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Editorial

There is a certain plasticity of meaning inherent in any use of language. If that weren't the case, poetry and literature would not exist. There would only be contracts, scientific formulas, shopping lists, and so forth. Journalism would be properly factual—there would be no fake news or disinformation. All utterances would document isolated events, never evoking larger patterns or tapping into hidden desires. But then the question arises: Even if language could be cleansed of all ambiguity and spin, what role would images play?

If language is the problem, images can only be worse. Against a backdrop where postmodern slippages in language and image have been so efficiently weaponized by right-wing populists, it would be a huge mistake to imagine a good old time when language was honest and images just showed what was there. Not only because this time never existed—and would be a lucrative right-wing fantasy to concoct on its own—but because all of the creative power of language and image lies precisely in this fold. Even by 1919, Dada was in full swing. Now, just as then, the perversion of autocratic power triggers a kind of absurdist, perverse artistic response.

In the 103rd issue of *e-flux journal*, the artist collective Metahaven excavates the power and danger, and sometimes failure, of metaphor, metonymy, and allegory, among other linguistic devices. Their essay "Sleep Walks the Street, Part I" considers Victor Klemperer's tracing of the rapid proliferation of Nazi language in everyday German life, side by side with contemporary terminology from the Dutch far right, such as the word *klimaatminaretten* ("climate minarets"), which collapses at least two layers of denial and xenophobia/Islamophobia into a few syllables. In the next installment of this essay, Metahaven will look into a certain tradition of "absurdist" Russian poetry.

One hundred years after the founding of the Communist International, facing a growing, transnational neofascist movement, Sven Lütticken calls not for absurdism but for the building of a new, anti-capitalist and anti-fascist International—or, rather, a "Terrestrial." This coalition of survivances, urges Lütticken, could eventually become a real source of political strength and action. Lütticken asks whether our current organizational structures could nurture an infant Terrestrial—very much among them the art world, where international finance capital roams free. Lütticken writes that a movement such as a Terrestrial must confront and work with the "all-too-human mutants and monsters of actually existing capitalism." This proposition of a Terrestrial is not dadaist, nor absurdist, and Lütticken positions this line of thinking directly against Situationism. It works to unravel how power is constituted and invoked.

Also in this October issue, Elvia Wilk sinks into the world of vampire "larping"—as well as other kinds of "live-action role-playing"—with consideration for the kind of detailed

discussions of consent and recognition that allow for this kind of serious play. Larping is perhaps able to suggest the possibility of some new forms of temporary autonomy, but nevertheless accountable and consensual ones that use fictions to address our world.

Meanwhile, iLiana Fokianaki delves into the increasingly alarming contemporary condition of narcissistic authoritarian statism. She begins her study with a parable from Julio Cortázar's 1951 story "Casa Tomada," in which a group of siblings inherits a mansion. Plagued by growing paranoia that "others" are inhabiting the house's many rooms, they close off and relinquish room after room to "them," finally abandoning the whole inheritance. Fokianaki relates this to the political situation of today, and examines several artists whose work offers real retorts to this statist condition.

Aaron Schuster turns his focus towards Ernst Lubitch's 1939 romantic comedy *Ninotchka*, relaying how the film had a profound effect on, for example, the 1948 Italian elections. Schuster zooms in on Greta Garbo's laugh and Lubitch's use of certain kinds of humor, showing the ideological complexities contained in its comedy and meta-comedy, its historically symbolic imagery, and its light-handed decomposition of Soviet communism. Despite the fact that the film was turned into anti-communist propaganda, Schuster writes that "many of the film's best jokes are directed against capitalists and aristocrats."

Curator Claire Tancons and artist Peter Friedl hold a conversation about theater, neutralizing curators, postcolonialism, and contemporary art as a prison in laying out a "Portrait of the Artist as a Dramatist." The two discuss Friedl's marionette works, starring, among others, Antonio Gramsci's wife, Julia Schucht. Friedl probes the concept of "resistance"—central to some currents of political discourse, and as Friedl maintains, long held as a property of contemporary art. But, he says, because of this, it's strange that contemporary art picks up the capitalist optimization of a certain kind of performance.

Jörg Heiser examines Adrian Piper's 2018 book *Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir*. Heiser details how, as shown in the memoir, Piper's decades-long battle with Wellesley College and self-imposed exile exemplifies the hostility of America's most "progressive" institutions to African-American artists and intellectuals. Heiser describes being drawn to Piper's work by the deadpan humor in several of her performances. This quality survives in Piper's work despite the growing difficulties she has faced, leading up to her decision to leave the US for good. Heiser points out that, at Wellesley, Piper became an American whistleblower for workplace abuses of power, and was punished for playing that role—a tradition that continues into the present.

And Cuauhtémoc Medina writes that Francisco Toledo, an artist whose work contained something of the absurd, and who died last month, fervently hated tributes. Toledo's work, spanning several decades, also spanned painting, sculpture, textile, surrealism, animism, eroticism, and so on. Medina writes that in recent years, with violent deaths rising in number across Mexico, Toledo created kites and clay funerary urns depicting the departed. In addition to his physical work, Toledo founded and maintained a series of cultural institutions—schools, libraries, museums—that transformed the city and state of Oaxaca. Medina maintains that as much as Toledo would have resisted memorialization, Mexicans have the right to mourn the late artist, who brought so much tangible good to a nation in desperate need of it.

—Editors

X

Clouds are a poetic symbol, muses the parrot
They stand for standing for just about anything
They are like the concept of number which itself is no number
A poem upon the writing block
Music without the music
Theirs is an absolute loneliness
Yes, let us consider the loneliness of clouds
Wafting over the frothing, bestial sea
What are you dreaming of, clouds
Never mind, you have no mind and therefore cannot dream
Excuse our pathetic fallacy
Clouds we wished to be mute like you
There's so much error in language
Everything we say turns out not right
Or almost right; that is, to be precise, wrong
So we left language, but there was nowhere to go so we
came back

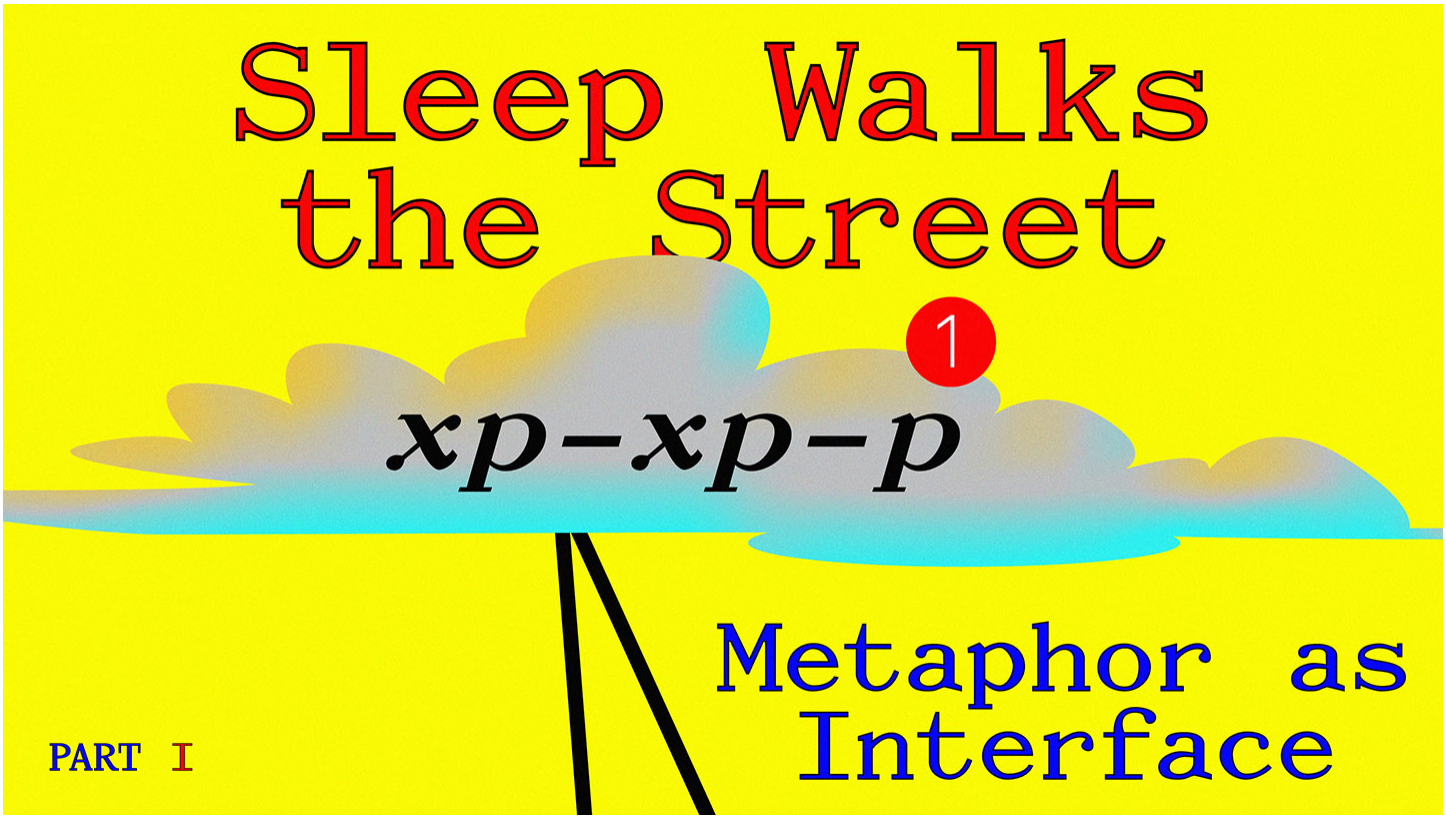
—Eugene Ostashevsky, from *The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi*, 2017

Metahaven

Sleep Walks the Street, Part 1

The linguist and philologist Victor Klemperer once noted that words can be "like tiny doses of arsenic" that are "swallowed unnoticed."[1] Klemperer, who was Jewish, hinted at his own, unwitting adoption of Nazi jargon, which was apparent from his use of terms such as "extermination" and "work deployment," and collectivities such as "the Russian" and "the Jew." In his seminal 1947 book, *Language of the Third Reich*, Klemperer recorded changes in everyday language during the Weimar Republic, the Nazi era, and the ensuing German Democratic Republic. A professor of French literature at the University of Dresden who lived through the seismic political shifts of the first half of the twentieth century, Klemperer initially tried to hold on to his existence by strictly clinging to academic work. "I buried myself in my profession," he wrote. "I tried to cut myself off from the present entirely." But it would become impossible to maintain any distance. He was barred from his job, prohibited from using the library, deported from his home, and deployed into factory labor. It was due to his marriage to a German woman, and later, to a coincidence involving a misspelling of his Jewish last name (a doctor's handwriting on a medicine bottle reading "Kleinpeter" instead of "Klemperer")[2] that he survived the Nazi regime.

Klemperer resorts to arts of noticing[3] and literary erudition to examine the ways in which certain words, phrases, syntax, and semiotics permeated—and so created—the language of the Third Reich. Most of Klemperer's encounters weren't with fanatical party ideologues, but with everyday people. Often they were his half-friends and acquaintances. Their unwitting usage of Nazi phraseology



demonstrates the power that these linguistic motifs possessed (and continue to possess) to emanate and sustain a politics, even and especially when the subjects at hand would deny there being one. A series of awkward gaffes that runs through the book demonstrates this. For example, Klemperer works in a factory that produces envelopes. He befriends a coworker, Frieda, who helps him with his envelope machine, and even talks to him sometimes, which is prohibited. At some point, Klemperer confides to Frieda that his wife is sick.

The next morning, he writes,

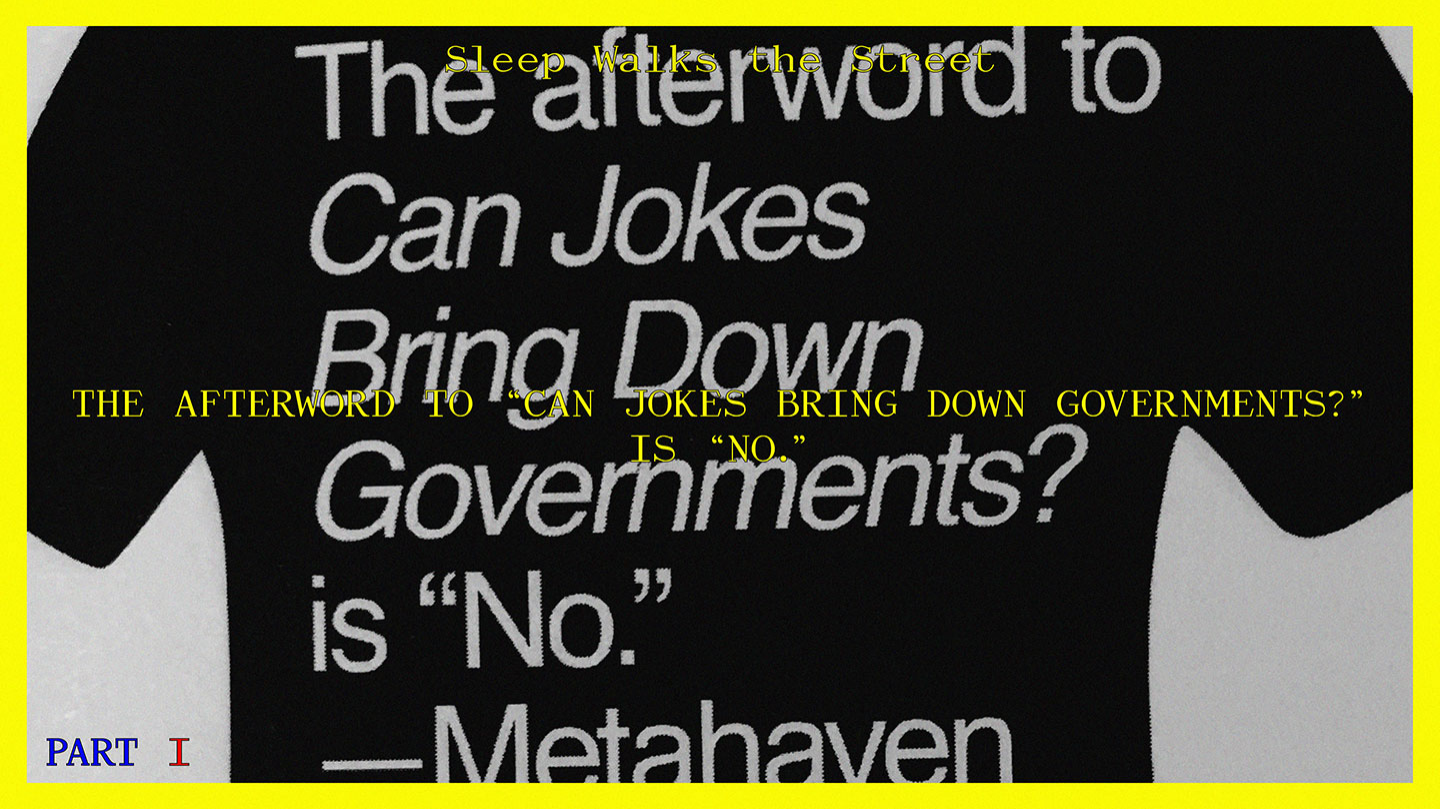
> I found a big apple in the middle of my machine. I looked over to Frieda's workplace and she nodded to me. A little later she was standing next to me: "For Mama with my best wishes." And then, with a mixture of inquisitiveness and surprise: "Albert says that your wife is German. Is she really German?"

"The pleasure in the apple was gone," notes Klemperer. "This Sancta-Simplicitas soul, whose feelings were entirely un-Nazi and humane, had been infected by the most fundamental ingredient of National Socialist poison."[4] Indeed, the notion that a "proper" German must be an Aryan was an idea that permeated Nazi ideology. Yet a similar obsession with taxonomy exists within racist practice at large. In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Gloria Wekker describes a visit by Jonathan Jansen—a black academic and dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Pretoria, South Africa—to Utrecht University in the Netherlands. A Dutch colleague asks Jansen "without batting an eyelid": "Are you really the dean ...? Is that so because you are good or because you are black?"[5]

Metaphor as Interface

Klemperer absolved most of his subjects of Nazi fundamentalism. Instead, he argued, it was all about those small doses of arsenic: the words themselves—the ways in which fallacies become repeated, then slowly but surely accepted as commonplace expressions. In Wekker's anecdote, we find a white academic unable to face the possibility of a university dean being both good and black. The cognitive shortcut that appears in the academic's response is backed up in words found in everyday Dutch language. Wekker mentions the pejorative *excuustruus,* the "female version of a token appointee."[6] Variations of this word also include *excuusneger* ("excuse ni**er"), a pejorative used in mainstream discourse in the Netherlands as recently as 2018 to indicate the black version of a token appointee.[7]

Though Klemperer does not point this out explicitly, many of the predominant motifs of Nazi rhetoric engendered metaphors, metonyms, and allegories that functioned to



Our afterword to Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? (Strelka Press, 2013) as published in Ingo Niermann and Joshua Simon (eds.), Solution 275-294: Communists Anonymous (Sternberg Press, 2017).

construct their own particular versions of reality, the enemy, and the world. Often mischaracterized as colorful or jokey language, all three of these rhetorical figures are essentially methods of disfiguration. Far-right politicians today take pride in their use of metaphor—especially when they incite violence. As recently as late September 2019, footage leaked of UK prime minister Boris Johnson defending his use of military metaphors around Brexit. Johnson exclaimed to a cheering crowd: "Do you think it's okay for me to call [the European Union's Brexit bill] the 'surrender act'? Am I fighting a losing battle to use these military metaphors or should I stick to my guns?"[8] Days earlier, Johnson had compared, at the UN General Assembly, the stretched-out Brexit process to the torment of Prometheus. This allegory had been reported upon as being "joking,"[9] yet what concerns us here is the *epistemological erosion* that takes place through the near-constant replacement of realities with rhetorical manipulations, and their amplification. Rhetorical construction can take on the role of a cognitive placeholder, a closed caption or subtitle already formed and available to overlay the reality it refers to. We can say that the metaphors and other rhetorical figures in question are becoming more *scalable*, just as in the Nazi era, when they could influence what a whole country was and wasn't thinking. As the politics of public space has been, by and large, replaced by the politics of digital platforms and smartphone apps, is it still correct to see metaphor, metonymy, and allegory as mere oratory instruments? Perhaps not. Indeed, they have exceeded the oratory purposes they had in city-states. Today's pervasive planetary overlay of social media lends to them a role as *interfaces* with reality—understood narrowly, in Lev Manovich's technical terms, as designating "ways to represent … and control the signal," but also more broadly, as ways to format and constrain a public's encounter with realities that are, at the same time as being represented, obscured.[10] Political metaphor may be running afoul of us in ways not dissimilar to financial derivative products that triggered the 2008 financial crisis. Both rely on an ever-increasing distantiation between their "product" (derivative/metaphor) and "reality" while pertaining to the performative "realness" of the statement itself: in the case of the derivative, the obligation to pay; in the case of metaphor, the obligation to "deliver" the political reality that the rhetoric prescribes.

Child's Play

Is there a way out of this?

This essay is the first in a series concerned with this question. The title of the series—"Sleep Walks the Street"—is a quote from a children's poem by the Russian

Dutch far right conservative politician Thierry Baudet, of Forum for Democracy (FvD), delivers a speech rife with doomsday metaphors, intensely subtitled on an associated YouTube account. Baudet, known for his close allegiance to far right and white supremacist figures, praises "boreal Europe," a phrase with a long and notorious history within the European extreme right and its rhetorical apparatus. (Klemperer had observed the verb aufnorden ("to nordify") being a Nazi term for changing the names of cities with Slavic or Lithuanian signatures into names that sounded "German," see Language of the Third Reich, 83.)

author and absurdist poet Alexander Vvedensky (1904–41), whose work we will examine in Part 2.[11] We are concerned with the (mistaken) reliance on constative and performative speech acts, and in that sense, with the mistaken reliance on language itself. We turn to poetic approaches that have attempted to work with this problem, often doing so under the duress of political and social turmoil. The epigraph of this essay—from Eugene Ostashevsky's book-length poem *The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi*—nicely summarizes the dilemma we find on our metaphorical path: "So we left language, but there was nowhere to go so we / came back." In a conversation we had with him last year, Ostashevsky said something apparently straightforward in response to a question of ours on absurdist poetry: "People don't say things because they believe them, they believe them because they say them."[12]

Indeed, one of the things that "absurdism" did was to undermine the expediency of all language that was meant to be believed simply because it was uttered . This is still unwelcome politically, whether it is the "realism" of official Soviet aesthetics, the "promise" underlying a financial product, or the "organic truth" of Nazi ideologists like Alfred Rosenberg, or indeed whether it is the memes, metaphors, and allegories of the far and populist right that freely borrow from their ideological predecessors: all of these doctrines and "interfacial regimes" rely on believing their own performative phraseology. This is true whether such regimes are messy or systematic, whether centrally imposed or adopted as part of news cycles, troll and bot attacks, hashtags, likes, and retweets. Klemperer writes that the Third Reich, with its permanent accumulation of "historic" events and "momentous" ceremonies, was "mortally ill from a lack of the everyday."[13] Something similar seems to be the case with far-right leaders in Europe, whose speeches, whether delivered half-shouting or not, are swollen with rhetorical pomp that attempts to instill in the audience an idea of membership in some enormously important historical shift of tides. One way in which these speeches achieve their sense of inflated importance is by their heavy usage of metaphor.

Political Technologies

The cognitive scientist George Lakoff once explained that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[14] Fredric Jameson has written about allegory in a similar manner, explaining that in it, "the features of a primary narrative are selected ... and correlated with features of a second one that then becomes the 'meaning' of the first."[15] Indeed, conceptual substitutions of one thing for another thing can overwrite, and thereby erase, the possibility of an encounter with the first. Rather than being instances of clever wordplay to entertain or convince some Greek polis, metaphors, metonyms, and allegories have become scalable political technologies obfuscating, undermining, and instrumentalizing the realities they represent. Of course, the political expedience of metaphors has been well documented. Kateryna Pilyarchuk and Alexander Onysko assert that conceptual metaphors "help [political actors] to both direct and constrain the audience's understanding by drawing on certain metaphorical themes."[16] Others have noted "the incredible potential of metaphor as a political tool."[17] But all this, while correct, is still understating what such linguistic operations comprise cognitively, and collectively, when supercharged by amplification on digital platforms. Rather than merely shifting a narrative frame, they tend to *become the narrative*. Some of this belongs to what is now sometimes called "memetic warfare,"[18] which, by its very emphasis on "meme," highlights the amplification and scalability aspects at the cost of taking into account the process of substituting fiction for reality (or of one story for another) that precedes the amplification.

Your Last My Own Private Idaho Causality

Let us, for the time being, resort to an example from the Dutch far right. In the right-wing media space of Dutch news outlets, resentment about Islam is often expressed by the same audience that also "object[s] to climate hysteria," which is what was formerly called climate-change denial. As a matter of ideological consistency, the same Twitter accounts that share Italian far-right demagogue Matteo Salvini's beach selfies are also tend to hate the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. The activities of trolls and bots aside,

Yet again.

Islamophobic resentment in the Netherlands takes place with little to no actual knowledge about Islam or its practitioners; the same can probably be said about the level of knowledge regarding climate science. For a convincing assessment of the ways in which Dutch mainstream culture processes Islam's otherness, Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence* is invaluable—especially so the lengthy sequence devoted to the former politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Interested as Wekker is in "the self that constructs these hysterical, excessive, repressed projections," we are interested in the self that creates (equally hysterical and excessive) cross-domain ideological consistency through metaphor.[19] The mainstream Dutch right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*—notorious for its collaborative stance with the Nazis during World War II—recently soldered anti-Islamic resentment and climate-change denial together when, in its official reporting in 2019, it began to refer to windmills as *klimaatminaretten* ("climate minarets"). *De Telegraaf* didn't invent the word. The far-right Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders appears to have coined it in or around August 2014; since then, specific credit for it has been given to the PVV politician Harry van den Berg.[20] When used by the news media, it initially appeared only as a citation between quotation marks.[21] But only two months after it was coined, the term was used without quotation marks by the *Telegraaf*-owned far-right "shockblog" *Geenstijl*.[22] By 2015, an extreme-right Belgian politician amplified the term on Twitter.[23]

"Climate minarets" navigates its way through culture: beginning as fringe jargon, it eventually becomes a commonplace term in mainstream media.

Collapsing metaphor and metonymy to describe devices that collect and convert wind energy into electricity, "climate minarets" typifies a linguistic and cognitive short-circuiting that is as interfacially fundamentalist as it is rhetorically expedient for the demographic that likes its climate-change denial Nespresso with a touch of lactose-free Islamophobia. Tellingly, its far-reaching stupidity may belong to a backlash against the deafeningly idiotic technological lingo of "smart cities." Yet under the aegis of free speech, phantasmatic concepts like "climate minarets" are exactly the *ignes fatui*—or "will-o'-the-wisp"—that Thomas Hobbes warned of when he discussed the danger of metaphors.[24] Klemperer describes a factory foreman who used be a doctor, until the Nazis threw him out of his former job. Since then he has "appropriated all of the Nazis' anti-Jewish expressions, and especially those of Hitler, and uttered them so incessantly that he himself could probably no longer judge to what extent he was ridiculing either the Führer or himself." The foreman allows some members of his work group to use the tram, while others have to travel on foot, giving rise to the foreman's distinction between "*Fahrjuden* (travel Jews) and *Laufjuden* (foot Jews)."[25] A similar word construction can be detected in the vocabulary of the columnist-turned-politician Annabel Nanninga, a representative for the Dutch far-right Forum for Democracy (FvD) party. Nanninga referred to refugees drowning in the Mediterranean as *dobbernegers* (float ni**ers). In her original use of the word—in 2014—representative Nanninga called the "common *dobberneger*" by a fake Latin name, "*Nigris flotillas vulgaris*," like an animal species.[26] In a tweet posted on April 14, 2015—and since deleted—Nanninga wrote: "*Illegalen en dobbernegers: we zijn te beschaafd dus ze blijven komen*" ("Illegals and float ni**ers: we are too civilized, so they keep on coming").[27] Rather than performing on the level of expressing "opinion," provoking "debate," or enacting "free speech"—the levels at which a liberal politics conventionally assesses and classifies expressions such as these—the *dobbernegers* metaphor functions more like an interface. While its author (Nanninga) is absolved from any direct responsibility with regard to its ethics (because free speech, etc.), the word operates in a transformative relationship to its underlying epistemic reality. Just like *klimaatminaretten*, for the recipient the vacant space of knowledge, curiosity, or sensing is occupied with "ideas," indeed heavily "interfacing" the now-overwritten, obscured epistemic reality with a particular "meaning."

Against the Precarity of Life, the Security of the Interface

The political effect of a term like *dobbernegers* is heavily predicated on its distribution through digital platforms. It appears as if it has been designed and tailored to interface with reality in compliance with the specific panel of instruments that users have when interacting with content and ideas on a digital platform. We will refer to this, as a whole, as an "interfacial regime"—a term coined by Benjamin H. Bratton in his 2016 book *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. We use the term "interface" here in the same way as one would think of a software navigation panel or a dashboard—or for that matter, a radio host or AI persona that takes the place of a visual interface in the aural spectrum of interaction with computers. The idea that interfaces "have" "neutrality" is

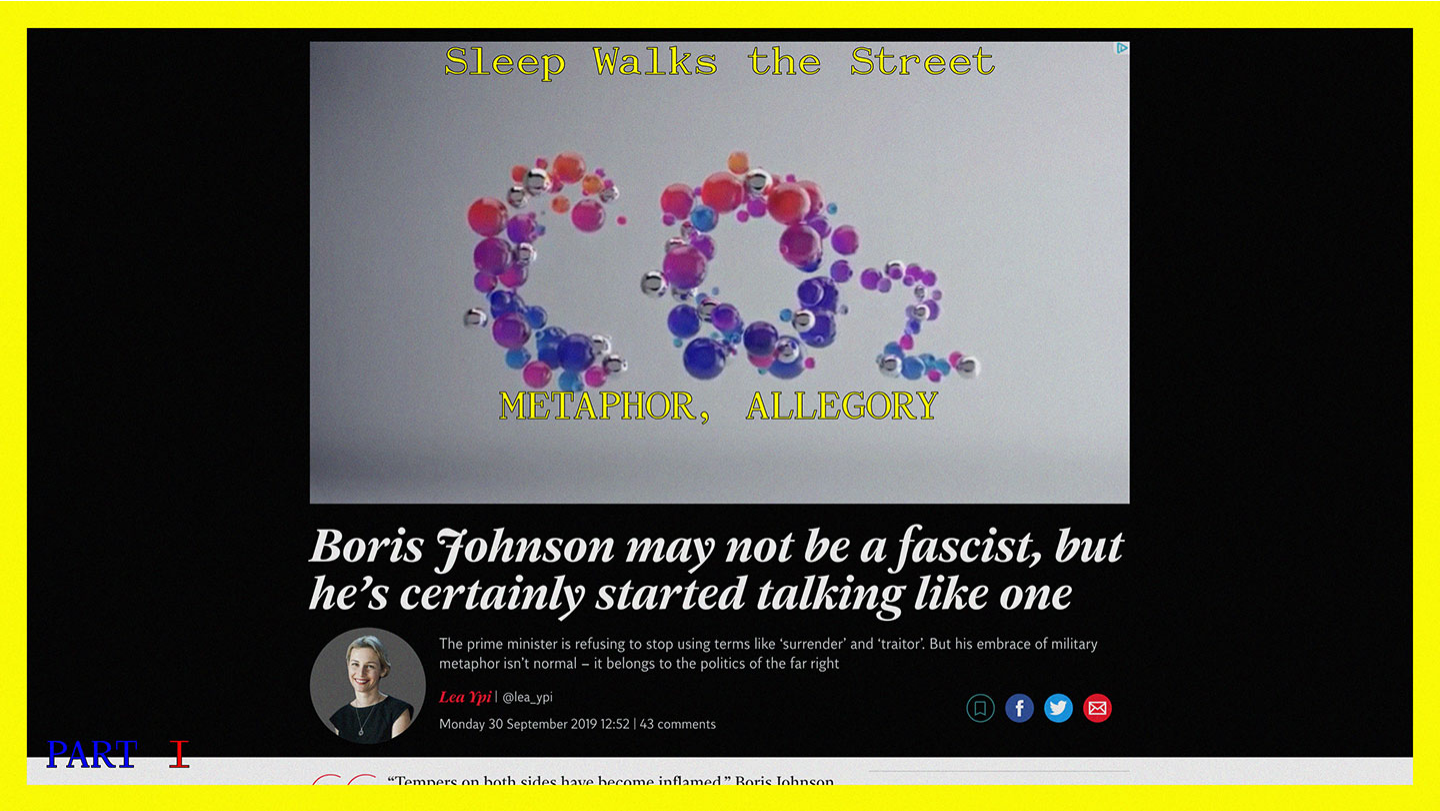
A trash can on the streets of Hamburg, Germany, 2019, is emblazoned with a text balloon that says "your papers, please!" The phrase—likely unwittingly—applies the coercive language of border crossings, ID checks, etc., as a recent (and relatively arbitrary) example of how ideological language transpires from one domain to another.

ludicrous, as any fan of Dieter Rams–designed radio sets will readily acknowledge, as will anyone who rated Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* above-average. "The operating system may exist as an executable on disk, but it also exists phenomenologically as a metaphoric, cybernetic interface: the 'desktop.'"[28] Alexander Galloway's characterization of operating systems appears to qualify the ways in which metaphors reach beyond accountability and move us into unknown realms with regard to the interface and its consequences. Indeed, "the fact that abstraction and figuration do exist in software (the interface metaphor of the 'desktop' as functional emanation of source code ...) demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of a technological apparatus that is, admittedly, grounded in ... deterministic mathematical language."[29]

What happens in interfaces though, with their buttons and controls and their logistics, or their Elizas or Siris or Alexas, is perhaps the last form of direct causation that users will see happening in their lifetimes: against the precarity of life, the security of the interface. While generally unable to control income equality, pensions, the climate, wars, economic recessions, asteroids hitting objects in space including earth, the world resetting to its post-Permian state, tank battles, and many other things, our interactions with interfaces can cause digital objects and their "underlying" realities to be liked and disliked, blocked, muted, seen and unseen, ordered, eaten, ridden, unpacked, had, discovered, found, traced, wanted ...

George Lakoff singled out, in a short 2016 assessment of metaphors used during the US presidential election, then-candidate Donald J. Trump's preference for "direct causation" over "systemic causation." There is a key parallel with the workings of the interface here. The comparatively more nuanced model of "systemic causation" recognizes chains of direct causes, interacting direct causes, feedback loops, and probabilistic causes contributing to a given situation. Acknowledging systemic causation or complexity does not give users the same primary satisfaction as having ordered an Uber, booked a flight, received a "like," or received a new vacuum cleaner from Amazon. While systemic causation can explain things, it cannot create the same endorphin shot. According to Lakoff,

> Systemic causation in global warming explains why global warming over the Pacific can produce huge snowstorms in Washington, DC: masses of highly energized water molecules evaporate over the Pacific, blow to the Northeast and over the North Pole and come down in winter over the East coast and parts of



This page from The Independent website shows an ExxonMobil ad about "green energy by reducing C02 emissions out of fossil fuels" prior to footage of Boris Johnson, the current British PM.

> the Midwest as masses of snow.

He continues: "Many of Trump's policy proposals are framed in terms of direct causation." Indeed, here, in the logic of direct causation,

> the cure for gun violence is to have a gun ready to directly shoot the shooter. To stop jobs from going to Asia where labor costs are lower and cheaper goods flood the market here, the solution is direct: put a huge tariff on those goods so they are more expensive than goods made here.[30]

Actions facilitated by interfaces, such as driving cars, ordering cab rides, paying for food, liking and disliking pictures and people and stories, voting (when it happens on a computer), and many more such actions, can only be done in tandem with processes of reduction. We suggest that in metaphor, metonym, and allegory, reality is not merely expediently manipulated to make a rhetorical point, but somehow also *really* lost. Klemperer noticed that during the Nazi era, there was an exponential growth of "technical expressions being applied to non-technical areas, in which they then function as a means of bringing about mechanization. In the German language this was only very rarely the case before 1933."[31] He asks:

> Should it really be considered Romantic when Goebbels misrepresents a trip to the bombed cities in the west by claiming that he who had originally intended to instill courage in the victims had in the end himself been "recharged (*neu aufgeladen*)" by their unshakeable heroism?[32]

The ideology "inside" such language has become entirely commonplace to us. At every airport, we encounter curvilinear-shaped booths where we can "reboost" [*sic*] ourselves. The ideas of "recharging" or "resetting" our skin, of "recharging" our energies or youthful appearances—all of it is a long-lasting new normal to us. But we may well think of this as belonging to the *longue durée* of interfacial regimes. Summarizing the proliferation of metaphorical mechanical and technical terms instrumentalizing their underlying realities, Klemperer writes: "You can see and hear the button at work"—that is, the interface.[33]

Bratton coins the term "interfacial regime" to denote a

This page from The Independent website shows a video of Johnson gesturing. The article critiques Johnson's usage of metaphors.

variety of ways in which interfaces constitute a political and ideological apparatus striving for consistency. While "the *Interface* layer describes the projective, perceptual cinematic, semiotic layer on a given instrumental landscape, including the frames, subtitles, navigable maps, pixelated hallucinations, and augmented realities through which local signification and significance are programmed," its "power (and danger) is [the] remaking of the world through instrumentalized images of totality; it is what gives any interfacial regime even a politico-theological coherency and appeal."[34] This seems very much the case for the different computational platform ecologies "within which" information is deemed to be true or significant. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are all explicitly associated and involved with processes of political and ideological cognitive short circuiting—for example, through disinformation campaigns, hyper-targeted ads, trolls and bots, algorithmic suggestion and autoplay, as well as resultant "filter bubbles." As such, they act as interfacial windows in which that which is visible passes for "the world." And, according to Bratton, "as multiple interfaces congeal or are deployed as strategically particular interfacial regimes, they push toward naming everything that is visible to its scope."[35] In other words, some of the inhabitant objects of the interface are not so much its buttons and controls, nor its corporate colors and modes of display and interaction, but rather materials in them that bear on the interface's potential to amplify and distribute—materials such as low-res image hoaxes, former forms of "satire," remnants of archaic pasts, deepfakes, Salvini selfies, Trump's hair, and clouds of words that settle in our collective memory only to erode it from inside. All of these, and all of them together, constitute a memetic-cognitive interfacial complex that deters users from further examining the hard-to-reach "underlying" materials. Hence, the subjects of our investigation, and participating factors in interfacial regimes, are not only words but also word-pictures, image macros, subtitled images, subtitles and closed captions themselves, and even words and images or their combinations as featured on the metaphorical "buttons" of apps and software platforms—thus, a field crossing from metaphor to meme to allegory to user interface. The engagement with mobile phones/smartphones as interfaces is relevant here structurally because they bring us interfacial realities that we cannot separate ourselves from without divorcing ourselves first from digital communication as a whole. The idea of the mobile phone itself, and what it means both metaphorically and physically to always carry its embodied ideas/metaphors with us, remains unexamined, principally because the connection that overloads us with metaphors has not yet been diagnosed as one that is epistemologically critical in cognitive terms.

Augmented realities. Still from Metahaven, The Sprawl (Propaganda about Propaganda), 2015.

A further parallel can be drawn between interfaces as technological products using language, and techno-financial products whose operations are so unclear, yet complex, that they appear to "run away" with themselves, beyond their creators' abilities to control them.

The media scholar Arjun Appadurai had identified the 2008 financial crash with the derailment of the "promise" at the heart of most gift rituals. Since this promise is a performative speech act and a key component of contracts and contract law, the reality of the promise—its keeping—is made "real" or actual by the performance. Appadurai's assessment of the financial crisis is that of a "failure of language"—the language through which the promise is enacted. Appadurai sees the promise as an "illocutionary speech act that creates the reality it refers to by its very utterance."[36] By commanding the reality that it proclaims to exist, the promise becomes a precondition for further promises, in which dividuation (the separation of the whole into parts) plays a key role. Through partitioning and re-bundling, derivative financial products were promises chained to prior promises. Appadurai illustrates his claims by showing that the failure of language in the derivative mainly lay not in each individual

promise made for a specific financial product, but rather in the chain of contracts that followed, in which there was increasing distance between initial contracts and derivatives built from it. Appadurai asserts that "any sequence of ritual action acquires its reverberative, amplificatory, and rippling effect on ordinary life by building on a series of links between things that resemble one another and things that are actually connected (as parts, components, or extensions) to one another." He continues: "It is [the] 'dynamic replication' through metaphor and metonym that may be the most important way in which finance also achieves its amplificatory effects."[37]

relationship to reality, ridiculing the performance of rhetorical gesturing to then have one's *telos* and eat it too—and in the processes of lyrical ridicule and negation, ending up, paradoxically, in premodern philosophical territory. Whether documentary, absurdist, or lyrical in approach, what holds these practices together are acts of disbelief in the stated constative and performative functions of concepts and words. Klemperer wrote his *Language of the Third Reich* in an involuntary banishment from society. Indeed, he made his most striking observations only after the Second World War, when, resuming his teaching job, he met many young people in his classroom who wanted to get away from Nazism, but were unable to do so, as their language was still imbued

Analogy and allegory: "Ebola the ISIS of biological agents?" Still from Metahaven, The Sprawl (Propaganda about Propaganda), 2015.

Are Metaphors Too Big to Fail?

What if (political) language itself, supercharged via its social media amplifiers, is going the way of the derivative—the credit default swaps that, as Appadurai claims, brought the economy down in 2008 through the "failure" of its metaphors? As we will see in Part 2 of this essay series, for Eugene Ostashevsky, as well his predecessors in the Russian poetry group OBERIU (the Union for Real Art), there could not have been a "true" or "real" promise at all. Strikingly, at moments of structural political change, and in the historical context of seismic ideological and political shifts, artists as well as scholars have aimed to question language itself and hence its

with its expressions. Thus, the language of the Nazis was prolonged long after the regime was supposedly over and done with. Today, there is ample proof that it never went away.

The *Language of the Third Reich*'s very partial systematicity is also its undeniable strength. A diary—the blueprint for the book—would become its writer's lifeline, indeed showing how in a situation of utter despair, nothing could stop him from beginning again and taking in all that was necessary to document and remember during the moment itself. The diary was

> a balancing pole … without which I would have fallen down a hundred times. In times of disgust and despondency, in the dreary monotony of endless routine factory work, at the bedside of the sick and the dying, at grave-sides, at times when I myself was in dire straits … and when my heart was literally breaking—at all these times I was invariably helped by the demand that I had made on myself: observe, study and memorize what is going on—by tomorrow everything will already look different, by tomorrow everything will already feel different; keep hold of how things reveal themselves at this very moment and what the effects are.[38]

X

The work of **Metahaven** consists of filmmaking, writing, and design. Films by Metahaven include *The Sprawl: Propaganda About Propaganda*(2015), *Information Skies* (2016), *Hometown* (2018), and *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* (2018). Recent solo exhibitions include "Version History" at the ICA London (2018), and "Earth" at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2018). Recent group exhibitions include "Ghost:2651" Bangkok (2018), the Sharjah Biennial (2017), and the Gwangju Biennale (2016). Recent publications by Metahaven include *PSYOP* (2018, edited with Karen Archey), and *Digital Tarkovsky* (2018).

1
Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich* , trans. Martin Brady (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15.

2
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 86.

3
The term "arts of noticing" appears in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* as a way to describe one's perception of the environment under precarious circumstances. It applies to Klemperer's methods of observing and subsisting amid the Nazi context. No longer able to carry out knowledge-gathering and knowledge-production from a position of privilege (such as an academic post), Klemperer's mode of observing and writing is fundamentally touched by precarity and scarcity, as is the necessity to maintain brittle bonds with others whose political beliefs are sometimes all but certain.

4
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 98.

5
Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016), 74.

6
Wekker, *White Innocence*, 74.

7
In 2013, television host Humberto Tan, after having been invited to host a late-night talk show on Dutch commercial network RTL, defended himself against being called an *excuusneger*. See https://www.bndestem.nl/overig/humberto-tan-ik-ben-geen-excuusneger~ab60ea26/ (in Dutch). As late as 2018, fashion entrepreneur Olcay Gulsen criticized the Dutch television system for being too white, pointing at the presence of merely a single *excuusneger* on its channels. See https://www.telegraaf.nl/entertainment/1781549/olcay-vindt-tv-wereld-extreem-blank (in Dutch). In saying so, Gulsen unwittingly affirmed that the perpetuation of a racist term can happen independently of political views—something Klemperer set out to prove in his book. The idea that words like *excuusneger* amount to racism has, strangely, been subject to denial, perpetuating the idea that race and racism are at play in all former colonial powers *except the Netherlands* —as Wekker points out, "essentially by acclamation, because we say that is the case." See Wekker, *White Innocence* , 79.

8
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W806uuJm4eU .

9
See https://twitter.com/michellenichols/status/1176693293457051649 .

10
Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 155.

11
As we will see in more detail in Part 2, the term "absurdism" does not entirely cover what Vvedensky and his artistic contemporaries were doing both artistically and philosophically.

12
Metahaven, "Pirates, Parrots, Poetry: Conversation with Eugene Ostashevsky," in *PSYOP: An Anthology* , eds. Metahaven and Karen Archey (Koenig Books, 2018), 78.

13
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 45.

14
George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

15
Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (Verso, 2019), 4–5.

16
Kateryna Pilyarchuk and Alexander Onysko, "Conceptual Metaphors in Donald Trump's Political Speeches: Framing his Topics and (Self-)Constructing his Persona," *Colloquium: New Philologies* 3, no. 2 (2018).

17
Bryan Meadows, "Distancing and Showing Solidarity via Metaphor and Metonymy in Political Discourse: A Critical Study of American Statements on Iraq During the Years 2004–2005," *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines* 1, no. 2 (2007).

18
Jacob Siegel, "Is America Prepared for Meme Warfare?" *Motherboard* , January 31, 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W806uuJm4eU .

19
Wekker, *White Innocence*, 11.

20
See https://twitter.com/radiobakker/status/638658420816674816 (in Dutch).

21
See https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/180304/Klimaatminaretten-PVV-steunt-strijd-tegen-windmolens-Ossendrecht (in Dutch).

22
See https://www.geenstijl.nl/4151751/nutteloos_windmolenpark_vijf_m/#comments (in Dutch).

23
See https://www.geenstijl.nl/4151751/nutteloos_windmolenpark_vijf_m/#comments (in Dutch).

24
Indeed, "Metaphors, Tropes, and other Rhetoricall figures" may be "lawfull to say," yet "in reckoning, and seeking of truth, such speeches are not to be permitted." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Penguin Classics, 1982), 114–15.

25
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 199.

26
See https://www.geenstijl.nl/3911571/het_is_weer_lente_de_grote_ove/ (in Dutch).

27
"Annabel Nanninga, lijsttrekster FvD Amsterdam," https://valsepianobaudet.noblogs.org/ .

28
Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Polity, 2012), 72.

29
Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 74.

30
George Lakoff, "No One Knows Why Trump is Winning. Here's What Cognitive Science Says," *Evonomics* , 2016 https://evonomics.com/lakoff-no-one-knows-why-trump-is-winning/ .

31
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 157.

32
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 160.

33
Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* , 159.

34
Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack* (MIT Press, 2016), 71, 229.

35
Bratton, *The Stack*, 229.

36
Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 149.

37
Appadurai, *Banking on Words*, 130.

38
Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich* , 10.

Sven Lütticken

Toward a Terrestrial

The specter of communism was the specter of the International. The International Workingmen's Association (the First International) wasn't created until 1864, but the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* had already noted that the uncontainable, transnational nature of the threat of revolution had forced the European powers "into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies."[1] The *Communist Manifesto* largely reverts to discussing communism in the context of the nation-state, but Europe's empires were concerned precisely because the haunting was not containable—it disregarding national borders, the real-life embodiment of this spectral spread was the media of print and of steam travel, allowing for the dissemination of ideas and of agitators and organizers.

Thus, the International was a figment before it became an official organization, or a series of more or less successful approximations of such an organization. After the end of the International Workingmen's Association following the 1872 Marx/Bakunin split, the Second International was founded in 1889, becoming increasingly reformist and collapsing when the socialist parties rallied behind their national governments and armies at the outbreak of WWI in 1914; the Moscow-led Third International or Comintern tried to organize the world revolution from 1919 on, retreating to a defense of Soviet interests with Stalin's "Socialism in One Country" state policy in 1925–26, and organizing the antifascist Popular Front in the 1930s; while becoming ever more marginal, Trotsky's anti-Stalinist Fourth International was a hothouse of activity in the late 1930s and 1940s, and spawned its own opposition with C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayeskaya's Johnson-Forest Tendency. Whereas the Trotskyists at least aspired to be an international mass movement, the Situationist International of the late 1950s and 1960s took the vanguard model seriously to the point of privileging the exclusion of inclusion. Even so, they frequently presented themselves as a reincarnation of the First International, down to the document of its dissolution, Debord and Sanguinetti's *The Real Split in the International*, which echoed Marx and Engels's *Fictitious Splits in the International*, published exactly one hundred years earlier (1872).[2]

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, when Jacques Derrida developed his hauntological inquiry into the "specters of Marx," he also conjured up a New International that would take the post–Cold War field of International Law as its point of departure, transforming it beyond its status as a neoliberal framework for US- and World Bank–led interventions.[3] By now, neoliberalism has spawned its dialectical product in the form of *transnational neofascism* in Europe and beyond.[4] The international of those who are often still euphemistically called "right-wing populists" is a decentralized network with powerful funders and strong nodes. Steve Bannon's Brussels-based organization to support Europe's

Andreas Siekmann, Wir fahren für Bakunin, 1992–1995.

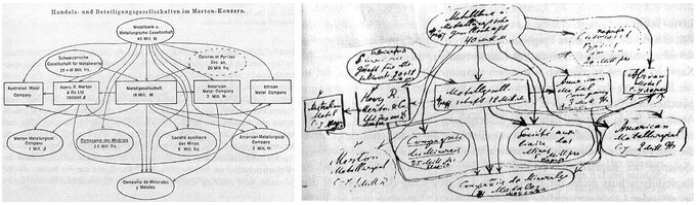
neofascist parties is an attempt to organize this informal international under American tutelage. Meanwhile, on the (artistic) left we see a reevaluation of the Popular Front of the 1930s, when the Soviet Union used the Comintern to orchestrate a Popular Front policy aimed at strengthening the left through alliances between communist and other leftist parties in various Western countries even while domestic repression was reaching ever greater heights.[5]

The specter of the International raises its head again—or the specter of the *Transnational*, for whereas the notion of the international might still be said to affirm the primacy of the nation state, that of the transnational accords primacy to the movement across borders. As Jonas Staal has put it:

> While the Comintern was brutally weaponized, the lack of a Transnationale today shows its disastrous consequences: authoritarian-capitalist states pursuing aggressive foreign policies dominate transnational trade and military agreements, and subsidize corporate actors that disproportionately influence our political and economic life. This leads to terrifying situations in which the Rojavans, who bravely fought and sacrificed to protect their multiethnic and multireligious region in North-Syria against the Islamic State while establishing their own feminist democracy in the process, are forced to ask support from the Trump regime as the Erdoğan dictatorship threatens with their massacre. As Kurdish Women's Movement activist and thinker Dilar Dirik argued, that would be the moment to call upon a "Left Air Brigade"—but in the post-Comintern world, there is no such thing.[6]

If we are "lacking a Comintern" in the fight against the Fascist Transnational, and more broadly the version of neoliberal capitalist "globalization" that is neofascism's raison d'être, then what could such an anti-fascist and anti-capitalist International or Transnational (or, as I will argue, *Terrestrial*) look like? Is any speculation on that point bound to be frivolous, a mere pipe dream by armchair Leninists? Thinking through the international to come as an *unrealistic necessity* can help us take stock of possibilities and impossibilities, necessities to contend with, and chances worth taking. Whereas Derrida sought

to appropriate and detourn international law, the equally problematic and compromised framework or medium here is the globalism of the financialized art world—that integral part of the neoliberal world order and its relentless wealth redistribution toward the top.



Robert's Liefmann's 1913 diagram of the Merton Metallgesellschaft, and Lenin's hand-drawn sketch based on that diagram. Both images feature in Daniel Damler's book Konzern und Moderne. Die verbundene juristische Person in der visuellen Kultur, 1880-1980 (2016).

You and What International?

Even before the *Communist Manifesto,* political radicalism was connected with international organizations and with sinister international conspiracies. The French Revolution and its radicalization, culminating in the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, could not *possibly* have been the result of a complex and overdetermined chain of events. It *had* to have been the work of devious conspirators. In this context, eighteenth-century conspiracy theories about the Jesuits, the Freemasons, and the Bavarian Illuminati came in handy. "Revelations" about secret Illuminati guidance in the Revolution by the conman Gagliostro, the sensational potboiler *Tombeau de Jacques de Molay*, which traced a conspiracy going back to the Knights Templar, and Augustin de Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, created a powerful narrative.[7]

Meanwhile, some small-scale conspiracies were actually underway. In 1796, under the Napoleonic Directoire, Gracchus Babeuf and a group of coconspirators create a *directoire secret du salut public* which aimed to reinstate the 1793 constitution and radical equality. One of the key participants, the Italian Filippo Buonarotti, sought to realize this program across Europe through his contacts in Italy, Holland, and elsewhere. The conspirators were quickly rounded up by Napoleon's police. Babeuf was killed, and Buonarotti embarked on a checkered career as the world's first professional revolutionary, making the obscure 1796 *Conspiration pour l'egalité* well known through an 1828 book, and serving as a role model for another nineteenth-century conspirator: Blanqui.[8] It was precisely this model of revolution as a putsch by a small gang of conspirators that Marx rejected in favor of mass organization. But what *kind* of organization?

There is a long history of anarchist Marx-bashing that puts him in the corner of authoritarianism, with Bakunin as his libertarian counterpart. This is a self-serving distortion of the historical record. Bakunin was a grotesque and disastrous throwback to the plotting, scheming, conspiratorial kind of revolutionary, appropriating right-wing conspiracist fantasies both for the purposes of self-aggrandizement (there was always a more secret order or directorate into which Bakunin could initiate you) and discrediting Marx in vituperative anti-Semitic attacks (alleging that the International had been taken over by a cabal of Jews in thrall to "their dictator-Messiah, Marx").[9] While Marx may have failed to reflect on the risk of perpetuating conventional organizational forms if the revolution was to initiate not just a takeover of the means of production but a qualitative leap in productive and social relations, Bakunin's aim "to ensure the Freedom of the sovereign individual Ego" meant that Bakunin's own ego and power ran unchecked.[10] Whereas Marx, in fact, valued democratic protocol, "Bakuninism in operation meant the imposition of its own authority in autocratic forms: the establishment of a special sort of despotism by a self-appointed elite who refused to call their dictatorship a 'state.'"[11] Furthermore, as *The Fictitious Splits in the International* rightly noted, Bakunin undermined the project of international solidarity by relapsing into an essentialization of races and the rhetoric of race war. Perversely, he projected his own racism onto Marx, whom Bakunin—the Pan-Slavist—presented as a Jewish Pan-Germanist in league with Bismarck.[12] Like many a contemporary race-baiter, Bakunin can certainly be said to have *lived* internationalism. In the mid-1990s, Andreas Siekmann's project *Wir fahren für Bakunin* proposed subverting the infrastructure of neoliberal globalization for an activist-artistic tour through the almost 260 cities where Bakunin hung his hat at some point.[13]

The divided International Workingmen's Association, which had come under intensified police scrutiny after the Paris Commune of 1871, was wrecked by Bakunin's stratagems and quickly folded after the self-destructive 1872 conference in The Hague. Founded in 1889, the Second International was not a centralized organization but rather a federation of national socialist parties and unions. While this means that it was clearly based in mass movements and could no longer very well be painted as a backroom conspiracy, the focus on national representative democracy in the end served to undermine it, with Bernstein's reformism being the inauguration of social democracy as we still (just about) know it. Social democracy regarded the nation-state as a "neutral" institutional framework (rather than an instrument of the bourgeoisie) that can be used for progressive purposes. This reorientation notwithstanding, the International maintained a commitment to internationalism, with the Russian and Japanese delegates symbolically shaking hands during the 1904 Amsterdam conference. When the threat of war loomed large in 1912, the internationalist position was reiterated—only for the dominant social-democratic elements within the international to fold

in 1914, rallying behind the various war efforts. By 1915, the Second International was dead, with both the social democrats and the radicals around Lenin and Luxemburg departing.

The First World War and the October Revolution were a shot in the arm for far-right conspiracy theories, with anti-Semitism cranked up to the max. The boundaries between popular fiction and political discourse were fluid. Having been forged in Paris during the 1890s, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had their greatest impact around this time. In John Buchan's 1915 novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (which is effectively the first spy novel, and became one of Hitchcock's most successful English films) the protagonist is informed that "capital has neither conscience nor a fatherland," and that the Jews are behind it all.[14] To be exact, the Jews were deemed to be behind *both* international finance capital *and* anarchism/communism; these are just different sides of the same conspiracy, and depending on their ideological profile, authors attacking the Jewish conspiracy may focus on one side or the other. In 1920, Henry Ford published the *Protocols* in an American edition, while Winston Churchill railed in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* that one could scarcely "exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews."[15] Drawing a genealogical line from Marx via Rosa Luxemburg to Emma Goldman and Trotsky, Churchill traced this sinister global Jewish conspiracy back in time to the Illuminati and the French Revolution. Here Churchill reveals his indebtedness to the older theories about the fall of the Ancien Régime, but of course his real interest lies closer to home, writing that they are the "mainspring of every subversive movement during the Nineteenth Century; and now at last this band of extraordinary personalities from the underworld of the great cities of Europe and America have gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads."[16] In a fairly grotesque case of karma, a 1941 Nazi poster included Churchill himself in a diagram of the worldwide Jewish Conspiracy.

Meanwhile, a different, but related, imaginary had been gripping authors on both the left and right: that of the (international) business conglomerate, or trust. The paradigmatic case was Rockefeller's Standard Oil, comprising many seemingly independent companies. Such trusts were often depicted in the media as octopuses with their tentacles reaching everywhere.[17] More sober-minded scholars drew up flowchart diagrams trying to make sense of the networks of interconnected companies. One such diagram, published in 1913 showing Wilhelm Merton's Frankfurt-based Metallgesellschaft, fueled British fears of a German-Jewish conspiracy, resulting in alarmist press reports and the protectionist non-ferrous metal bill of 1918.[18] Lenin studied, copied, and modified that same 1913 diagram during his Swiss exile in 1915. As Daniel Damler has noted, he added geographic names to indicate the headquarters of the various companies, turning the corporate chart into a map of imperialism.[19] For him, such an international trust was a crucial symptom of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. Imperialism, as defined by Lenin, equals the effect of finance capital:

> A report from the Austro-Hungarian Consul at San-Paulo (Brazil) states: "The Brazilian railways are being built chiefly by French, Belgian, British and German capital. In the financial operations connected with the construction of these railways the countries involved stipulate for orders for the necessary railway materials." Thus finance capital, literally, one might say, spreads its net over all countries of the world. An important role in this is played by banks founded in the colonies and by their branches. German imperialists look with envy at the "old" colonial countries which have been particularly "successful" in providing for themselves in this respect. In 1904, Great Britain had 50 colonial banks with 2,279 branches (in 1910 there were 72 banks with 5,449 branches), France had 20 with 136 branches; Holland, 16 with 68 branches; and Germany had "only" 13 with 70 branches. The American capitalists, in their turn, are jealous of the English and German: "In South America," they complained in 1915, "five German banks have forty branches and five British banks have seventy branches … Britain and Germany have invested in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in the last twenty-five years approximately four thousand million dollars, and as a result together enjoy 46 per cent of the total trade of these three countries." The capital-exporting countries have divided the world among themselves in the figurative sense of the term. But finance capital has led to the actual division of the world.[20]

When Lenin quotes the economist Heyman's analysis of trusts in terms of a "mother company" controlling "daughter companies" and "grandchild companies" so that "if holding 50 per cent of the capital is always sufficient to control a company, the head of the concern needs only one million to control eight million in the second subsidiaries," it is hard not to speculate that Lenin's Communist International took a leaf out of the book of finance capital as analyzed by that same Lenin a few years prior.[21] C. L. R. James noted that "each of the three great workers' internationals [corresponded] in form to a particular stage of capitalism."[22] The Leninist Comintern, then, was a quasi-corporate endeavor befitting the age of monopoly capitalism and imperialism.

The October Revolution gave the Russian party and state a clear head start. With communist movements and parties in other countries still in the process of disentangling themselves from social democracy, and with the

perspective of world revolution rapidly dwindling after 1920, the Bolsheviks all too eagerly infantilized the non-Russian parties, turning them into only seemingly independent local branches of what was de facto a political trust ruled from Moscow. Anti-colonial and black liberation struggles were instrumentalized as well, though for some time this instrumentalization seemed the least bad alternative to radicals such as George Padmore or Otto and Hermina Huiswoud. The rise of fascism caused the Comintern to waver in its support of anti-colonial struggle in favor of alliances and coalitions within democratic capitalist nations in the West. The groundwork for the Popular Front era was laid at the 13th Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in early 1933, and that same year *Negro Worker* editor George Padmore severed his ties with the Comintern precisely for what he saw as a betrayal of the anti-colonial cause.[23]

In France, where the Front Populaire was highly successful for a while, a central image was that of *les deux cents familles*. This political myth derived from the fact that the general assembly of the Banque de France used to be constituted by the two hundred largest shareholders. This was generalized into the notion that two hundred families pretty much controlled the entire economy of France.[24] Such a myth was obviously susceptible to fascist cooptation, as one local instance of the *jüdische Weltverschwörung*, but the left sought to use it as a motivating myth in the Front Populaire, providing an enemy (high finance) that appealed not only to workers but to a broader segment of society. One Front Populaire poster, with the slogans "Maıtres et valet," "Contre les 200 familles," and "Vive l'union du Front Populaire," shows a network of corporations and wealthy entrepreneurs funneling money towards the right-wing PSF party.[25] The image builds on a history of the graphic representation of trusts; the text identifies the two hundred families with "High Finance and Trusts." At the top is a tower labeled "City" and "Finance Internationale." From here continue direct connections to German Nazism, Franco, Italian fascism, Krupp and AEG, and to various French conglomerates and their shareholders.

Here, a Comintern-backed venture returns to Lenin's tracing of trusts during WWI. With its trickle-down of influence and corruption from the "masters" (the financiers and industrialists) to the "valet" (the PSF politician), the diagram shows the failure of bourgeois democratic representation. However, what about the Comintern's similarly hierarchic structure, with unacknowledged forms of control, with its "front organizations"? The Lenist-Stalinist Comintern mimicked the enemy all too well.

Sovereignty and Disregard

The anti-Semitic racialization of internationalism by reactionaries such as Churchill is no accident, nor is Bakunin's tendency to collapse class war back into race war. As Michel Foucault argued, modern historical consciousness emerged though the trope of race war. For the longest time, historical writing was power talking to itself: the history of sovereignty, in the service of sovereignty, glorifying the deeds of kings and the continuity of dynasties and empires.[26] In his 1975–76 lectures at the Collège de France, published as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault presented an ambitious genealogical account of the emergence of what we would now think of as "history proper." In eighteenth-century France, authors from the milieu of the reactionary aristocracy developed a historical myth about the "Barbarian" Celtic invasion of Gallo-Roman France as a weapon in a struggle against royal absolutism. For thinkers such as Boulainvilliers, the Franks—the Germanic invaders of Roman Gaul—were freedom-loving barbarians who liberated Gaul from Roman imperialism, thus becoming the true founders of France, whereas the modern French state represented a relapse into a foreign, Roman mode of government.[27] While Marxist historians have tended to associate the "rise of historical consciousness" with the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, culminating in the French Revolution, Foucault gleefully presents the reactionary French nobility as the key historical actor.[28]

Beyond France, Foucault goes back to seventeenth-century England, where during the reign of Charles I and the Civil War, Parliamentarians, Puritans, and Levelers invoked the Norman Conquest and idealized a pre-Norman, Saxon society in which laws were more just and the king's powers more circumscribed. Here, the invaders (the Normans) had not been the liberators but those who subjugated a more egalitarian and just indigenous society. Nonetheless, the English and the French scenario are both "counter-histories" about warring races that introduce "new characters" as the real historical subjects: the Saxons, Norms, Gauls, and Franks.[29] Against the new "historico-political discourse" of mid-seventeenth century England, Thomas Hobbes defended the old conception of sovereignty. Foucault argues that Hobbes wanted to "eliminate the conquest": "Leviathan's invisible adversary is the Conquest."[30]

In a response to the challenges leveled at royal sovereignty during the reign of Charles I and during the Civil War, Hobbes removes the issue of legitimacy from the equation. He presents two scenarios for the founding of a state: one can have a commonwealth by institution (in which the subjects choose their sovereign) or a commonwealth by acquisition (conquest).[31] Before the advent of an Enlightenment notion of popular sovereignty and constituent assemblies in the eighteenth century, the idea that European subjects had in any way "chosen" their sovereign was a strategic fiction that in fact gives all the

Andreas Siekman, Wir fahren für Bakunin, 1992–1995.

power to the sovereign, not to the people, who are condemned to follow their sovereign "representative."[32] In any case, it doesn't really matter whether we are dealing with "acquisition" or "institution." One way or another, the people are now tied to a sovereign (a king or, as a second-best option, some kind of committee) who holds all the cards. Intriguingly, Hobbes's scenario of "acquisition" provides a close parallel with Hegel's master-slave dialectic as interpreted by Kojève, and Foucault's retelling brings these to the surface.[33]

While Foucault dismisses Hegel as someone who performed an "authoritarian colonization" of historico-political discourse" by "[codifying] struggle, war, and confrontation into logic, or so-called logic, of contradiction," one should remember that Foucault's intellectual coming of age had coincided with the moment when the French reception of Hegel peaked, and he had close ties to a number of thinkers involved in this project.[34] As David Macey notes, during Foucault's formative years at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure, a certain French version of Hegel was dominant there, resulting in a spate of Hegelian theses (including Foucault's own). Kojève, whose lectures were published by Raymond Queneau in 1947, had a well-known spin on Hegel as "the theorist of the unhappy consciousness, of the master–slave dialectic and of the struggle unto death for recognition, and the anthropologist of desire."[35] Jean Hippolyte was another French Hegelian, with whom Foucault was in direct contact; and then there was Georges Bataille, with whose work Foucault engaged in depth. Bataille followed Kojève in his strong misreading of Hegel, which turned the master-slave dialectic from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* into a metahistorical myth not too dissimilar from the role played by the primeval horde in Freud: history began when, as a result of a primordial fight, the vanquished begged for mercy and accepted the life of a slave. However, whereas Kojève insisted that some kind of "universal and homogeneous state" would sublate the dialectic of masters and slaves and end history, Bataille

folded the Hegelo-Kojèvian state sovereignty back into the sovereignty of masters, as opposed to serfs/slaves.

In Hobbes, as read by Foucault, the primordial battle posited by Hegel-Kojève as the *beginning of* history becomes a battle *in* history. Nonetheless, the basic plot is the same: if the victors do not kill the vanquished but let them live, and the latter do not rebel, they thus renounce the risk of death and show "their preference for life and obedience."[36] Foucault here translates and amplifies part of chapter 20 of *Leviathan* into the sound of Kojève and Bataille:

> It is therefore not the defeat that leads to the brutal and illegal establishment of a society based upon domination, slavery, and servitude; it is what happens during the defeat, or even after the battle, even after the defeat, and in a way, independently of it. It is fear, the renunciation of fear, and the renunciation of the risk of death. It is this that introduces us into the order of sovereignty and into a juridical regime: that of absolute power. The will to prefer life to death: that is what founds sovereignty.[37]

The sovereign, or the master, is born when the opponent chooses to not die, and, following Kojève, becomes a slave; or, following Hobbes as read by Foucault, becomes the sovereign's subject. But what of those who do not even become full subjects? What of those whose condition is that of a colonized or enslaved subaltern, those who did not even count as proper subjects, as real humans? In modern European thought, the differences between various white (sub-)races paled in comparison when measuring and theorizing races from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, or the Americas.

By the early nineteenth century, after Napoleon, the triumph of cultural nationalism meant that history was now indeed written as the history of nations grounded in races and their intermixing. It is not so much that "the history of sovereignty" was replaced by "history as race war," as that sovereignty itself was racialized, with a focus on barbarian invasions, *Völkerwanderungen*, and racio-ethnico-cultural continuities across the centuries.[38] In one of the most popular novels of the age, *Ivanhoe,* Walter Scott presented a beguiling mix of characters, but arguably the real protagonists were various races. In Scott's own words, the novel dealt with

> the existence of the two races in the same country, the vanquished distinguished by their plain, homely, blunt manners, and the free spirit infused by their ancient institutions and laws; the victors, by the high spirit of military fame, personal adventure, and whatever could distinguish them as the Flower of Chivalry.[39]

If Enlightenment thought and the American and French Revolutions had redefined sovereignty as popular sovereignty ("We, the people"), Romanticism racialized the concept of the people, making "historico-political discourse" hegemonic. Throughout, the concept of race retained what Eric Michaud had called its "extreme porosity," often ill-defined and mixed with notions such as nation and ethnicity.[40]

Fluid specters such as the Nordic Race, the Germanic Race, and the Latin Race populated the writings of historians and art historians; art was seen as a symptomatic manifestation of essential Germanness, Nordicness, Latinness, etc. But those were the "civilized" races. While ostensibly focusing on the Saxons and Normans, in *Ivanhoe*, Scott keeps returning to Jews and black "Saracen slaves" as figures of the more or less absolute Other. Although Foucault notes that the counter-history of race war fed into nineteenth-century biological racism, he tends to treat the latter as a fairly forgettable phenomenon, and has little to say about colonialism—though he does quote the striking assertion by Adam Blackwood, in 1581, that "the Normans acted in England as people from Europe are now acting in America."[41] In the words of Sylvia Wynter, in a text that is virtually contemporaneous with Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, one could charge Foucault with an "oversight of the Friday relation"—that is, the centrality of the relation between colonizer and colonized Other (Robinson Crusoe's Friday) to Western capitalism.[42] Delving into the history of the terms "ethnos" and "ethnic" and discussing Wallerstein's account of the emergence of the world economy (the capitalist world-economic system) in the sixteenth century, Wynter suggests that

> the X factor of this mutation was the discovery of the New World; that is, the discovery of vast areas of land which in becoming the frontier of what was then still primarily a Christian civilization, transformed that group of people and of states into what we today call the West … The West became the We, and the people of the Periphery-states became the OTHER. But the point is that neither the We nor the Other now existed as autonomous entities. Both We and Other were now bound in a concrete relation, a hierarchical global relation.[43]

As Wynter notes, this "We" was defined by the ruling classes in relation to both (internally) ruled *classes* and (externally and internally) ruled *races*. Today, the Fascist Transnational everywhere stages a perverted class-race war: middle as well as working classes who feel that centuries of Western global dominance are coming to an end are given handy scapegoats. Keyboard warriors and white supremacist terrorists imagine themselves as

sovereign subjects whose disregard for others is justified by the fact that they are the master defenders of the white race that is the *real* sovereign, while other races are an undifferentiated mass of (potential) slaves. Embattled subjects reinvent themselves as foot soldiers of an international of (white) masters. Congresswomen of color are told by the American president to "go home." Migration is seen through the prism of "replacement theory"—basically, barbarian invasions masterminded by "Cultural Marxists." It's not just migrants but also women and the specter of LGTB "genderism" that can be used as a convenient enemy, and ultimately some phantom race of queer/black/Jewish "liberals" comes to take on the features of some alien invading race threatening "our way of life."

If the internationals of the nineteenth and twentieth century proposed a different "cut" in the social continuum than that effected by the right (class struggle as opposed to race war), today the challenge is to again effect a divergent redistribution of the sensible, in social and political terms—a cut across social and racial divides that scrambles neofascist essentialism. This means that one also has to challenge today's dominant social classifications, as opposed to becoming entrenched in some liberal or progressive sense of being "on the good side" and becoming not so much the fascists' worst nightmare, but their wet dream. If progressiveness is not just a lifestyle and a form of distinction but an emancipatory project and open offer, then what kinds of coalitions might be posited?

entrepreneur is marked by an economy of survival."[44] What forms of subjectivation does this generate, and what are the consequences for collaboration and association? According to a certain Frankfurt School analysis, it was the stinted subjectivity of subjects unable to develop into autonomous human beings that made the triumph of fascism possible. More recently, a neoliberal ideologization of the self-sufficient, entrepreneurial self or "sovereign individual" has fed into an online and offline culture of entitled (male, white) trolls and thugs—the yuppie as the larva of the fascist. When a sense of eroding privileges is essentialized, a life reduced to survival can quickly be translated into phantasms such as "white genocide." However, (seemingly) progressive forces are clearly not immune from the social pathologies of the age. The need for coalitions is constantly frustrated by jockeying for position through the construction of hierarchies of grief. In a volatile cultural economy, the accumulation of cultural capital often seems to prevail over the need to build infrastructures of coexistence.

Time and again, entrepreneurs of grief and victimhood assert their sovereign rights of subalterity, weaponizing historical violence as a unique selling point in the present. The growth of Jordan Peterson's zombie army seems to be regarded as only collateral damage, or as a boon for business. What is urgently needed is a socialization of the individuated sense of survival that would allow for the recognition of shared interests and the fostering of solidarity across *some* of today's highly mediated and carefully maintained divides. It is tempting to side with Jodi Dean when she argues for a shift from the victim to

Left: Eugène Delacroix, Combat de chevaliers dans la campagne, 1824. Oil on canvas. 81 cm x 105 cm. Photo: Louvre Museum/Wikimedia Commons; Right: Letterist International, "Construct Yourselves a Little Situation Without a Future," 1955. Leaflet.

The International and Which You?

Neoliberal self-entrepreneurism creates a sense of life-as-survival: "A society in which everyone is their own

the comrade. She writes: "Survivors experience their vulnerability. Some even come to cherish it, to derive their sense of themselves from their survival against all that is

stacked against them."[45] Years ago, in a different context, Elizabeth Freeman already questioned the turn toward loss and grief in queer theory, and warned that "melancholic queer theory may acquiesce to the idea that pain [is] the proper ticket into historical consciousness."[46] In contrast to identitarian victimhood, Dean claims that the "term 'comrade' points to a relation, a set of expectations for action. It doesn't name an identity; it highlights the sameness of those who share a politics, a common horizon of political action."[47]

Dean's insistence on working towards the "comrade" is valid and valuable—particularly her insistence that "'comrade' names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity. For communists, this sameness, equality, and solidarity is utopian, cutting through the determinations of capitalist society."[48] However, Dean's Leninizing stance would need as its dialectical counterpoint Bini Adamczak's critical reading of the (masculinist) forms of subjectivity and relationality that were promoted and produced by the Bolsheviks during and after the October Revolution.[49]

Among the more problematic features of Dean's account is her (performative?) confidence in the power of the comrade relation to cut clean through the accumulated and embodied weight of history, as congealed in the present. In 2019, as in 1968, 1917, or 1871, what is required is long and patient work *with* and *on* the human wreckage that is us: the all-too-human mutants and monsters of actually existing capitalism. Becoming-comrade is always a work in progress, and progress is never assured. The relation between survivor and comrade thus needs to be conceptualized in less dualistic and more dialectical terms.

The fight against the reduction of *life* to mere *survival* was one of the key tropes in the Situationist International's activities. At the height of the Cold War, this entailed not just a critique of consumerist, capitalist alienation in general, but also an attack on the imaginary of the nuclear bunker, on the "new aristocracy of the caves" that thought it could weather the nuclear winter.[50] On the other hand, the Situationist Asger Jorn also employed "survival" in a different register, not so much as a critique of capitalism but in a direct throwback to the nineteenth century. Pitting Nordic "Vandal" culture against Latin classical culture (and himself against Debord), Jorn searched for traces that would reveal the survival of this Nordic culture throughout the centuries, documenting graffiti and decorations in churches in the northwest of France to show " *survivances de l'influence nordique en Normandie*" long after the Vikings had integrated into French culture (becoming French-speaking Normans in the process, and going on to invade Britain).[51] Admonitions by experts that there is no proof for any of this did not deter him, nor did the fact that this way of reasoning had culminated in Nazi ideology, which reads any form of culture in racial terms: Rembrandt is great because he was so quintessentially Germanic, etc.

While the Situationist critique of the reduction of life to a managed bio-social survival needs to be distinguished from Jorn's romantic and essentialist hypostatization of Nordic cultural survival, today biological, social, and cultural survival become a blur. The popular success of Jimmy Nelson's obscenely titled photo project *Before They Disappear* can be read as a symptom. This is a throwback to a trope from the heyday of imperialism: the trope of the "vanishing races" that are doomed to disappear soon. Many of these cultures have in fact refused to follow this script. Why, then, the success of this generic *National Geographic* version of Edward S. Curtis? Perhaps there is a sense that more and more forms of life are now put in the position of the "vanishing races" and have to fight for survival, as more social, racial, or cultural groups begin to sense that they, too, may be threatened and endangered *ethnics*—endangered economically, but also ecologically, as a consequence of the very economy that tends to turn more and more humans into surplus labor.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had already asserted their internationalism by stating that

> the real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections. Only then will the separate individuals be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in a position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth (the creations of man).[52]

The slippage between "whole world" and "whole earth" here is suggestive. As Jean-Luc Nancy (who quotes this passage) has noted, capitalist "globalization" has "[circumscribed] the Earth more and more in a horizon without opening or exit," resulting in "a world where we only find a globe," or "an earth without sky."[53] The earth is the aboriginal ground that enables the world-historical process, and is transformed and wrecked by its dialectical violence.

While highly aware of this, as his remarks on soil depletion and colonial primitive accumulation show, Marx did not develop a systematic account of the dialectic of earth and world. The Capitalocene forces us to reconsider the question. From Bruno Latour, Déborah Danowski and Eudardo Viveiros de Castro to Kelly Oliver, among others, the earth has come into focus as the non-identical Other of the world—an Other that may resist or act up in ways not

Artist Jonas Staal's photo of a Kurdish demonstration (2015) and its recent use in a call to protest against the US shafting the Kurds.

foreseen. Latour and Danowski/Viveiros de Castro differentiate between Humans (the gas-guzzling inheritors of the "Moderns" and their state and corporate institutions) and whom they call the Earthbound or the Terrans, who are perhaps most fully incarnated in traditional, indigienous societies.[54] This is a twenty-first century version of history as race war or class warfare; the *real* political conflict would be that between the Terrans and their Human enemies in (trans)national guises. One way of looking at the Terrestrial is precisely as an organizational form for Terrans. In *Down to Earth,* Latour has also introduced an "attractor" called the Terrestrial, in contradistinction to three other such attractors: the Local, the Global, and the Out-of-this-World. This returns us to the familiar terrain of Sciences Po theoretical radicalism. If the Terrestrial is to be a political actor, as Latour claims, it needs to be understood precisely as the new International—as something to be built, as an artefact.[55]

Building and Branding the Terrestrial

Marx famously noted that what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is that the architect makes a conscious design, whereas the bee follows its instinct.[56] In the age of swarm intelligence and hive minds, we are less certain about this distinction—less certain about not being bees. No doubt the Terrestrial in some way also imposes itself on the humans that build it, and no doubt issues of nonhuman representation, of including "nonhuman comrades," are pressing.[57] Yet it is clear that in a constellation that includes other technological and environmental actors, humans have a particular capacity—or a need—to translate what may be conflicting imperatives into design, and to ask: If the Terrestrial must be built, how to go about this project?

The Terrestrial can have presence as a specter, as branding without much in the way of organizational or institutional infrastructure to back it up. We have seen that historically, the international was a myth or a conspiracy theory before it took on a degree of reality—and

internationals can always revert to that, or try to exploit their image as one tactic among others. After May '68, the Situationist International found itself turned into "a collective star" by media and hangers-on with a tendency to regard the upheavals as the result of a "worldwide plot by a handful of individuals," even as the SI as an organization was struggling to continue meaningful work. Always having opted for an exclusive, reductive membership to ensure they not become a hierarchical mass organization (even though some might argue that on its micro scale it still managed to be plenty hierarchical), the remaining Situationists (essentially Debord and Sanguinetti) decided to let the myth do the work. *The Real Split in the International* boasts that "from now on, Situationists are everywhere," and "the more famous our theses become, the more shadowy our own presence will be."

In recent times, the Invisible Committee has embraced mythmaking, leading to excited Fox News hosts waving *The Coming Insurrection* in front of the camera. At the same time, even while catering to conspiracist fantasies, the Invisible Committee is of course part of an ecosystem or network of groupuscules and movements. One way to think about the coming Terrestrial is in terms of a coalition of survivances, of *zones à defendre* in the Global South, the former West, and elsewhere: a loose coalition from which more public manifestations can emerge. A next step would be looking into networked forms for transnational organization, decision-making, and funding. As with previous internationals, the coming Terrestrial can only be an intervention in and modulation of existing (capitalist) infrastructures—not the networks of steam travel and trusts, but of cheap flights and cloud computing, with their destructive ecological consequences.

Crowdfunding the transnational may not be the biggest challenge. What would the mechanisms of decision-making be like? How much organizational centralization is needed on top of a decentralized technological infrastructure? How to get beyond Marx-vs.-Bakunin reenactments? How to marshal the intelligence of the hive mind and of volatile combinations of distinct individuals? Are there actually existing institutions and organizational structures that can be incubators of the Terrestrial, including in the art world, that playground of global finance capital? If the contemporary condition is a "disjunctive unity of present times," of different presents, then it come as no surprise that deepening and widening rifts traverse the field (or fields?) of art.[58] Various types of para-institutional organization-building and movements to decolonize or "liberate" existing institutions are so many attempts to exit a dominant and dismal version of Contemporary Art to create and maintain platforms and forums for futurity beyond and against futurism. This process involves the severing of alliances and the building of new alliances: becoming *Zeitgenossen*—comrades of time—with people, groups and forms of life outside of Contemporary Art.[59]

In an age when accelerationism—that geriatric disease of the European art-affiliated intelligentsia—hawks its retro-futurist fantasies, the transnational must not be another manifestation of accelerationist longing for the jetpacks of yesteryear. *Tomorrowland ist abgebrannt*. The accelerationist future is already here: the unfolding future of surveillance capitalism, of machine learning and predictive analytics, of relentless value extraction from the fabric of human (inter)actions. There is no earthly reason to believe that an acceleration and intensification of this history would result in an Engels-style leap from quantity to quality, would result in a dialectical self-overcoming of capitalism, before the planet has become uninhabitable for those who self-identify as *some kind* of human. The transnational needs a notion of futurity that is multiple and open to contradictions between different versions of the present—contemporaneity as anachronistic montage. As Yuk Hui suggests, it is crucial to ask

> what futures are still available for imagination and realization. If we identify Enlightenment thought with modern technology as an irreversible process guided by universality and rationality, then the only question that remains to be asked is: To be or not to be? But if we affirm that multiple cosmotechnics exist, and that these may allow us to transcend the limit of sheer rationality, then we can find a way out of never-ending modernity and the disasters that have accompanied it.[60]

If existing blockchain-based models such as the Distributed Autonomous Organization are essentially based on property and contracts, amounting to a "reinvention of the company form" in a Peter Thiel–scented ether of libertarianism, the question still remains whether anti-state technolibertarianism can provide some means for creating "a networked, self-sustaining framework for the development of consensus" whose distributed infrastructure offers some much-needed opacity for the preparation of public interventions[61] What Dan McQuillan writes of AI can be applied more broadly: "AI is currently at the service of what Bergson called ready-made problems; problems based on unexamined assumptions and institutional agendas, presupposing solutions constructed from the same conceptual asbestos ... We don't need autonomous machines but a technics that is part of a movement for social autonomy."[62]

Can the machinery of networked surveillance capitalism be used to foster forms of decision-making that would actually enable a "Left Air Brigade," as well as a myriad of less spectacular activities? What would the contemporary distributed version of Lenin's crypto-corporate Comintern be? That the questions are tentative and gauche (never

mind the possible answers) may be the strongest indication that these are the right questions. Asking and discussing them is one way of giving the specter a degree of reality and agency.

X

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Winston Churchill, "Zionism versus Bolshevism" (1920), quoted in in Ellen Engelstad and Mímir Kristjánsson, "The Return of 'Judeo-Bolshevism,'" *Jacobin*, February 16, 2019 https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/antisemitism-judaism-bolsheviks-socialists-conspiracy-theories . The full text of Churchill's article can be found on any number of neofascist websites.

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Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended,"* 95.

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Gutorm Gjessing, "Nord et Normandie," in Asger Jorn *, Signes gravés sur les églises de l'Eure et du Calvados* (Borgen, 1964), 79. See also Jorn's sprawling essay "Sauvagerie, barbarie et civilsation" in this volume (123–311), and the one dissenting voice: a single-page letter by Michel de Bouard, who insists that " *l'hypothèse de survivances du paganisme des Vikings* " is contradicted by all known historical sources (111).

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Hobbes already grappled with these issues, maintaining that inanimate things "cannot be authors," yet can be *personated* by "actors" under certain circumstances.

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Elvia Wilk

Ask Before You Bite

Mutual love is often thought of as mutual recognition: I see you for who you are and you see me back. But recognition is inevitably also a naming, a fixing, a pinning down. In order to recognize, you have to categorize, and categories are notoriously inflexible. Recognition, if understood as a projection that disallows the evolution of self and identity, becomes restrictive rather than liberating. However inadvertently, the recognition required for mutual love can easily slip into a form of control.

Jan Verwoert describes the slippage between love-as-recognition and love-as-control in an essay called "Masters and Servants or Lovers: On Love as a Way to Not Recognize the Other." He writes,

> To love the other, we believe, is the most intimate way to recognize the other, to get to know and understand who he or she really is … But this is what power is about as well, when it manifests itself in structures of domination. Modern regimes of power are built on the intimate knowledge of who the people are they dominate. Surveillance, espionage, and market research are techniques of recognition … Consequently, radical love would be a love that goes beyond recognition, that is a love in which the lovers would renounce their desire to fully grasp the identity of the other and no longer insist on understanding who the other is.[1]

Allucquére Rosanne Stone expresses similar ideas about the potential violence of singular naming as a form of recognition in an essay called "Identity in Oshkosh." The essay revolves around a 1990 court case resulting from a woman with multiple personality disorder accusing a man of rape. The judge and jury struggled to account for the presence of multiple personalities, each with their own backstories, genders, names, and identities, all testifying on the stand—much less were they able determine whether it mattered that only one personality had been "present" for the attack. Stone writes,

> Retaining the same name throughout life is part of an evolving strategy of producing particular kinds of subjects. In order to stabilize a name in such a way that it becomes a permanent descriptor, its function must either be split off from the self, or else the self must acquire a species of obduracy and permanence to match that of the name. In this manner a permanent name facilitates control; enhances interchangeability … you become the generic identity that the institutional descriptors allow.[2]

So how might one learn to love another without reducing

Film still of the movie Vampyros Lesbos (1971) by director Jesús Franco.

the other to recognizability, without fixing the other to a single unchangeable name?

Or should it go the other way around: must the lover consent to being forever misrecognized? Is allowing oneself to be transfixed a fundamental part of loving and being loved?

If you're looking for a metaphor for the complexities of naming, recognition, consent, and control within love relationships, look no further than the vampire bite. In this case, not the bite that kills, that bleeds the other dry, but the bite that transforms the bitten into another vampire. Such a transformational bite is an act of extreme intimacy entwined with extreme violence. It is ultimate pain as ultimate pleasure. It is an exchange of fluids leading to eternal life, a master-servant dialectic that negates itself upon completion, an exercise of unequal power that results in mutual empowerment. In some stories, the vampire coerces the unknowing victim to transform. In others, the knowing victim desires and consents to the transformation. But most often, the two are hard to distinguish. After all, who can really understand what such a radical transformation is like before it happens? Is there not always an element of coercion when one side possesses so much more power? Whether there can ever be a truly consensual bite is precisely what is at stake when the skin breaks.

World of Darkness

In 2017, Berlin hosted the first International World of Darkness Convention. World of Darkness (WoD) is a decades-old gaming franchise that took off in the US in the 1980s and '90s with tabletop role-playing games, the most popular of which was called *Vampire: The Masquerade*. The series included card games and dice games with narratives based on mythical creatures, especially vampires. The games' popularity might be attributed to the flexibility of the storylines and the freedom players had to develop characters and relationships, while still maintaining the win/lose fun of a traditional points-based system.[3] Eventually, *Vampire: The Masquerade* evolved into a video game, as well as a live-action role-playing game, or "larp."

What is larp? There are many answers, none of them complete, because the form has multiple and divergent histories. A shorthand description might be "improvisational theater without an audience." Players take on characters, either assigned or developed by them, and inhabit those roles within the parameters of a designed world. They collaboratively play out a story that each player contributes to over the course of a set period of time. Plotlines can be sketched out or even heavily planned before gameplay begins, but the fun is in the improvisation in the moment. The absence of an audience is crucial for larp purists; it's what distinguishes

role-playing from both theater and performance art. You aren't doing it for someone watching, you're doing it for yourself and your fellow players. While a lot of writing may go into designing a larp—rule books can be a few sentences or a hundred pages—and larpers often document games post facto, the larp itself occurs within the "magic circle," or "the membrane that encloses virtual worlds."[4]

Larp cultures are manifold and have evolved from a variety of practices, including tabletop gaming and video gaming but also historical reenactment, method acting, psychodrama, Gestalt therapy, and war games. If you've heard of larp before, you're probably thinking of geeks in the forest bashing each other with padded swords, and you aren't wrong; that's one branch of larp practice termed "boffering." Boffering came partly out of Dungeons-and-Dragons culture decades ago, and a lot of those games are based on fantasy universes from popular culture like *The Lord of the Rings*. They are usually structured around a quest to be won or lost; there are point systems and micro-economies; they tend to be rife with clichés when it comes to sex, gender, and race (with some surprising exceptions).

The traditional game structure of boffering is iterative, that is, the rules are the same each time, and the players can return to play the same characters month after month, year after year. It's a parallel and static universe where an elf is always an elf, a wizard is always a wizard. World of Darkness games began as rather traditional larps, but by the mid-2010s some organizers had begun morphing them to incorporate elements of a different game structure.[5] This structure is often termed "Nordic larp," for its geographical origins, although it's sometimes called "progressive larp" (or in French, " *romanesque*," meaning "novel-esque"). Nordic larp is a kind of play where each game is designed to address a specific set of questions for a specific set of people. While any game can be played repeatedly by different groups, its rules can evolve each time and can be modified to suit the players and the situation. Nordic larps focus on plotlines, relationships, cultures, and experiences rather than necessarily winning and losing. The intention is psychological challenge, creative experimentation, physical boundary testing, and intellectual exchange, as opposed to racking up points by hitting someone else on the head—though plenty of that exists too.

The invaluable 2010 *Nordic Larp* anthology presents a range of case studies, documented in stats, photography, and first-hand accounts by participants and organizers (the role of documentation within larp is controversial, given that the magic circle is premised on privacy).[6] The first larp chronicled in the anthology is the massive *Trenne Byar*, subtitled by the authors as "The Woodstock of Nordic larp." During this week-long event in the Swedish countryside in 1994, a thousand people joined to play medieval villagers, developing a civilization from the ground up. Another historically instantiated, smaller-scale role-playing is the five-day, 120-player *Once Upon A Time*, which first took place near Oslo in 2005 but was set in a fictional Wyoming town in 1887. The kitschy Western saloon-and-brothel backdrop allowed players to both inhabit their favorite stereotypes and bend them; many players were given characters with different gender identities than their own.

Nostalgic tropes are set aside in favor of contemporary satire in the Norwegian larp *PanoptiCorp*, first played in 2003. "PanoptiCorp" is the name of a fictional ad company where the "employees"—twenty-five players, plus eight organizers and fifteen drop-in players (extras)—were stuck in an office together for seventy-two hours and forced to learn a new corporate lingo and constantly rate each other's performances. The organizers intended for the experience to be mentally harrowing (one player who worked in corporate media said the game "comes back to haunt me"), but found that too many people were able to retain an "ironic distance." Real-world politics without much ironic distance are the focus of *Europa*, a four-day, forty-player Norwegian larp first played in 2001.[7] A group of players from the Nordic countries and Russia maintained their real-world nationalities and native languages in character; the Russian characters played the "natives" of a country in which the others were seeking asylum through an opaque bureaucratic process.

Other larps extrapolate into future dystopia: a well-known game called *Mad About the Boy*, first run in 2010 and repeated many times since, imagines a global disaster where all the men have died and women are faced with rebuilding society. Some games take place in no time and no place. *Luminescence*, a well-known example from Finland (2004), occupied a room where players could wade through hundreds of kilos of white flour, meant as a metaphor for coping with cancer. Larps like this can be nonverbal, with gestural communication or none at all. In 2018 I played a "blackbox larp"—just a room with no set design or costumes—called *We Are One*, where players were separated into two groups of prelinguistic beings who could only make one of two vowel sounds. It took two hours for us to learn to communicate.[8]

The Bite

Berlin's 2017 WoD convention was a weekend-long affair based in a hotel/convention center, which hosted all-day tabletop games, vampire-tooth fittings, book signings, keynotes, and panel discussions. Larps were held at different venues across the city (one took place across bars and clubs where non-playing partyers were often none the wiser). I requested a comp ticket as a journalist for a larp called *End of the Line*, which I learned was being run by a few well-known Nordic larp designers.[9] By speaking with them before and after the game, I learned that they were finding ways to embed the more traditional

Still of the American pre-Code vampire-horror film movie Dracula (1931), directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi and Helen Chandler.

vampire play within a progressive framework, forging safer spaces for transgressive experiments through principles of ethical interaction design. I was told that I was welcome to observe, but that to observe I would have to participate.

A few weeks before the larp, I received an email with two PowerPoint presentations attached, one explaining the rules of the game and the details of the world, and another describing the character I was supposed to adopt: Margaret Olivier, real estate entrepreneur, TV personality, and mortal. Margaret had social and familial affiliations. I received links to Facebook groups where Margaret and her acquaintances—and also I and the fellow players—could get to know each other before meeting. We were informed that participation in the six-hour larp was only possible if we attended the mandatory four-hour preparatory workshop and hour-long post-larp debrief.

On the morning of the larp I pulled on pleather pants and a hot-pink club top and took the subway to a disused factory on the periphery of Berlin, which had been decorated to resemble a postindustrial night club in Bristol, UK. In between the workshop and the larp, all seventy players walked along the highway, in full costume, to have lunch at IKEA: planned social time during which we got to know each other and chat about the game over meatballs. (Lunchtime was not incidental; out-of-game relationship building is key to mutual accountability in-game.)

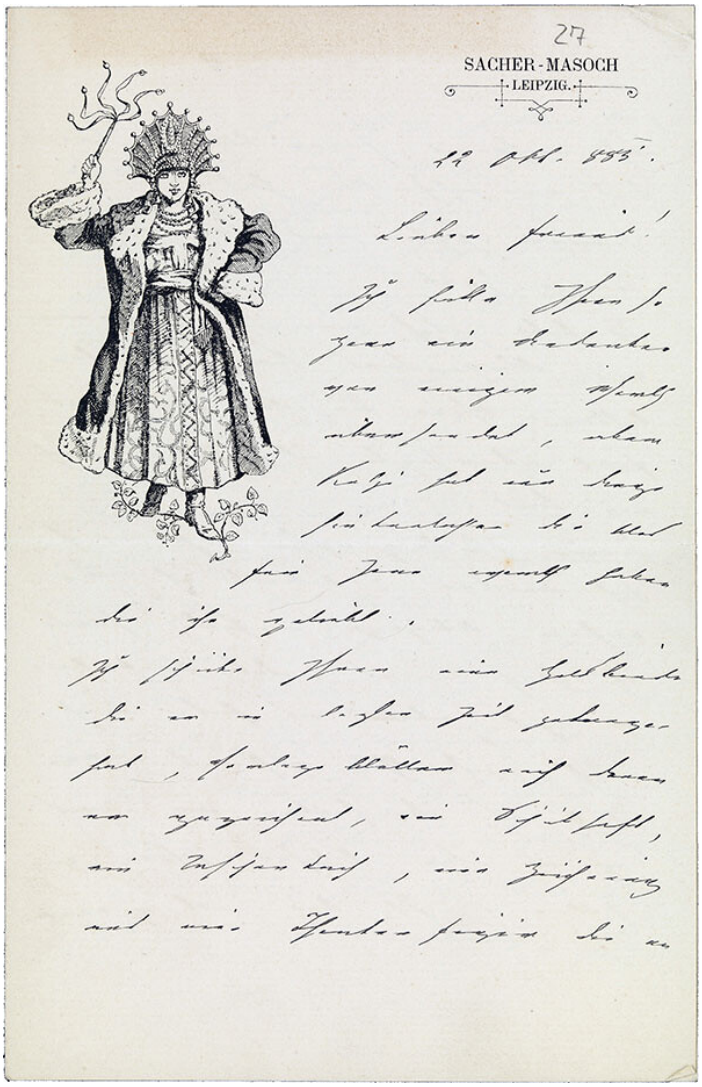
The pregame workshop began with typical warm-up theater exercises and get-to-know-you games, but quickly moved into a rehearsal of consent and safety tactics. These were based on a system of mechanics that have been developed over decades of progressive larping. In WoD, sex, violence, intoxication, and power games are built into the narratives—and negotiating the degree of

reality with which these are simulated is a major part of the safety concern. *End of the Line* was explicitly 18+, because it would be up to us how much "actual" sex and violence to do.[10]

In *End of the Line*, negotiation of consent manifests in the recurring formal element of the vampire bite, which in vampire parlance is called "the embrace." The vampire locks eyes with the mortal, putting the helpless—or knowing—victim into a kind of trance, before going fangs-deep. There are myriad ways to simulate a bite in-game. One way is to categorically decide before the game starts how the simulation should work. For instance, you can say "all biting happens in mid-air, no skin contact, no exceptions." But in this run of *End of the Line*, bites were to be negotiated in a meta-space within game play. We were given a script for a planned exchange anytime our characters might be heading toward biting, sex, or violence, at which point we had to halt and enter the meta-realm where we could speak as players until reaching an agreement. The simulation of a bite could be as close to or as far from physical "reality" as the players chose, barring actual puncturing of the skin for legal reasons.

How do you prefer to be bitten? Light skin contact? Lick? Kiss? Hard bite? Fake blood? Extremely detailed narration? Nod and handshake?

Consent-based negotiation is clearly relevant when it comes to physical boundaries, but it also helps safeguard psychological ones. If a *character* is the unknowing victim of a manipulative vampire, how can you be sure that the *player* is not being manipulated as well? What separates power play from power reality?



Letter penned by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 1883. The author is known to have signed himself into slavery for a period of six months in a contract with Baroness Fanny Pistor. The term masochism derives from the authors' name. Photo: Wellcome Library MS. 6909 - L0072452.

Safe Emergency

A common complaint among American gamers is that Nordic larpers want to make gamer culture more politically correct. On the contrary, I heard one panel discussant at the WoD convention vehemently argue, "We're making your culture *less* PC, you just have to ask before you do something now."

Post-Gamergate, many gaming worlds woke up to the fact that the real-world structures upholding "virtual" gaming were also perpetuating real-world violence and discrimination; simulation and reality could no longer be treated as entirely distinct. This is something Nordic larpers have long understood. As larp designer Johanna Koljonen, who designed the consent mechanics for *End of the Line*, told me: "The minute you're creating a world to suit the participant, you have to treat the participants as humans, and there has to be a social contract. I don't know if traditional iterative structures demand a negotiation of social contract … There's always a social contract [in a game] but in most cases, it's implicit." In relation to WoD, she says that "these more and more complex narrative games, whether digital, analog, or board games … seem to be extremely suitable for our age, because they are so much about agency and power dynamics and complexity."[11]

Having safety mechanisms in place allows things to enter much more dangerous territory than they would if consent were taken for granted and not addressed. This regulation requires a constant conceptual separation between player and character, between self and performed identity, between reality and simulation, while acknowledging that they can never be fully teased apart. In the *End of the Line* workshop, women were instructed to wait five seconds before consenting to anything risky; it would be our inclination, the organizers said, to immediately say yes.

Documentation of a nordic live-action vampire role-playing game titled End of the Line. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen.

Scripting regulatory mechanisms for negotiating boundaries is not dissimilar to what happens in BDSM scenarios, where predefined safety constraints allow for greater freedom in the moment. When pleasure and pain are explicitly combined, or when power discrepancy is the source of the pleasure, the membrane around the magic circle has to be firmly drawn in advance: contracts, safe words, aftercare. Power roles can diverge widely from reality—everyone loves the cliché of the CEO crushed beneath the dominatrix's heel—but it's *a better reality*, because you get to choose your role; you get to consent to the dynamic.

Acting out fear or fantasy in a safe space can be cathartic, even therapeutic. For one, Gestalt therapy relies on manufacturing "safe emergencies" where clients might role-play a parent, a younger self, an imagined opponent, inhabiting facets of their subjectivities by adopting others. In a larp, players do this together. Negotiating a simulated experience with another person is a complicated conceptual act of mutual recognition, or maybe *un* recognition. You are player and you are a character, and you'll be a different player and character next time.

The rather utopian goal of inhabiting multiple invented selves mirrors the hopes of many early internet users, whose creative role-playing in online text-based game worlds was made possible by their relative anonymity.[12] There was no expectation that users of Multiple User Domains (MUDs), Bulletin Board Services (BBSs), or Role-Playing Games (RPGs) would represent themselves according to real names, ages, genders, races, abilities. In fact, in "Identity in Oshkosh," Stone proposed that the very existence of multiple personality disorder, which became a DSM-recognized disorder in 1980 (renamed as "dissociative identity disorder" in 1994), was due to the fracturing of virtual identity made possible by the early internet era. This new pathologized state could be seen as the posthumanist update of the previous era's favorite theoretical diagnosis, schizophrenia.

Of course, as the internet changed into a corporatized landscape, the fantasy of anonymity disintegrated. In today's internet your face is pinned to your real name, address, buying history. You're recognized for who you "are," and who you are is a particular overlap of consumer categories and market segments. Recognition down to the single pixel. In Stone's words: "You become the generic identity that the institutional descriptors allow." Those structures of recognition-as-domination work via coercion rather than consent. When they work best, you don't even know what you've been coerced into until long after the bite.

Members of the Boston Direct Action Project dressed as vampires impersonate public relations associates of the World Bank during a protest in Washington, D.C., on April 15 and 16, 2005. Photo: Matt Osborn/CC-by-2.0.

Unrecognizing one another in-game tends to change the way players think of themselves and their relationships out-of-game too. If you're in the business of inhabiting multiple identities and multiple social worlds, the conventions of your own identity and society reveal themselves as mutable. Over many decades, larpers have developed a keen understanding of how to engineer out-of-game relationships. As Koljonen describes it, "We realized that designing a fictional culture is the exact same skillset as designing a functioning real-world community."[13] Social engineering is a marketable skill with obvious commercial applications, from massive multiplayer games to interactive virtual reality experiences. Apparently larpers have been brought in to help Disney design an immersive *Star Wars* resort. Militaries, science departments, corporations, and governments have long asked game designers to invent scenarios to test how soldiers might cope with an IED explosion, how scientists might deal with an epidemic, how consumers might react to a product launch, or how prison guards might treat prisoners. Computer simulations can test a range of possible outcomes, but the human element can only be determined by involving humans.

Bleed

"Bleed" is the name given by larpers to the crossover between player and character. Your real-life experience bleeds into the game, and what happens in the game likewise bleeds back into your real life. Players will inject themselves into their characters; likewise, the experience of being in character will become part of your sense of self. This is why designated postgame debrief time is important, to ease the transition from one role to another.

Every larper knows that bleed is inevitable. The game happens in life, not outside of life; it starts long before you enter the larp and ends long after you leave it. While game bleed can cause problems when unmanaged, the experience of bleed—the blurring of the line between your self and your performed identity, between the narrative of your life and the narrative of the game, between power play and power reality—is the whole point of the larp. Acknowledging bleed is acknowledging the mutability of infinite possible selves, without fearing loss of the self among them.

"Eros is an issue of boundaries," writes Anne Carson. "He exists because certain boundaries do … But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh, and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can." Unrecognition is the acknowledgment of that interval: the gap, the inevitable boundary, the skin, the irreducible difference between. Performing the bite is acting out the desire to annihilate the boundary, while accepting the impossibility of resolution. The bite is one of love's "tactics of imagination," tactics that Carson writes are all aimed at resolving the "edge between two images that cannot merge into a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality—one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros."[14]

Consent-based larp revives the hope of unrecognition, but not the kind premised on anonymity or enabled by technology. It is premised instead on the very old technology of emotional labor. Unrecognition IRL is a lot of work. Work towards an impossible goal—you can't know every new iteration of self, yours or another's. You can never dissolve the irreducible difference. You can only acknowledge the fact of constant transformation despite the appearance of constancy. Love is not anonymous, but neither is it fixed to a single name. Whereas a system of control desires to recognize you as a generic entity according to a single name, a system of mutual love recognizes you as wonderfully multiple—as endlessly specific.

X

A version of this essay was first given as a talk at the book launch for the e-flux reader *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?* in July 2017 at Miss Read fair, Berlin. Another version was given at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, in August 2018. Several similar ideas were explored in the October 2017 essay "More than a Game" for **Frieze**. Thanks to Susan Ploetz for the introduction to larp, to Kaye Cain-Nielsen for the invitation, and to Brody Condon and Johanna Koljonen for the conversations.

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1
Jan Verwoert, “Masters and Servants or Lovers: On Love as a Way to Not Recognize the Other,” in *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want* , ed. Vanessa Ohlraun (Sternberg Press, 2010).

2
Allucquére Rosanne Stone, “Identity in Oshkosh,” in *Posthuman Bodies* , eds. Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Indiana University Press, 1995).

3
For an in-depth history of WoD, see the 2017 documentary *World of Darkness* https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6177752/ .

4
This phrase describing the magic circle as a membrane is often circulated without attribution, but I believe its original usage is from Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

5
The evolution of game worlds is led by players as much as by the official franchise. It’s important to note that player communities adopt the rules of a game but develop their own in-game cultures and modes of play. Anyone could theoretically organize a game anywhere, so it’s not possible to comprehensively track their individual evolutions.

6
This is by no means the only larp anthology, but it is one of the most comprehensive regarding a specific time period of experimental but high-production larp design from the mid-90s to the late-2000s in the Nordic countries. *Nordic Larp*, eds. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola (Fëa Livia, 2010).

7
Europa was the second in a series following *AmerikA* (2000), which was designed according to a manifesto with aesthetic and functional rules for larp called “Dogma 99.”

8
See https://alexandria.dk/en/data?scenarie=5431 .

9
End of the Line was produced by Participation Design Agency for White Wolf Publishing. It was created by Bjarke Pedersen, Juhana Pettersson, and Martin Ericsson, with consent and calibration mechanics by Johanna Koljonen. The larp is based on *Vampire: The Masquerade* by White Wolf Publishing AB.

10
Another way of thinking of what happens in-game is the diegetic versus the non-diegetic. If you need to take a break from a scene because it’s overwhelming, can your character think of an excuse to do so? Or do you need to “tap out” and exit as a player? Does day become night according to the real circadian rhythm or is it simulated at a different speed through light changes? Is the liquor you’re drinking “real” or is it Kool-Aid?

11
Interview with Johanna Koljonen, May 14, 2019, Berlin.

12
A user of the popular multiple user domain LambdaMOO described the chat room as a place “where looks don’t matter and only the best writers get laid.”

13
Interview with Johanna Koljonen, May 14, 2019, Berlin.

14
Anne Carson, “What Does the Lover Want from Love?” in *Eros: The Bittersweet* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 30, 69.

iLiana Fokianaki

Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism, Part 1: The Eso and Exo Axis of Contemporary Forms of Power

In *Bestiario*, a book of short stories by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar, "Casa Tomada" from 1951 stands out. It narrates the life of two middle-aged siblings in their inherited mansion, who fastidiously clean its eight bedrooms each day and silently enjoy lunches and dinners in peaceful surroundings. One night, the siblings hear noises from a different side of the house and, petrified, they seal off the doors, relinquishing half the house to "them." By the end of the story, they are driven out by the thought of other inhabitants occupying all the remaining rooms—"others" who they never see but who they are convinced exist. Driven by fear, they finally abandon and lock up their house, disposing of the key.[1]

This story offers a parable for contemporary conundrums regarding territory and legitimacy, although its meaning is open to interpretation. Who occupies what territory? Do the siblings possess their inherited home and property, which they fail to defend against the unknown "occupiers"? Or is it the other way around? The story also brings up questions about the imaginary fear that creates the dichotomy between "the native" versus "the Other." Do the siblings represent the law-abiding citizens of today, who try to keep their houses clean and quiet, mind their own business, and refuse to engage at all with the Other? Do they represent the guardians of normality? Or do they represent progressive democratic citizens, who have been forced to give space to the elected tyrants of today? Or, rather, do the invaders represent an authoritarian regime?

As the world turns to the right, nationalist and racist politicians take power in local and national politics, a phenomenon spreading like a virus. As this manifests at an unmanageable rate, one sad realization sinks in: in nearly all cases they are being elected. That said, the means through which they are elected can be scrutinized. During the recent scandal surrounding Cambridge Analytica, a subsidiary company of the multinational SCL Group, evidence surfaced that Analytica "aided and abetted the selling of democracy down the river" by interfering with the Brexit referendum as well as elections in the US, Brazil, and Myanmar, among other places.[2] It is useful to reframe this recurring pattern of democratically elected authoritarian figures—brought to power with the help of institutions and multinationals—vis-à-vis the concepts of the state and state power in their current globalized, neoliberal versions. Are we facing a new behavioral pattern of the state, or a new form altogether?

Sociologist Bob Jessop argues that "there can be no general, let alone trans-historical, theory of the state."[3] In Max Weber's 1918 lecture "Politics as a Vocation," he defines the state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory"—what he called the monopoly of violence.[4] Weber's writings demarcate the "three-element approach" of state theory: territoriality, violence, and legitimacy. During the 1970s, political theorist Nicos Poulantzas added to this analysis, figuring

Meme created by the author.

the state as a social relation and a variable—not a passive tool or neutral actor, but a "relationship of forces."[5] These forces then, create frictions, which he insisted are derived from the class character of the state. Poulantzas pointed out that by the late 1970s, features of the political order previously considered exceptional and temporary (in times of dictatorship, for example) were becoming increasingly normalized. He termed this process the "authoritarian statism" of the capitalist state, demonstrated through "state control over every sphere of socioeconomic life, combined with a radical decline of institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so called 'formal' liberties," as he wrote at the end of the 1970s, while witnessing the world market slowly integrating.[6]

Forty years later, the global market has integrated considerably more, and we are now faced with even more complex power structures: "extra-state formations," elected or not, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU). The shift from liberalism to neoliberalism, and the process of state transformation, is tracked in Vijay Prashad's magnificent 2012 book *The Poorer Nations*. Prashad explains how the liberal ideologies of the 1970s, which tried to break with the 1940s Bretton Woods management system of the IMF and the World Bank, facilitated new formations of extra-states like the G7. These ideologies also crushed the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the Non-Aligned Movement[7] while weakening the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with under-the-table deals between Henry Kissinger and Helmut Schmidt. After 2000, multinational corporations like Facebook, Apple, and Amazon came to the forefront to influence but also bypass state power, manipulating or cajoling it through contemporary propaganda techniques. Their current practices make use of lobbyists who push for laws favorable to their operations and who negotiate deals with states and extra-states alike, acting as mercenaries.

Many have highlighted the importance of technology in redefining state theory, specifically through the increased power of social networking platforms, which have proven to be substantial tools in the hands of activists seeking the democratization of repressive regimes. During recent decades, however, we have seen authoritarian governments use these emerging technologies just as effectively. Journalist Rebecca McKinnon, who covers how technology has been used by authoritarian regimes, calls their tactics "networked authoritarianism," citing the example of China.[8] Today, seemingly democratic states are also using technology to their benefit by employing multinationals. The ethical question of whether states and extra-state formations should interfere with other states' democratic processes has done little to stop multinationals like SCL Group from mining data and interfering with state politics. The nerve, audacity, and arrogance of corporate actors is underpinned by their agility, allowing them to outmaneuver the law or even

create corporate rulings of their own (such as with the North American Free Trade Agreement) by way of abusing human rights.[9] States remain lenient towards the activities of multinationals, mostly because state representatives benefit immensely from their operations. One recent example is how WhatsApp, a subsidiary of Facebook, was implicated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; another is the recently revealed connection between newly elected prime minister of the UK Boris Johnson and Facebook.

Behind the obvious structure of the state, we can find several agents of power that constitute it: some seen, some unseen, some official, some unofficial, but all components of a new state formation. What comes forth is a capitalist-corporate power structure, a new version of the old machine, but this one has more parts. Weber's three-element theory of the state (territory, legitimacy, violence) is clearly not enough to describe our reality—and we are beyond what Naomi Klein called "disaster capitalism." Perhaps we are entirely beyond capitalism as such, regardless of any descriptor or modifier, as McKenzie Wark argues. In his recent book *The State: Past, Present, Future*, Bob Jessop proposes to add a fourth element of state theory to Weber's: the idea of the state as a semantic framework. Combining Jessop's work with Poulantzas's concept of "authoritarian statism," I aim to draft the profile of a newly emerging state formation, executed by agents of power that come both from state and corporate structures, which I have previously named the Westphalian White Western patriarchy (the WWW).[10] These agents utilize the territory and legitimacy of the state through violence, and construct a new form of the state via the use of technology: a contemporary version of authoritarian statism, which I term narcissistic authoritarian statism.[11] For the first part of this essay, I would like to look into this new state formation, including its "idea" and its behavioral patterns, and discuss the ways that certain cultural practices respond to it. Certain responses propose counter-hegemonic power structures through speculative scenarios to construct an imaginary for other forms of emancipatory power structures. Others actually infiltrate the power structures of the current state formation, hacking its systems and using its own tactics to expose its narcissistic authoritarian profile, thus "dismantling" its very idea.

Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism

In her recent book *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (2019), Nancy Fraser offers a very insightful reading of the US's political-economic genealogy, focusing on the period after the introduction of neoliberalism. Fraser identifies two versions of neoliberalism after the 1980s: progressive and reactionary. Progressive neoliberalism, although Fraser admits that it sounds "like an oxymoron," was a real and powerful alliance of two unlikely bedfellows: the mainstream liberal currents of new social movements and the most dynamic, high-end, "symbolic," financial sectors of the US economy (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood.)[12] Reactionary neoliberalism was its antagonist, including mainly ethno-national, anti-immigrant, and pro-Christian figures, with similar distribution politics to the progressive neoliberals, "but a different reactionary politics of recognition."[13]

Today, Fraser sees Donald Trump's profile as one of reactionary neoliberalism and populism, in an augmented version that she calls "hyper-reactionary neoliberalism," which "does not constitute a new hegemonic bloc." Rather, "it is on the contrary chaotic and fragile, partly due to the peculiar personal psychology of its standard-bearer."[14] This psychological portrait of the Trumps, Putins, Dutertes, and Modis of the world is painted by writers such as Eve Ensler, as in a 2018 collection of fictional essays titled *Strongmen*.[15] Ensler portrays Trump as the carrier of a virus, injected into the populace "through angry white-hate filled spittle, slimy superlatives, sham-filled promises, and toxic red caps which allowed the virus to seep in through the follicles and hair." In her story, Trump is a "genocidal narcissist, a person willing and able to destroy everyone and everything on the planet as long as it makes him feel momentarily better. That extreme and total endgame narcissism made the oafish man the perfect host for the virus."[16]

This peculiar personal psychology that Fraser analyzes and that Ensler describes through prose is the personification of narcissistic authoritarian statism. Today, more than ever before, it is an epidemic. We see political figures that fit this same description across the globe: Trump has his tangerine-headed counterpart in Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán is channeling Erdoğan and Putin, and even Greece's newly elected Kyriakos Mitsotakis has emulated Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. In just a few months of governance, Mitsotakis has established himself as a churchgoing, anti-migration leader who has abolished mechanisms for monitoring tax evasion (to allow the circulation of black money), changed legislation in favor of the Greek elite, and wishes to restore "law and order" through the militarization of the police, the enhancement of religious propaganda in schools, and the expulsion of refugees from the health care system and from all civil-society institutions in Athens, where until now they have lived with dignity as part of the Athenian social fabric (instead of in tents in the countryside).

What Foucault named the "society of discipline," later to be framed by Gilles Deleuze as the "society of control," now demonstrates new characteristics. For psychoanalyst Lynne Layton,

> Foucauldian theories describe neoliberalism's ideal rational actor, but without a notion of unconscious

> process, so they offer only a partial sense of how neoliberalism is felt and lived. It thus makes sense to use their work to rethink earlier ideas about culture and character, to see what psychoanalysis might contribute to understanding neoliberal versions of subjectivity.[17]

Here, Layton offers a reading of the psychological tropes of neoliberalism that not only bring narcissistic leaders to power but that also *produce* narcissistic subjectivities—identities driven by individualism.

The difference between narcissistic authoritarian statism and previous examples of autocratic governance is the creation of a new reality, a new idea of normality, that in turn normalizes violence with the help of technology. It succeeds because neoliberal subjectivities have been brought to the point of apathy and detachment, and therefore facilitate, perpetuate, and mimic this type of statism. The psychological drive for success embedded in neoliberal subjectivities further alienates them from those who are less affluent and fortunate; a dependent or vulnerable human is seen as a failed human.[18] Dependent humans represent the fear of failure and therefore are cast as a burden to society, making it very easy to ignore them, thus encouraging the corrosion of those support systems that neoliberalism has long been unraveling.

This lack of interest in the disenfranchised, vulnerable, dependent, and precarious among us fortifies the us-versus-them divide. This recalls Cortázar's story: the fear of losing space, property, and privilege, the fear of sharing or being faced head-on with the Other, goes hand in hand with the refusal to engage with what is presupposed as a threat. We are now suspicious of collective action and care for others, and this creates a "radical split between autonomy and dependence."[19] The capacity to separate individual fate from the fate of others is one hallmark of what Layton describes as "social narcissism." This also leads to the complete denial of any culpability or responsibility for the living conditions of others, or any consideration of how such conditions were produced. Robert Samuels has called this the "obsessional narcissism of the privileged."[20] This divide exists between and also within groups demarcated by race, gender, and sexuality, as well as by the qualifiers citizens, migrants, refugees, and those in exile. Narcissistic authoritarian statism thrives on this split between autonomy and dependence and is sustained by a social fabric governed by individualism. A new form of apathy cultivated through technology and its continual incorporation into our lives optimizes the condition for narcissistic authoritarian statism's survival. This psychological condition of apathy towards the less fortunate is embodied by states and their leaders, but also by institutions, and consequently subjectivities.

The Eso and Exo Axis of Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism

I recently proposed an axis to map and display the behavior and structures of narcissistic authoritarian statism.[21] It was helpful to use a form of visual mapping to better understand the characteristics of this type of statism and its four-element makeup: constituted through territory, legitimacy, violence, and idea. Cartography allows one to represent how structures of power and counterpower are positioned, for example by counterpoising statism in relation to "counter-state" formations: activism, collectivism, radical left politics, feminism, and so on, as well as their subsequent roles in culture and contemporary art. The map is drawn according to two different terrains, which I name the eso-state and the exo-state.

The "eso" prefix comes from the Greek word - (inside, internal, or within), while "exo" comes from - (outside, external, or without). The eso-state delineates all the structures the state encloses, accepts, embodies, contains, implements, supports, and validates. We can think of the eso-state as the power imposed on subjectivities that are legitimized as part of it, the so-called "natives" or citizens within its borders—a topography where the state demonstrates Deleuze's societies of control.[22] The exo-state, on the other hand, is defined by all that the state rejects, attacks, represses, sidetracks, archives, or hinders. It is directed towards the external, the Other, and the "outside" of its borders. Thus, it refers to subjectivities that do not belong, both actually and metaphorically, or what can be thought of as the "extra-statial" body. Whether in the eso-state or in the exo-state, the eso- and exo-axes are defined through territoriality and legitimacy.

In relation to territoriality, this type of statism drawn along eso- and exo- lines denies the inhumane conditions of millions of refugees whose situation is continuously highlighted by humanitarian organizations the world over. Documented mostly via social media, the "compassion" is fleeting and lasts only until the next click. The body/territory of the refugee/border represents the absolute topos of narcissistic authoritarian statism. Many countries have closed their borders and simultaneously persuaded thousands of citizens that such violent actions are legitimate methods of safeguarding their territory and the existence of the state itself. Other countries find alternative ways to control borders: in 2019 the former Italian deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini passed new legislation that fines boats attempting to unload refugees, with amounts reaching up to one million euros. These tactics operate in concert with military interventions waged outside the borders of Europe, that create millions of refugees; the EU, however, can legislate and define what counts as war and what doesn't. For instance,

refugees who come from Afghanistan are no longer recognized by the EU as refugees from a war zone, even though military operations by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are still being conducted in the region.[23]

Another important issue through which narcissistic authoritarian statism manifests is climate catastrophe: the inability or unwillingness to act upon the ecological crisis that is occurring before our eyes. The denial is dumbfounding. Trump's June 2017 Paris Agreement withdrawal was based on a manufactured narrative based on reinforcing the us-versus-them divide as well as dismissing science. Trump's narrative relied on the harm supposedly caused to the US economy by conservation, the minimal impact the agreement would allegedly have on bettering the climate catastrophe, and the accusation that other countries simply want to handicap the US—pointing the finger towards China.[24] Bolsonaro employed the same tactic by using the argument of "colonialism" when the G7 expressed concerns about the massive fires burning the Amazon, and attacked Brazilian scientists who reported on the extent of the fires, further accusing them of serving foreign interests and "spreading lies." This is an astonishing tactic of appropriating the discourse of the Other (here the indigenous or the native who has sovereign right over their land and economy) against the "evil" propaganda of science and other "colonizing" countries. It is the same tactic that defines a narcissistic personality: twisting truth (here we can pose scientific facts as some sort of objective truth), while creating a new narrative and blaming the victim for what is happening to them.

In culture, and particularly the contemporary visual arts, we should not underestimate the extent to which cultural workers themselves mimic the tropes of narcissistic authoritarian statism. We need look no further than Ai Weiwei's 2016 recreation of a photograph depicting the death of Aylan Kurdi, a child refugee whose body washed up on the shores of Turkey. Weiwei cast himself in the role of the drowned child, as if the only way to raise awareness was to reenact the drowned refugee child, publicizing his image as equally strong as the actual event. Or consider Swiss artist Christoph Büchel's work *Barca Nostra* (2019), presented at the 2019 Venice Biennale: he docked a vessel in which more than seven hundred people died on the night of April 18, 2015 on a pier in Venice's Arsenale, next to a snack bar. In both cases, the narcissism of the artist employs neoliberal logics: their cultural capital is important enough to justify breaking codes of respect toward the dead. And what more accurate display of narcissistic authoritarian statism is there than art-lovers taking selfies in front of this boat? Narcissistic authoritarian statism is performed continuously by state, semi-state, and privately funded museums, institutions, cultural bodies, and their staff, which kill any idea that does not fit their own by positing the museum as "a safe space for unsafe ideas." In this way both artists and institutions abuse power and deny culpability. Being safe has become truly scary, to paraphrase artist Banu Cennetoğlu.[25]

Cultural Workers and Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism

Thankfully, many cultural workers have instead begun organizing and working with the forces of counter-state formations: activism, collectivism, radical left politics, and feminisms. Notwithstanding the fact that neoliberalism has decimated the potentials in unionizing, collectivity, and the concept of mutual care, we see collective actions consistently surfacing through published letters, in-situ demonstrations and interventions, and petitions and articles in mainstream media. Decolonize this Place (DTP), a collective of cultural workers based in New York, is one example. The collective resists unethical, neocolonial, and abusive practices within the art institution and elsewhere, targeting broad institutions profiting from continuing (neo)colonial violence. Recently, DTP and many other cultural organizations, community groups, and cultural activists organized for many months against Warren Kanders, CEO of Safariland and (now-former) vice chair of the Whitney Museum board.[26] After months of sustained pressure, they succeeded in forcing him to resign. Traces of narcissistic authoritarian statism can be found in Kanders's response to the initial letter that came from the staff of the museum calling for his resignation:

> Safariland's role as a manufacturer is to ensure the products work, as expected, when needed. Safariland's role is not to determine when and how they are employed. The staff letter implies that I am responsible for the decision to use these products. I am not. That is not an abdication of responsibility, it is an acknowledgement of reality.[27]

This is the epitome of abdicating responsibility.

Another initiative worth noting is a new project by artists and researchers Nayantara Ranganathan and Manuel Beltrán: ad.watch, a seriously researched tool that breaks open Facebook's machine of political persuasion. It is an extremely comprehensive visualization of the political advertisements that appear on the social media platform across thirty-four countries, presenting an insight into targeted propaganda. So far, only those thirty-four countries have been researched because Facebook refuses to provide access to data from others, but the duo hopes to collect more in the second phase of the project. Ad.watch successfully unmasks the influence of narcissistic authoritarian statism on the eso-axis—when, for example, state and para-state officials collaborate with corporate actors to manipulate public opinion using Facebook's tools. It also directs the viewer to the dozens

Left: Mercy Vera at Convention of Women Farmers and Ecological Feminists (2019), a project by Marwa Arsanios at the Biennale Warszaw, 2019. Right: detail of Convention of Women Farmers and Ecological Feminists.

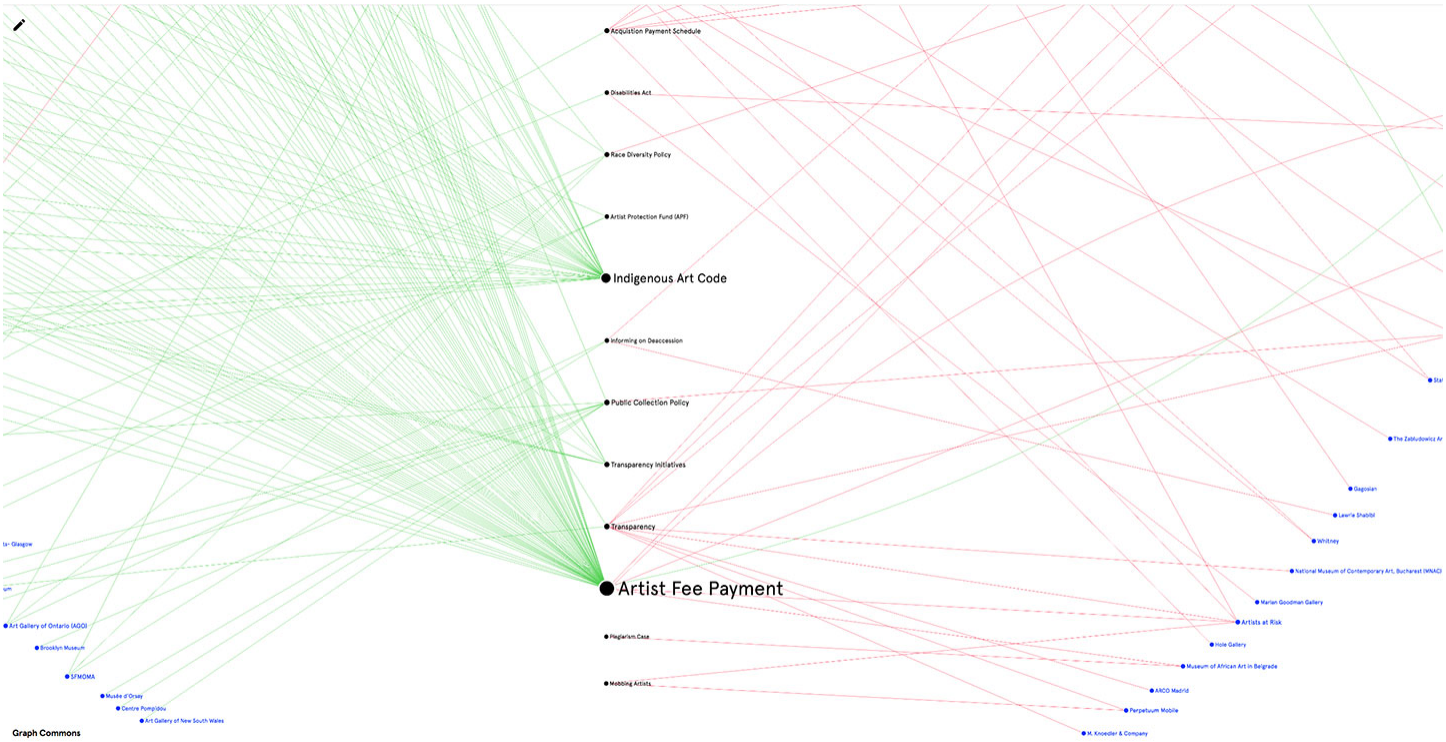
of countries that have employed such tactics, but also to companies linked with governments, campaigns, and politicians—companies that abuse the opaque operation of Facebook ads, as recently demonstrated in the Boris Johnson case.[28]

Artists can imagine counter-hegemonic structures that propose ways to replace the narcissistic authoritarian institutions of this type of statism. *Silent University* (2012–ongoing) by Kurdish artist Ahmet Oğüt is a solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform by displaced people and forced migrants. It is led by a group of lecturers, consultants, and research fellows who in many cases remain anonymous. Oğüt's recent project, *Code of Acquisitions*, initiated with Burak Arikan, is a platform that exposes the good and bad practices of institutions as well as cases of misconduct and abuse, aiming to create a database of conflicts and codes of conduct to increase awareness about the accountability of art institutions and organizations.

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's projects have also made a consistent inquiry into inhumane migration policies. At times, her works rupture the fabric of the eso-axis of narcissistic authoritarian statism. Her work *Citizens Manifesto for a European Democracy, Solidarity and Equality* (2011–13) was a three-year process of popular consultations across Europe, in which thousands of Europeans (by birth, choice, or circumstance) were asked to elaborate policy proposals which, in their view, should constitute the primary focus of the work of the next European Parliament and Commission. In Brugera's words, the work "springs out of a detailed analysis of current European legislation and an understanding of the power the EU currently has, the power it does not have, or the power it could have if there was enough political will to act radically."[29] This is one work that unmasks the narcissistic authoritarian statism of the EU—today's supra-state—and its delusion of being a progressive superpower that provides care to the less fortunate while remaining diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and nationality.

The reality that migrants face is beautifully presented in artist Meriç Algün's depiction of migrant life in Northern Europe. In her large body of work *Becoming European,* the artist acts as the unofficial registrar of the bureaucratic process of moving across borders, where application forms, customs, civil servants, and other players of the state apparatus perpetuate a consistent violence on the extra-state body. The racism felt by migrant communities throughout the EU and the thousands of deaths at sea in recent years—what many sociologists have called "white innocence in the Black Mediterranean"—bear witness to this break between autonomy and dependency that I mentioned earlier.[30]

Marwa Arsanios, born in the USA, responds to climate catastrophe by highlighting the inability of governments and corporations to take responsibility. She documents women's farming collectives that utilize their means and knowledge to carry out what she calls "the work of repair."[31] Arsanios researches the modus operandi of such communities and is specifically interested in their view of territory as one that treats land as a subjectivity to be "cured from a history of marginalisation, mistreatment and drought." In this way Arsanios echoes the politics of care and repair prominent in feminist histories. For the 2019 Biennale Warszaw, she organized an assembly of ecofeminists, climate activists, and scientists along with women farmers from Syria, Lebanon, Mexico, India, Greece, and Poland to exchange knowledge about how they communally live and cooperate and how they create infrastructures. Small groups such as these, focused on developing alternative structures, offer counterproposals to the continuous negligence of narcissistic authoritarian statism and its climate-change denial. Similarly, Petra Bauer has long been unfolding the powerful legacies and



Map from the platform initiated by artists Ahmet Oğüt and Burak Arikan titled Code of Acquisitions (2019–20). The project's mission statement, posted on its website, reads: "Code of Acquisitions is a platform that exposes good and bad practices of art institutions and galleries based on published policies as well as cases of misconduct and abuse, where artists are not paid, not told the truth after sales, or did not get back their works." Courtesy of Code of Acquisitions.

realities of the women's movement and has worked with organizations in her native Sweden as well as Greece, the UK, and other countries. Bauer is interested in the medium of film as a political tool that can be used to challenge contemporary social and political events and processes. Her works are often made in collaboration with existing social and political organizations, such as the Southall Black Sisters (SBS)—the radical, pioneering London-based feminist organization has politically engaged with the contemporary social and political conditions of black and minority women since 1979.

Lastly, in her project *Operation Sunken Sea* (2018–ongoing), Cairo-born artist Heba Y. Amin appropriates the language and gestures of authoritarian male figures of the past in order to comment on current policies surrounding the migration and movement of peoples, therefore hinting at the narcissistic nature of today's statism. *Operation Sunken Sea* is a proposition for draining the Mediterranean Sea that takes the form of a speech by an imagined leader, performed by the artist and presented on film. Looking into specific historical figures of fascist and authoritarian regimes and appropriating their speeches, the artist uses past claims to address the contemporary concept of territoriality, as well as current socio-economic and political conditions regarding the Mediterranean. These include: a continuous refugee crisis, war, and the collapse of nation-states in the Middle East—vis-à-vis the further deterioration of the concept of the nation-state within the EU itself—and the effects of crypto-colonialism and turbo-capitalism beyond EU borders. The project therefore offers a warped mirror image of narcissistic authoritarian statism, by mocking it and deconstructing its semantics from a feminist perspective. Laying bare the modus operandi of current neo-nationalist and racist leaders who mimic authoritarian tactics and propaganda from the twentieth century, Amin manages to break the mirror as such and reveal the true ugly face of new narcissistic authoritarian tropes.

Contemporary artistic practice operates within a difficult reality of acute polarization, but the artistic practices discussed here counteract the structures of narcissistic authoritarian statism and what it embodies. They manage to attack the "idea" that has been slowly building by exposing its behavioral patterns—dismantling its modus operandi and depicting the sinister workings of its model—or proposing other ways of creating power structures that embrace dependency. In other words, many of them present models of autonomy based on interdependent care.

These practices need space to flourish, and our task as cultural workers is to facilitate this space. As pointed out

to me recently by one of the founders of the Melissa Network of migrant women in Greece, Nadina Christopoulou, “art is the unexpected ally”: it can bring forward questions and propositions to wider audiences. And for the sake of this argument, I think it can do so against the “idea” of this current state formation. Thinking back to Cortázar’s story, it feels as if we have already relinquished a lot of space, just as the siblings did. While riding the turbo-capitalist wave, we have accepted our current condition as either normal or as a temporary glitch. We have adapted to a reality that promotes a competitive autonomy over dependencies of care. We play out a short-term vision of monetary success in a field defined by narcissism, precarity, public relations, and diplomatic nonideological positions. Is the battle lost? Faced with the ever-growing presence of narcissistic authoritarian statism and all its tropes, one thing becomes apparent: it is the magnitude and multiform nature of its very idea, played out through the concepts that define it, that should be our focus. Its deconstruction and the creation of counter-hegemonic power structures through the field of contemporary art, in alignment and in solidarity with a larger coalition of already existing (and currently threatened) counter-hegemonies of civil society, can create the groundwork for a new power bloc against narcissistic authoritarian statism and its current violent ideology and practice.

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1
Published in Greek, the stories are included in a book of collected works titled *Axolotl and Other Stories* , which combines several story collections from 1950 to the 1980s, including *Bestiario* . Julio Cortazar, *Axolotl and Other Stories* (Papyros Letra, 2009).

2
David Fear, "The Great Hack Review: From Data-Rights Fights to Democracy R.I.P.," *Rolling Stone* , July 22, 2019 https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/the-great-hack-movie-review-netflix-861785/ .

3
Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present, Future* (Polity Press, 2016), 5.

4
Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* , trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. David Owen and Tracy Strong (Hackett Publishing, 2004), 37.

5
Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (Verso, 1978), 147.

6
Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* , 203–4.

7
This was in fact never implemented and instead led to neoliberalism, granting more freedom for multinationals to transcend borders and state control.

8
Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's Networked Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy,* April 2016, 32–46.

9
There has been a campaign from several organizations to incorporate the protection of data into human rights. The United Nations has issued a guidance note for treating data as a human right https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/GuidanceNoteonApproachtoData.pdf .

10
See my previous article: iLiana Fokianaki, "Redistribution via Appropriation: White(washing) Marbles," *e-flux journal*, no. 91 (May 2018) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/91/197800/redistribution-via-appropriation-white-washing-marbles/ .

11
Here I am utilizing the methodology of Deleuze and Guattari's employment of psychiatry in their book *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* , in which they define the state's self-presupposition as "schizoid Urstaat."

12
Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (Verso, 2019), 12.

13
Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* , 17.

14
Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* , 26.

15
Strongmen , ed. Vijay Prashad (OR Books, 2018).

16
Eve Ensler, "Trump: A Fable," in *Strongmen* , 24.

17
Lynne Layton, *Some Psychic Effects of Neoliberalism: Narcissism, Disavowal, Perversion, Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (Macmillian, 2014), 161–78.

18
We only need look at the contempt with which contemporary societies view people that receive benefits and the decade-long crusade of neoliberalism to dismantle the welfare state.

19
Layton, *Some Psychic Effects of Neoliberalism* , 164.

20
Richard Samuels, *New Media: Cultural Studies and Critical Theory after Postmodernity* (Macmillian, 2009), 32.

21
For further context see "Extra States: Nations in Liquidation," curated by iLiana Fokianaki, September 2018, Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp.

22
Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, vol. 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

23
The detachment with which we consider with the news of hundreds of bodies drowning in the Mediterranean or thousands starving in Yemen operates similarly to our indifference with regards to extreme levels of poverty found throughout the world and the rise of inequality. As I am writing these lines nine refugee children below the age of twelve have died either at sea or by burning alive in the camps in Greece. This did not make mainstream European news headlines, or not as much as it should, let's say. One must ask, why is it that we find it easier to mobilize in large numbers for climate catastrophe but not for the constant death of people of color in the Mediterranean, especially children? We must, of course, understand all this injustice to be interrelated. The left—at least in the EU—is not loud enough, because it is also to blame for this condition. In Greece, one of the biggest refugee camps, built for three thousand people but currently hosting twelve thousand, was created by the left Syriza government. On the one hand, the EU left and center left abandoned the working class across the continent, accepting the collapse of the welfare state while failing to constructively oppose the further augmentation of class disparities. They did not only abandon their citizens and legal constituents, but furthermore, all the "exo-state" bodies, mainly refugees and migrants, who not only suffer across the continent from failed and disgraceful "assimilation" policies, but also face progressively more hostile infrastructures in their attempts to reach Europe. Therefore, instead of demolishing the us-versus-them divide, the center and left political forces of the EU unwillingly aided it, giving ground to far-right rhetorics.

24
See https://climateanalytics.org/briefings/fact-check-trumps-paris-agreement-withdrawal-announcement/ .

25
The work *Being safe is scary* (2017) was installed in the entrance of the Fridericianum as part of Banu Cennetoğlu's contribution to Documenta 14 in Kassel.

26
Safariland is a company responsible for manufacturing and marketing weapons (such as tear gas) used against migrant families at the US–Mexico border, water protectors at Standing Rock, and protestors in Ferguson, Oakland, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Egypt, and other countries.

27
Alex Greenberger, "'I Am Not the Problem': Whitney Vice Chair Responds to Open Letter Calling for Action Against Him," *Art News*, December 3, 2018 http://www.artnews.com/2018/12/03/not-problem-whitney-vice-chair-responds-open-letter-calling-action/ .

28
See further https://techcrunch.com/2019/08/05/uk-watchdog-eyeing-pm-boris-johnsons-facebook-ads-data-grab/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cDovL2FwcGxlLmNvbS9zcG90bGlnaHQtc3VnZ2VzdGlvbg&guce_referrer_cs=A830Abj7SowVZmG9GNuJYQ .

29
Noted in a private conversation with the artist.

30
See https://thedisorderofthings.com/2017/06/07/white-innocence-in-the-black-mediterranean/ .

31
See https://biennalewarszawa.pl/en/konwencja-rolniczek/ .

Aaron Schuster

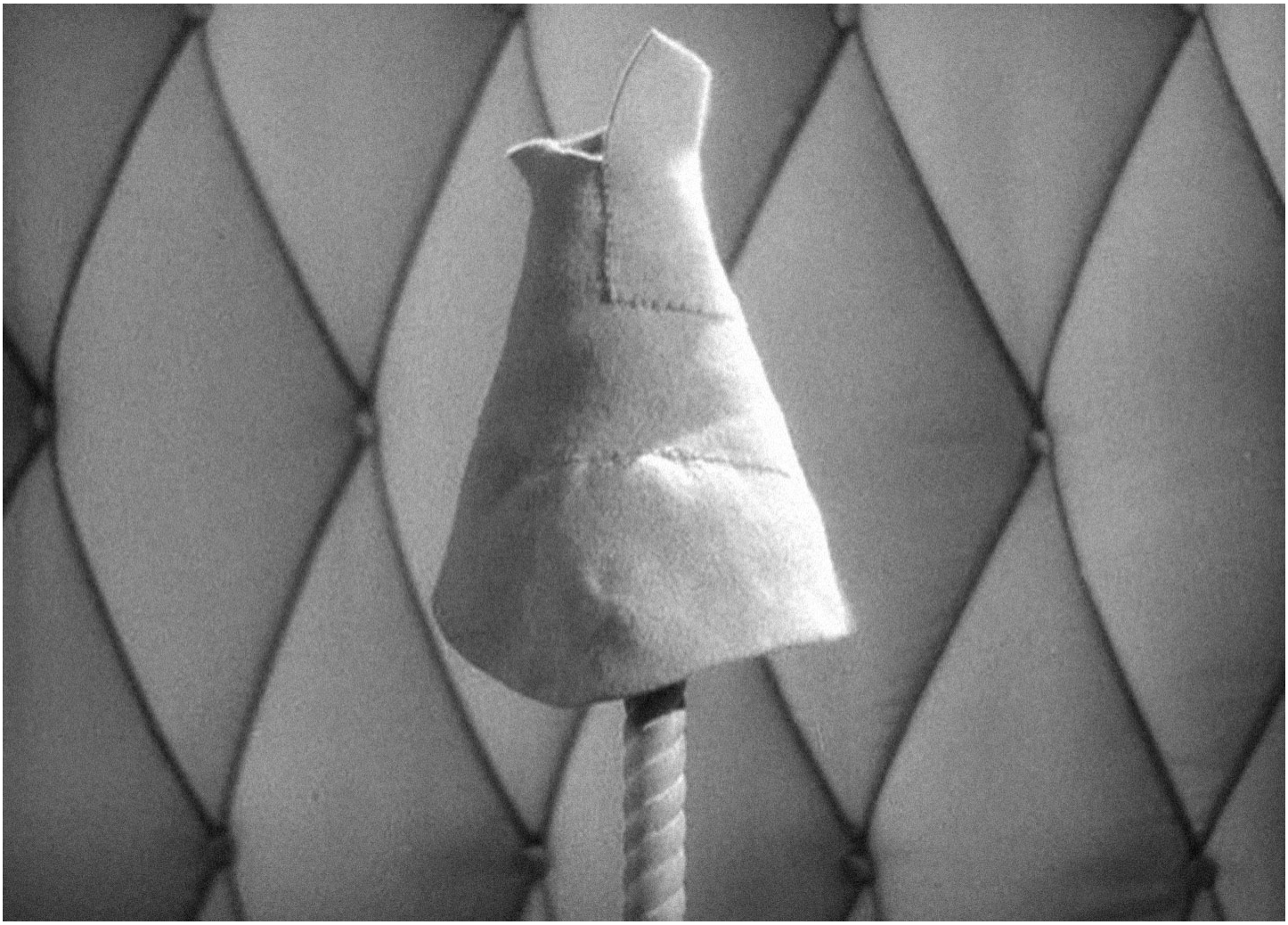
Communist Ninotchka

It Won't Be Long Now, Comrades

To start with a story about the 1948 Italian elections:

> Italian communists made several attempts to forestall the showing of *Ninotchka*, including threatening movie-theatre managers if they did not remove it from programmes and stealing copies from cinemas. When Russia's embassy asked the Rome authorities in early April to take *Ninotchka* out of the city's ten theatres in which it had been showing for several weeks, the publicity probably added to the film's nationwide success. "What licked us was *Ninotchka*," one disappointed Communist party functionary is reported to have said when the pro-Soviet left was defeated at the polls, and the main anti-communist party, the Christian Democrats, gained an absolute majority in the new parliament. "Greta Garbo Wins Elections," proclaimed one conservative newspaper.[1]

First released eighty years ago, in 1939, Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* is a singular romantic comedy, dealing with relations between East and West, communism and capitalism, love and politics—and one particularly momentous laugh. The film certainly doesn't pull any punches in its depiction of the USSR: belying its light, witty atmosphere, the comedy abounds in references to executions, forced confessions, censorship, and the Gulag. While underlining the dire conditions of the Soviet Union, it showcases Western prosperity in the form of glamorous Parisian life. Yet despite its (remarkably effective) anti-communist satire—as the Italian story illustrates, *Ninotchka* was used as a propaganda tool in the Cold War—there is another "red" thread going through the film. Lubitsch's treatment of communism is far more nuanced than Garbo's "election victory" would suggest. Indeed, many of the film's best jokes are directed against capitalists and aristocrats, and Ninotchka, despite the transformation she undergoes, never repudiates her dedication to the communist cause. Far from the Soviet heroine simply abandoning her political ideals after falling for a Western gigolo, and by extension, the West itself, the film proposes—as improbable as this sounds—a kind of screwball communism, which sets Ninotchka's revolutionary commitments in a sympathetic light (James Harvey calls her "the closest thing to a convincing socialist heroine the English-speaking cinema has yet produced").[2] This complex and original depiction of communism—as we shall see, the comedy works on multiple levels—is what makes *Ninotchka* such compelling viewing today. And insofar as the politics of comedy has become a pressing issue, Lubitsch's cinema can again provide a valuable lesson.[3] At a time when power appears more and more as a derisory comedy, an obscene parody of itself,



Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie Ninotchka, starring Greta Garbo, Melvyn Douglas, and Ina Claire.

with political satirists hardly able to keep up, aren't we in desperate need of a "Lubitsch touch"?

To briefly recount the plot: *Ninotchka* is the story of the unlikely romance between Comrade Nina Ivanovna Yakushova, a Soviet envoy sent from Moscow to Paris to oversee the sale of precious jewelry in order to raise badly needed money for the state, and Count Leon d'Algout, a charming ne'er-do-well and kept man of the Grand Duchess Swana, an exiled Russian noblewoman who happens to be the previous owner of the jewels. Ninotchka is played by Greta Garbo with her signature distance and feminine mystique. She is intelligent, totally dedicated, and highly capable—unlike her bumbling comrades Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski who nearly botch the sale due to Leon's clever manipulations and the hedonistic attractions of Parisian life. But Ninotchka too is soon thrown off balance by the debonair Westerner and the charmed world he represents; eventually her cold Soviet exterior is cracked and she falls head over heels in love with him. She is not the only one to undergo a change: Leon also acts strangely out of character, his frivolous playboy persona giving way to a newfound sincerity and devotion—and interest in Marxism. Jealous of Leon's affair with the Bolshevik beauty, Swana maneuvers to steal the jewels, and then offers them back to Ninotchka in exchange for her leaving Paris and Leon for good. Though heartbroken, Ninotchka does not hesitate: she dutifully takes the plane to Moscow, then drowns her sorrow in work. The final twist comes when her superior, Commissar Razinin, sends her on a new assignment abroad. Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski, now on a fur-trading mission in Constantinople, are up to their old hijinks, and he wants Ninotchka to investigate. She begs him not to make her go, but his decision is final. Little does she know that the whole affair is Leon's cunning plan to get her out of the USSR, with the help of her three comrades' bad behavior. Ninotchka arrives in Constantinople to discover that Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski have opened a Russian restaurant there and intend to stay, and she is happily reunited with Leon.

In order to get a sense of the film's ideological complexity, let us begin by looking at a few key instances of how it treats capitalism, communism, and aristocracy.

Page from the periodical Picturegoer, (Jan 27, 1940), p. 8. Image: Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive.

The Hat

After Ninotchka's arrival in Paris, she passes by a shop window display containing a ridiculous funnel-shaped hat. Regarding the odd fashion accessory with disdain, she delivers a damning verdict: "How can such a civilization survive which permits women to put things like that on their heads? It won't be long now, comrades"—the latter line a neat profession of faith in the iron law of History. If the hat is a symbol of the decadence of capitalist civilization and its inevitable doom, later in the film it acquires a very different meaning. After falling for Leon, Ninotchka goes back to the store and purchases the reviled hat, which has now become the symbol of—what? Ninotchka's feminine vanity? Her new taste for Parisian style? An openness to gaiety and romance? Or, in a more socialist vein, has the geometrical headpiece become her comrade object?[4] The hat is a classic Lubitsch touch, portraying Ninotchka's transformation through the vicissitudes of a single object. Yet, when she tries her new purchase on in the mirror, she cannot quite recognize herself in it; it retains its fundamental emptiness. It would be too easy to see in Ninotchka's fashion makeover an embrace of the formerly doomed capitalism. Instead, in a more elusive manner, the hat symbolizes the loss of her rigid bureaucratic socialist identity, without however crowning a new Western consumerist one.

Reading Capital

As much as Ninotchka undergoes a transformation, so too does Leon. Not only does he fall completely under Ninotchka's spell, he starts reading Marx and even confronts his personal butler about relations of economic exploitation. The irony is that the butler is positively repelled by his employer's leftist talk. "May I add, sir, that it was with great amazement that I found a copy of Karl Marx's *Capital* on your night table. That is a socialistic volume which I refuse to so much as dust, sir. I view with alarm, sir, the influence over you of this Bolshevik lady." As a sidenote, this is an interesting sociological observation that runs across Lubitsch's films: servants take more pride in their position and have a stricter sense of class hierarchy than aristocrats. In *Cluny Brown* (1946), for example, it is the domestics, Syrette and Mrs. Maile, who insist on respecting traditions and minding one's proper place, while the upper class are willing to tolerate transgressions and make jokes about their status.

The Leninist Kiss

After a night on the town Leon takes an inebriated Ninotchka back to her hotel room, where they continue the party. Before leaving, he lays her on the bed and gives her a goodnight kiss. Though it is easy to miss, the visual composition of the kiss is very deliberate. In the background, perfectly posed between the lovers' faces, is a framed portrait of Lenin. To paraphrase Jean Genet: "But what exactly is a couple? First of all, how many is it?" Lubitsch's answer is that it takes three to make a couple: Leon, Ninotchka, and Lenin (indeed, this combination is already present on the level of the signifier: *Le* on + *Nin* otchka = *Lenin*. In the American tabloid tradition, if Leon and Ninotchka had a supercouple name, it would definitely be "Lenin"). It is only under the gaze of the "little father," as Ninotchka calls him, that the lovers can enter into a sexual relation. On the other hand, after the kiss the notoriously stern visage of Lenin undergoes its own transformation, softening into a (weird) smile: a hallucinatory cheerful Lenin, ready to bless their screwball love. Again, what the film shows is a double transformation: the Westerner learns to embrace Marxism, while the communist learns about surplus enjoyment (emblematized by the perverse smiling Lenin), beyond the rational management of life and desire. Is there here a possible Lubitschean formula for a "comical" Freudo-Marxism?

The Jewels

It's the next morning. Swana enters Ninotchka's suite, catching her in a compromising situation, hungover in bed and still wearing her dress from the previous evening. But Ninotchka refuses to be embarrassed, and cuts right through the charade of manners. "Madame, what is it you people always say, regardless of what you mean? 'I am delighted to have you here'? I have not reached that stage of civilization." Swana reveals that she is now in possession of the jewels. In the confrontation that follows, Ninotchka decries the crimes of the tsarist aristocracy, pointedly saying of the jewels that "They always belonged to the Russian people. They were paid for with their sweat, their blood, their lives and you will give them back." What is remarkable about this long scene is the complete lack of jokes or satire: Ninotchka is portrayed as dignified, earnest, and committed, and her words are charged with truth. The scene's importance is further underscored by it being the turning point of the film, after which Ninotchka abandons Paris and Leon.

The Politics of Lingerie

Another article of clothing: Ninotchka is back in Moscow, and has brought with her her silk negligée. Left out to dry, her flatmate warns her to not put her Parisian lingerie where others can see it, lest it draw suspicion. Ninotchka sarcastically remarks, "I should hate to see our country endangered by my underwear." Yet her gesture right afterward belies this satire of Soviet paranoia and conformity. Admiring the lingerie, her flatmate asks if she might borrow it for her honeymoon, and Ninotchka immediately gives it to her as a wedding present. Despite its real and sentimental value, Ninotchka easily parts with her property. If communism is equated with informants and state surveillance, it is also associated with the spirit of generosity, a lack of attachment to private ownership.

The Freedom of Complaint

Near the end of the film, Ninotchka is in Constantinople with her old comrades, who have defected. Iranoff proudly illustrates their newfound freedom by throwing open their hotel room door and shouting "The service in this hotel is terrible!" Pause. "See? Nobody comes, nobody pays any attention." *This* is Western freedom: you can complain all you want and nobody reacts or does anything at all. The ultimate proof of freedom is the ability to complain (about the stupidest annoyances of everyday life, especially concerning one's social privileges: bad service) without fear of reprisal or censorship. The flipside of this is that nobody cares or even listens; speech is reduced to the empty cultivation of complaining (there's a direct line from this to *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: from Lubitsch to David). This shows the subtlety of the anti-communist jokes in *Ninotchka*, which often cut both ways: freedom from censorship entails the society of the complaint.

Your Cornea is Excellent

What does the film have to say about the desire of the Soviet New Woman? Let us focus on the seduction scene between Leon and Ninotchka. Leon has invited Ninotchka to his apartment, where they engage in a sparkling, rapid dialogue.

> LEON: Ninotchka … do you like me just a little bit?
> NINOTCHKA. Your general appearance is not distasteful.
> LEON: Thank you.
> NINOTCHKA. The whites of your eyes are clear. Your cornea is excellent.
> LEON: Your cornea is terrific. Ninotchka, tell me. You're so expert on things. Can it be that I'm falling in love with you?
> NINOTCHKA. Why must you bring in wrong values? Love is a romantic designation for a most ordinary biological … or shall we say "chemical," process. A lot of nonsense is talked and written about it.
> LEON: I see. What do you use instead?
> NINOTCHKA. I acknowledge the existence of a natural impulse common to all.
> LEON: What can I possibly do to encourage such an impulse in you?
> NINOTCHKA. You don't have to do a thing. Chemically, we are already quite sympathetic.

While Ninotchka is portrayed as cold and unromantic, she is not deprived of sexual feeling. On the contrary, while Leon proceeds elliptically, she cuts right to the point. Ninotchka regards her seducer with scientific detachment: she is studying Leon, just as she studies the engineering marvels of the city of Paris. The Western playboy is a specimen of a doomed culture and an outmoded form of male subjectivity. "You are something we do not have in Russia," she tells him, and after his "Thank you" adds, devastatingly: "That is why I believe in the future of my country." But even though she views his kind as soon-to-be-extinct, she is not unmoved by him. "Chemically, we are already quite sympathetic" she states, as if objectively reporting on a factual situation. Assessing his physical attractiveness, she pays him a compliment whose clinical precision makes it hilariously out of place: "Your cornea is excellent."

Ninotchka regards love as a purely material process, the sexual base stripped of its sentimental-romantic superstructure. Love is a "natural impulse common to all." From this demystified, materialist perspective, Leon's seduction ploys and romantic cooing appear as wasteful and frivolous as a haute couture hat or a sumptuous French meal—later on we see Ninotchka trying to order "raw beets and carrots" at a bistro, to which the proprietor replies, "Madame, this is a restaurant, not a meadow." Sexual desire is about the satisfaction of a natural impulse just as eating is about the proper caloric intake: naturalism is asceticism without prudery. Ninotchka's no-nonsense sexuality recalls a line that was actually reviled by Lenin, the so-called glass of water theory of sexuality: "Make love to a woman as if you were drinking a glass of water" (what is scandalous here is that it is a woman who extols communist "free love").[5] The film pokes fun at communist efficiency as applied to matters of romance, but isn't there something strangely utopian in Ninotchka's attitude toward sex? She is fully in control, uncompromised by her desire, which she treats in a totally pragmatic way, without the usual embarrassment, anxiety, or guilt. Moreover, viewed today, does not the Soviet libidinal materialism satirized by Lubitsch fit perfectly the ideology of late-capitalist consumption, combining scientific expertise and efficient management with health-consciousness and ascetic self-control? Nowadays it is more likely to be a creative professional sipping raw beet and carrot juice at a hipster juice bar, extolling the drink's health benefits in objective chemical terms (vitamins, antioxidants, etc.). In an ironic dialectical reversal, Soviet materialism now appears in the guise of Western excess and luxury, from the molecular connoisseurship of products through to the idea of sex as a matter of biochemistry to be manipulated through pharmacological means. Ninotchka is our contemporary ideal.

Will the obverse of Ninotchka's disenchanted chemical eros be the head-over-heels romantic passion which she discovers thanks to Leon? Things are not quite so simple, as is indicated in a later scene, one of the most ingenious of the film. Ninotchka and Leon have fallen for each other, and not only metaphorically (more on this "falling" soon). They are enjoying a big night on the town, drinking and dancing at a chic nightclub surrounded by *le Tout-Paris*, the Duchess and her entourage included. Lubitsch

Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie Ninotchka.

subverts the rom-com cliché where one of the characters gets drunk and does something embarrassing or transgressive, typically of a sexual nature. After a tense exchange with the Duchess, Leon and Ninotchka take to the floor and start dancing. Overcome with emotion and champagne, Ninotchka turns to her fellow ballroom dancers and addresses them in solidarity, "Comrades, comrades, good people of France," then announces to Leon her desire to make a speech and foment revolution against the Duchess. An embarrassed Leon quickly hushes her up, and sends her off to the ladies' room. But soon after he is informed by the distressed maıtre d'hôtel that his companion is "spreading communistic propaganda in the powder room" and organizing the attendants. What makes this scene so effective is Lubitsch's substitution of communism for sex. Ninotchka loses control over herself, she is overcome by passion—the desire for communism. Labor organizing and communist propagandizing have the same transgressive punch as what, in a standard romantic comedy, would be achieved by sexually risqué behavior. And here we get a very different image of Lubitsch's heroine: it is not that she's a cold Soviet robot, but deep down there's a carefree Western romantic waiting to break out. On the contrary: totally soused and unable to control herself, it is comradeship-love that comes bubbling to the surface. This is Ninotchka's deepest drive, her truest passion, her most transgressive desire. Freud described the impersonal "id" as "connected with certain forms of expression used by normal people. 'It shot through me,' people say; 'there was something in me at that moment that was stronger than me.' 'C'était plus fort que moi.'"[6] Ninotchka too loses her head, she is overwhelmed by something that is "stronger than her," but hers is a communist id.

Laughter in Search of a Joke

What about Garbo's laugh? The whole idea for the film reportedly started with just two words: "Garbo laughs!" This was the advertising slogan for the movie, echoing the catchphrase for Garbo's first sound feature, *Anna Christie*

Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie Ninotchka.

(1930), "Garbo talks!" In the beginning was the laugh, and then they needed the joke, and eventually the plot, the characters, the setting, the whole world—all to support that inaugural outburst of laughter, the spasm at the origin. Is this something like the Gospel According to Lubitsch? Or a kind of Pirandellian laughter in search of a joke?[7] To use the psychoanalytic term, Garbo's laugh is the ultimate Lubitschean partial object; in a cinema abounding in deft visual touches and singular objects, Garbo's laugh is arguably the most elementary and the most profound, neatly encapsulating the whole problem of comedy.[8] What is at stake in *Ninotchka* is actually a metacomedy; it is a comedy about how to do (and not to do) comedy, its conditions of possibility.

Leon has secretly followed Ninotchka to the working-class restaurant where she is having lunch; he wants to crack Nintochka's ideological shell, to get her to stop taking things so seriously and enjoy herself, and his trick for doing so will be comedy. In a bid to get her to laugh, he tries various anecdotes and jokes, but is unsuccessful. (Indeed, Ninotchka's deadpan remarks about the jokes are much funnier than Leon's pathetic attempts at humor.) Increasingly frustrated, he blames his comedic failure on the audience: "Maybe the trouble isn't with the joke. Maybe it's with you." Leon's smooth manner turns deadly serious, as he gives her one last chance to laugh, a weird comic ultimatum. This is the joke he tells: "A man comes into a restaurant and sits down and says, 'Waiter! Get me a cup of coffee without cream.' After five minutes the waiter comes back and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, we're all out of cream, can it be without milk?'" Ninotchka doesn't react. He tries telling the joke one more time, but, flustered, botches the delivery, then starts up again, only to become even more frustrated and belligerent. The satirical target of this exchange is not Ninotchka's humorless socialism but rather the aggression contained in Western fun-loving ideology: Leon embodies the paradoxical pressure to relax, the superegoic imperative to enjoy. If Ninotchka stands for the command economy, Leon's open society is one of *command comedy*. It would hardly be a stretch to note the sexual subtext here: what Leon desperately wants, but fails, to command is the woman's enjoyment. He suffers from performance anxiety; he cannot produce

in her the coveted laughter.

Suddenly everything shifts, thanks to an accident. While scolding Ninotchka for her lack of humor, Leon leans back in his chair, which topples over, sending him crashing to the floor. Everyone in the restaurant, including Ninotchka, laughs uproariously at this pratfall. What could not be produced through cleverness, irony, wit, or even intimidation, is accomplished by the most elementary of gags: it's only with the fortuitous fall that laughter finally finds its joke. There is a metacomedic lesson here: true comedy is about surprise and loss of mastery; it consists in an awkward, "unwanted" satisfaction, a satisfaction one was not looking for yet provides pleasure nonetheless (one could say that it's satisfaction that finds *its* subject, rather than the other way around). Comedy, in other words, belongs to the order of the *event*—it is unpredictable and disorienting, just like love. It thus makes sense that Leon's pratfall corresponds to the magical moment of falling in love. *Ninotchka* proposes an original formula for the miracle of love: the meeting not of two kindred souls but two kindred falls—one person collapses to the ground, and the other falls into spastic laughter. Or as Ivana Novak and Jela Krečič beautifully describe the scene:

> What follows is a whole series of falls: First, there is a fall in the immediate physical sense: Leon falls on his ass in the most embarrassing and clumsy way. But this also signals a fall from his symbolic status as a sophisticated charmer, a fact directly registered by his expression of anger ("What's so funny about this?")—he no longer controls the game of seduction and is momentarily lost. And, as befits true love, Ninotchka does not react to this fall with condescending grace ("don't worry, when you stumble, I love you even more"), but with *her own fall*—the two falls overlap. At the immediate level, she *falls into uncontrollable laughter*—loses control of herself in exactly the same way one loses control when one falls into tears. Her fall, however, goes much deeper, providing an exemplary instance of what Lacan calls "subjective destitution."[9]

As Novak and Krečič argue, the moment of the fall is doubled—it is even doubly doubled—since it involves both Ninotchka and Leon, who undergo both literal and symbolic falls: he falls on his ass, she falls into convulsive laughter; he loses his signature poise and suaveness, his mastery over the game of seduction, she loses her symbolic armor, her identity as an emissary of the Soviet state (with all that implies: coldness, strictness, asceticism, etc.). Ninotchka is not laughing *at* Leon, from a superior position that would confirm her ego; rather she answers his fall with her own: a solidarity of falls. Subjective destitution is the right term to capture what happens to Ninotchka, as it designates a radical loss of identity, the dissolution of the coordinates of one's self-image. This is a shattering laugh that cuts through her being, marking a before and after. It is significant in this regard that we do not actually see the moment of laughter. "One moment she is deadly serious, the next dissolved in laughter, and there is really no way to bridge the two states."[10] The editing indicates something crucial: that the instant of laughter is an unrepresentable zero point, a *caesura* or pure loss inaccessible to an external gaze. Garbo's laugh is the embodiment of a void.

This is the metacomedy of *Ninotchka*: for the birth of laughter to take place, it must conquer two resistances, or two kinds of anti-comedy: the Soviet dispirit of bureaucracy, and Western compulsory mirth (if anything, the former possesses more wit and is closer to the comic spirit). What results, then, from the magical moment of laughter? Garbo's laugh is usually viewed as the moment of Nintochka's conversion to frivolity, luxury, and romance; that is, her capitulation to the capitalist West. But what if comedy were on the side not of Western hedonism but communism itself? On the one hand, there is Ninotchka's mechanical efficiency and self-sacrifice to the state—this is the repressive apparatus that is shattered with her laughter. On the other, there is her overwhelming passion of ballroom speechifying and powder-room revolts, of authentic devotion to the cause: the "libidinous" communist drive. Two readings of the film thus present themselves: in the official, satirical version, Ninotchka's laughter signals her transformation into a fun-loving "nonideological" Western subject. But there is another, more subversive undercurrent running through the film in which the three transformative events of comedy, love, and revolutionary politics are aligned.

I'm Out of the Omelette

Let us back up a little, and return to the joke itself. Ninotchka does not laugh at Leon's joke. But the irony of Ninotchka's not laughing is that the joke is, quite simply, excellent: it's funny that she doesn't find it funny.[11] To recount it one more time: "A man comes into a restaurant and sits down and says, 'Waiter! Get me a cup of coffee without cream.' After five minutes the waiter comes back and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, we're all out of cream, can it be without milk?'" In fact, the joke is so witty that it lends itself to being abstracted from its context and treated as a metaphysical comedy in its own right—which is precisely how it has been analyzed by Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Zižek, who refers to it often in his work. For Zupančič and Zižek, the joke contains a philosophical lesson; it illustrates, in a Hegelian way, the operation of determinate negation, or from a Lacanian perspective, the conjuration of the object of desire as the positivation of a void.[12] The waiter treats a determinate absence as a real property, so that it is not simply that x (coffee) is without y (milk or cream), but x is *with* without y: the negated or missing

element is posited as part of the material reality of the thing itself. While empirically speaking, they are one and the same black coffee, coffee without milk is not the same as coffee without cream: the absent addition insists, through the joke, as a spectral element of positive reality, appearing as its shadowy supplement. This is a key aspect of the magic of comedy, to conjure the void, to make nothing count as (an odd) something.[13] Here I would like to propose a slightly different interpretation, a Marxist twist to this philosophical reading by returning the joke to its original setting, turning Hegel on his head, as it were (although it's by no means my intention to simply oppose a materialist reading to an idealist one: what the joke reveals is the much more interesting and uncanny category of the "materialism of the idea"). The spectral element that the joke conjures turns out to be none other than the specter haunting Europe—that of class struggle. Recall that the joke is told in a working class restaurant, by a déclassé aristocrat who is making a show of his solidarity as part of a ploy to seduce communist Ninotchka—and in fact, the workingmen get the joke and laugh heartily, even if Ninotchka remains unmoved. What the punchline tells us is that not all coffee drinkers are equal. Coffee without cream is a rich man's black coffee; lacking this commodity, the best the waiter can offer is the more proletarian coffee without milk. What is thereby intimated is class struggle as the specter haunting social relations, ironically reduced to a matter of opposing deprivations: without cream versus without milk.

Beyond this punchline, one can trace a chain of associations throughout the film relating to this missing milk. Soon after Ninotchka's arrival in Paris, she castigates Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski for their profligacy, calculating that the cost of their luxurious hotel suite is equivalent to seven cows back home. "Who am I to cost the Russian people seven cows?" she pleads. Later, when Leon and Ninotchka are having their big night on the town, it's revealed that not cow but goat's milk has a special significance for Ninotchka.

> NINOTCHKA: It's funny to look back. I was brought up on goat's milk, I had a ration of vodka in the army, and now champagne.
> LEON: From goats to grapes. That's drinking in the right direction.

Then, during her confrontation with Swana the next morning, a basket of flowers arrives from Leon, with a gift hidden inside: a bottle of goat's milk. A final reference to cream, or lack thereof, near the end of the film makes explicit the political-economic stakes of Leon's "without" joke: after Ninotchka quotes the "Russian saying," "The cat who has cream on his whiskers had better find good excuses," to which Buljanoff replies: "With our cream situation what it is, it is Russia which should apologize to the cats." (Note how Buljanoff's ironic retort twists an implicit threat of state violence into an indictment of the socioeconomic conditions of a Russia "without cream.") If milk stands for the life of the Soviet people, including Nintochka's childhood sustenance, death is intimated through the symbolism of blood, introduced by the brilliant casting choice of Bela Lugosi to play Commissar Razinin: Count Dracula as a Soviet apparatchik. Todd Browning's *Dracula* appeared eight years prior to *Ninotchka*, and Lugosi was already famous as a horror villain. The typecast actor's presence in the film cleverly evokes the Stalinist terror, but, even more subtly (and perhaps unintentionally), it also recalls Marx's line about the vampirism of capital: "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[14] Between milk and blood a whole political history is sketched, which provides the dramatic backdrop for the romantic comedy.[15] And if the film ends with the successful formation of the couple, it is politics that has the final word. After Leon and Ninotchka have reunited—the fairy-tale nature of this happy ending is signified by its taking place in a nonexistent "Constantinople"; in 1923, the city had been renamed Istanbul[16]—the very last scene warns of future struggles and continuing class conflict: Kopalski is protesting outside the three comrades' restaurant, wearing a sandwich board that reads "Buljanoff and Iranoff Unfair to Kopalski."

What *Ninotchka* provides is a kind of comedic decomposition of Soviet communism, disentangling three lines which may be understood according to the Freudian division of the psyche: there is a *superego communism* of state bureaucracy, combining efficiency, severity, asceticism, and terror—Razinin's vampire socialism; and an *id communism* of overwhelming passion and subjective engagement, comradely solidarity, and revolutionary struggle. Ninotchka embodies both of these dimensions, and if her superego communism is the object of the film's satire—this is the stern, centrally planned Ninotchka, whose cold exterior is cracked by love—her id communism is afforded a real dignity, and gives rise to another sort of comedy. The three rascally "Marx brothers," Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski, on the other hand, stand for a corrupt and opportunistic *ego communism*, a communism of outward conformity, wily adaptation, ironic detachment, and the pursuit of personal gain, including a labor protest when that is in (one of) their interests. With their clever ironies and frauds, they are already the comedians of the system. One should thus distinguish three levels of comedy in the film: the satire of communism, viewed from a Western perspective (communists don't laugh, they have no humor, they are cold, inhuman robots); the comedy internal to communism, the cynical humor that belongs to everyday life (exemplified by the three comrades' hijinks and wit); and the comedy of communism itself, as irrepressible drive (which, just like Garbo's laugh, pops up eventfully in unexpected and unmasterable contexts: communism in

Actor Bela Lugosi in the movie Ninotchka (1939) and Dracula (1931).

the powder room).[17] There are also many non-comical, pathos-filled moments in the film, where Ninotchka directly speaks the truth—think especially of her dramatic confrontation with Swana. How do these relate to the comedy? Isn't Ninotchka oddly out of place in a comic universe? Ninotchka's seriousness is certainly an object of satire, but the opposite impression also imposes itself: that the pleasure of satire works as a kind of ruse or façade that allows the film to smuggle in a sympathetic portrait of a dedicated communist. Similar to the Freudian tendentious joke, where an innocent, socially acceptable pleasure paves the way for a dirty, repressed one, the film's anticommunist humor is the cover for a "dirty" and "scandalous" drive, the drive for communism.

And to extend our analysis one step further: not only does *Ninotchka* provide a comic dissection of Soviet communism, it also contains a utopian horizon. This relates to the film's double transformation, or double conversion, of the West to Marxism, and of communism to laughter, superfluity, and excess. Is not the real romance of film the romance between communism and surplus enjoyment? This screwball communism is what the (smiling) "Leninist" couple of Leon (the decadent Western reader of Marx) and Ninotchka (the laughing revolutionary militant) represents. "Luxury communism" is a facile phrase, but the more interesting question might be stated as follows: What would it mean to organize a society where surplus enjoyment would neither be ascetically denied nor captured by, and exploited for the production of, capitalist surplus value? How to avoid the two figures of the superego, the rational-ascetic Soviet command economy, and the fun-loving Western command comedy, which appear as two faces of the same compulsion to enjoy?

But I wish to conclude with another joke—not about milk or cream this time, but another essential farm product: eggs. Ninotchka is back in Moscow, and she has invited her comrades to her communal apartment for a dinner party. In contrast to the Parisian luxury they once enjoyed, Moscow life is poor and hard. But when the trio profess nostalgia for their sojourn in the West, Ninotchka, ever the communist stalwart, calls them to recognize the accomplishments of the Soviet people. "It's great. Think what is was a few years ago and what it is now. It's a tremendous achievement." Even though this is immediately undercut by several jokes, the dignity of Ninotchka's sentiment stands. Here we have another example of the film's comic reversal: it is not simply that Nintochka's socialistic statements serve as an object of parody, but the parody is what permits the genuine expression of her politics. They are making an omelette. Everyone contributes to the collective meal: Iranoff gives an egg, Kopalski gives an egg, Ninotchka has saved two eggs for the occasion; but when it comes to Buljanoff, it turns out that his egg has broken in his coat pocket. "Comrades, I'm out of the omelette," he sadly announces. "Don't worry, there'll be enough," Ninotchka and the others warmly reassure him. Here we have an interesting variation on the old saw, often associated with Stalinism, "In order to make an omelette you have to break some eggs." This line is the height of cynical wisdom; its bloody logic is referenced early on in the film with Nintochka's shockingly nonchalant allusion to the Gulag: "There are going to be fewer but better Russians." (Despite her initial orthodoxy, Ninotchka does not, in the end, inform on her corrupt comrades, but sends a "wonderful report" about them to Razinin; this, in turn, is why he dispatches them on a fur-trading mission to Constantinople, thus setting up a repetition of the original situation and the film's conclusion.) The omelette adage has a curious history. In fact, one of its earliest uses is connected not with communist terror but royalist reaction: François de Charette, a defender of King Louis XVI and one of the leaders of the counterrevolutionary Revolt in the Vendée,

Acme

STALIN'S KAGANOVITCH

"Why wail over broken eggs?"

Photo from Time magazine (October 24, 1932), p. 19.

justified his crimes at his 1796 trial by saying, "*On ne saurait faire d'omelette sans casser des œufs*" ("You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs"). The proverb eventually switched ideological sides, though the attribution to Stalin is mistaken; it was Lazar Kaganovitch, one of Stalin's lieutenants, who is quoted in a 1932 *Time* magazine article titled "Stalin's Omelette" as saying, "Why wail over broken eggs when we are trying to make an omelette!"—this during a time of mass famine. And is not the Silicon Valley motto "move fast and break things" a shinier, accelerationist version of the same idea? There is a Lacanian variant as well, playing on the words *homme* (man) and *hommelette* ("manlet"), in a way that subverts the proverbial logic: instead of justifying violence and destruction for the sake of the greater good, *hommelette* designates the oddball, the outcast, the remainder that falls out of any such "good"; this brings us back to the problem of the partial object, dear to Lubitsch.[18] The simple gesture of comradeship in Lubitsch's film is a riposte to this cynical wisdom. Against the brutal necessity of egg-breaking in order to construct the new omelette, the lesson of *Ninotchka* could be stated as: You can participate in the omelette even if you don't have an egg—not a bad formula for communism.

X

A different version of this essay was first published in Slovenian, "Komunistka Ninotchka," in *Lubitsch: Komedija brez olajšanja*, ed. Ivana Novak (Analecta, 2019).

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1
Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 26.

2
James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (Da Capo Press, 1998), 392. Tatjana Jukić observes that "Ninotchka remains dedicated to the revolution even after everybody else's sense of politics has shifted and mutated, and even after she herself has abandoned her initial strict bureaucratic socialism." "The October Garbo: Classical Hollywood and the Revolution," *Studia Litterarum* 2, no. 2 (2017): 58.

3
This essay in intended to contribute to an understanding of Lubitsch as a political filmmaker, examining the relationship between comedy and politics in his work. Lubitsch's great political trilogy, composed by *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Ninotchka* (1939), and *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), deals with the biggest shock to the capitalist system the world has yet known, the Great Depression, and the two major historical responses to the deadlocks of capitalism: communism and fascism.

4
As Marjorie Hilton observes, Ninotchka's new Western hat and dress are curiously reminiscent of Soviet avant-garde aesthetics: "Paradoxically, as much as this outfit is meant to convey Western fashion forwardness, it also evokes Russian constructivist experiments in fashion of the revolutionary years." "Gender and Ideological Rivalry in *Ninotchka* and *Circus*: The Capitalist and Communist Make-over," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 8, no. 1 (2014): 13.

5
Lenin comments in his conversations with Clara Zetkin: "You must be aware of the famous theory that in Communist society the satisfaction of sexual desires, of love, will be as simple and unimportant as drinking a glass of water. This glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad." Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (1924; Modern Books, 1929), 57–58. Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai, to whom this theory is often wrongly attributed (including by Lenin himself), is rumored to have been the inspiration for the character of Ninotchka. An outspoken proponent of sexual liberation and the only female member of the Central Committee, she was also sent abroad and eventually became the Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, coincidentally Garbo's homeland. In fact, however, Ninotchka was modeled not on Kollontai but Ingeborg von Wangenheim, wife of Lubitsch's friend and actor Gustav von Wangenheim; the communist couple fled Nazi Germany to Russia in the early 1930s, and Lubitsch visited them during his trip to Moscow in 1936. For more on this connection, see Laura von Wangenheim, *In den Fängen der Geschichte: Inge von Wangenheim Fotografien aus dem sowjetischen Exit 1933–1945* (Rotbuch Verlag, 2013), 12, 17–18.

6
Sigmund Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* , vol. 20, trans. James Strachey (Hogarth, 1955), 195.

7
Harvey writes: "According to some accounts, the whole project began with 'Garbo laughs!': once they had the slogan, they looked for a movie to go with it. It was Melchior Lengyel, a Hungarian playwright now on the MGM payroll, who came up with the idea of a Soviet in Paris succumbing to capitalist delight." *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood* , 384.

8
For a discussion of another of these Lubitschean partial objects, see my analysis of the jeweled handbag in *Trouble in Paradise*: "Comedy in Times of Austerity," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Theoretical Examination* , eds. Ivana Novak, Jela Krečič, and Mladen Dolar (Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014), 34–38.

9
Ivana Novak and Jela Krečič, "Introduction," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait* , 12; original emphasis. This passage is also discussed by Slavoj Zižek in *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2014), 293–94.

10
William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy* (Columbia University Press, 1983), 219.

11
For a contrary opinion, see Harvey: "He decides to tell her a joke. But this works no better, mainly because the joke is so dumb." *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood* , 383.

12
See Alenka Zupančič, *Why Psych oanalysis?: Three Interventions* (Nordic Summer University Press, 2008), 42–43. For two of Zižek's discussions of the "without milk" joke, see *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2012), 765–68; and *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (MIT Press, 2017), 140.

13
A brilliant example of this is provided by the Russian avant-garde writer and slapstick metaphysician Daniil Kharms: "There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about. We'd better not talk about him any more." *Today I Wrote Nothing* , trans. Matvei Yankelevich (Ardis, 2009), 45.

14
Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* , vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), 342.

15
I draw on Jukić's discussion of the symbolism of milk and blood in her excellent "Garbo Laughs: Revolution and Melancholia in Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait* , 86–87.

16
Hilton, "Gender and Ideological Rivalry," 16.

17
This notion of the drive is a key aspect of Lubitsch's comedy. From a formal perspective, one can compare Ninotchka's communist drive with that of the title character of *Cluny Brown*, a working class woman who has a peculiar passion for plumbing. The telltale features of the Lubitschean drive are that it doesn't obey social rules and cannot be assigned its proper place; it emerges in inappropriate contexts and awkward situations (e.g., plumbing in the middle of a formal birthday dinner, communism in the powder room), like a laugh that comes not when commanded but only at the "wrong" moment.

18
For more on the *hommelette* (which Lacan also refers to as the *lamella*), see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* , ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton, 1981), 197–98; and "Position of the Unconscious," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton, 2006), 717–18.

Claire Tancons

Portrait of the Artist as a Dramatist: A Conversation with Peter Friedl

What can a contemporary dramaturgy of the image look like? How might the theatrical come to the rescue of context in exhibitionary modes of display? Are representation and identity mutually exclusive? As Peter Friedl wanders through the making and meaning of images, warns against the pitfalls of context, and discusses the respective features and failures of theatre and performance, the artist as a dramatist ponders silence and absence as a remedy to censorship in the puppet theatre of history.

Claire Tancons: Would you rather go to jail for your ideas or retreat to a monastery?

Peter Friedl: From my point of view, contemporary art is a prison. Can I opt for the monastery? Tolstoy's very last getaway in November 1910 began with a monastery. He was heading south and wanted to find a hideout in Bulgaria.

CT: If given a choice, would you rather go to a pre-Foucauldian or a more modern prison?

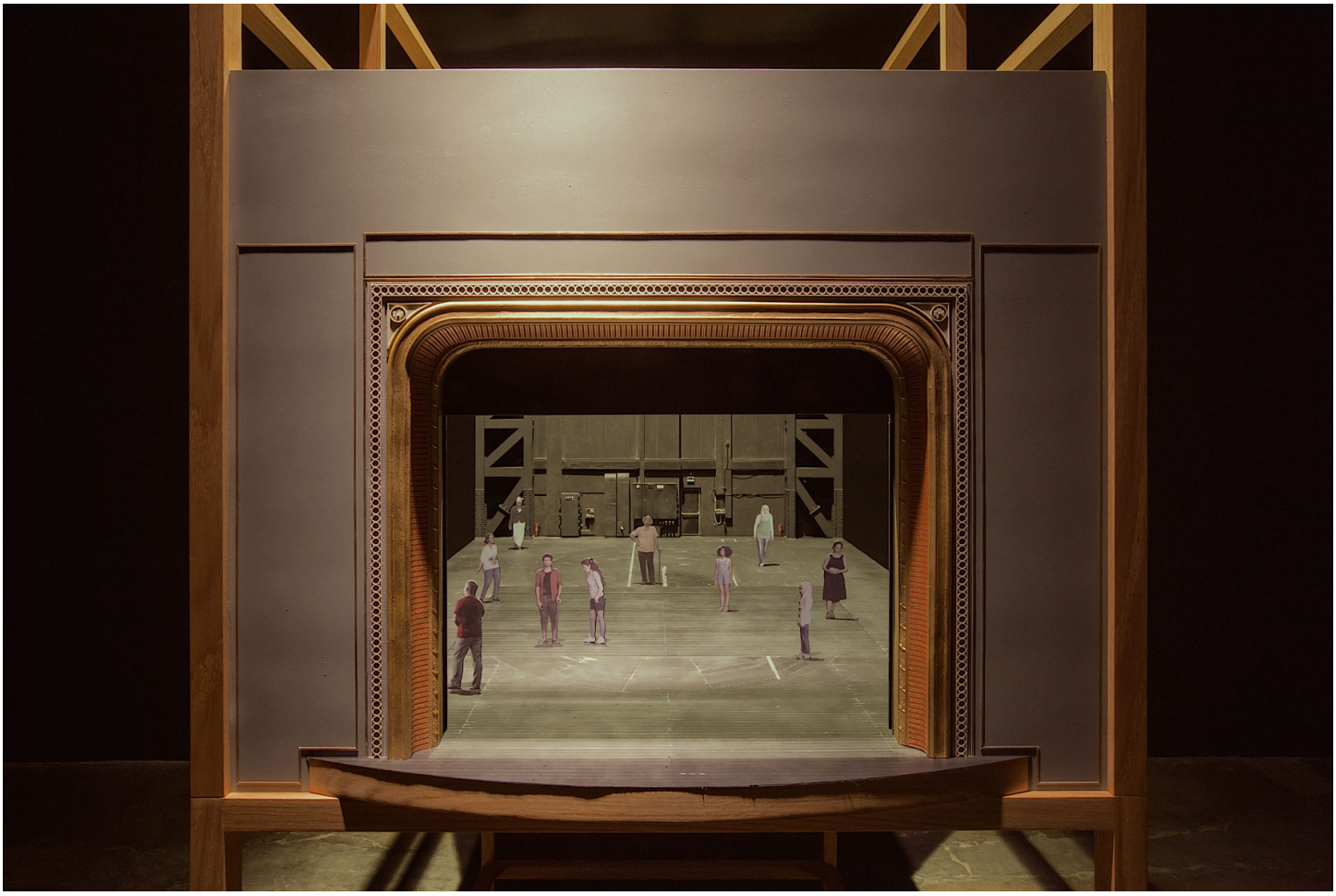
PF: Definitely not one of the outsourced prisons like the secret UAE-backed prisons in southern Yemen. Better a classical social-democratic lockup in Belgium or Germany, with television and a hopeless shrink … Inherent in this kind of question is the illusion that culture might be linked to freedom.

CT: I'm asking about the prison in relationship to your longstanding reverence for Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For instance, you have depicted his wife, Julia Schucht, in many drawings and as a marionette. And I know that your own diaries, started in 1981, are central to your work.

PF: Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is one of the great palimpsests of political philosophy in the twentieth century and, at the same time, an extremely individual document, his *via crucis* or passion. It's a document for how the mind works under aggravated circumstances, which I often pair with another unique document, Simone Weil's *Cahiers.* It's all about the fragility of thinking. I came to know the *Prison Notebooks* better in the 1980s when I lived in Italy. Yes, of course, this is familiar terrain.

CT: If you were to follow a church, would you pick an Eastern or a Western church? I'm thinking here of your interest in the icon and iconostasis as described by the priest, philosopher, mathematician, and polymath Pavel Florensky in the 1920s.

PF: Well, I'm also interested in Robert Fludd's attempt at picturing nothingness, the black square of *The Great Darkness* (1617) from his *History of the Macrocosm and Microcosm*. I remember worshiping in an Orthodox church in Sofia, Bulgaria, when I was ten or eleven years



Peter Friedl, Teatro (Report), 2016–18. Oak, MDF, plywood, brass, plexiglas, polyurethane resin, polystyrene, PVC, stainless steel, digital print, neodymium magnets, acrylic paint, 185 x 119 x 84 cm. Courtesy the artist and Guido Costa Projects, Turin. Photo: Cristina Leoncini.

old. At about the same time I saw Tarkovsky's epic *Andrei Rublev* somewhere. As often happens in life, I never saw the film again, but it created lasting images for me. That's how imagination—whether it's a fiction or not isn't really important—and how the art of memory work. I recall that after all the turmoil and atrocities of history, depicted in black and white, there was the apotheosis in color: the works of Rublev, the icon painter. Masterpieces can be quite detached. Flaubert calls them dumb in one of his nocturnal letters. They have this tranquil aspect, like large animals or mountains. By the way, I find it very disturbing that the epic has disappeared from visual art. That's a real loss.

CT: Has culture turned apostate? Is art iconoclastic?

PF: The contrary is true: art has become completely self-indulgent, totally in love with and surrendering to images and information. I think the problem of art today is that it hasn't found very convincing answers to the dream life of the World Wide Web. Mimicry is not enough. I remember T. J. Clark preaching that. When it comes to my métier, the creation of complex images, I have the feeling that resistance must take strange paths and go far beyond any iconoclastic impulse. Saying "no" means to radiate negativity towards all sides, in order to save some positivity that isn't just self-absorbing. I find it important to close certain windows now. For example, I don't want to give away too much information about the alchemy of layering. This isn't about self-censoring or mystifying, it's about salvaging aesthetic substance that has become too fragile. My job is trying to become silent, for only silence cannot be censored.

CT: In which epoch would you prefer to live?

PF: I don't think I was born in the wrong century. I have to live now. The alternative is: better to not have been born at all. I have no nostalgia about loss, but it's true that composing a complex image has become a very solitary job. Although it's been captured by all the discursive tropes, we can still dream of it and desire it. There's a difference between claiming complexity and somehow fabricating something in a clever way that is supposed to look layered and complex. Rather, I consider myself a decontextualizer. First, I'm looking for as much context as

possible, and then I want to kick it out.

CT: I'm interested in the invisible hand behind the many stages you provide for your works. Let's start with *The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint)* (2013), in which four handcrafted marionettes from different overlapping periods leave us anticipating action or motion, though they remain still. Gramsci's wife, Julia Schucht, stands for love and resistance in fascist Italy; Henry Ford embodies the apex of classic American capitalism; black Hamlet comes from pre-Apartheid South Africa; and Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, belongs to another century entirely.

PF: All together they are the dramatis personae of an unwritten plot. Giulia and Henry Ford were contemporaries, as was John Chavafambira, the Manyika *nganga* and protagonist of the first African psychoanalytic study in Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet*. Long-lived Henry Ford, who once said that history is bunk, was of course much older. And Toussaint L'Ouverture, the hero behind one of the revolutions I like most, is the undead. It's an idiosyncratic Gang of Four. There's also another group of three marionettes, *The Dramatist (Anne, Blind Boy, Koba)* (2016) — a dysfunctional family of sorts. Anne Bonny, one of the most famous female pirates of all time, was Irish and operated in the Caribbean. Koba is young Joseph Stalin, who during his early years in Tbilisi adopted his nickname from Alexander Kazbegi's novel *The Patricide*. The blind boy is me, but he's also a character from Edward Gordon Craig's series of puppet plays. I'm floating through lives and times, but I don't think this is so unusual. Nothing is more forced upon us than belonging to a certain time. Achrony or anachrony makes more sense. When it comes to the past, especially in theater, shortcuts known as actualization are very common. I prefer distance. I like to look at old things in a museum. I even like theater as a museum.

CT: The overarching title of your solo show, "Teatro," at the Kunsthalle Wien earlier this year and now at Carré d'Art in Nımes, suggests that you're the dramatist here. Is staging theater inside a museum your way of supplanting it?

PF: I just take up certain elements from the history of theater and theatricality and look closer at the museum's alienating effects. To exhibit something is never normal; to exhibit history is even more problematic. The interesting thing about the past is precisely that it's a foreign place. They do things differently there. Yet, at the same time it doesn't look so different. It's this mobility or potentiality that I'm interested in. I don't see how something could be given any more value by selfishly classifying it as contemporary. You don't have to go so far to consider something more beautiful, more intelligent, and greater just because it belongs to the past. It's often lost, and

Peter Friedl, Report, 2016. Filmstill. Single-channel HD video installation, color, sound, 32:03 minutes. Courtesy the artist; Guido Costa Projects, Turin; Galerie Erna Hécey, Luxembourg; and Nicolas Krupp, Basel. Commissioned and produced by documenta 14.

nobody will get it back. This is one extreme. On the other hand, when you remember that people in the past also loved and mourned, then the difference doesn't look so disparate. Despite the fact that they had a completely different historical fate. As an artist, you don't have to worry too much about any of this; it's your material. I like to wander the many available streets on different levels. The notion of the archaeologist can quickly become a melancholic cliché, but it does have its merits. We're used to hearing Walter Benjamin described as an archaeologist of modernity, for example. For Freud, the unconscious was timeless and unchangeable, like a landscape of ruins. With its layers of architectural remains, Ancient Rome was his model for the modern psyche. You dig a hole somewhere and discover another city. You dig a little more and you find yourself in another epoch. Standing in front of all these different layers, simultaneously in space and time, this is how I am in history.

CT: Is your sense of a lost past reflected in certain forms of absence?

PF: The past isn't lost. The past is part of the present. Or I could also say: there is no present.

CT: How does absence manifest formally in a work like *The Dramatist*?

PF: There is no performance and there is no puppeteer. It's like freezing a specific situation: the moment before or after a performance. The performance itself is omitted, which is, of course, a very conscious decision. In fact, I hate the dictate of immediacy. The theatrical in art became prominent once as a form of resistance against a certain understanding or misunderstanding of modernism. A lot of arguments seem to be based on relatively unproved theorems and assumptions, for example, the way in which theatrical space and time are relational—in relation to the viewer. Or immediacy as opposed to the

distance that separates thought and speech, purity as opposed to an impure theatricality. One can say that performance is a sort of rebirth of the Passion, without a script. The fact that in theater, speech creates space must have been a lure to visual artists, around 1917. But I'm not aiming to restage the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Actually, I'm starting to develop more sympathy for certain positions and ideas attributed to more backward or dogmatic forms of classical modernism. Impurity isn't necessarily more subversive than purity. The rather melancholic or classical atmosphere that I'm trying to create has a lot to do with my desire to start from an aesthetico-historical situation in which certain things already coexist in a kind of synthesis. From there, I want to push everything toward openness by means of various genres to find other forms of narration. *The Dramatist* doesn't have much to do with any romantic ideas of paradise lost or regained as far as the famous essay "On the Marionette Theater" by Heinrich von Kleist or Craig's über-marionette and *Drama for Fools* are concerned. My question is how such a configuration—through aesthetic contemplation—can open another way of thinking about history differently. It bothers me when context gets reduced to mere text. Of course, if you don't know the four characters at all you can ask: Where's the text? How much text do I need to decipher it? But this problem occurs in front of any phenomena. Immediacy is no salvation. The theatrical helps to simultaneously enforce and mitigate the erratic aspects in my work.

CT: In *Report* (2016) you staged a largely amateur cast, dressed in their everyday clothes, reciting excerpts from Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" (1917) on an empty stage stripped down to the firewalls. The twenty-four actors speak in their native tongue or in a language of their choice: Arabic, Dari, English, French, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, or Swahili. With the exception of Maria Kallimani, a well-known Greek actress who chose to speak in English, they share complex histories of migration, exile, and displacement. Yet, *Report* is not "about" the so-called migrant crisis in the Mediterranean.

PF: *Report* mirrors a specific historical situation when art about refugees and migrants started to abound. I wanted to put an end to the bad habit that artists and the art world have of permanently running after world crises. They should pay for it instead. As Godard said with regard to *Apocalypse Now*: Coppola should have paid Nixon something since all his ideas about Vietnam came from Nixon, not from anywhere else. So, I wanted to offer one of my classical solutions. As much as the actors or participants in *Report* are part of the movement of global migration, being a migrant or a refugee isn't a profession. I also try to bypass the question of exploitation. There's always some sort of exploitation in art. Are we exploiting the Passion of Jesus Christ when you make a religious painting? Or, are you exploiting colonial history, your own family, and your love stories.

CT: If no material can escape exploitation, how much distance do you have to establish between yourself, your material, and your work?

PF: I feel like the aesthetic material available today is rather mediocre, but there's nothing else, so I try to find my way through it. Clearly, I didn't want to focus on the TV news stories about migrants that you get when you put a camera in front of someone who has just survived a dreadful passage across the Mediterranean, who maybe saw their friends or kids dying and, with tears in the eyes, in another language, says something that's considered authentic. This is just pornography. Choosing Kafka's canonical "A Report to an Academy" as if it were a biblical text in various translations was a way out. How can I understand someone if I don't know their language? *Report* is about shared fatigue. I had the feeling that it was time to put an end to documentary truism. But again, this isn't too ideological. From time to time, one has to equilibrate things differently. From the very beginning the filmic image started with fiction and documentary coming together. The Lumière brothers knew that to film a street scene in Paris, they had to find a certain angle if they wanted to capture movement in its entirety, on a limited reel. A film lasted two minutes in 1896. Now, it's two hours. I remember a slightly anachronistic TV documentary that Eric Rohmer did in 1968. He invited Jean Renoir and Henri Langlois to talk about Louis Lumière. It's interesting to see such a sublime film director as Renoir indulging in "I still remember" anecdotes, whereas Langlois insists on the political and artistic choices behind that kind of filming. If you look at things differently, they suddenly become a bit strange or look a little odd. This is how I regard working with genre. Genre means that you put parentheses around something. You exhibit it. That's exactly what I like about the museum: it decontextualizes. If you're concerned about the correct context, you can always try to reconstruct it. That's easy. I'm interested in how narration works, and my use of the theatrical has a lot to do with being conscious of the fact that narrating history is always problematic.

CT: Historically, theater has been the arena where politics is examined. I am thinking about your work *Teatro (Report)* (2016–17), a model of National Theatre in Athens, and a companion piece to *Report* which was shot entirely in the National Theatre. I wonder if you believe in theater as an adequate place for the representation of democracy?

PF: I don't know much about representing democracy. In my view, theater's impuissance is evident. Once it had lost its significance as a place to debate power to cinema, then to television, and finally to all other screens, the tricks and methods of theater became available to everyone. If at all, my theater model is haunted by other ghosts coming from the esoteric parts of Renaissance philosophy. I'm referring to Giulio Camillo's *L'Idea del Theatro* or to Fludd's *Theatrum Orbi*, but not to Greece as the cradle of

democracy and tragedy. Sure, the Acropolis is just a short walk from the National Theatre where the scenes of *Report* were shot. The classicist National Theatre was built by the German architect Ernst Ziller and opened in 1901. Usually, you wouldn't see the people I invited on stage there.

CT: Would you agree somehow that the actors in your polyphonic cast are the contemporary face of a people that is missing?

PF: Oh, I'm not sharing any sentiments or expectations of a coming community. I can't really evoke it and don't want to flirt with it. I'm afraid I won't be part of any community, I'm not good at that. The people in *Report* are first and foremost individuals who got stranded in Athens at some point. My job was, perhaps, to celebrate the beauty of their faces. If someone speaks Kurdish or Swahili, I can look at the face, the body, and gestures, but of course, there's a barrier. *Report* doesn't celebrate fraternization or nonverbal theater. I know some of the life stories of most of these people, because we were talking during the casting and shooting. Why didn't I publish them? Because I have no form for them. So I decided to preserve their stories. I'm not censoring or mystifying anything, they probably told their stories to others or they can tell them at any time. I don't have to be the medium for their stories in their own words.

Peter Friedl, The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint), 2013. Wood, metal, fabric, leather, glass, straw, oil paint, nylon strings. Dimensions variable. Collection Carré d'Art—Musée d'art contemporain de Nımes. Courtesy the artist and Guido Costa Projects, Turin. Photo: Maria Bruni.

CT: *Report* is as much about film as it is about performance, conflated, in fact, in a filmed performance. You've adopted this tactic before, for example in *Liberty City* (2007) and *Bilbao Song* (2010).

PF: A filmed performance offers just another possibility of using and, at the same time, avoiding live theater. I don't want the histrionic and the cult of immediacy to take over. In fact, I've always been attracted to close encounters of the third kind between film and theater, and there's a very long and rich history of them. *Liberty City* was epic theater in the genre of documentary aesthetics—actually in the form of a short loop, taking the infamous Arthur McDuffie incident and the dramaturgy of the 1980 Miami riots as a reference. It's very much in line with Brecht's *Street Scene.* The tableaux vivants of *Bilbao Song*—a phantasmagorical allegory inspired by Basque history—were specifically staged for the camera in a theater near Bilbao. *Report* is different because it resorts more than any other work to speech and language.

CT: You lay out another stage awaiting activation in *Teatro Popular* (2016–17) by introducing elements from Portuguese street theater that go far beyond the traditional repertoire and set into motion a myriad of narratives. Here, too, like in *The Dramatist*, you created a cast of idiosyncratic characters which, in this case, relates to the history of the Lusophone world. Why did you want to use glove puppets to address Portugal's colonial era and its aftermath?

PF: The traditional Teatro Dom Roberto is a *minor* art, based on typecasting and repetition, with a very restricted repertoire and cast. Its stage, the *barraca*, is a minimalist DIY construction covered with cloth, which conceals the puppeteer inside from the public gaze. My *barracas* are prototypes that can be set up and dismantled without any tools. I use them and the hand puppets to create my own idiosyncratic Lusophone universe, peopled with characters from different centuries and continents. In it, you can find, for example, the Sephardic astronomer Abraham Zacuto (1452–ca. 1515), a refugee from Spain who became Royal Astronomer in Lisbon until he had to leave for Tunis due to the persecution of Jews in Portugal. His *Almanach Perpetuum* revolutionized ocean navigation. Then, there's Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba (1583–1663), who held off Portuguese invaders for many years. Or, in the immediate present, Isabel dos Santos, Africa's first female billionaire, as well as her father, Eduardo dos Santos, who was president of the Republic of Angola for nearly forty years. Art collector and philanthropist Calouste Gulbenkian ("Mr. Five Percent"), one of the first to exploit Iraqi oil, isn't missing. The promise of royal glamour is embodied by the unfortunate king Dom Sebastian I, whose ideas of a late crusade led him to embark on a fatal military adventure in North Africa in 1578. Dom Nicolau (ca. 1830–60) was a prince of the Kingdom of Kongo who published letters protesting colonial economic policy. Other characters are Stanley Ho, Macao's "King of Gambling," born in 1921 and still alive, Angolan songwriter Bonga, and Olga Mariano, a tireless defender of the rights of the Romani in contemporary Portugal. There are also fictional characters, such as Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), who wants to escape Morocco on

a plane to Lisbon in *Casablanca*. The figure of Maria can be read as a little homage to the 1962 film *Dom Roberto* by Ernesto de Sousa. Floripes comes from a Carolingian legend which can be tracked to the island of Príncipe. I made all of the figurines with the help of a local puppeteer in Lisbon.

Peter Friedl, Teatro Popular (detail), 2016–17. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon.

CT: Are the motionlessness in the display of the four impenetrable *barracas* and the array of unused puppets meant to dismantle certain conceptions of power in the representation of history and its protagonists?

PF: *Teatro Popular* is a sort of shadow fighting with realism and mimesis. This theater gives the impression that it may start to perform at any moment. Instead, it remains silent and still as if the fall of individualization and historiographic fixation had cast a spell on all these heroes and heroines. There's no action, no plot. But there are no people either. The people are missing, as Paul Klee said. I think in the traditional genre of popular theater, the dramatis personae were more protected. It was a place to find refuge from the excesses of history. I try to explore how history works.

CT: I'd like to talk about one of your more recent works, through a discussion of piracy. *No prey, no pay* (2018–19) was produced for the Sharjah Biennial, in the Persian Gulf, formerly known as the Pirate Coast. I know that, for you, piracy isn't really a political alternative to good governance. This is how we differ in our interest in piracy. I've always been intrigued by the way in which anarchists such as Peter Lamborn Wilson aka Hakim Bey looked back at the historical manifestations of piracy as autonomous forms of self-governance. I've also been following the way in which piracy has blossomed into political parties from Norway to Tunisia and, recently, how it's been invoked by far-right Italian politicians and media to criminalize the rescue maneuvers of Captain Carola Rackete, dubbed " *la piratessa*."

PF: The fascinating thing about pirates lies beyond genre-specific fandom. All histories and biographies of piracy get close to fiction. There's no reliable portrait of any Golden Age pirate, just as there's no truthful portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture. The history of piracy is fictitious, and the images circulating around it are even more so. I don't know how much truth there is in Exquemelin's *History of the Buccaneers*, which was first published in 1678. The woodcuts and engravings in the various "who's who in piracy" books are imaginary. Yet, inadequate, imperfect documents show how imagination works. Just take, for example, the sketches done by Harro Paul Harring, a professional German-Danish revolutionary and a bad poet, who in 1840 traveled to Brazil to fight slavery. Or think of dreams as documents in a broader sense, which was the case in Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*. Every history is open to projection, but the history of piracy is wide open. It's a good example for how history is being staged. This goes far beyond the question of whether such projections are right or wrong. It also goes beyond celebrating supposedly forgotten or hidden counter-histories of the revolutionary Atlantic.

Peter Friedl, Teatro Popular, 2016–17. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna. Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon.

CT: What makes *No prey, no pay* so appealing to counter-historical narratives is precisely its strong piratical subtext. In this multipart work composed of an Islamic green flag with a white skeleton stitched on, circus plinths, and fancy pirate costumes, a global history of piracy is hinted at, but never fully revealed under the garments of the grotesque.

PF: Well, as far as we know, Edward Low (1690–1724) used a red skeletal figure on a black background for his Jolly Roger. But he also used his Green Trumpeter flag to call his fleet's captains on board. Low is remembered as

one of the most notorious and murderous pirates. Anyway, I think the concept of counter-history is a little schematic. It's based on a rather simplistic image of history, similar in some ways to certain leftists' notions of the turn to immaterial labor as the big paradigm shift and which exposes a strange concept of historical capitalism, one which doesn't take into account how the term "immaterial labor" is insufficient to accommodate forms of work that have long existed and continue to alienate people, such as what was called "women's work." In order to propose an alternative, one has to reduce and simplify things. It's the desire for a clearly identifiable enemy. That's why long-lasting monoliths such as colonialism and the Shoah remain so popular and successful. I think the idea of a pirate ship as an anti-state model for multicultural or multiracial coexistence is naive. It's as naive as the ignorance of all encounters between Africans and Europeans before the Middle Passage.

CT: The circus plinths are named after fictional and historical figures. They are all personifications of sorts, between Robin Hood antiheroes—or heroines—and sans-culotte martyrs, struggling for agency and autonomy. My favorite, entitled *Little Ben*, the square black plinth which looks like a soapbox, doesn't actually depict a pirate. Neither do *M.* or *Chocolat*.

PF: *Little Ben* is a monochrome portrait of Benjamin Lay (1682–1759), the Quaker dwarf who demanded the total emancipation of all enslaved Africans around the world. *Chocolat* refers to Rafael Padilla, the Afro-Cuban clown who around 1900 became one of the first successful black entertainers in France. *Joice* stands for Joice Heth, obviously. When P. T. Barnum exhibited the elderly, blind African-American woman in 1835 as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington, his showman career in antebellum America took off. *Black Caesar*, *Dragon Lady*, and *Hunt the Squirrel* are distinctly piratical. Each of the plinths looks different and can serve as a relatively autonomous sculpture at the same time as a fully functional display object—something between pedestal, tiny stage, and speakers' corner.

CT: But the main formal reference remains the circus plinth. You once wrote to me that *No prey, no pay* is about "the history of showing and showing off." Did you intend to allude to the freak show and lead towards the notion of exhibition as entertainment?

PF: My motley crew isn't a freak show, no matter what the real or fictional characters look like. I don't want to talk endlessly about the common thread that connects them. For sure, the age of Barnum continues to be reincarnated and prevail. And context is always a construction. People often think that there's an artwork that can be considered the text, and this text seems to be embedded in and protected by context. This formula suggests that the "text"—an artwork—needs to be deciphered, whereas the context can be immediately understood. Yet context is also text and embedded in the history of texts. It's not like Russian dolls, but it does mean that more effort is needed. The same happens with history and counter-history.

Peter Friedl, No prey, no pay, 2018–19. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 14. Performance by Johnathan Lee Iverson. Courtesy the artists and Sharjah Art Foundation. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation.

CT: Can we discuss *No prey, no pay* within the context of the Gulf and the "New Middle East"? I was wondering if you see any relationship between your project in Sharjah and *The Zoo Story* (2007), with the stuffed giraffe that traveled from Qalqilya, Palestine, to Documenta 12.

PF: Wasn't the "New Middle East" an invention of the last Bush administration? You can't really compare *The Zoo Story* with *No prey, no pay*. The so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict played an important and deadly role for the giraffe. Instead of exhibiting any media images, I wanted to show the original. The giraffe was meant to function as a narrative model. It was clearly propaganda for the Palestinians. I considered Palestine the last region in the world where images are needed from artists. Normally, I would rather avoid such hot spots. In the case of *No prey, no pay*, I wanted to very consciously keep my distance from any local context. I found the Sharjah Biennial quite compromising and problematic, with no freedom to maneuver. Whereas in the case of the giraffe and Documenta, I had the feeling that I could control everything—the question of transport and of using a loan as my medium—once the giraffe was permitted to leave the West Bank. That's totally different from the biennial circus in an Emirati biotope. What can you do there? I chose the colorful forms of my circus plinths and a slightly mad atmosphere to mark the territory—not exactly in a satirical mode, but by way of suspending meaning. The *No prey, no pay* scenario isn't claiming at any moment that it could be a place to negotiate truth. The giraffe was also a prop, but in a very realistic drama that you might follow in the media—or that most likely, you don't want to follow anymore. The props in *No prey, no pay* are highly hermetic. It's an alternative folklore of sorts.

CT: So, the hermetic nature of the plinths and the crypto-piratical camouflage of the project were part of your plot against the diktat of site-specificity from the very beginning?

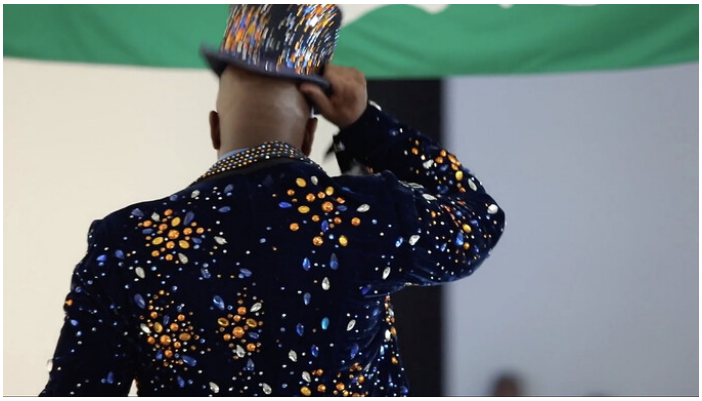
PF: Yes. In any case, I have my doubts that there were ever-glorious days of site-specificity. To formalize things is always an effort. I'm now not only tired, I am exhausted, to quote this beautiful text by Deleuze on Samuel Beckett, "The Exhausted." Exhaustion of all possibilities is a necessity. I feel quite at home there.

CT: What is the role of live human presence in your work, whether filmed, performed, or suspended?

PF: There are artworks that do not require any beholder. They communicate among themselves through time and space, comment on each other, and try to combat and annihilate or fulfill one another. This could be a post-human world with no human beings anymore, just sleeping beauties somewhere in an abandoned museum. Then there are other forms of communication. A classical form of performance is a visitor in front of a painting moving from left to right and a little closer, mimicking the role of the painter. Remember the funny sentence in C. L. R. James's essay "Picasso and Jackson Pollock": "*Guernica* is to be looked at from the right and the whole picture moves visually from right to left." There are artworks that should be seen from a certain perspective. Performativity is part of architecture, is part of an encounter between body and space. I'm not saying that everything is performance. Performativity doesn't bother me per se, I just wouldn't single it out in the continuum of artistic possibilities. Performance today makes me feel quite uncomfortable. Yes, I think it's a fashion, which has a lot to do—when there's nothing better to do—with the capitalization of the body and gestures of estrangement and alienation. Working with one's own body has become a kind of self-optimizing exercise, close to complicity with capitalist positivity. Performance has become the mainstream model of social behavior. Now everybody's performing, every chief executive expects you to perform. I don't understand why the art world—always so keen on "resistance"—has embraced this deformation so wholeheartedly.

CT: *No prey, no pay* is an open stage that offers the possibility for performance. Given your desire to distance yourself from performance, can it be understood as a pastiche of sorts?

PF: It's very much a caricature. It could also grow and become an opera. Due to my animosity towards theater as an apparatus, I've always refused to put my head in the lion's mouth by working in a regular theater. But, I have to say that I could do it now. Give me an opera house and I would do it my way. I'd accept the actors and opera singers, the musicians, the arrogance of the technicians, everything.



Johnathan Lee Iverson in No prey, no pay, 2018–19. Production still. Opening performance, Sharjah Biennial 14. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

CT: Could you really accept the whole theater apparatus?

PF: I think I could neutralize it now, like I try to neutralize curators, with varying success. We know a lot about form, and still, I believe that art functions best through forms we don't totally trust. It's become so incredibly easy to imitate and counterfeit a layered artwork. Around 1900, in Europe let's say, every girl in a bourgeois household could play Beethoven or Chopin. And around 1970, every second French household had an unpublished novel somewhere in a drawer. Something similar is happening now. Since contemporary art has become so popular and successful, it probably isn't really needed anymore.

CT: For the opening performance of *No prey, no pay*, Johnathan Lee Iverson, a professional African-American entertainer who proudly presents himself as "the last ringmaster" (of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus), lent his voice and presence to your display. How did you choose him?

PF: I didn't see the performance and I wasn't there for the opening. We also wanted to invite another expensive special guest, Kabir Bedi, who played the title character in *Sandokan*, the 1970s TV series, an Indian prince turned pirate, fearlessly attacking British forces. I imagine Iverson became a prop.

CT: Are you immune to potential criticisms of staging black performers as props? I remember the unease of one reviewer about non-Western actors taking turns to embody the ape Red Peter.

PF: Isn't Red Peter more red than black?

CT: Well, yes, but the association between blackness and apeness is a minefield.

PF: My aim isn't to represent blackness, nor to problematize it. There was once another red-winged monster, Geryon. Hercules came to steal his cattle and killed him with his arrows. I am Pink Peter.

CT: The impossibility of representing blackness is a recurrent trope in contemporary African-American culture. How do you position yourself as someone who works with such charged material in ideologically tense times of identity politics?

PF: I have nothing against sectarian struggles such as "if you're not black, you're not allowed to speak." But what can one achieve by establishing rules that won't function? At times, I'd also like to be more authoritarian or terroristic and decree what is good and bad art. I think I know what good art is, but everybody else would just laugh. We end up in a field where everybody can claim anything, but who can decree things without becoming the police? This is the problem in culture. So, one falls back on politically tinged empowerment strategies, but empowering of what exactly? Power in art or in culture is problematic because we never know exactly how real it is.

CT: Apropos colonial history, you once said that sometimes it would be best if no images were made at all. You've also expressed reservation about the notion of the postcolonial. But wasn't it meant to protect against the abuse of images, a concern that you share?

PF: When it comes to the postcolonial, my simple question is: when was it? Isn't that a question posed by Stuart Hall and Ella Shohat in the early 1990s? To be honest, I haven't seen much progress since then in the art world. It seems that we continue to live in an ahistorical limbo. Anyone can come and tell me they're doing some work on the postcolonial. There's no proof, no criteria. This is what bothers me. The same applies to much identity discourse. I don't know much about my identity. I am a guest, an observer. I am nothing. Aesthetic substance is much more fragile than identity. I'm afraid it doesn't make much sense to control images or the fabrication of images. You may have images that are clumsy, such as an opera with the most beautiful music and a dull libretto and plot. If you can do it better, then of course this is a good argument for an ouster. Basically, the questions about blackness and the postcolonial imply that you don't merit the trophy. I wonder where this idea of taking away a trophy comes from. After all, being misrepresented or less represented and trying to defend a territory isn't so special. I can also be very much in favor of a Byzantine-like ban on images. Unfortunately, I don't believe in adequate images. As for my problem with the postcolonial label as an increasingly anti-historical and therefore dangerous notion in art, I would still say: colonizing is going on constantly, more than decolonizing.

CT: What artistic material is left then? And where is it hiding? You often say that you only want to work with material that's waiting for you.

PF: Sometimes, you feel there's a story or a constellation lurking, waiting to get redeemed, kissed, and to be woken up and transfigured. My expectations are always high. It must be something that probably isn't interesting for anybody else. Well, I understand why people place so much emphasis on counter-history or neglected history when talking about my work, but I'm not roaming the world in search of neglected stories. They can be found everywhere. It's some sort of contemplation or meditation in order to get in touch with the one neglected thing that's really waiting for me. I've always been skeptical about the intentions behind the idea of giving voice to the voiceless. Silence is much better.

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Excerpt from the catalogue of Peter Friedl's forthcoming solo exhibition at Carré d'Art–Musée d'art contemporain de Nımes (October 25, 2019–March 1, 2020).

Peter Friedl is an artist who lives in Berlin. He has recently participated in documenta 14 and Sharjah Biennial 14. His most recent solo exhibition is "Teatro" at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2019). A new book project, *Rehousing*, with texts by Hanif Adurraqib, Dionne Brand, Renee Gladman, Annemarie Jacir, Mark von Schlegell, Madeleine Thien, Mike Wilson, among others, is in preparation (forthcoming, Sternberg Press).

Claire Tancons is a curator and scholar invested in the discourse and practice of the postcolonial politics of production and exhibition. Tancons was recently a curator for Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber with Zoe Butt and Omar Kholeif. She is also currently the recipient of a Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her book *Roadworks* on processional performance.

Jörg Heiser

The Great Escape: Adrian Piper's Memoir on Why She Went into Exile

Like many others interested in contemporary art, I first came across the work of Adrian Piper in the pages of an art magazine—in my case in the early 1990s. I remember quite vividly seeing a black-and-white photograph of her riding a New York bus with a white bath towel stuffed in her mouth, a work from her early 1970s *Catalysis* cycle of unannounced performances (unannounced in the sense that in most cases she would just turn up in public and confront regular passers-by with these actions). I was struck by the deadpan humor, whether the performance involved her walking around Central Park with Mickey Mouse helium balloons attached to her teeth, hair, and ears, or riding the subway with clothes that had been soaked for a week in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil. But besides the humor, I was also struck by the way these enactments seemed to challenge the very mechanisms of cognition and recognition with which we instantly tend to categorize people and try to pin them down. And it seemed significant that these enactments were performed by a female conceptual artist who identified as African American and would later become a tenured professor of philosophy.

In 2018, the Museum of Modern Art in New York awarded Piper its largest ever retrospective of a living artist, spanning five decades of her work. The exhibition travelled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and was accompanied by a sumptuous catalogue, as well as a comprehensive reader of in-depth essays on Piper's work (full disclosure: I was one of eight contributors to that reader). Whatever mechanisms of recognition might have previously failed, Piper has finally gotten her well-deserved due from museum curators and art historians.

However, as the dust raised by the much-acclaimed retrospective has begun to settle, another book comes into view that Piper herself has written. It is titled *Escape to Berlin*, and subtitled: *A Travel Memoir*. It's a stunning, beautifully written book. At times I felt I needed to read it at the pace of an epic poem, but then again it was like reading a thriller. It's alternately moving and devastating, often both within short range or simultaneously. To be sure, this is not a memoir like any other, though it does also, like most memoirs, tell the story of an upbringing, and a coming to maturity. But its main concern is revealed on the page just before the first chapter, which is empty but for one simple question, "Would you like to know why I left the US and refuse to return?," followed by a short answer: "This is why."[1] And indeed Piper tells the story, between the hard covers of a book handsomely illustrated with her artworks, poetic texts, and family photographs, of why she has become an American artist in exile, who did not attend her own New York MoMA retrospective. It is a story of discrimination based on race and gender, a story of workplace bullying and gaslighting in academe, but also one of resistance and reckoning. You could also say: Piper, as she reveals in this book, at some point in the 1980s, became a whistleblower in the workplace. And like other American whistleblowers, she was severely punished for

Detail of the book Adrian Piper, Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir / Flucht nach Berlin: Eine Reiseerinnerung, (Berlin: APRA Foundation Berlin, 2018). Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

being one.

The book is bilingual English and German (at 327 pages, roughly half for each language), which is unusual but in itself a statement: it is Berlin, Germany, where Piper has lived since 2005, and it is the German context which she addresses just as much as the American and international ones (Piper, an expert in Immanuel Kant, is fluent in German). Piper's memoir makes clear that her move to Europe, which she had prepared for since the year 2000—that fateful year of the Florida recount that made George W. Bush president—has a lot to do with the United States, in the sense that it reflects the country's development especially in regard to the toxic discriminatory politics that have continued to structure and dominate it. Her flight into exile also has a lot to do with US academia, and specifically with the ideological-educational complex that forms a substantial part of it; and with Piper's experiences therein as a philosopher and tenured professor. It is no exaggeration to say that because of these two factors combined, Piper went into exile.

As I read on, what also became increasingly clear was that pretty much all of Piper's artwork since the 1980s can be directly related to the experiences that eventually led to her decision to escape to Berlin. And while these were largely—not only—experiences within academia, they were reflected in her artistic work, but not necessarily in a way that would be detectable unless you knew—as upon reading this memoir—about her traumatic experiences.

Of course that does not license reducing that artistic work to mere outpourings of pressure experienced in the social or professional sphere, illustrations of biographical incidents, or a therapeutic release valve. Her works—key ones are depicted in the memoir, and are part of its narrative—transcend the therapeutic and the biographical. They have cathartic or compensational value only because they transcend an all-too-illustrative or instrumental function.

Naturally, we may expect a good memoir to transcend the merely biographical or therapeutic towards something artistic and possibly political. And Piper's can indeed be seen in the venerable lineage of the great memoirs of writers who tackle American racism and its historic roots—maybe most clearly in relation to James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). There are obvious parallels: both born and raised, intellectually and artistically gifted, in the north of Manhattan (Piper in Washington Heights and Riverside Drive, Baldwin in Harlem); forced into exile in the face of harassment (in Baldwin's case, harassment by the FBI, to France's Provence from 1970 and for most of the rest of his life until his death in 1987); and a fundamental inability to flinch or shut up in the face of discrimination. And there are also, of course, some differences: Baldwin's stepfather became paranoid and treated his stepson harshly, whereas Piper describes her father as a man of modest restraint and gentle paternal love. While Baldwin's famously lucid, rhythmic prose was trained on the force of preachermen (the stepfather was a Baptist minister, Baldwin himself became a child preacher), Piper's prose—though also eloquent and elastic—has more to do with the deductive reasoning of a philosopher, and the imaginative leaps of a conceptual artist.

There is another difference: Baldwin writes about how the bitterness of his stepfather, but also his power and "crushing charm," had something to do "with his blackness, I think—he was very black—with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that he was beautiful."[2] Baldwin was as black as him, and anyone could see his African ancestry by looking at him, whereas Piper's was more difficult to determine—which often led others to search for or concoct visual evidence to confirm it.

So while black kids in Harlem might tease her by calling her "pale face," white kids might play cruel games challenging their siblings to guess "whether Adrian is white or colored." These early childhood experiences, of course, took on more monstrous dimensions later in life. This kind of ideologically programmed cognitive dissonance comes out of what Piper describes as "the wackiness of the American caste system, based on the imagined binary opposition between 'black' and 'white' 'races.'" Her inadvertent violation, and then deliberate ridicule, of America's caste categories were the main cause of the virulent retaliation she elicited.

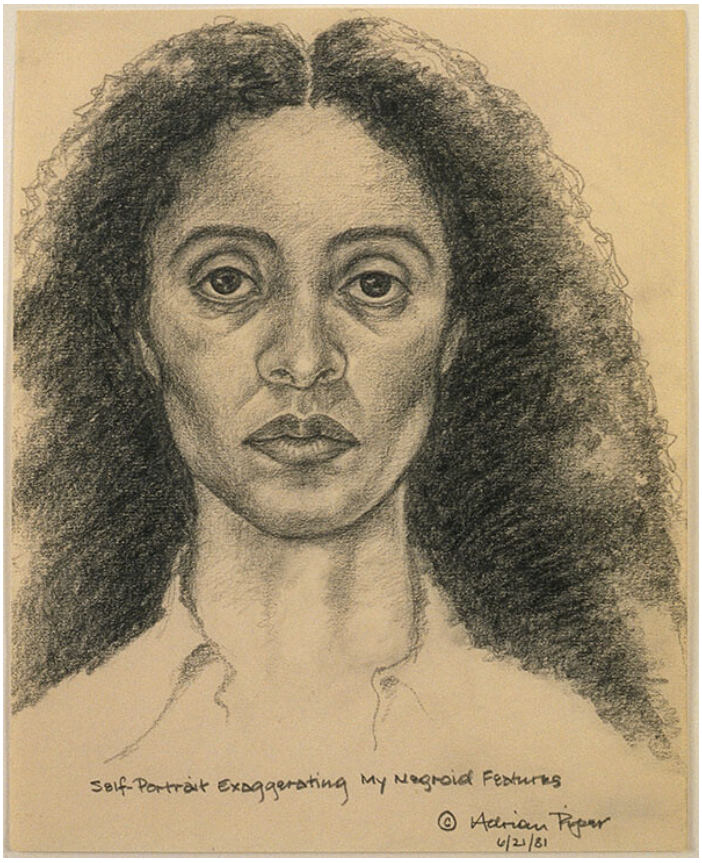
Nevertheless, Piper to some extent is a successor of Baldwin, one generation after (Baldwin was born 1924, Piper 1948). Like him, she conveys direct connections between personal experience and societal interrogation: on the one hand, her upbringing and relationship to her parents, her experiences of authority and elite social circles; on the other, her more general questioning of society's success or failure in coming to terms with the historic crimes and contemporary taboos that structure it.

Piper makes vividly clear how the circumstances of one's upbringing are the decisive factors in the creation of one's psychological and social makeup. Her striking allegory, at the beginning of the book, is that of a delicate sprout wrapped or bandaged in layers upon layers of social effect, layers that harden or soften throughout the years, become torn or remain firmly in place. She relates this to Vedic philosophy, the ancient Indian body of texts forming the basis of Hinduism—here, also, the body and the soul are described as a complex system of layers upon layers. I was reminded, at the same time, of the way Melanie Klein, founder of child psychoanalysis, diverges from Freud in putting emphasis on the very early stages of child development, and on how decisive loving touches, or their absence, during that early stage are. In the 1970s, German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, based on Klein as well as Wilhelm Reich's theory of "body armor"—bodily stiffening that is like a compensation mechanism masking the absence of love, and the denial of related desires—developed an understanding of how fascist subjectivity came into being not least as a result of a deep-seated fear of that bodily armor being fractured. The fascist is seeking to release that fear, "heal" the armor, through the annihilation of others.

In Piper's family, there was no fear of that kind. "On my father's strict orders, I was never hit or spanked or beaten or whipped … As a result, I grew up physically inviolate, unable even to imagine the possibility of a breach to my physical integrity." On top of the absence of violence, her parents—both hardworking, modestly earning, always impeccably dressed members of what they termed "the negro community"—established the child-raising policy, which they also asked family and friends to abide by, to never comment on or refer to Piper's physical appearance, whether negatively or positively, in order to allow her to grow up without the feeling of being reduced to her looks. But then there came the fifth-grade teacher who asked her parents if their daughter was aware that she was colored. It wasn't until 1978, Piper writes, that she recalled that incident, when an American whose sexual advances she rejected called attention to her race. Numerous artworks came directly out of these and similar experiences, such as the 1981 drawing conceptually titled *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*.

Piper's parents, by loving her and creating an environment of trustworthiness around her, as well as encouraging her to speak her mind and argue whatever her case freely, had made her fearless about being who she is. But she also describes how that fearlessness made it hard for her to correctly identify reactions to it:

> I cannot count the number of colleagues and former friends I have shamed, embarrassed, or alienated by putting their claims of friendship and good will to the test, on the assumption that, like my parents', their word could be trusted. It took me decades even to



Adrian Piper, Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features, 1981. Pencil on paper. 10" x 8" (25.4 cm x 20.3 cm). Collection of Eileen Harris Norton. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

> figure out what the problem was: that, having been raised in an environment in which people meant what they said, I lacked the ability to distinguish between sincere utterances and merely polite or political ones.[3]

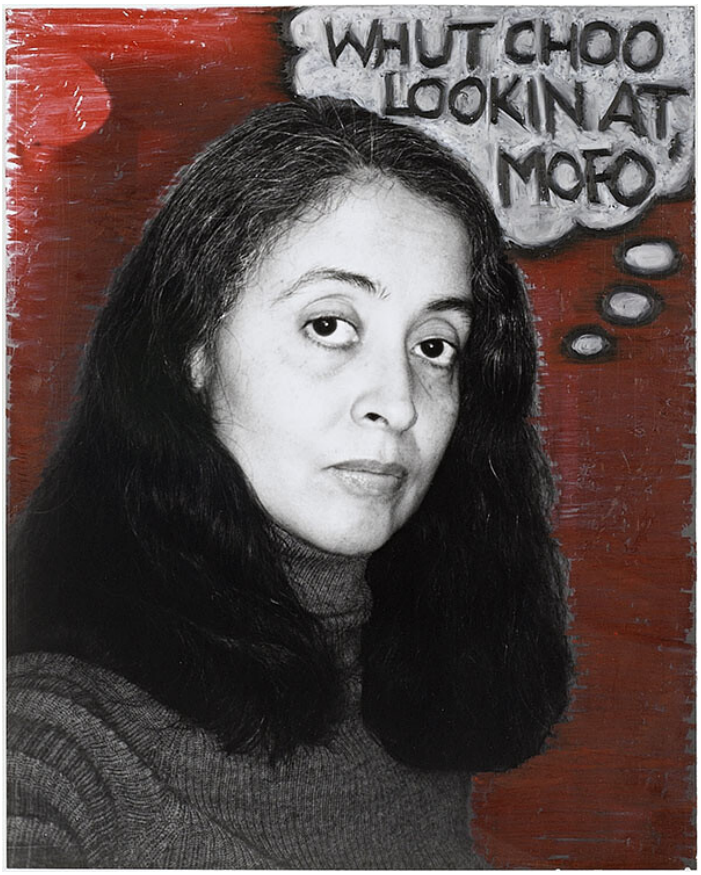
Polite and political: Piper is talking about the art world, but just as much if not more about academia, the environment in which she worked regularly as a teacher and philosopher who had written her doctorate with John Rawls.

In 1990, she accepted a tenured full professorship in philosophy at Wellesley College, the private women's liberal arts college in Massachusetts whose alumnae include Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright. She writes about the rewarding experiences she had teaching its students, almost all undergraduates ("teaching these undergraduates was like teaching my very best graduate students in other institutions"[4]). Which is to say that the ordeals she goes on to write about and that dominated her life for the following almost two decades have nothing to do with these students, but a lot to do with the institution in question, and the structures and behaviors it apparently nurtured and provoked. What Piper describes in vivid detail is nothing short of a history of harassment and gaslighting in the workplace, and what, in her detailed description, sound like serious violations of labor and social benefit rights that are absolutely jaw-dropping.

In the early 1990s, while taking care of her dying mother on Cape Cod, teaching full time, publishing in philosophy, exhibiting her artwork, and presenting at conferences in both fields without administrative support, Piper has repeated physical collapses. It's pretty clear that in an environment of harassment, in which intrigue and false accusations—including allegations that Piper fabricated her illnesses—seem to have been the daily routine, literally no one would have continued unharmed. It takes Piper a while to realize how much this is connected to her stubborn belief in the trustworthiness of self-proclaimed standards: in an academic environment that prides itself on integrity, scientific rigor, and antidiscrimination measures, how could it be that the person who delivers, in 1998, an internal committee report on discrimination against African Americans at the college is not rewarded for that effort to help improve the environment, but is rather penalized, while the report itself is suppressed? The paper, which she had not circulated outside the university at the time but today can be accessed via a link in Piper's personal chronology on her website, seems based on diligent empirical research, and is a soundly argued, razor-sharp analysis of the pathologies of racism and how they manifested themselves at the venerable college, hiding behind a "false facade of civility and impeccable manners" and longstanding conventions "that assume that everyone is the same."[5]

Piper's unwillingness to sugarcoat the truth in her report resulted in attempts to discredit it as her personal vendetta. This proved a nasty kind of irony, given that she had, in fact, delayed a lawsuit against Wellesley College in order to avoid compromising her report by calling attention to her personal experiences of discrimination. She eventually lost that lawsuit—which charged the college with "fraud, breach of contract, unjust enrichment, loss of reputation, and racial, gender, and disability discrimination"[6]—in 2002, on the grounds that she had waited too long to file her complaints. Imagine that happening to you after the numerous measures apparently taken against her that the memoir lists: reductions of her salary; the delay or cancellation of payments for her health insurance, at a time when Piper was undergoing expensive diagnostic testing for numerous serious illnesses; the termination of research funding; the cancellation of her courses from the curriculum, and their "accidental" deletion from the course catalogue; the repeated, mysterious slashing of car tires on her return commutes from Wellesley to her Cape Cod house; the burglarizing and vandalizing of her house, four times. But even if one assumed that Piper merely had an exceptionally sinister streak of bad luck, the mere fact that Wellesley eventually terminated her tenured full

professorship two months short of her eligibility for retirement benefits speaks for itself. Think of FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe, who in early 2018 was fired by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions days before retirement, depriving him of a substantial part of his pension: it seems a common practice for punishing the delinquent, and by example sending a message.



Adrian Piper, Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady, 1995. Self-portrait, oil crayon on black and white photograph. 30.4 cm x 20.3 cm. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

Piper identifies three weapons to drive someone out: first, starting rumors, gossip, in order to poison the atmosphere around them; second, demonization through portraying them as ill-intended; third: ostracism through silence and noninformation. The things said in that atmosphere of hypocrisy, denial, and intimidation are what contributed to the creation of a signature piece that not least of all graced the cover of the catalogue of Piper's recent retrospective. It's from a series she had already started working on in 1991, during her second semester as professor at Wellesley, called *Decide Who You Are.* The key element of the work is an authentic black-and-white portrait of Anita Hill as an eight-year-old child. Yes, *the* Anita Hill who spoke up against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1989, the way Christine Blasey Ford, two decades later, came forward against Brett Kavanaugh. "I chose her because when compelled to speak publicly," Piper writes,

> she spoke plainly and truthfully, regardless of the consequences to herself and her wellbeing, which were severe. And I chose this picture of her as a child because the fact that she could do that as an adult showed me that she had been a real child, like me; and the same kind of sprout as I am.[7]

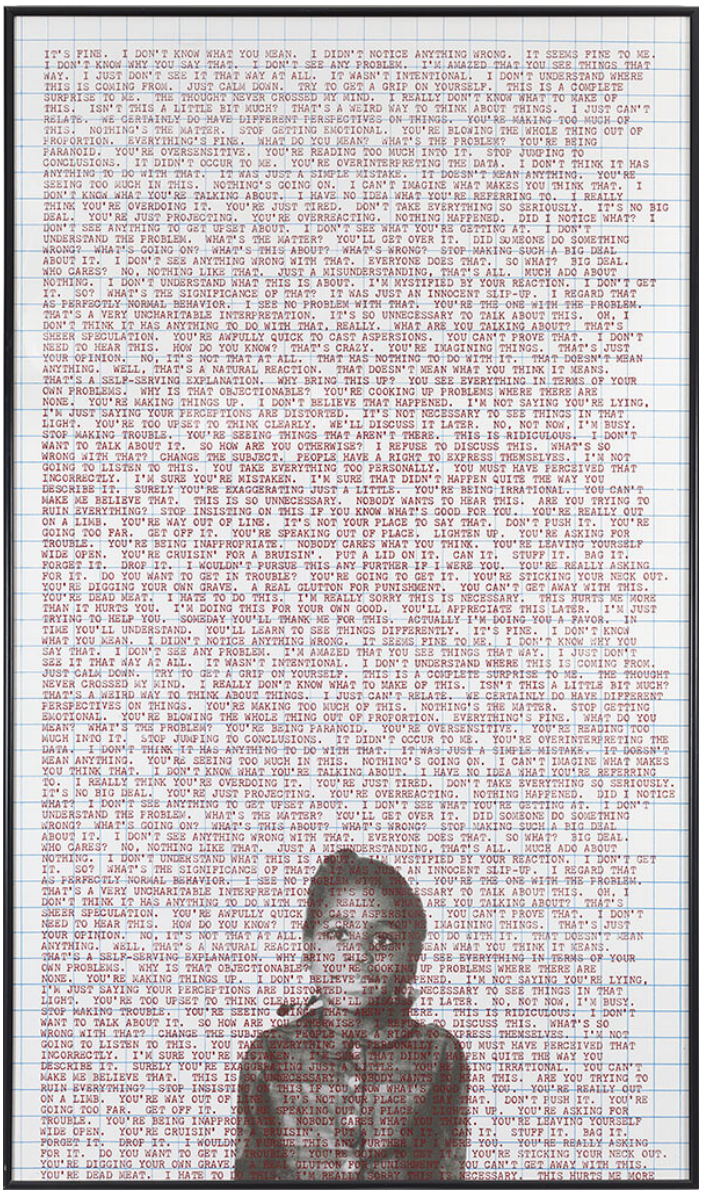
In the piece, the onslaught of deflective rhetoric and the attempts at manipulation and intimidation in response, are represented by red typewriter letters filling the page and running across the Anita Hill portrait, as if in an attempt to drown out that optimism and fearlessness that allows these girls and women to come forward and speak out: *I don't know what you mean. I didn't notice anything wrong. It seems fine to me. I don't know why you say that. I don't see any problem. It's not your place to say that. Put a lid on it. Actually I'm doing you a favor. You're oversensitive ...* The litany goes on and on. And it feels strikingly, eerily real. As Piper puts it:

> Whenever someone tries to gaslight me with this kind of language now, I feel fear, because I know that these words of denial and intimidation conceal sinister motives and realities that the speaker wants to conceal—motives and realities that could not survive rational scrutiny were they exposed to the light of day. This alerts me that I am dealing with someone who knows that her motives are bad. And it shows me that the most explicit and overt of these bad motives is to try, through this perversion of words, to drown me out, to shut me up, to gag me, make me change the subject or retreat into speechlessness. Another reason I am writing this memoir is to demonstrate that this attempt has failed.[8]

This is the dark, chilling truth of this memoir: that even in the very environments that consider themselves the beacons of liberalism and equal opportunity, there is continuing discrimination that perversely pretends not to exist.

In 2006, a year after Piper had settled in Berlin, she discovered her name on the "US Transportation Security Administration's Suspicious Travelers Watch list," and decided not to return to the US as long as her name remained there. This became the excuse for Wellesley College to deny her request for an unpaid leave of absence. And thus, according to Piper, "The College"—as

she simply calls it—found the excuse for terminating her tenured position two months before retirement. And if one is still in disbelief—can it really be that liberal, educated America is so devious?—one need only consult reports that Piper wrote at the time and has made available through links on her website chronology.



Adrian Piper, Decide Who You Are: Right-Hand (Constant) Panel, 1992. Silkscreened image-text collage printed on paper mounted on foamcore, silkscreened text. 185.4 cm x 109.2 cm. Various public and private collections. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

Piper's eventual loss of her tenured position and her retirement benefits was the culmination of a fifteen-year-long struggle that many would have backed down from much earlier. Already a decade before, Piper had made a work called *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady*. It's a deadpan image: she looks calmly at the camera, but with a comic thought bubble added, saying "WHUT CHOO LOOKIN AT, MOFO." Piper created it because it made her laugh, helping her to keep her temper; the idea had come to her when she had tried to imagine

> what the President, the Dean of The College, and my Philosophy department colleagues could possibly have been seeing when they looked at me, in order to have reacted to me as they did ... The minute the image came up in my mind I burst out laughing, and laughed helplessly for several minutes.

But what had aroused the enmity of her colleagues? Maybe that, she continues,

> I had dared to present myself as a Black Woman in the first place ... How dare I make a claim on affirmative action resources reserved for the restitution of the legitimate victims of slavery, the ones you can see coming at a distance? On this hypothesis, the college's harassment was actually an extended program of fully justified retribution ... Believing I had tricked them, they would feel no moral compunction about tricking me in return.[9]

Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady finds its logical conclusion in another piece from 2012, first published on Piper's website, which was included in her retrospective, and is depicted in *Escape to Berlin*: it shows her smiling, with a strange artificial skin color, accompanied by the lines of a signed letter:

> Dear Friends, for my 64th birthday I have decided to change my racial and nationality designations. Henceforth, my new racial designation will be neither black nor white but rather 6,25% grey ... Please join me in celebrating this exciting new adventure in pointless administrative precision and futile institutional control![10]

Like a news headline, another statement next to the image reads: "Adrian Piper has decided to retire from being black." Titled *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, A Moment of Embarrassment*, the piece, with its seemingly lighthearted but heavy-hitting humor, raises eyebrows and causes cognitive dissonance—is she even *allowed* to do that? Can we ignore this? Is she really saying "retire from being black"? Is she suddenly denying her heritage and betraying her community? Is this some kind of

self-inflicted twisted minstrel, like the one in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* of 2000?

If you take into account the aforementioned story of harassment in the workplace though, it becomes very clear that the "retirement" Piper mentions in her artwork is to be taken literally in a particular sense: what Piper retires from is being available as the target of stereotyping, but she also retires from allowing those who denied her her well-earned retirement the opportunity to gaslight her. She is retiring from a toxic environment of abandonment, silence, indifference, fear, and outright hostility in the wake of her whistleblowing: "the fish-eyed, so-what's-your-point expectant silences … the knee-jerk blame-the-victim mentality … the distancing tap dance."[11] Most chilling, she writes, was the "repeated suggestion that I had much to be grateful for and would do better not to complain"[12]—implying that as the first tenured African-American professor at "The College," she should be glad she was awarded that position in the first place, and get on with it.

Piper is not resorting simply, however, to condemning her former colleagues and acquaintances in order to avoid self-critique. On the contrary, she observes how the conditions of her upbringing—a single child encouraged to always speak her mind, shielded from violence—had made her insensitive to the alienating effect on others of openly criticizing them, assuming they would simply criticize her in turn: "It hadn't occurred to me that I was hurting others by calling attention to their failings."[13] But even with Piper's self-described "ego-limitations" taken into account, the hardest thing for her—and for the reader—to stomach is that of the whistleblower being abandoned by virtually all of her colleagues and acquaintances, especially those who had experienced discrimination themselves.

In 2002—a period of sickness and operations, as well as a cancer scare—Piper sees *Braveheart* for the first time, with Mel Gibson as the thirteenth-century Scottish rebel who in battle finds himself betrayed by the Scottish noblemen whom he thought were on his side: "They just watched, then turned their horses around and retreated. They had all been bought off by the King of England." She continues:

> That is basically what happened to the College's black caucus. We had forged an alliance to fight racism at The College, and to force The College to honor its promise to hire more tenured black faculty. I had fought single-handedly to prevent the black caucus from being dissolved by The College's faculty council in 1992, and again in 1999 … When I called on them for help, they just watched, and then retreated.[14]

Piper discovers the divide-and-conquer tactics of combining intimidation with incentives that deflate any sense of solidarity with her:

> Prominent African-American women in academia, the arts, and the national electronic media were particularly receptive to The College's sudden, extended burst of interest and largesse during this period, its unexpectedly benevolent dispensation of prizes, gifts, and invitations to speak or teach. No such woman, most of whom I knew personally, spoke up on my behalf.[15]

Upon this tough charge, you can almost arleady hear those presented with it denouncing Piper's description as a sweeping and false allegation, as an example of betrayal of their antidiscriminatory cause. But the reader who has read that passage in the context of this thoroughly soul-searching memoir already knows by this point that it is indeed the grey slab of human moral failure that whistleblowers, amidst institutional retaliation against them, bring out most starkly, inadvertently, through their abandonment not least by those whose cause they had defended. That is a painful truth that is not for the squeamish. Anyone involved with emancipatory politics will know it deep down; and might still prefer to continue wallowing in the myth of communities always standing together in uncompromised solidarity.

In 2002, Piper was forced to either return to teaching at The College despite all the intimidations and obstacles described, or else lose her tenured position. One month beforehand, she had recorded a forty-five-minute endurance performance on video, in which she repeats the mantra "I can take it" over and over again, until, at one point, it spontaneously becomes "I can't take it." But Piper's work as an artist doesn't stop there, in the maladies and terrors of an individual's life; it becomes about overcoming the fear of death itself, for example in a set of works that in one way or another are connected to the single sentence "Everything will be taken away," also started in 2002. One imagines a janitor putting up such a statement: that all bulky items will be removed, in the entrance to an apartment building—an accidentally profound statement about the transitory nature of mundane things. Depicted in the book are private photographs that became part of the series, and what is taken away are the faces in these photographs: Piper photocopied the images onto graph paper, erased all facial features with sandpaper, and then overprinted the sheet with that same sentence in typewriter style. In most of the images people are huddled together for a couple or group snapshot, so they must be … colleagues and acquaintances. Although Piper doesn't give any names, it is safe to say—as her own silhouette appears in some of the shots—that these are pictures of personal

Adrian Piper, Everything #21, 2010-13. Four vintage wall blackboards in lacquered wood frames, each mounted on wall at eyelevel in landscape orientation and covered with single handwritten sentence, "Everything will be taken away," repeated 25 times in white chalk handwritten cursive text. Each framed blackboard 120 cm x 250 cm. Installation view from All the World's Futures, Central Exhibition of the 56thVenice Biennale, 2015. Photo credit: Andrea Avezzù. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Copyright: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

significance, and that the connotations of such erasure are highly charged, especially if reproduced in a personal memoir. It becomes clear that these pictures represent friendships and professional alliances that were poisoned and destroyed in the wake of her fight with Wellesley College.

"Everything will be taken away," depending on the context, takes on different meanings, but it is always with the same underpinning: loss is always occurring, but there is also a sense of relief at being able to let go of attachments. Piper's memoir allows you to read very concrete meaning into this in regard to her professional affiliations in US academe and the US art world: being abandoned by all those depicted in the erased snapshots made it easier for her to leave behind the country from which she has taken exile.

In 2015, Adrian Piper won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for a work called *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game # 1–3* (2013–15). It's an artwork that firmly builds on her insights and convictions as a Kantian philosopher and political human being— *and* on her experiences in professional environments that pride themselves on integrity, trustworthiness, and truthfulness, but often fail these very standards in reality. On three slate-gray walls, each with a circular gold reception desk placed in front of it, are emblazoned sentences in gold capital letters. The first states, "I will always be too expensive to buy"; the second, "I will always mean what I say"; and the third, "I will always do what I say I am going to do." At the desks, visitors can sign a contract to confirm that they are willing to follow through with one, two, or all three of these promises. After the exhibition closes, each signatory receives a list of all the others, but contact information is not provided unless explicit permission is granted, through the exhibiting institution, to a fellow signatory who has requested it.

The Probable Trust Registry is built on Piper's Kantian

argument about the relationship between rationality and ethics: your promise is worth nothing if you haven't first made the promise to yourself; and if you don't have the rational capacity to see the importance of abiding by certain rules—communally, and without exception—you won't see the importance of keeping your promises without exception.

But what if others distrust and possibly persecute me because I stick to my promises, which may include breaking one rule—say, keeping a company or state secret—in favor of another, more fundamental rule—say, pointing out that that company or state secret implies major violations of constitutional rights? That distrust, the blaming and shaming and punishing of the whistleblower, the one who dares to speak and tell, is a sure sign then that the social contract has already been undermined, and that it is in dire need of repair. So while Piper has been living in Berlin since 2005, *The Probable Trust Registry* no doubt also reflects the bitter experiences she has had in American educational institutions. Those institutions, and those who play along with their power games, tend to engender a standpoint of inherited entitlement and privileges (we might call them the Kavanaugh privileges) from which it seems easy to justify hostility and belligerence toward anyone who inherently or explicitly questions their machinations.

Let's not overgeneralize; there are as many fantastic academics full of integrity in the US, as there are dodgy, dubious types in Berlin or German universities. And in a political system as severely in crisis as the US's, we encounter an increasingly unhinged far-right xenophobia and hatred, which is also to be found all around the globe, from Brazil to the Philippines, to—not least—Germany. Nevertheless, Piper sees a more robust foundation for a civil society at work in the German context, whose majority still supports Angela Merkel's decision in 2015 to open the borders for Syrian refugees, despite the risks.

Towards the end of her memoir Piper has these statements to make about today's Germany:

> I am awed by the sophistication of the public discussions and debates, and the high degree of civic education by the news media they presuppose … This is a culture that is determined to instill in its citizens a reflective and informed grasp of the unacceptability of war at any price, and it is succeeding.[16]

I tend to be more skeptical about Germany, because of all the alarming signs of deterioration of that civic education in the far-right populist fear-mongering that is spreading across social media and around the globe like a virus. Nevertheless, if we follow Piper's point here, the big question is whether or not a society eventually makes a concerted effort to come to terms with the crimes against humanity it has committed in the past, and that continue to structure it in the present. Does it face those crimes, work through them, and publicly commemorate them? Or is it in denial, creating deflections and taboos?

In Germany, we still see many taboos at work, and a failure to come to terms, for example, with the country's colonial history, and its genocide, between 1904 and 1908, of the Herero and Namaqua people in German South West Africa (Namibia today), involving the killing of probably more than a hundred thousand people. It is now considered the first genocide of the twentieth century. And the discussion over whether, and how, Germany can come to terms with this responsibility has only just begun. That said, the country *has* acknowledged guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust. In 2017, one of the leaders of Germany's proto-fascist far right, Björn Höcke, called Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, erected in the center of Berlin in 2005, a "memorial of disgrace in the middle of our capital." Well, if you're a Nazi, indeed this large field of steles right next to the Brandenburg Gate can only be perceived as a "disgrace" to your dreams of Aryan German supremacy. Nevertheless, a large part of society has taken responsibility, including its political establishment, even if against obstacles and its own inhibitions. A significant part of society has questioned the concepts of "race" that have led to the treatment of German Jews first as aliens, then as vermin. This is not to deny continuations of racism and xenophobia, not least and especially against people of color. But the Holocaust Memorial at the heart of Berlin *is* an undeniably visible marker that reminds anyone who can see and think of the consequences of toxic concepts of race and supremacy. The monument's centrality, vastness, and undeniability are its very points. Which makes clear why Piper expands on her admiration of the way Germany is coming to terms with and facing the truth of its historic crimes against humanity; she makes very clear that America, in her view, at present lacks precisely those qualities.

America is still, to quote James Baldwin, "the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth … and the burning, buried American guilt."[17] Baldwin wrote this in 1985, in relation to the rise of Michael Jackson (but that's another story). The burning, the burying, the guilt: these are tropes of ghost stories and horror movies. They speak of the parts of history, and fragments of memory, that are denied, not acknowledged, in an attempt to render the underlying crimes—crimes against humanity—invisible, to make them go away, even pretend they never happened, to let things stay as they are. You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to realize this doesn't work.

That Adrian Piper, like Baldwin before her, decided to go into exile, is a strong indication that there are lessons that still need to be learned about the foundations and symptomatic realities of those burning, buried parts of

history. In this regard, her memoir is a bone-chilling, yet deeply moving, reading experience; but it's also an encouragement to draw our conclusions, and speak and act accordingly, not backing down—essentially, to stick with our promises to ourselves and others, and speak truth to power, whether we are white or black or of color or female or male or nonbinary. *Escape to Berlin* does not back down: with philosophical reason, artistic imagination, and humor, it fights the lingering realities of American guilt.

X

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1
Adrian Piper, *Escape to Berlin. A Travel Memoir* (APRA Foundation, 2018), 8.

2
James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Penguin, 2017), 89.

3
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 67.

4
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 137.

5
Adrian Piper, "Racism at Wellesley: Causes and Containment," March 20 1998 http://www.adrianpiper.de/docs/WebsiteRWCC.pdf .

6
See http://www.adrianpiper.de/docs/MCADDocEvidto8_15_05.pdf .

7
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 91.

8
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 91.

9
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 159–61.

10
See http://www.adrianpiper.de/news_sep_2012.shtml .

11
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 171.

12
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 177.

13
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 171.

14
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 181.

15
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 183.

16
Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, 311.

17
James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998), 828.

Cuauhtémoc Medina

A Southerly Gale: Francisco Toledo, 1940–2019

Despite the legends put forth by art dealers and political figures alike that tried to depict him as a representative of some sort of original ethnic authenticity, Francisco Toledo, who died on September 5, 2019, in Oaxaca, Mexico, always stressed that the formative years of his childhood took place in a state of cultural exile. Francisco Benjamin López Toledo was born to a family from Juchitán, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. Owing to the town's political turbulence and the father's job as a salesman, they ended up migrating to Minatitlán in the Gulf of Veracruz. In fact, Toledo himself was "accidentally" born in Mexico City when his mother was just passing through. That distance, however, would become one of the focal points of the artist's life and work, evidenced in the way his entire oeuvre points to the reinvention of an imagined homeland.

After playing around with a camera and learning to paint and etch with Arturo García Bustos at the National Institute of Fine Arts, Toledo traveled to Paris in 1960. His images, brimming with eroticism, and his inexhaustible, mythological imagination, which incorporated natural elements and indigenous stories, opened his eyes to the practitioners of a declining surrealism: Octavio Paz, the poet André Pieyre de Mandiarges, and—completing an explosive quadrangle—the poet and painter Bona Tibertelli. Although still quite young, Toledo fit in perfectly with a cultural milieu that, not entirely free of exoticism, was eager to incorporate non-European artists. Near the end of that decade, Toledo returned to Mexico, this time to his father's hometown, Juchitán, in order to recreate—or, rather, reinvent—a culture he barely knew. It was there that he found the student movement diaspora, which led to his meeting a young activist, the poet Elisa Ramírez, with whom he would come to found the Juchitán House of Culture in 1972. It would be the first of many institutions the painter founded and financed with the proceeds from his art—the beginning of a pattern in which Toledo would redirect the power and prestige stemming from his fame towards constructing spaces for cultural enjoyment and social memory in Oaxaca. His activism, aimed at rescuing the Isthmus Zapotec culture and linking it with other cultures from around the world, coincided with the rise of multiple grassroots movements throughout Mexico. The House of Culture connected with the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus in Juchitán, making it the first municipality governed by a communist organization. Toledo would come to personally and physically experience the violence and repression that leftists faced during that first brush with electoral power.

Toledo's commitment to Juchitán and the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus coincided with his radicalization as an artist. His living knowledge of Zapotec culture would become entangled with an upwardly spiraling sense of artistic and literary learning: Toledo united the brutality of Dubuffet's spaces with the humor of Posada's engravings, made the colorful patterns of Oceanian art dance with the childlike imagination of

Francisco Toledo, 2010. Copyright: Regina Mejía. Courtesy of Amigos del IAGO y CFMAB A.C. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Paul Klee, and harnessed the graphics of Alfred Kubin or James Ensor to reflect on pre-Columbian mythology. His ability to approach the prose of Borges and Kafka using tropical imagery, and to envision the sexuality of reptiles as being a lost genre of the classical fable, would come to constitute an imaginary that refuted the supposed identity of Amerindian art in order to reinvent it. His artistic powers expanded when, in addition to paintings, drawings, and prints, he took it upon himself to produce a multitude of assemblages and other objects. This kind of work combined his animistic imagination with botanical and animal remains in an eroticism no longer of mere images but of all kinds of materials and bodies. These powers became especially noticeable in his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City in 1980, which catapulted him to the position of new standard-bearer for art in Mexico, a position Toledo would maintain until his death, despite the various revolutions in which Latin American art played a prominent role over the last forty years.

In Mexico, his imagination constituted the magical trick of creating an unlikely mix: his art was an alternative that challenged the European orientation of artists of the so-called "Rupture," as well as the unaesthetic values of 1970s political art, using delirious textures and forms unprecedented in regional modern art. His status as a topic of popular obsession was also based on proclaiming a utopia of liberated sexuality: Toledo's work celebrates vaginas and phalluses, as well as mythological animals and talking furniture, all the while suggesting the way in which animism is the essential component of every story, the retelling of a transformation. His work certainly escaped the intellectualist limitations of conceptual art, as well as the neurotic confusion stirred up by much of the art that sought to lend expression to underdevelopment. As one of his primary critics, the Guatemalan poet Luis Cardoza y Aragón wrote, "Toledo cannot be captured by reason alone." Indeed, appreciating his images requires of us a burst of laughter, along with a feverishness recognizable as having come from the tropics. Toledo is a southern artist who distilled all kinds of standards and traditions into a localized art.

After a new, more productive stay in Europe, Toledo invested his earnings in the creation of one of the Mexican subcontinent's most significant collections of graphic art, leading him to eventually found, in 1988, the Institute for

Francisco Toledo, Untitled, 1991. Silver gelatin photo, 37/55. Courtesy of Amigos del IAGO y CFMAB A.C. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Francisco Toledo, Sin título [Untitled], 2015. Ceramic. Courtesy of Amigos del IAGO y CFMAB A.C. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Francisco Toledo, 2010. Copyright: Regina Mejía Courtesy of Amigos del IAGO y CFMAB A.C. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Graphic Arts of Oaxaca (IAGO), the mother ship of an entire fleet of cultural institutions and libraries, which themselves transformed Oaxaca from a marginalized city into an authentic cultural capital. The other institutions founded by Toledo include two libraries (one for the sighted and one for the blind), a museum of contemporary art, a photography center, and the San Augustín Etla Arts Center, which occupied a disused nineteenth-century manufacturing complex that sat in an ideal location. Even at the cost of cutting his productivity as a painter during the 1990s, Toledo dedicated himself to turning each of these institutions into a small utopia, not only in terms of their content, but also in terms of the incomparable beauty of these spaces, which served the public at large. This gesture was a true act of political-cultural alchemy; Toledo rejected the banality of occupying the predestined throne of artist-king of the nation, and instead redefined the role of the activist to include securing access to culture, defending native heritage, and raising awareness of nature's fragility. Toledo also became the touchstone of so-called "civil society" in Mexico: that hybrid group of recognizable figures and everyday citizens who mobilize as a last resort whenever the government of unbridled capitalism commits an act of aggression against nature, destroys the residue of memory, or condemns to extinction this or that species, this or that cultural form, this or that important historical space. Toledo's activism famously managed to prevent McDonald's from opening a franchise on the main plaza in Oaxaca, sought to save the hills surrounding the city, and introduced all sorts of struggles for social justice and human rights into the public consciousness. Similar to artists in other countries with a tyrannical or cynical political class, Toledo served as a sort of alternative moral authority in Mexico: the conscience of society, the defender of ways of life that would otherwise be eradicated in favor of reckless modernity.

Toledo would sometimes interrupt his incessant and overwhelming public activity—through which he became the minister of a parallel culture—to produce waves of new art, including photographs of phallic performances, and stained-glass windows with delirious and fantastic colors made out of craft paper, cement tiles, pressed felt, and natural mica. These works were all intended to resuscitate various artforms in decline, and to finance Toledo's other cultural operations. Contrary to generalized rules and expectations, Francisco Toledo's later work was

Francisco Toledo, Sin título [untitled], 2017. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Amigos del IAGO y CFMAB A.C. Oaxaca, Mexico.

not at all melancholic or introverted; rather, it proclaimed a passion for life and the world itself. More recently, Toledo had vigorously protested the indifference to the widespread violence plaguing Mexico through extraordinary clay funeral urns and kites on which the images of the disappeared were imprinted. In these works, expressiveness depends on an almost magical domain of materiality: surfaces and light simultaneously evoke the iridescence of night, the depth of minerals, and the shadows of moving animals.

For more than three decades Francisco Toledo was the reference point for a cultural practice that invented common space as a form of ethical expression. Mexico in particular, and the Global South in general, have lost a multifaceted artist, one of inexhaustible depths. In today's Mexico, no one knows who will continue to protect the causes that Francisco defended. The danger that the beauty he created in his cultural institutions will be lost is a ghost that haunts our nightmares with an oppressive sense of dread. The possibility that Francisco Toledo will become the victim of all sorts of tributes—something that he hated with a militant passion—is all but inevitable. Still, in Mexico the people have a right to mourn him: unlike politicians and ideologues, Francisco Toledo was one of the few Mexicans of whom it can be said that they brought goodness to society. His departure impoverishes this already depleted century.

X

Translated from the Spanish by Ezra E. Fitz.