a resin floor looking like solid water encrusted with detritus and marine garbage. The entrance has been moved to the back of the building, where one passes through a messy storage area; we are told by a guide that the artist has dug a tunnel to the neighboring British Pavilion (to oppose Britain's growing insularity). Prouvost's movie is emotional and chaotic, filled with Franglais puns. It has the texture of what life after capitalism will be like if we are to witness it. The footage comes from a journey that starts in the Paris suburbs and ends in Venice, at the French Pavilion. When the voice-over describes what the extinction of a species feels like, and when the actors sing to the waves a song for the migrants lost at sea, we forgive every minor fault of the work. There were also performers and sculptures on the premises, but they were not as compelling.

In the Biennale for the first time, Ghana's pavilion benefitted from its wonderful thermally insulated premises, designed by David Adjaye and built with the same earth used to construct buildings in Africa. In John Akomfrah's *Four Nocturnes*, high-end technology is used to film the smallest details of plants and wildlife. At times one is under the impression of being plunged into a three-channel nature documentary, almost sensing the smells and the temperature of what one sees. But everything tells the tale of the planet becoming unlivable, and of migrants being treated like animals. We see people wearing elephant masks on their journey through a desert, right after witnessing the death of a baby elephant, his sibling trying to revive him over and over again, his family stroking his bones with their gray trunks when they later return to his grave. Neither Akomfrah nor Adjaye are from Ghana (other featured artists are), but the idea in *Ghana Freedom* is to convoke talent from the African diaspora, in

order to celebrate the happy exception of the first African country to shake off colonialism.

There was hope in large amounts at the Chilean Pavilion as well: a solo show by Voluspa Jarpa entitled *Altered Views*, curated by Agustin Rubio. The pavilion is a meta-exercise, both more and less than an exhibition: formally, the solutions and inventions adopted by Jarpa are barely recognizable as coming from the same artist. We don't have to like every part of it, although everything is, for one reason or another, likeable. The emancipatory opera, in which humor and tragedy find common ground amongst images of cowboys and lyrics about class struggle, colonialism, and social oppression, is a truly experimental work. The attention Jarpa devotes to revisiting the destabilization strategies of security services in South America, Italy, and elsewhere—displaying both classified and unclassified documents, showing how to access some of them online—is sorely needed. The videos about Chiquita bananas, the United Fruit Company, and the latter's role in the Guatemala coup of 1954 deserve way more attention than we are able to give them here. These things are happening, Jarpa seems to remind us in countless ways, via multiple media—right here, right now, this minute. Hear the story! Tell the story!

Venice is also a city where historic movie theaters are turned into supermarkets with exhibition spaces on the side. Kenneth Goldsmith was showing his work *HILLARY: The Hillary Clinton Emails* in the former Cinema Teatro Italia, now a Despar supermarket. A text pile made of double-sided, rainbow-colored printed paper, the work displays all the emails sent by Hillary Clinton from the domain clintonemail.com between 2009 and 2013. Over sixty thousand pages removed from their ghostly status as online documents have become the material of an uncreative poem. In addition, projections by several artists whose work appears in the UbuWeb database reactivated screens hanging over the checkout registers.

Counter-narratives flow and leak like unstoppable high waters despite the Mose—this technological monster is portrayed in Hito Steyerl's semicircular video installation at the Giardini. Realized in the liquid aesthetics of recent apps that turn photos into unstable painterly things, we hear the screeching sound of the dam supposed to save Venice, like a myriad of screaming seagulls. Entitled *Leonardo Submarine*, the video installation features a robotic Italian voice telling us how Da Vinci kept secret his invention of an ancestor of the submarine, afraid that it would be used as military technology. Steyerl's piece in the Arsenale, *This Is the Future* (everybody has two separate works in Rugoff's exhibition), makes us enjoy the company of electronic flowers that have superpowers, in a hilarious and smoky dark room. A video projection on a transparent screen informs us that the risks of entering the future for the human species are rather high, and we should seek help from the vegetable kingdom.

The closed Venezuelan Pavilion, Venice Biennale Giardini, 2019. Photo: Claire Fontaine.

On offer at this year's Biennale are many visual examples of thinking outside the box—among them the thrilling contributions from prize-winning Arthur Jafa and his long-time friend and collaborator Khalil Joseph. Joseph's *BLKNWS*, a pair of two-channel videos made of found footage and occasional conversations staged in the studio, are mesmerizing. We tried several times unsuccessfully to leave the bench while watching it in the Giardini: we were hooked. The graceful balance between political and ecological (bad) news and hopeful and tender footage of black lives makes for an irresistible cocktail. For the white Westerners who make up most of the audience, it's hypnotizing to see black beauty and intelligence condensed in this hyper-politicized work in progress. There are familiar pop videos whose soundtracks have been replaced, making us feel that when it comes to "news," the bodies that are speaking don't always talk with their own voices. We are also left wondering to what extent our fascination is a form of orientalism, and if we are the right receivers of these narratives. But Jafa's work, a video called *The White Album*, has twists and turns that wake us from this oneiric state. Being black, as much as being white, isn't a condition related to an origin or a race; it's a relational reality whose complexities need to be

explored. (Many black experiences and voices are present in multiple remarkable exhibitions throughout Venice this year, including AfriCobra's *Nation Time*, which features amazing documents from the Black Arts Movement.)

The White Album tests our level of wokeness in its exploration of the fiction of whiteness as such, causing us to be uncomfortable, scandalized, and at times disoriented by our own image. That Jafa was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Participant was good news. So was the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement awarded to Jimmie Durham, somehow removing the focus from the stormy controversy about his Cherokee origins and highlighting his remarkable work. The Special Mention awarded to Teresa Margolles was also well deserved. (Although art prizes are all absurd, and their sole function is to send a political message.) Margolles's works in Venice this year were different from her *What Else Could We Talk About?*, featured in the memorable Mexican Pavilion from ten years ago, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina. No fluids from corpses or objects from morgues are on site. This time her materialist approach uses architectural fragments to make us feel the way women's bodies move through and are endangered in public spaces that exist at the limit of formal political rights. Margolles's *La Busqueda (2)* (2014) is a series of glass panes, taken from the city center of Juárez, Mexico, covered with posters of missing women, accompanied by the modified noise of a train recorded near the tracks that divide the city. In addition, a section of a wall from Juárez from 2015, covered in bullet holes and surmounted by razor wires, gives the ready-made a deeply political dimension in times where borders are more and more deadly everywhere.

There are a lot of paintings in Venice this year, figurative but also abstract, surprisingly all by women (some excellent canvases by Julie Mehretu stand out). This year Venice is definitely female and feminist.

That said, there is also a lot of digital animation made by men. When entering the Arsenale, the video game–like sounds emitted by these works give you the impression of having walked into a dystopian video-game arcade. Alex Da Corte, Ed Atkins, and Jon Rafman have very different approaches and research fields, but the retinal joy of watching adult cartoons must have been decisive for their selection. Pleasure is key to Rugoff's curatorial strategy. "Artists have different ways of entertaining us," he says, "and different ways of playing."[10] In Rafman's *Dream Journal 2016–2019*, there is a profoundly disturbing moment where a child is using the same virtual reality mask that Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster invites us to wear to experience his *Endodrome*, also on display in the exhibition (but we can't experience it because the line is, and will possibly always be, too long). The child is on the deck of a boat crossing a dead ocean full of garbage. On the same deck there is a drunken, vomiting creature. None of this appears in the visions of the boy, who in his head is running through a meadow and walking amongst enchanted lunar ruins. At some point he lifts his hand and all the chiromantic symbols float above his fingers. Then we see him from the outside, sitting on a bench in squalid surroundings, aimlessly moving his hand in the air. For a moment we realize that the child is an allegory of ourselves, transfiguring the apocalypse whilst watching an animation, sitting in a dark room in a dying city.

That's why the awakening that grabs us when in the presence of Christoph Büchel's installation *Barca Nostra* becomes so important in this context. The polemics raised by Büchel's gesture (the exhibition of the wreck of a ship salvaged by the Italian government from the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea in order to identify the corpses of the migrants who died in it) are more thought-provoking than the work itself. Every single objection against it has the aim of preserving the art space from the violence of reality: people refuse to be surprised by the nonnegotiable evidence that the migrants' tragedy isn't made of images and words but of real rusty vessels and the drowned bodies of those who didn't manage to escape hell. The news can be subconsciously dismissed, but metal can't, judging by the reaction to *Barca Nostra*, and this gives us hope in the future of sculpture and conceptual art. The criticisms of the piece stem in part from the fact that the gesture was expensive. It's in fact the only artwork whose production budget seems to interest journalists, although it's not for sale, because the ship is a "monument" whose purpose is to remember the suffering of migrants, and it belongs to the Italian government. The artist has only moved it from Augusta, Sicily, where it is usually located. The act is deemed "cynical" supposedly because it comes from a "privileged" position[11]—as if any of the artists featured in the Venice Biennale wasn't enjoying privilege and thriving in one of the most competitive professional fields in the world. Eschewing political correctness, Büchel is systematically cultivating the unease that contemporary art *can* still produce. His detractors would probably prefer the artwork to be authored by a Libyan or an African artist. If this is the case, we should rather ask ourselves why we want our art space to remain reassuring, why we want to bathe harmlessly in its privilege and deem it abusive whenever it wanders into troubled waters. What is exactly the breach of the secret etiquette that *Barca Nostra* is accused of? The answer might be more disturbing than the artwork and its history. The people who died in the Mediterranean and continue to die despite the efforts of militants, NGOs, and charities are not the only devastating losses we are accountable for. Something has also died inside us and continues to die. That's what Büchel is trying to tell us.

X

1
Ralph Rugoff, "Double Vision," interview by Daniel Birnbaum, *Artforum* , May 2019 https://www.artforum.com/print/201905/ralph-rugoff-talks-with-daniel-birnbaum-about-the-58th-venice-biennale-79532 .

2
Paolo Baratta, "The Visitor as a Partner," statement included in press kit for 58th Venice Biennale.

3
Baratta, "The Visitor as a Partner."

4
Taylor Dafoe, "It Costs a Whopping $3 Per Minute to Run the Venice Biennale's Universally Acclaimed Lithuanian Pavilion. Now Organizers Want You to Help," *artnet news*, May 31, 2019 https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/lithuanian-pavilion-venice-biennale-1561228 .

5
After recent incidents involving cruise ships, they have been banned from entering the center of the city, where their imposing presence is both dangerous for people and destructive of the landscape. See Philip Pullella, "Venice Must be Put on U.N. Danger List, Ban Cruise Ships: Conservationists," *Reuters*, June 24, 2019 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-environment-venice/venice-must-be-put-on-u-n-danger-list-ban-cruise-ships-conservationists-idUSKCN1TP1UB .

6
Ralph Rugoff, curatorial statement included in press kit for 58th Venice Biennale.

7
Wikipedia: "White torture is a type of psychological torture that includes extreme sensory deprivation and isolation. Carrying out this type of torture makes the detainee lose personal identity through long periods of isolation" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_torture .

8
From the brochure for Shu Lea Cheang's *3×3×6*.

9
See http://www.isuma.tv/one-day-in-the-life-of-noah-piugattuk-0 .

10
Rugoff, "Double Vision," *Artforum*.

11
Alexandra Stock, "The Privileged, Violent Stunt That Is the Venice Biennale Boat Project," *Mada*, May 29, 2019 https://madamasr.com/en/2019/05/29/feature/culture/the-privileged-violent-stunt-that-is-the-venice-biennale-boat-project/ .

Geert Lovink

Cybernetics for the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with Philosopher Yuk Hui

In his latest book, Recursivity and Contingency *(2019), the Hong Kong philosopher Yuk Hui argues that recursivity is not merely mechanical repetition. He is interested in "irregularity deviating from rules." He develops what could be called a neovitalist position, which goes beyond the view, dominant in popular culture today, that there is life inside the robot (or soon will be). In the "organology" Hui proposes, a system mimics growth and variation inside its own technical realm. "Recursivity is characterised," he writes, "by the looping movement of returning to itself in order to determine itself, while every movement is open to contingency, which in turn determines its singularity."*[1]

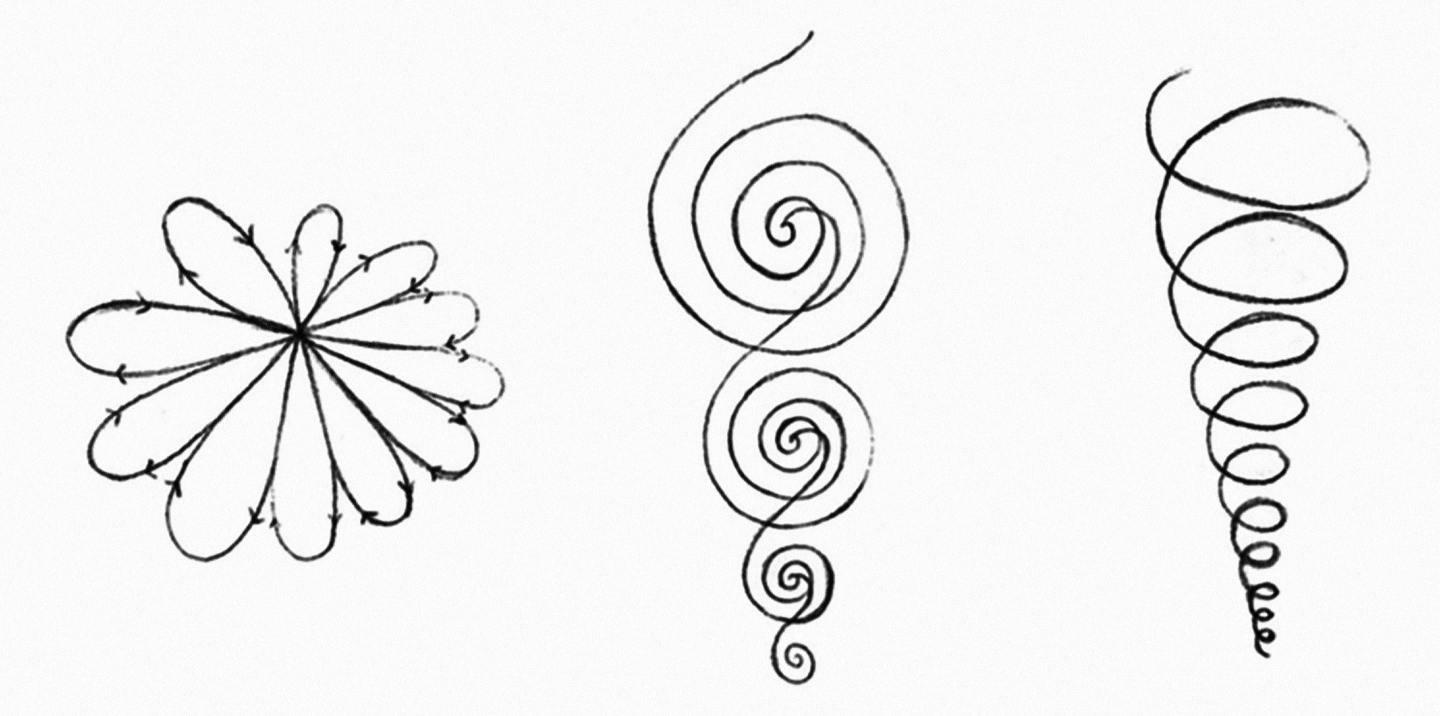
Following On the Existence of Digital Objects *(2016) and* The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics *(2017),* Recursivity and Contingency *is Yuk Hui's third and by far most ambitious book. Divided into five chapters that deal with different eras and thinkers, it starts with Kant's reflective judgement, which Hui sees as a precursor to recursivity. The book then moves on to Hegel's reflective logic, which anticipates cybernetics. According to Hui's organology (and that of Bernard Stiegler), science and technology should be understood as means for returning to life, as paths towards true pluralism, or "multiple cosmotechnics," to use Hui's own key concept from his earlier book.*

Our understanding of computational possibilities should not be limited to the "disruptive" technologies of Silicon Valley, oriented as they are towards short-term profits. Hui looks beyond this myopic view of technology. His foundational project is to dig into the philosophical foundations of today's digitality, to examine the episteme that presents itself as a new form of totality (or as a "techno-subconsciousness," as I have described it elsewhere). How can we think individuation in an age when the online self is surrounded by artificial stupidity and algorithmic exclusion in the name of ruthless profit maximization and state control? Is there a liberated self inside cybernetics?

—Geert Lovink

Geert Lovink: Could you introduce the terms "recursivity" and "contingency"? How do these two terms relate to feedback, which is a central concept in cybernetics? Is it possible to sketch out potential cybernetic technologies that are not based on the principles of the current information revolution?

Yuk Hui: Recursivity is a general term for looping. This is not mere repetition, but rather more like a spiral, where every loop is different as the process moves generally towards an end, whether a closed one or an open one. As a computer science student, I was fascinated by recursion because it is the true spirit of automation: with a few lines



Sketchs of forms of recursion as featured in the book Recursivity and Contingency (2019). Featured in the center is Heidegger's diagram on Schelling.

of recursive code you can solve a complicated problem that might demand much more code if you tried to solve it in a linear way.

The notion of recursivity represents an epistemological break from the mechanistic worldview that dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially Cartesian mechanism. The most well-known treatise on this break is Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, which proposes a reflective judgment whose mode of operation is anti-Cartesian, nonlinear, and self-legitimate (i.e., it derives universal rules from the particular instead of being determined by a priori universal laws). Reflective judgment is central to Kant's understanding of both beauty and nature, which is why the two parts of his book are dedicated to aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment. Departing from Kant, and with a generalized concept of recursivity, I try to analyze the emergence of two lines of thought related to the concept of the organic in the twentieth century: organicism and organology. The former opens towards a philosophy of biology and the latter a philosophy of life. In the book, I attempt to recontextualize organicism and organology within today's technical reality.

Contingency is central to recursivity. In the mechanical mode of operation, which is built on linear causation, a contingent event may lead to the collapse of the system. For example, machinery may malfunction and cause an industrial catastrophe. But in the recursive mode of operation, contingency is necessary since it enriches the system and allows it to develop. A living organism can absorb contingency and render it valuable. So can today's machine learning.

GL: Cybernetic concepts such as feedback and the "black box" often gives rise to a simplistic understanding of automation. How can we overcome this?

YH: In the time of Descartes, and later Marx (who described human–machine relations in the factories of nineteenth-century Manchester), automated machines performed homogeneous, repetitive work, like a clock. As Marx wrote, a craftsman-turned-factory-worker failed to cooperate with this kind of machine on both a psychological and somatic level because a machine enclosed within itself is a separated reality. Marx attributed this failure to alienation. In our time, however, automated machines are no longer based on the same epistemology. Rather, they are recursive—capable of integrating contingency into their operations.

This centrality of recursivity to contemporary machinery has been obscured by various ways of describing capitalism, due to the fact that Marxists tend to discuss information technology in much too abstract terms—"immaterial labor," "free labor," and so forth. Deleuze tried to make this point in his famous "Postscript on Societies of Control," but he lacked the vocabulary to do so, and simply borrowed the concept of modulation from the philosopher Gilbert Simondon.

If we want to overcome this failure to appreciate recursivity, we need to understand its significance, and

find ways to describe it and analyze it. Martin Heidegger claimed that the emergence of cybernetics in the mid-twentieth century marked the completion and end of philosophy. In response to Heidegger, I recontextualize cybernetics within the history of philosophy, with the aim of exposing both its limits and potential. In order to do this, a new language and new concepts are needed. This is why the book focuses on developing the concepts of recursivity and contingency, which I then use to analyze the theoretical foundations of organicism and organology.

We can distinguish two strains of organicism: a philosophy of nature (exemplified by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Joseph Needham, Joseph Henry Woodger, and Alfred North Whitehead, among others), and a what I call a "mechano-organicism," which encompasses cybernetics as well as systems theory. Through historical analysis I try to think recursivity beyond cybernetics. This is reflected in how the book is structured: the first two chapters are dedicated to organicism from Kant to cybernetics via Schelling, Hegel, Norbert Wiener, and Kurt Gödel; the third and fourth chapters are dedicated to organology from Kant to Henri Bergson, Georges Canguilhem, Simondon, Bernard Stiegler, and my own reflection on this tradition; the last chapter unfolds a political philosophy that argues against the totalizing tendency of far-too-humanist modern technology.

GL: What is mechanism today, in a world where digitization has taken over? The nineteenth-century mechanistic worldview essentially tried to explain life without life. This has since given way to the "organic" perspective that is dominant today. Why is it nonetheless necessary to distance ourselves from the mechanistic? Is it still a living ideology?

YH: We live in an age of neo-mechanism, in which technical objects are *becoming* organic. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Kant wanted to give a new life to philosophy in the wake of mechanism, so he set up a new condition of philosophizing, namely the organic. Being mechanistic doesn't necessarily mean being related to machines; rather, it refers to machines that are built on linear causality, for example clocks, or thermodynamic machines like the steam engine. When I say that Kant set up the "organic" as the condition of philosophizing, it means that for philosophy to be, it has to be organic. So for post-Kantians like Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, there is a pronounced organic mode of thinking, ranging from the philosophy of nature to political philosophy. And if philosophy since Kant has mechanism as its counterpart, it seems that today, as you and others have observed, this counterpart has been transformed into an organic being. Our computers, smartphones, and domestic robots are no longer mechanical but are rather becoming organic. I propose this as a new condition of philosophizing. Philosophy has to painfully break away from the self-contentment of organicity, and open up new realms of thinking.

What I wanted to elaborate in this book is not only a history of philosophy and a history of technology, but also what comes after this organic mode of thinking, or a *new* condition of philosophizing after Kant. Organicism is still regarded as a remedy to industrialism today, even though the actualities of machines and industry in the twenty-first century are no longer the same as they were hundreds of years ago. A false analysis can be misleading and also harmful for the understanding and assessment of our situation today. Philosophy has to negate the totalizing tendency in organic thinking, which is in the process of being implemented in different technical apparatuses, from social credit systems to the "superintelligence." I think Jean-François Lyotard already reflected on this some forty years ago in his *Postmodern Condition*, especially in his critique of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. One should reread Lyotard carefully. This is why my last chapter is devoted to Lyotard and the "inhumanism" that I want to elaborate as a philosophy of fragmentation.

GL: You write that for a vitalist such as Bergson, artificial systems are mechanical and not real. "Science, when it becomes mechanical, prevents us from comprehending the creativity which is life itself. Life is a recursive process of making in the unmaking."[2] In this passage you quote Canguilhem, Foucault's mentor, who argued in *Knowledge of Life* from 1966 that we should "rejoin life through science."

YH: Bergson was a philosopher who opposed the organic to the mechanical. This was due to the historical background that we briefly mentioned before, the nineteenth century being the age of mechanism, physics, and industrialism. In 1907, Bergson published *Creative Evolution*, which for Canguilhem, together with the journal *L'Année Biologique* launched in the same year, marked the birth of the philosophy of biology in France. It was also Canguilhem, in his 1947 essay "Machine and Organism," who proposes that there is a general organology in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. The return to life is a return to an organic whole which renders the mechanical part possible. This organic whole takes the name of "*élan vital*" in Bergson. Life is a recursive process; it is a constant exchange between the figure and the ground (if we use Gestalt vocabulary) through a process of making and unmaking.

This is also why evolution is creative, since it is fundamentally organological in the sense that evolution is also a process in which human beings are obliged to constantly create new organs (e.g., figures), while not being blinded by them, i.e., by not regarding them as the totality of reality. Mechanism wants to explain life, without realizing that it is only a phase of life, e.g., a figure. Bergson, on the other hand, wants to resituate mechanism in a broader reality—namely life itself. So Bergson is not against science or even mechanism, but rather against science becoming merely mechanical and ignoring life. There is basically no opposition between Bergson and

Canguilhem, since both of them reject the proposal to explain life without life. They want to "rejoin life through science."

GL: Should we no longer be concerned about the uncritical use of biological metaphors in technological and social contexts? I come from a political generation where this was openly questioned. Why do you speak of the "evolution" of systems? What do we gain by speaking of "emergence," knowing that all these technologies are consciously fabricated by humans, aka male engineers?

YH: Today, when certain dualist logics (e.g., human vs. machine) have been more or less overcome, yet criticism of dualism as such remains essential for various social and political projects—such as overcoming modernity, for example—isn't this ignorance problematic? How do we reflect critically on all this? That is the aim of my book. What does it mean for one to become cyborg? Donna Haraway has always been an organicist. Her work was significant in the 1990s for overcoming the dichotomy between the mechanical and the organic. However, at that time the organic mode of thinking was already coming to an end. Maybe today we should reconsider all these concepts from the new condition of philosophizing that I tried to explain above and that I elaborate in my book.

To ask a concrete question: Is someone who has an artificial arm and an artificial eye no longer human, since within this person the organic and the mechanistic are no longer opposed? Or from another perspective, is transhumanism, with its belief that the entire body can be replaced and enhanced, actually built upon a linear way of thinking, one that expresses an extreme humanism? On the surface, transhumanism seems to want to get rid of the concept of the human. However, this gesture is only camouflage. Transhumanism is a quintessentially humanist approach to the world, since all is captured within a metaphysical gaze.

How helpful is it to think from the perspective of organology? The term "general organology" was coined by Canguilhem in "Machine and Organism." But more than anyone else it was Bernard Stiegler who elaborated on the subject. He developed the concept of organology around 2003 while he was the director of IRCAM at the Centre Georges Pompidou, an institute dedicated to experimental music. The term actually comes from music, not Bergson. Notwithstanding the different motivations of Canguilhem, Stiegler, and Bergson, they all point to the idea that human life can only be maintained through the organization of the inorganic, i.e., through the invention and use of tools. Maybe we should pose the question in this way: Will the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning allow us to rejoin life?

Let's move a step further. What if these machines are no longer simply "organized inorganic" entities, but rather gigantic systems in the making? The evolution from technical objects to technical systems was my focus in *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, and it is further elaborated in *Recursivity and Contingency*. These systems are now the organizing agents of human lives and social orders. It seems to me necessary to return to these questions and to extend the concept of organology already developed by anthropologists and philosophers to the analysis of our actual situation.

GL: Towards the end of your new book you ask if recursive thinking will allow us to the relaunch the question of organicism and technodiversity, or if it will only by used by a deterministic system "that is moving toward its own destruction."[3] We already know about the reductionist school of thought—it has taken over the world. How about the non-reductionist school of thought? What can people do to become part of it? Is it a movement? What forms of organizations do you envision for it? A Frankfurt School? Bauhaus? What are some contemporary examples that inspire you?

YH: You are absolutely right, this has to be a new movement, or a new school of thought that develops different understandings and practices of technology. In recent years, many people have been talking about a certain revival of the Black Mountain College model, since this new movement will first of all demand a new syllabus and new forms of collectivity, with the aim of transforming the industrial world, like what the Bauhaus wanted to do. For my part, in 2014 I established a research network called "Research Network of Philosophy and Technology." We have been trying to develop collaborations between different institutions and individuals, but we still have a long way to go. I believe that this has to be a collaborative project. We will need the participation of researchers who share a certain analysis and set of problematics.

GL: Is cybernetics the metaphysics of today? Heidegger may have predicted that cybernetics would replace philosophy, but there is no sign of this so far, at least not in the Western academic world. Philosophy of technology is a marginal subdiscipline at best. Is it time for a radical reform of the academic disciplines?

YH: In *Recursivity and Contingency*, I try to show why Heidegger was right concerning the end of metaphysics and also why it is necessary to think beyond Heidegger. In 1966, journalists from *Der Spiegel* asked Heidegger what comes after philosophy. He replied: cybernetics. The organic is, for Heidegger, nothing but the mechanical-technological triumph of modernity over nature. This is why I think the organic mode of thinking, and the fields it has given rise to such as ecology, cybernetics, Gaia theory, etc., are manifestations of this "end." The question is how to think beyond this end.

In his 1964 essay "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," Heidegger also says that this end means that world civilization will henceforth be based on Western

European thought. This is of course a provocative assertion, and I deal with it extensively in my second book, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*.

The concept of cosmotechnics concerns the idea that different cultures and epochs have different ways of thinking about technology. Cosmotechnics is central to *Recursivity and Contingency* too, since the book tries to reconstruct different understandings of technology, with the aim of developing Heidegger's concept of "enframing" (*Gestell*), which he regards as the essence of modern technology. I do not argue that we abandon cybernetics, just recognize both its limits and its potential.

In *Recursivity and Contingency* there is a dialogue between cybernetics and Chinese thought through the figure of Joseph Needham. You can see the book as a footnote to §17 of *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, where I discussed Needham's characterization of Chinese philosophy as organicism. In the latter book, I argue for the existence of a Chinese technological thought that is grounded in a different understanding of the cosmos and the moral. I am glad to see that this proposal has been welcomed in China, Japan, and Korea (largely because of the similarity of thought in those places). Some younger scholars have enthusiastically engaged with it. The Korean translation has already come out, and the Chinese and Japanese translations will come out later in the year.

If we follow what Heidegger says—that world civilization is now completely based on Western European thought—then the end of philosophy is also a call for other ways of thinking. Can the Global South rediscover its own cosmotechnics and technological thought, and thereby give new direction to technological development in general? Will the defeat of Huawei in the recent political struggle between the US and China force the company to develop its own operating system, or will it just develop another version of Android coded in Chinese? This is decisive for a new technological agenda as well as a new geopolitics to come.

You asked about philosophy of technology. I rarely present myself as a philosopher of technology unless I find myself in a situation where I am forced to choose a narrow discipline. Like Stiegler, I tend to believe that technology is the first philosophy. Philosophy has always been conditioned and called forth by the technological conditions of its given epoch.

GL: Just as cybernetics has failed to replace philosophy in the academy, disciplines like "digital studies" and "internet studies" have yet to catch on. At the same time, we've seen the rise of "digital humanities," which has been given the unholy task of innovating a dwindling field of knowledge from the inside. Any humanities approach that is not data-driven is in fact fading away. What's going on here?

YH: Today, every discipline wants to have artificial intelligence, machine learning, and big data as their research subjects. We see it in sociology, architecture, philosophy, anthropology, media studies, the natural sciences—you name it. But as you suggested, the research questions are often rather narrow. I am not against digital humanities. The problem is that its agenda is far too limited. Two years ago, I was invited for a job interview by a department of digital humanities in England. Afterward I was told, with a certain amount of regret, that they didn't need a philosopher at the moment.

It seems to me that technology has become the common thread across disparate disciplines. In other words, different disciplines all want to respond to the challenge of technology. Will this bring forth new forms of radical technological thought that aren't limited to twentieth-century media theory, philosophy of technology, and literature studies? Digital humanities is not yet a global discipline. Maybe as it is adopted in different localities, it should be questioned and redefined. I think this is what researchers from different disciplines have to think together. We have to take this opportunity to rethink the existing disciplines and allow new thoughts to flourish.

GL: The gap between the intense use of digital technology and the fundamental understanding of the transformations caused by these technologies is growing by the day. What would you suggest to bridge this gap? I don't see this happening in Europe, a continent that is rapidly closing in on itself, becoming more and more regressive. Should we pin our hopes for new technological thinking on Asia? Or should we perhaps envision distributed networks of knowledge production?

YH: We need to rethink the education system and the existing divisions of disciplines that have been adopted in the past several decades. It is probably not possible to bridge the gap between already existing disciplines, since when you attempt to bridge a gap, this gap is at the same time maintained. One possibility is to create a new discipline in which this gap no longer exists.

I spent the best time of my youth studying and working in England, France, and Germany. Europe is deep in my heart, but I am afraid that Europe will be impoverished by its increasing racism and conservatism. I wouldn't want to say that new technological thought will necessarily come out of Asia instead of Europe, but I do believe that such thought can only emerge out of the incompatibility between systems of thought, since it is the incompatibility between them that leads to the individuation of thinking itself, avoiding both subordination and domination. However, I have increasing doubts if Europe is ready for this. It seems to me of ultimate importance to rearticulate the relation between philosophy, technology, and geopolitics today, which I am afraid remains largely

unthought.

X

Yuk Hui is a philosopher based in Berlin. He is the author of three monographs: *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Univ. of Minessota Press, 2016), *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (MIT Press, 2016), and *Recursivity and Contingency* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist and internet critic. Since 2004 he has led the Institute of Network Cultures. His latest book is *Sad by Design* (Pluto Press, 2019).

1
Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), X.

2
Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*.

3
Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*.