e-flux journal

issue #61

01/2015

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

Editors
Julieta Aranda
Brian Kuan Wood
Anton Vidokle

Managing Editors
Kaye Cain-Nielsen
Mariana Silva

Image Editor
Mariana Silva

Copy Editor/Proofreader
Mike Andrews

Editorial Intern
Taylor Dafoe

Graphic Design
Jeff Ramsey

Layout Generator
Adam Florin

PDF Design
Mengyi Qian

PDF Generator
Keyian Vafai

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

www.e-flux.com/journal

Tom Holert, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle

Editorial— “Politics of Shine”

Shine and shininess are characteristic of surface effects, of glamour and spectacle, of bling-bling contingency, of ephemeral novelty, value added, and disposable fascination. Shine is what seizes upon affect as its primary carrier to mobilize attention. Shine could be the paradoxically material base of an optical economy typically (mis)understood as being purely cognitive or immaterial. Even at an art fair or Hollywood gala, surface effects are widely deployed while being categorically condemned to the domain of inconsequential superficiality, for shine is also persistently unwilling to compromise speed for substance, surface for depth, attractiveness for soul, effect for content, projection for stasis, inflationary wealth, success, and splendor for reality.

Shine and luster tend to block the view of things, while at the same time inviting fetishistic adherence. The architectures of finance and global management pretend transparency while offering glistening opacity. Likewise the impression management of art world glitz acts through the highly refined shininess of contemporary signature white cube buildings, containing tons of gleaming video equipment for costly multi-screen installations. Who's doing the polishing of high-end Poggenpohl kitchens (when the masters are at work) or outside at the skyscraper's window, in the limo garage or at the hairdresser's boutique?

Indeed, it is the particular materiality of declarative shininess that we now recognize as a clear sign of paradox, as it is so often used to mediate decay and divert attention away from oncoming collapse. And as we now start to recognize how lighting effects constitute a primary function of what can only exist through mechanisms and metaphorologies of visibility, recognition, refraction, and dissemination, we might start to ask whether there is another side to shine altogether. Does shine not also serve a core planetary function of giving life to our planet, through the solar capital of the sun? We cannot afford to be idealistic here, as the sun's light and heat do not always disclose and reveal. They cannot be geo-engineered through cool roofings at will, since they're equally cruel and unstable. The sun's radiance also subtracts life—it produces famine, drought, and night.

Edited together with Tom Holert, this first of a two-part issue of *e-flux journal*, though determined to focus on shine, surfaces, and light in all their aesthetic peculiarity and contemporary relevance, aims less at adding to the (still very slim) cultural history of the phenomenon than to rendering palpable the cross-sections of power and aesthetics in the material and immaterial discourses of shine—past, present, and future.

Although the physical behavior of smooth surfaces, the gloss of lips or the shiny coat of car metal, the hard body sheen of porn or the blaze of solar panels all continue to be experienced in the offline world of skin, glass, and steel, it would seem that shine is now predominantly produced

and obtained on-screen, as a digitally calculated mimicry of (sun)light refractions and deflections, as mediated radiance. Yet, this virtual availability of shine and gloss, of Glanz and éclat, is deceptive in its awesome ability to simultaneously neglect and conflate the material, the political and economic, infrastructure of the production of today's fetish-artifacts.

Do we need a different discourse of light and exuberance, a counter radiance that outshines the sun that shines on the privileged, an insurgent technology of brilliance in the service of those who are doomed to do the rubbing? Perhaps this light could already be today's version of what Guy Debord described in his 1978 *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*:

> A society which was already tottering, but which was not yet aware of this because the old rules were still respected everywhere else, had momentarily left the field open for that ever-present but usually repressed sector of society: the incorrigible riffraff; the salt of the earth; people quite sincerely ready to set the world on fire just to make it shine.

X

Tom Holert is an art historian, curator, and cultural critic based in Berlin who works on learning curves and knowledge vessels at the crossroads of politics, economy, contemporary art, design, and architecture. He is also a cofounder of the Harun Farocki Institut, Berlin.

Julieta Aranda is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal.*

Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

Anton Vidokle is an editor of e-flux journal and chief curator of the 14th Shanghai Biennale: Cosmos Cinema.

Tom Holert

The Sunshine State

1.

In *Two Days, One Night*, Jean Pierre and Luc Dardenne's 2014 installment of their series of portrayals of contemporary psychosocial landscapes of precarity, the protagonist, a woman named Sandra (Marion Cotillard), is coming out of a period of clinical depression and is now faced with redundancy. Struggling to return to her job at a small solar panel factory, Sandra roams—by car, by bus, and by foot, often hesitantly, always tired—the urban and exurban spaces in and around Seraing in French-speaking Wallonia. She is seeking support for her cause from her coworkers, who are ashamed for taking a small bonus at the cost of Sandra's unemployment, but who have a hard time turning their bad conscience into solidarity with the woman.

The "days" of the film's title are bathed in relentless sunlight. A hot Belgian summer turns Sandra's quest into a physical challenge, into an act of enduring heat and light. Occasionally she escapes the sunshine by lying down in bed, surrendering to the pull of her depression, protected by curtains that filter the glaring light. The extreme weather conditions figure as the cruel irony of the crisis haunting parts of the European solar industry, a crisis which of course is not limited to a single economic sector, however much it affects the production of photovoltaic cells in particular (and with great symbolic-symptomatic force).

Not too long ago, solar technology was considered to be part of the (green) future and was therefore entitled to be forever green-lighted for subsidies. Since then, the solar industry has come under the immense pressure of global (especially Chinese) competition, leading to a slump in solar module prices as expansion in production capacity has outpaced growth, ironically causing the bankruptcy in 2013 of Suntech Power Holdings Co., China's biggest manufacturer of solar panels. "Solwal," as the film's factory is called—confounding the cosmic (sun) and the regional (Wallonia)—is the sad and saddening focus of Sandra's attention, although it is almost entirely absent from the camera's eye, stowed away in an indistinct industrial park. The factory is supposed to provide the protagonist with work, as well as with a social environment of mutual support and the money to live life like everybody else. But it fails utterly to deliver any of these essentials.

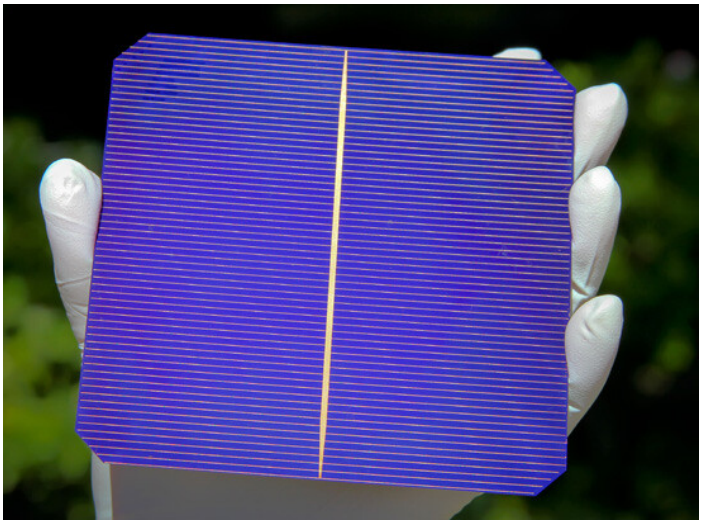
The Dardenne brothers' "Solwal" is as far away from the sun as one can imagine. Other than the narrative and allegorical function of this place that refers to the neoliberal destruction of organized labor and the prosaic financialization of sunlight, this bleakness may bear a relation to specific structural inequalities. Compared with Belgium's Flemish Region, for instance, Wallonia lags far behind in solar energy matters. It accounts for only about 12 percent of the country's photovoltaic capacity, whereas the Flemish Region accounts for the other 88 percent.

Jean Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Two Days, One Night (2014). Film still.

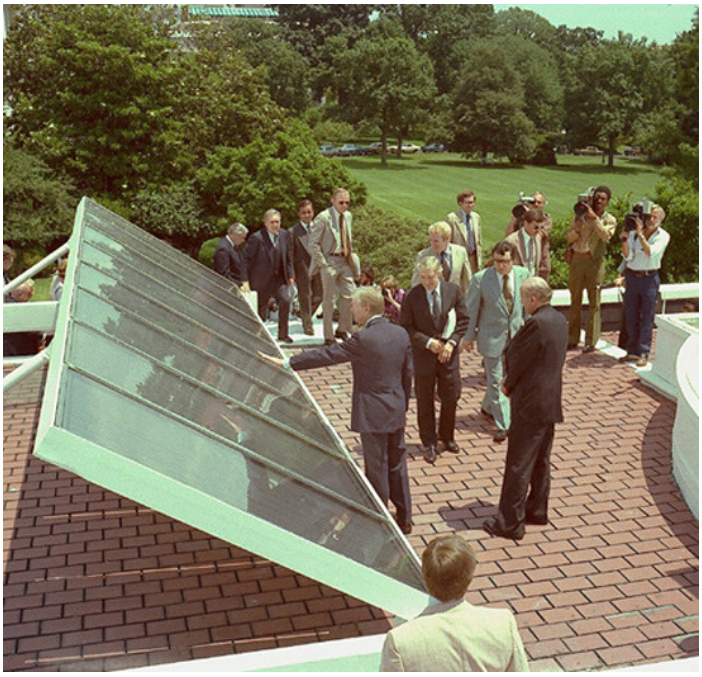
Although solar power in Belgium grew significantly from 2009 to 2012, expecting to reach "grid parity" in 2016, it is reported to have since declined. Deeply affected by the changing supply/demand ratio of photovoltaic technology, by national and transnational energy policies, and by the global competition in labor, knowledge, and raw materials, Sandra is an emblematic figure of the intersection of a plurality of crises and transformations. Using her as a highly vulnerable guide, *Two Days, One Night* envisages both the precariousness inflicted by the neoliberal economy and climate change, and a world in which a Western Europe once prosperous thanks to heavy fossil industry (coal, iron) now resembles a suburbanized sunbelt landscape, with a population moved and shaken by planetary forces. Though the film ends on a somewhat questionable note, calmly celebrating the resilience of its main character (the full-on experience of her powerlessness and dependency on others ultimately helps her overcome her depression), it provides considerable arguments, persuasive images, and other sensory evidence for the necessity of conceiving our contemporary condition in multiple, interrelated terms, of looking for the connections and causalities that can sustain a discourse on politics, economy, and affectivity under the sun.

2.

Although *Two Days, One Night* doesn't speak directly to issues such as solar energy, the political economy of sunlight, and the relations between psychic states and exposure to sunshine, these issues are latently at stake throughout. How much sun is needed to maintain or improve psychic and physical health? What are the repercussions on local labor politics of ripples in global energy markets? To what extent is the distribution of wealth related to the distribution of light? Questions of this order are placed in the folds of the narrative and the imagery of the film, and they haunt the western-style tale of the heroine searching among her coworkers and within herself for a reason to stay alive in the desert of the solar-industrial real.



In 2011, Silevo unveiled the Single Buss Bar Cell, which can convert about 20 percent of sunlight into energy. At the time, Silevo claimed it would be able to outperform incumbent Asian solar panel manufacturers on efficiency and industry cost with this technology.



On June 20, 1979, Jimmy Carter's message to Americans from the White House roof began with "No one can ever embargo the Sun..."

For us earth-dwellers, the recent history of the sun is marked by concerns about energy supply and human health, the former intimately linked with the period when awareness of postcolonial interdependency in matters of fossil fuel supply became inevitable with the oil crises of 1973 and 1979. (The second of these crises caused the Iranian Revolution, which was preceded, in November 1978, by a strike of 37,000 workers in Iran's nationalized oil industry. This strike initially reduced production from six million barrels per day to about 1.5 million barrels.) On June 20, 1979, a remarkable photo op was scheduled on the rooftop of the White House. "No one can ever embargo the Sun or interrupt its delivery to us," US president Jimmy Carter told the press, standing in front of an array of solar panels. He continued:

> A generation from now, this solar heater can either be a curiosity, a museum piece, an example of a road not taken, or it can be a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures ever undertaken by the American people: harnessing the power of the Sun to enrich our lives as we move away from our crippling dependence on foreign oil.[1]

Constructing a lineage of energy-and-light-savvy rulers, Carter compared himself to president Benjamin Harrison, who in 1891 had electric lighting installed in the White House. Carter announced plans for a "solar energy bank" with the goal—wildly ambitious even by today's standards—of generating 20 percent of US power from alternative energy sources by 2000. (In 2010, solar, thermal, and photovoltaic technology provided less than 0.1 percent of US energy.)

As is well known, soon after this press conference Carter fell victim to the disaster of the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–80. And of course, he was not the neoliberal game changer desired by big business. His successor, Ronald Reagan, slashed the US Department of Energy's research and development budget for renewable energy, and halted tax subsidies for the deployment of wind turbines and solar technologies, stating that "the energy crisis that had affected both foreign and domestic policy during Carter's term would not be a factor during his own."[2] The title of Joseph Beuys's 1982 song "Sonne statt Reagan" ("Sun Instead of Rain"), while focusing on the Cold War nuclear arms race rather than Reagan's anti-solar energy politics, nonetheless poignantly commented on the opposition between neoliberalism and the democratic solar economy,[3] if not "solar communism."[4]

In 1986, Reagan had Carter's solar panels dismantled and tossed in a government storehouse in Virginia. Greenpeace requested the panels to use them at a homeless shelter, but they were ultimately installed at Unity College in Maine ("America's Environmental College") in 1991, where they generated hot water at the student cafeteria. They were eventually taken out of operation in 2005 but remained on the cafeteria's roof until 2010.[5]

Around this time, Swiss artists and filmmakers Christina Hemauer and Roman Keller, who had discovered the story of Carter's solar panels four years earlier, released their

sixty-six minute documentary *A Road Not Taken: The Story of the Jimmy Carter White House Solar Installation.* (This film followed *No. 1 Sun Engine*, their multistage contribution to the 2008 Cairo Biennial. *No. 1 Sun Engine* was dedicated to an episode in the early history of the commercial use of solar energy: American engineer and inventor Frank Shuman's 1913 solar power generator in Maadi, near Cairo.[6]) But things have undoubtedly changed since Reagan took power and the neoliberal revolution in the US and elsewhere radically expanded the deployment of fossil fuel energy. In 2013, after years of lobbying by various environmental actors, President Obama again installed solar panels on the White House, though apparently rather reluctantly and without sending any programmatic message comparable to Jimmy Carter's.[7]

With regard to the potential of renewable energy—and solar energy in particular—to displace or even replace fossil fuel and nuclear energy, the narrative obviously depends on who is telling the story. Reading Daniel M. Berman and John T. O'Connor's still invaluable 1996 study *Who Owns the Sun?*, one is reminded of the fact that the quest for solar energy has always had immediate political and cultural implications. The 1970s, which saw not only a surge in solar energy research and development, but also a proliferation of grassroots movements claiming sunlight as a common (while occupying nuclear construction sites), were also a key decade for "the century-old and too often unappreciated public-power movement in the United States."[8] As Berman and O'Connor note, in the wake of Reagan and Bush's game-changing surrender to corporate control, the oil and coal companies, electric utilities, and car companies and road-builders turned their "former environmental adversaries into collaborators," invading the "formerly independent field of off-the-grid photovoltaics, without a peep of protest from the newfound environmental allies."[9] The task of any "the new solar movement," the authors assert, has to be a social and a cultural one:

> Solar entrepreneurs, socially responsible engineers, and other believers must break out of their old hippie ghettos (like California's Mendocino County) and their technocratic ghettos (on the utility plantations) and confront the conventional wisdom about energy in small towns, suburbs and cities across America.[10]

The telling mix of rural autonomism, off-the-grid environmentalism, Keynesian socialism, trade unionism, and commonism presented by Berman and O'Connor renders a very specific and routinely marginalized picture of the solar movement; but it also leaves no doubt about the political nature of its quest. As German politician Hermann Scheer, one of the intellectual pioneers of the current *Energiewende* (energy revolution), wrote in his 1993 *A Solar Manifesto* (revised in 2001): "The plea for solar energy is not a technological one, but a political one."[11]

In other words, solar energy is not an undisputed "good object"; instead, it is in need of critical appreciation and contextualization. Just think, for a start, of the poor so-called "streamers," birds that literally get roasted when they fly over huge solar plants in California, especially the recently opened plant in Ivanpah.[12] Located on a dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert, the Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System—an industrial earth art installation if there ever was one—was designed and built by engineering company Bechtel, using solar tower technology manufactured by BrightSource. The solar park, with monumental vertical structures resembling lighthouses or watchtowers, sprawls across an estimated five square miles and is designed to supply 140,000 households with energy, single-handedly doubling the amount of commercial solar thermal energy capacity in the US. Financed by BrightSource and investors such as NRG Solar and Google, Ivanpah began operating in February 2014. Since then, photos have been released showing birds whose feathers were singed when they flew into the scorching thermal flux around the towers—said to be as hot as one thousand degrees fahrenheit. In December 2013, even before the plant had officially opened, about 150 dead "streamers" were found—"a nonissue," in the words of an official from NRG Solar. A number of other ecological and cultural concerns were raised during the construction of the plant, "ranging from wildlife to water to Native American artifacts," proving the ambiguous nature of the apparently most sustainable and renewable form of energy.[13] Once solar energy reaches a scale and size that makes it an attractive investment for the likes of Google, it loses any connection to local, communized, grassroots "solarization" that would form part of a radically different politics of the sun.

3.

For artists and artist-activists, there are various ways to respond or relate to such a politics of the sun, which is also a politics of light and heat, of thermodynamics and energy. The Los Angeles-based Center for Land Use Interpretation[14] has expanded its archive of "unusual" and "exceptional" sites around the US by adding documentation and photographs (some of it taken from the air using planes or drones) of all major solar plants in the Southwest; these materials are viewable on CLUI's website and were on display at the organization's headquarters in spring 2014.[15] The entries, which include satellite images and brief profiles of around ninety operating and planned plants, could serve as a starting point for research into the contradictory anthropogenic aesthetics and politics of nature, landscape, land use, and solar power. However, there is no explicit critical or analytical commentary that would guide the website's users and the exhibition's visitors. The CLUI simply states

This burned MacGillivray's Warbler was found by the US Fish and Wildlife Service during a visit to the Ivanpah Solar Power Facility in October 2013. The Facility is located in the Mojave Desert in California.

that

> this year more energy will enter the grid from solar power plants than ever before. Propelled by federal government incentives and California's legislated decrease in dependence on fossil fuels, construction started on several $1–2 billion power plants in 2011, with most of them coming online in 2014. With so many proposed projects, and so many stalled in the complicated political and regulatory process, it's hard to know where things are really at. Over a few weeks in February 2014, photographers from the CLUI were dispatched to ground truth the current state of solar.[16]

Despite its symbolism of brightness and warmth, the political economy of solar is far from transparent or even "green." CLUI gestures at a somewhat arcane industry hinged between state bureaucracy, equity finance, research and development in photovoltaics, and the engineering struggles to synchronize a plant to the power grid, not to mention environmental issues. Hence, the "current state of solar" seems light years away from the democratization and decentralization so dear to the proponents of liberal-left, anticapitalist energy politics.

Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003), which at first glance seems like an utterly uncritical celebration of solar power, may deserve reassessment after having been the target of much criticism. Eliasson was accused of abandoning every standard of serious criticality and reducing the function of art to a spectacular contemplative special effect. The iconic installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall gained a reputation for being both one of the most popular, and one of the most most fiercely disliked, works of art of the past decade. The installation drew two

The Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System received a $168 million investment from Google in 2011. In November of that year, Google ended investment in a particular project of the facility, citing rapid price decline of photovoltaics.

Olafur Eliasson, The Weather Project, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding. 26,7 m x 22,3 m x 155,4 m. Installation view, Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London.

million visitors and engendered enormous praise, but critics such as Hal Foster and James Meyer dismissed *The Weather Project* as depoliticizing and anti-discursive kitsch, delivering "a mass audience that cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the installation itself."[17]

The Weather Project, like other light-based and heliophilic works by Eliasson, captures the viewer with physical force and atmospheric beauty, transforming Turbine Hall into a temple of immersive sun worship. Backed by the sponsorship of Unilever—the global corporation implicated in crimes that range from deforestation and the extinction of the orangutan population in Borneo to human rights abuses in India, and whose oldest and most famous brand, produced since the 1880s, is Sunlight Soap (for decades manufactured by workers housed in the faux-philanthropic, Arts-and-Crafts model village Port Sunlight, located in Merseyside in North West England), the installation's artificial sun acts on the sensorium of the audience, arguably turning them into non-cognizant, passive-passionate puppets of the artist, temporarily relieved of the responsibility to think critically.

Understood this way, Eliasson's work betrays the ethico-epistemological function assigned to the sun by Plato in his famous analogy from *The Republic*, where he likens the relationship between goodness and knowledge to the relationship between the sun and sight. However, *The Weather Project*, as well as Eliasson's practice as a whole, hardly resemble this dismissive picture of an anti-modernist contemporary sublime or an elevated version of amusement park entertainment.

As is well known, Eliasson illuminated the vast Turbine Hall with a light that seemed to emanate from a sun that had miraculously found its way into the museum, hovering at one end of the hall, high above visitors, who sat or laid down on the floor, immersed in the splendor of an otherworldly radiance. Eliasson, however, intended his sun to be perceived not as a spectacular remodeling of an already spectacular space, but as a carefully designed special effect made of "monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminum, and scaffolding," according to the official description of the materials and media deployed by the artist. This description continues:

> A fine mist permeates the space, as if creeping in from the environment outside. Throughout the day, the mist accumulates into faint, cloud-like formations, before dissipating across the space. A glance overhead, to see where the mist might escape, reveals that the ceiling of the Turbine Hall has disappeared, replaced by a reflection of the space below. At the far end of the hall is a giant semi-circular form made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps. The arc repeated in the mirror overhead produces a sphere of dazzling radiance linking the real space with the reflection. Generally used in street lighting, mono-frequency lamps emit light at such a narrow frequency that colors other than yellow and black are invisible, thus transforming the visual field around the sun into a vast duotone landscape.

It is thus made very clear that the grand sensation of a sunset displaced into the interior of the former power plant is based on sophisticated trickery, artistry, and technique. Visible to anyone who cared to notice, the luminous mystique conveyed itself as manufactured to the extent that being overwhelmed by the atmosphere did not

Andy Paradise, "Little Sun" at Tate Modern, 2012. Copyright of the author.

exclude reflection on the conditions of its very production. Indeed, one could argue that *The Weather Project* "was meant to unmask the artificial aesthetic environment as a constructed experience."[18] As Eliasson himself emphasized, "The benefit in disclosing the means with which I am working is that it enables the viewers to understand the experience itself as a construction and so, to a higher extent, allow them to question and evaluate the impact this experience has on them."[19]

In an overly subversive fashion, Eliasson engaged with the museum as institutional fact. For instance, he invited spectators to look at *The Weather Project*'s "sun" from behind, revealing the scaffolding of the lamps and the electrical wiring, giving away the secret of the origins of the fine mist. Seriously—or at least ostentatiously—interested in the cultural and scientific production of "the weather," Eliasson went to great lengths to couple the immersive with the discursive, the construction of the event with its deconstruction. Information on weather issues was displayed on posters around London; he had Tate staff members interviewed about their ideas on weather; and in the museum gift shop, a catalogue was on sale featuring results of the survey and essays by the likes of Bruno Latour. As art historian Anne M. Wagner has suggested, with Eliasson's projects, "it is only in retrospect, when weighing that experience as not only visual but also allegorical, that its critical ironies—and political purposes—come into view."[20]

Today, a retrospective view of *The Weather Project* is informed not only by Eliasson's subsequent large-scale projects, such as *New York City Waterfalls* (2008), but also, and arguably more interestingly, by Eliasson's Little Sun project, which he started with engineer Frederik Ottesen in 2012. With a nod to Joseph Beuys's more humorous *Capri-Batterie* from 1985 (consisting of a lightbulb plugged into a lemon), the solar-powered Little Sun lamp is cutely designed to resemble a sunflower. Sold for little money, the lamp is intended "to improve access to electricity and light in off-grid regions."[21] In the summer of 2012, Little Sun was launched at Tate Modern. There was an info space on the third floor of the museum, and on Saturday nights after ordinary museum hours, the lights were turned off and visitors were invited to view the Surrealist collection using only the light of Little Sun lamps—a reference to Man Ray's nocturnes at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition at the Galérie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, where attendees were handed torches to study the exhibited works. Even though Little Sun is presented at art institutions and gains significant visibility thanks to Olafur Eliasson's status as an art-world celebrity (he is a gifted speaker on TED stages and at fundraising events), it is not exactly an art project. Publicized and marketed with the professionalism of a carefully conceived and well-designed "social business," Little Sun aspires to contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals concerning poverty eradication, education, gender equality, health, and environmental sustainability. The lamp provides light for small businesses in off-grid areas, and, since it is made of inexpensive parts, it is cost-efficient, particularly compared to kerosene. While the indoor use of kerosene lanterns and candles can cause breathing problems or accidental fires, Little Sun is safe, clean, and ten times brighter. As of October 1, 2014, Little Sun claims to have sold 210,000 lamps worldwide, 93,000 of which went to areas without electricity, thereby changing "the fabric of off-grid communities" in nine African countries (Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, Burundi, Senegal, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa), where 200 African entrepreneurs have joined the project.[22]

The story becomes more complex the more one reads about Little Sun's global activities (for example, some have criticized Eliasson and Ottesen for manufacturing the lamps in China), but the project is nonetheless an interesting example of not only the increasing crossover between the art world and social business, but also of the ways art can "finally achieve its social function and make visible the relationship with [the] time with which it is engaged," as Eliasson wrote in the catalogue for *The Weather Project*.[23] Put into a dialogic, resonating relation, *The Weather Project* and Little Sun provide the means to think the place of contemporary art in a global environment where the aesthetics and metaphorologies of the sun constantly meet its political economy and social reality. (As Jacques Derrida has amply demonstrated, the sun used as a metaphor is "the sensible signifier of what is sensible, the sensible model of the sensible [the Form, paradigm, or parable of the sensible]"[24]). By connecting the art-based titillation of a metropolitan desire for sunlight with the needs of people that lack reliable light to pursue basic activities, Eliasson puts both dimensions into contact, the one (aesthetic) experience suddenly becoming unthinkable without the other (not necessarily aesthetic).

Glenn Ligon, "Warm Broad Glow II", 2011. Neon, paint, and powder-coated aluminum; 73.7 x 614.7 cm.

4.

Explicitly in Eliasson's work, and implicitly in the work of minimal and postminimal artists such as Adolf Luther, Dan Flavin, the ZERO group, and James Turrell, light is negotiated as an immaterial asset providing aesthetic information, social distinction, and psychological as well as physical well-being. Not coincidentally, the cover of the 2007 book *Rise and Shine: Sunlight, Technology and Health* by Simon Carter features a photo of *The Weather Project*, acknowledging Eliasson's contribution to a larger culture discourse on issues related to light and sunshine. Another artist working with electric light, albeit from a rather different angle than Eliasson, is Glenn Ligon. With his neon writing installations *Untitled (Negro Sunshine)* (2005) and *Warm Broad Glow II* (2011), Ligon makes effective, though highly interpretable, use of a phrase repeatedly applied by Gertrude Stein, in her novella *Melanctha* (a part of *Three Lives*), to characters that "are on both ends of a spectrum of acceptable blackness as defined by prejudicial norms" (William Simmons).[25] The despicable racism of Stein's formulation "Negro sunshine" is both attacked and made visually available in an unexpected fashion by Ligon's take on light itself. As art historian William Simmons has succinctly written, "The bright neon mimics natural light in color, but its extreme voltage gives it a distinctly artificial feel that ultimately belies the subject matter. It is at once like sunshine and beyond sunshine in its glowing presence."[26]

Once again, the metaphors of sun and sunshine prove to be critically ambiguous and strongly determined by their "environment" (Ferdinand de Saussure).[27] Ligon's "(en)lightning" of the racist trope opens it up to a discourse on the valorizing functions of light, unsettling the difference between natural and artificial light while underscoring the interplay of luminous phenomena and linguistic as well as political economies.

In Jonathan Swift's hilarious *Directions to Servants* (1745), a pseudo-handbook of manners, the author shows a strangely keen, yet—considering our contemporary low-intensity sunlight wars—uncannily comprehensible interest in the economic, i.e., in the ultimately *unequal* distribution of light in the master's household. The text exhorts the servant to handle the candles with particular care, making sure "to avoid burning daylight and to save your master's candles, never bring them up until half an hour after it be dark, although they be called for ever so often."[28]

Furthermore, Swift advises the butler to be both smart and humble with regard to the precious light resources:

> When you prepare your candles wrap them up in a piece of brown paper, and so stick them in the socket; let the paper come halfway up the candle, which looks handsome if anybody should come in. Do all in the dark (as clean glasses, etc.) to save your master's candles.[29]

The instruction to "do all in the dark" is one of the core directives of any feudal (and colonialist) regime, as it codifies unequal access to basic resources of survival. The economization of light according to class (and, by implication, race) that Swift points to remains a pressing issue, especially when it comes to housing and work.

A legendary two-part episode of *The Simpsons* (a series that has proved to be about not least the political economy of energy supply and climate change) brusquely demonstrates how power is actually about control over the distribution of sunlight as one of the fundamental commons. In "Who Shot Mr. Burns," the evil capitalist Mr. Burns constructs a giant, movable disk to block out the sun (reminiscent of the geoengineering fad of Solar Radiation Management, which attempts to "dim" the sun).[30] This compels the residents of Springfield to buy electricity from his power plant. As he activates the sun-blocker, Burns gets shot. Is this an act of anticapitalist environmentalist vengeance? (The answer is no: the gun was fired by the infant Maggie Simpson).

The struggle for access to the sun and for proper lighting to ensure health and productivity that lasted throughout premodern and modernist urban planning and architecture, involving fights for labor rights and workplace safety, is recurring in parts of the so-called Global South, if under somewhat different auspices.[31] While global corporations such as Philips, Osram, Shell, and Bechtel are busy launching well-meaning initiatives for the improvement of lighting conditions in underdeveloped areas—opening up new markets for their products on the way—there is increasing critical, or perhaps just human, interest in off-the-grid activities.

In an episode of The Simpsons called "Who Shot Mr. Burns," the nuclear plant tycoon creates a scheme to harness the power of Springfield's sun.

Evidence of such interest can be found in the 2012 documentary *Solar Mamas*, directed by Mona Eldaief and Jehane Noujaim. In the film, a Bedouin woman from Jordan travels to Barefoot College in India, where illiterate women from around the world are trained to become solar engineers in six months. This interest is also manifest in the common practice—especially in megacities—of stealing of power from the electricity grid. But media scholar Sean Cubitt argues that this inherently dangerous method of procuring power, which involves channeling live electricity "through hand-made switches and ring mains with little or no insulation or even protection from the weather," is "the result of the colonial legacy of power supply." The "real alternative," Cubitt suggests, for both slum-dwellers and people living in rural areas is the "local production of power" and "distributed electricity generation" as a "potent symbol for the exit from capital."[32] This, of course, rings familiar, as it harks back to the off-the-grid discourse of the 1970s solar grassroots movement.

However, the transformation of chronobiological rhythms and diurnal cycles that is taking place in the solarized capitalism of sleep deprivation and climate engineering has already priced-in peoples' desire to get off the grid. The struggle for autonomy and self-sustenance as a laboring person excluded from labor and energy supplies, whether in the Wallonia of the Dardenne brothers or in the slums of the Global South, may turn out to be a training ground for the acquisition of the skills necessary to perform in perfect biopolitical accordance with the logic of value extraction. The less your working hours depend on day/night changes, access to the grid, or the reliability of infrastructural agency, the more you are obliged to exhaustion. A regime that benefits from spatially and temporally flexibilized work and the negative saturation of the subject's lifetime by the cold glow of LED screens and oppressively modulated absences and abundances of sunlight requires a political practice guided by solar awareness, a politics of light and shine. Or maybe *politics* is just the very thing to avoid. In the face of the depolarization of the relationships between nature and culture, darkness and daylight, heat and cold, and living and dying, a nondepressive detachment "from the cruel optimism of a political fetish" (Lauren Berlant) seems a perfectly viable option for our solar predicament.[33]

X

Tom Holert is an art historian, cultural critic, and artist. A former editor of *Texte zur Kunst* and co-publisher of *Spex* magazine, professor at Merz Akademie Stuttgart and the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, he currently pursues research, writing, and other production in Berlin. Recent publications include *Deadwood* (Zurich and Berlin 2013) and *Übergriffe*. Zustände und Zuständigkeiten der Gegenwartskunst (2014). Holert's video installation *The Labours of Shine* (2012), originally commissioned for Anselm Franke's Animism (2012ff) endeavor, was at the beginning of this *e-flux journal* double issue on The Politics of Shine.

1
Jimmy Carter, "Solar Energy Remarks Announcing Administration Proposals," June 20, 1979 https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/solar-energy-remarks-announcing-administration-proposals .

2
See "This Day In History: June 20, 1979: Solar-Energy system installed at White House," HistoryChannel.com https://web.archive.org/web/20150401161722/https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/solar-energy-system-installed-at-white-house .

3
A "solar economy" certainly of a different order than the one introduced by Georges Bataille and further developed by Reza Negarestani "as the energetic model of dissipation inherent to the Sun." See Reza Negarestani, "Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss" (2010) https://de.scribd.com/doc/35828039/Solar-Inferno-and-the-Earthbound-Abyss-by-Reza-Negarestani .

4
The latter term was coined in 1996 by biologist David Schwartzman, who advocated "solarization along with containment of the technosphere" as "material prerequisites for a global civilization realizing the Marxian concept of communism, while optimizing its relations to nature." See David Schwartzman, "Solar Communism," *Science & Society* vol. 60, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 307–331. See also Peter D. Schwartzman and David W. Schwartzman, "A Solar Transition Is Possible," Institute for Policy Research & Development (March 2011) http://solarutopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/A-Solar-Transition-is-Possible_new.pdf ; and the Schwartzmans' Solar Utopia website http://solarutopia.org/ .

5
See David Biello, "Where Did the Carter White House's Solar Panels Go?," *Scientific* American, Aug. 6, 2010 http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/carter-white-house-solar-panel-array/ ; "The College That Rescued Carter Solar Panels: White House Prepares to Install Solar Panels, Unity College Ponders Its Role in History," Unity.edu, Aug. 15, 2013 https://unity.edu/unity-college-news/the-college-that-rescued-carter-solar-panels/ .

6
See Hemauer and Keller's *No. 1 Sun Engine* project website http://www.sun1913.info/ .

7
See Juliet Elperin, "White House solar panels being installed this week," *Washington Post*, Aug. 15, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/08/15/white-house-solar-panels-finally-being-installed . For a critical note, see also Hemauer and Keller, "First Summer Solstice with Solar Array installed on the White House – again," RoadNotTaken.info, June 20, 2014 http://www.roadnottaken.info/?p=929 .

8
Daniel M. Berman and John T. O'Connor, *Who Owns the Sun?: People, Politics, and the Struggle for Solar Economy* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1996), xvii.

9
Ibid.

10
Ibid., 239–240.

11
Hermann Scheer, *A Solar Manifesto* , 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005): 10.

12
See Todd Woody, "How to Stop Solar-Power Plants From Incinerating Birds," *The Atlantic*, Apr. 28, 2014 http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/04/how-to-stop-solar-power-plants-from-incinerating-birds/361318/ ; Morgen Peck, "Ivanpah Solar Power Tower Is Burning Birds," *IEEE Spectrum*, Aug. 20, 2014 http://spectrum.ieee.org/energywise/green-tech/solar/ivanpah-solar-plant-turns-birds-into-smoke-streamers .

13
Garrett Hering, "4 Reasons the Ivanpah Plant Is Not the Future of Solar," *GreenBiz* (February 19, 2014) https://www.greenbiz.com/article/4-reasons-ivanpah-plant-not-future-solar .

14
"A non-profit education, art and research organization, founded in 1994, dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived."

15
See The Center for Land Use Interpretation, "Major Solar Power Plants in the USA" http://www.clui.org/content/major-solar-power-plants-usa . The exhibition was titled "Solar Boom: Sun-Powered Electrical Plants in the USA."

16
See http://www.clui.org/section/solar-boom-sun-powered-electrical-plants-usa .

17
James Meyer, "No More Scale: The Experience of Size in Contemporary Sculpture," *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 223. See also Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2011).

18
Ole W. Fischer, "Atmospheres: Architectural Spaces between Critical Reading and Immersive Presence," *field: a free journal for architecture* vol. 1, no. 1 (2007): 39.

19
Quoted in "About the installation: understanding the project," Tate website, 2003 https://web.archive.org/web/20150306233200/https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/understanding-project .

20
See the Little Sun website http://littlesun.com/ . Eliasson's inspiration for this project was his first-hand knowledge of the poverty faced by many East Africans. In 2005 he founded, together with his partner Marianne Krogh Jensen, 121 Ethiopia, a small NGO based in Copenhagen, Berlin, and Zurich supporting Ethiopian orphans in their often difficult transition into permanent homes. See http://www.121ethiopia.org/ .

21
See the Little Sun website http://littlesun.com/ . Eliasson's inspiration for this project was his first-hand knowledge of the poverty faced by many East Africans. In 2005 he founded, together with his partner Marianne Krogh Jensen, 121 Ethiopia, a small NGO based in Copenhagen, Berlin, and Zurich supporting Ethiopian orphans in their often difficult transition into permanent homes. See http://www.121ethiopia.org/ .

22
Information provided at https://littlesun.org/ .

23
Olafur Eliasson, "Museums Are Radical," in *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project* , ed. Susan May (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 138.

24
Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (Autumn, 1974): 5–74, here 52.

25
William Simmons, "Glenn Ligon and Gertrude Stein: Beyond Words," *The Harvard Undergraduate Journal* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 28–32, here 30.

26
Ibid.

27
Derrida is quoting Ferdinand de Saussure when he says that it is "impossible to fix even the value of the signifier 'sun' without considering its surroundings: in some languages it is not possible to say 'sit in the sun'" (Derrida, "White Mythology," 17).

28
Jonathan Swift, *Directions to Servants* , foreword by Colm Tóibín (London: Hesperus Press, 2003), 16.

29
Ibid., 24. The German translation of the last sentence has become the title of a great 1970 film by Swiss director Daniel Schmid (*Thut alles im Finstern, eurem Herrn das Licht zu ersparen*).

30
See the instructive chapter "Dimming the Sun" in Naomi Klein's helpful new book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 256ff.

31
See, for example, Daniel Freund, *American Sunshine: Diseases of Darkness and the Quest for Natural Light* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012); Mohamed Boubekri, *Daylighting: Architecture and Health Building Design Strategies* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008).

32
Sean Cubitt, "Electric Light and Electricity," *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 30, no. 7/8 (2013):

309–323, here 319.

33
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 259.

Natascha Sadr Haghighian

Disco Parallax

I counted.

Twenty-eight seconds green
Two seconds yellow
Thirty-seven seconds red
One second yellow
And again
Twenty-eight seconds green

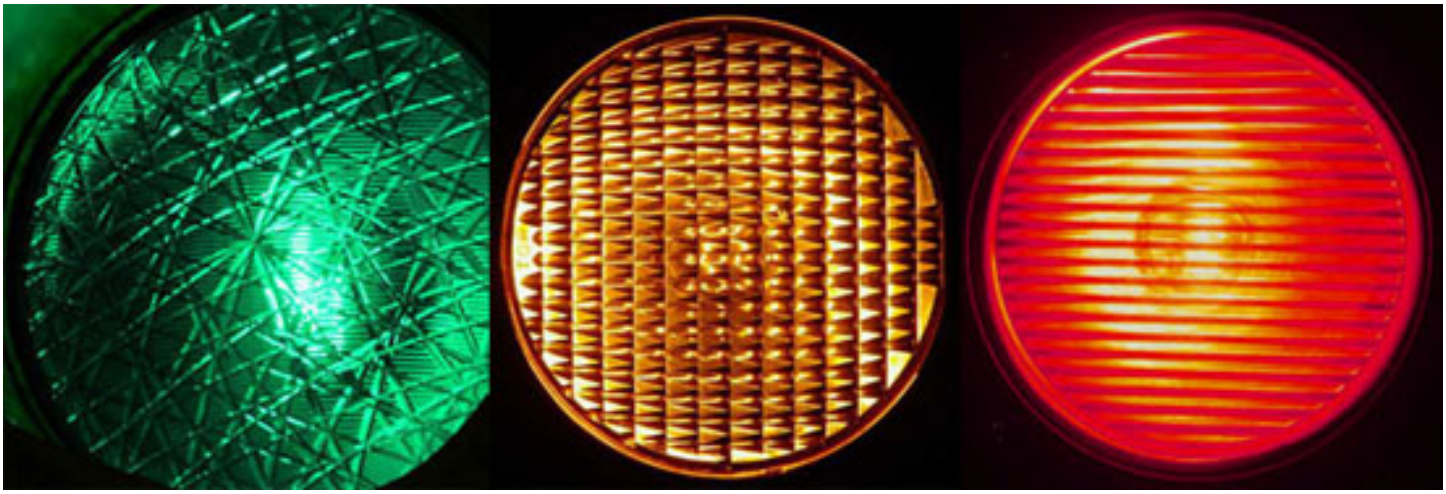
Backlight

The traffic light turned one hundred this summer, on August 5. I learn this from the "Innovation" section of the Siemens website. Apparently, the first electric traffic light was put in operation in Cleveland, Ohio. Its control signals were operated by a police officer who sat in a little shack at the intersection and rang a bell each time the colors changed. The company installed its first traffic light in Berlin ten years later, in 1924, on Potsdamer Platz.

But at this moment I am staring at the traffic light at the intersection of Ohlauer Strasse and Reichenberger Strasse in Kreuzberg. I have been part of a blockade on this section of Ohlauer Strasse for a couple of hours. Now darkness slowly sets in. The blockade started a few days ago, when a former school that had been occupied by 250 refugee activists was evicted—with the help of 1700 armed police officers in riot gear. A group of forty activists refused to leave the building on Ohlauer Strasse and withdrew to the rooftop, threatening to jump if the police attempted to evict them by force.

The refugee strike started in 2012 with a march on Berlin protesting the mandatory residence policy. The noncitizens established a tent city on Oranienplatz and later in the school, demanding abolition of deportation and mandatory residency and the reconstitution of the right to asylum in Germany, which has been effectively annulled since 1993. The strike action was triggered by yet another suicide of a noncitizen in an asylum camp in Bavaria in January 2012; the man hung himself out of fear of deportation and desperation over ill treatment in the camp.[1]

The refugee strikers' determined and powerful struggle was met by tremendous support from locals and an intransigent technocratic stance from officials, who tend to tighten asylum laws rather than grant people the formerly constitutional right. The right to asylum had been anchored in the German constitution since 1949 as a direct result of the lived experience of fascism in Germany. Over the course of the war, half a million political refugees had fled German National Socialism and were granted asylum by over eighty countries. Article 16 of the German constitution, the unconditional right to asylum, was an acknowledgement of this experience. Yet in 1993 this right was removed from Article 16 and transferred to a new article, 16a, thereby intricately eliminating the right to asylum in Germany.



Left: Siemens's Spiderweb lens model. Middle: Siemens's Marbelite Four-Way Corning lens. Right: Large bead lens. The company's website informs us that "Corning Glass patented a signal lens that contained prismatic beads in 1918. Known as the Type B, this lens was in many respects the forerunner of the modern traffic signal lens." See here

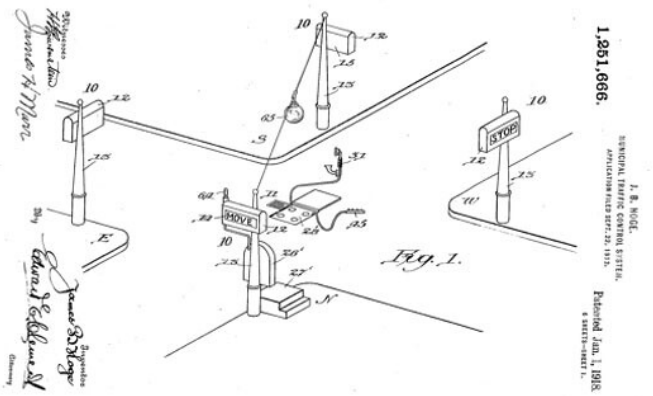
This discrepancy in response shows itself very clearly at the siege that evolved when 1700 riot police, some of them carrying live ammunition, surrounded the occupied school to supervise the eviction, while supporters immediately gathered behind the police lines to try to prevent the eviction. There has now been a deadlock for almost a week, growing layers of immobility like an onion, or a stack. The activists are barricaded on the roof and the police have cordoned off the entire block, only granting passage to people with resident permits. In another layer, locals who support the protest have blocked off the police cordon at all intersections around the clock, to hinder their flow of supplies and prevent eviction.

Democratic law has been suspended for five days in this part of Kreuzberg; all sides struggle to define what is inside and what is outside and flip the order of the stack. The police line defends German interests from the demands of the refugees and effectively declares the besieged school as "outside." The supporters declare the siege illegal and stand in solidarity with the people inside the school, averting the state's proposed exclusion, instead turning around and redefining the cornered police line as being outside. The people inside the school wait in limbo between deportation and captivity with nothing much too lose and everything to fight for. Nobody can make a move—the government shows no propensity for genuine negotiation that doesn't involve tricking the activists with empty promises.

So at this moment nothing budges on the crossing of Ohlauer and Reichenberger Strasse. Supporters sit on the pavement, drinking and chatting. Behind the barrier the men and women in riot gear shift their body weight from left to right while leaning onto their shields. Their backs are turned to the school, hardly visible in the dusk. The only things that move perpetually are the traffic lights, diligently turning from red to yellow to green and back as if they were operating invisible traffic, or just stoically insisting on normality.

But now, as night is falling, the red, yellow, and green lights shine on the scene rather like disco lights, changing the mood every thirty seconds or so by illuminating the faces of police and protesters alike, the cordons, the pavement, and the idle police vans behind the police line, immersing all in a detached glow and rhythm. And like disco lights, the colorful flashes suspend, fictionalize, and breach agendas, dress codes, movement, spatial layout, and power relations. But the vision flickers and other readings recrudesce. The sequential shine appears to signal the algorithmic cluelessness of a system that does not know how to respond to the complexity of a globalized world where the claim over freedom of movement means more than just jaywalking.

The main character in the BBC comedy *Little Britain* is a receptionist named Carol Beer. When asked a question, Ms. Beer types a random line into her computer, only to reply, "Computer says no," followed by a strong cough in the customer's face. Similarly, the flashing signal could be read as the response code of an ignorant state that has decided to be indifferent towards the demands of its citizens and noncitizens. The traffic signal's working/not-working status could also be seen as the apparent contradiction in the act of a democratic state that tries to defend its interests against the refugees by suspending said democracy. If a democratic order can only be protected through highly militarized police operations that suspend civil rights, then whose interests are actually defended? The traffic lights maintain an order that has actually been canceled because movement has not been flowing according to the convenience of the official sovereign who claims monopoly over who and



James B. Hoge, "Municipal Traffic Control System," patent sketch. Filed September 22, 1917, patented January 1, 1918 (US patent 1,251,666).

The eternal 8,000-Kelvin glow of Peter Zumthor's Kunsthaus Bregenz precludes the ability to tell time.

what moves.

Another piece of information from the Siemen's website illuminates recent company goals and innovations in this vein:

> Since March 2014, traffic lights have gone online. Thanks to a new control device from Siemens, cities can manage their traffic lights from a private "cloud" and correct problems without turning traffic lights off—and this from any location in the world, via smartphone, tablet, or computer. New technology also allows for remote maintenance. The Siemens Support Center in Munich already assists 255 cities worldwide, from Abu Dhabi to Würzburg, in the event of any problems with traffic computers or traffic lights. In the future, experts working in Munich will be able to fully service traffic light systems remotely, guaranteeing safe and trouble-free operation.

Blue Light

Back home I sift through collections of traffic lights and parts of traffic lights that people have put online. Willis Lamm, who runs a Natural Horsemanship Webring, owns a vast collection of different signal lenses, and he has photographed each one against the light—ribbed, crosshatched, beaded, and marbelite lenses, orange peel, Crouse-Hinds, and spider web.[2] The lens patterns are different attempts to meet problems like phantom light, diffusion, and enhancement, and chromatic standards. I remember finding such a lens on the street years ago and I kept it in my bag because I liked looking through it from time to time. This was before the illuminated screens of phone, tablet, and computer inhabited my bag. I remember truly enjoying the sensations I experienced when the refracted light coming through the lens hit my eyes, but I also often just held the lens against any surface to see whether the yellow spiderweb would emit its tinted pattern onto other things, and if so, how that would look. At that time, any refraction caught my attention. It was part of an involuntary study of my own perception. Seeking out refracted and reflected light seemed so much more interesting than looking at pictures.

Most things I look at now are on a screen, including the Twitter feed from the occupied school at Ohlauer Strasse. My backlit devices illuminate my face and my bedroom with a particular cool blue light that shines almost independently of what shows on my screen. The light has a color temperature of 6,500–10,500 Kelvin, which correlates with a partially overcast daylight of about 7,000–12,000 Kelvin.

Unlike the red and green colors of a traffic light that are part of a symbolic order I have learned to internalize, the device-blue light is more visceral and talks directly to my melatonin levels. It says ON! GO! OPEN! ACTIVE! DAY!, announcing a perfect eternal day—not unlike being at Kunsthaus Bregenz, a minimalist architectural structure designed by Peter Zumthor that hosts contemporary art. Its impervious façade consists of light panels that form a free-standing, light-diffusing skin. Its unpainted concrete and polished terrazzo interior is illuminated by changing ratios of artificial and incident light that emit consistently from invisible cavities above the glass ceilings, giving the space a uniform luminosity and color temperature. You can't possibly tell the time at Kunsthaus Bregenz, and you're intrinsically not supposed to. The eternal average 8,000 Kelvin of Zumthor's art space and of my smartphone screen equally eliminate cycles, transiencies, limits, stop signs, night, idleness, fatigue. The light doesn't care where I go or what I do—whether I'm productive, procrastinating,

editing, chatting, walking, or standing—as long as I keep it turned on.

> 1, 2, 1, 2, keep it on
> Listen to the shit because we kick it until dawn
> Listen to the abstract got it going on …
>
> Gonna get it together, watch it
> Gonna get it together Ma Bell
>
> I'm like Ma Bell, I've got the ill communications
> Ma Bell, I've got the ill communications
> Ma Bell, I've got the ill communications
> Ma Bell, I've got the ill communications
>
> Keep it on and on and on
>
> —Beastie Boys, "Get it Together," *III Communication*, 1994

When did this particular blue light start to light up my life? Someone must have switched it on at some point. Or is it truly without beginning or end? If I trace it beyond my phone's projections, one streak beckons to the blue apparel of Margaret Thatcher. She started her politics of deregulation, privatization, and flexibilization wearing 15,000 Kelvin, the color of a clear blue sky. And as we've learned from Adam Curtis, many who had destroyed the policeman inside their heads voted for this new economy of the product-aided, limitless self to explore further what they really, really wanted. Deregulation put the control, the ownership, and even the traffic into private hands. Ronald Reagan, Thatcher's fellow blue rider, followed the same privatization politics repeatedly announced in his campaign: he vowed to "let the people rule" and to "take government off your backs and turn you loose to do what you can do so well." In fact, privatization meant shutting down the idea of a common project, of shared responsibilities, and of a system of accountability and welfare. Now everyone was responsible for their own individual happiness-production and management, and had to work 24/7 to express and promote the results. It required special techniques of staying put. A new reversed type of "American night" filter had to be applied to the scene, one that simulated day in the middle of the night and illuminated our faces with the appropriate white balance. Additionally, due to the refresh rate of our displays, this new light came in the form of a stroboscopic flicker that pulsed the artificial day. Anyone who has experienced strobe at a club probably discovered that it changes the perception of motion profoundly. Movement can come to a standstill in this light.

But with the arrival of evermore tailored technologies, devices, and practices, the new freedoms and responsibilities of the self-actualizing individual turned

Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Mikhail Gorbachev are forever alive and well at Madame Tussads London.

into new social anxieties. To fight symptoms like FOMO and other Pavlovian reflexes that he, like many of us, has developed, a friend asks me how to de-smartphone. He thinks it's a necessary step in order to withdraw from the never-ending stream and regain some agency over his life, but he wants to do it without being expelled or left out of social interactions and information. He is worried that changing his status from constantly "ON" to "off and on" or to "OFF" altogether—by removing "infinity apps" or simply by throwing his phone in the trash—might turn him into an accursed nocturnal animal. An invisible creature that you've heard about but can't google.

If this particular light has a history, it might as well have a locus.

Scanning through the different registers of the blue light, I detect another substantial source: it is the blue glare of the European Union and its borderless Schengen expanse. A light that shines so bright that its representatives mistake dominance for relevance. The European flag that depicts twelve golden stars upon a uniform azure blue background tones this light. The official commentary by the ministerial committee at the flag's introduction in 1955 breaks down its symbolism as follows:

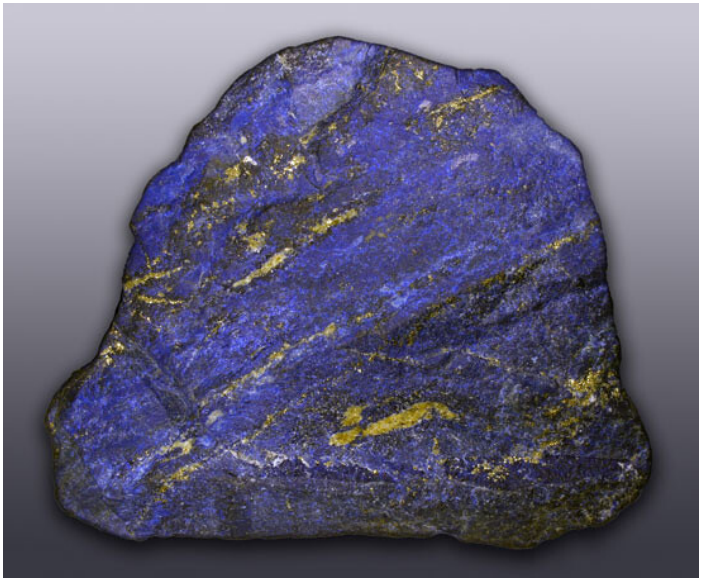
> Gegen den blauen Himmel der westlichen Welt stellen die Sterne die Völker Europas in einem Kreis, dem Zeichen der Einheit, dar. Die Zahl der Sterne ist unveränderlich auf zwölf festgesetzt, diese Zahl versinnbildlicht die Vollkommenheit und die Vollständigkeit.
>
> Against the blue sky of the Western world the stars depict the peoples of Europe in a circle, the sign of unity. The number of stars is invariably set to twelve, this number epitomizes perfection and completeness.[3]

Azure as a background color used to be rare in Europe, as the blue pigment "lapis lazuli" was scarce and therefore sublimely expensive. According to my art history teacher, it was Giotto di Bondone who first used the azure color of the sky instead of the traditional gold to paint the background of his frescos. He imported it from Badakhshan Province in today's northeast Afghanistan. Giotto's particular blue background and sequential string of rhythmic figures in the foreground marked the beginning of a new time in Europe that would become known as the Renaissance.

A starry blue map delineates the European Union and Schengen Agreement Area.

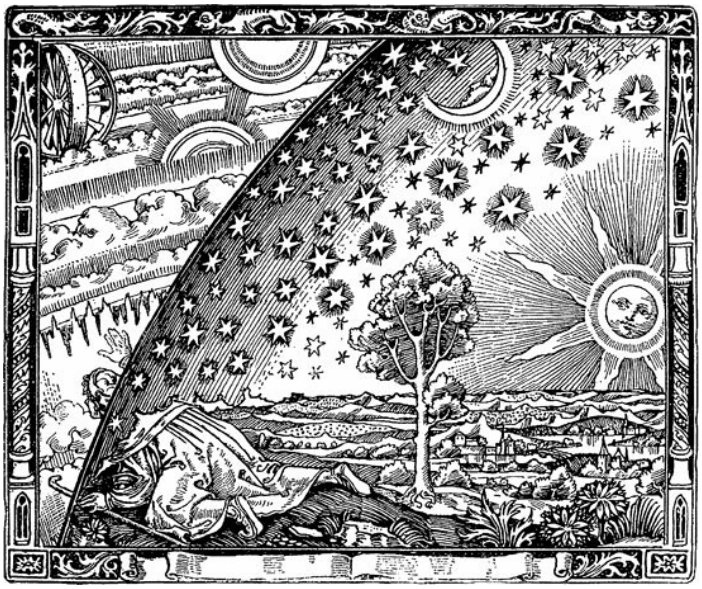
So apparently the blue sky of the Western world was imported and depended on mining in remote regions, a fact that does not really match the arbitrary symbolism of completeness that Europe defends so vividly at its outer borders and in our neighborhood in Kreuzberg. The circle of twelve stars does not even count all of Europe's member states, let alone the faraway regions on which Europe's shine has been feeding for centuries.

The borderless blue of the Schengen interior is suddenly dimmed at its seemingly insurmountable outside border. In fact, this border is ferociously jammed with several layers of different high-tech fences, enforced by Frontex, the privatized border police that deliberately ignores SOS calls from boats on the Mediterranean in order to lower the risk of illegal migrants entering the zone. This layer is followed by another bureaucratic border stack—the so-called Dublin Regulations. The broad deterrence campaigns of fencing and armed patrols and intervention by sea, land, and air make it almost impossible for asylum seekers to claim protection under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. But if they manage to reach Europe alive, under the Dublin Regulations they are restricted to the country they first enter. They often end up in detentions centers in Greece or Italy. Together, these measures partition the infinite blue sky into fortified layers that protect Europe's radiant circle of perfection and completeness.



Lapis Lazuli. Photo: Hannes Grobe. Copyright: Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 2.5

In yet another layer, Europe's outer limits voluntarily or involuntarily configure a gigantic mass grave. A democratic order claims the monopoly over who and what is allowed to move legally, thereby quashing its own foundational values and claims in order to protect those very values and claims. The antinomy grows in proportion to the number of deaths, but it is not part of the picture. Frontex released a 135-page "governance" document



This Flammarion engraving by an unknown artist appeared in Camille Flammarion's "Latmosphère: météorologie populaire," 1888.

Jim's Dog, from Donna Haraway's When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

entitled *Program of Work 2014*. The text does not mention the word "death" one single time.[4]

The limitless blue firmament in fact has a unflattering backstage—an unexpected depth that is not eternal, not borderless, but is nonetheless a very, very deep void. But this depth is of another order. One has to enter this order piled in stacks and other, messier conglomerations that loom behind the flatness of the devices and areas that so passionately suggest borderlessness and limitlessness.

But how can I touch or enter these other depths that come with the blue light?

> I got the ticket to fulfill your dreams,
> Just touch the sky with it, just touch the sky with it
> Just touch the sky with it, just touch the sky with it
> Just touch the sky with it, just touch the sky with it
> Just touch the sky with it, just touch the sky with it
>
> —Sean Paul, "Touch the Sky," 2011

Surface Depth

Donna Haraway received a JPEG file in an email from a friend named Jim. It was a picture that she named "Jim's Dog." Jim's Dog depicted a burned-out redwood stump overgrown with mosses, ferns, and lichens that resembled an unhurried sitting dog. Jim took a photo of this particular resemblance that lasted for one season only. But not only because of its temporality: Jim's Dog melts into a conglomerate of forces. According to Haraway, we touch Jim's Dog with a visual system inherited from our primate kin and now folded into the metal, plastic, and electronic flesh of the high-resolution digital camera, but also the e-mail program and the computers and servers that brought the compressed JPEG onto our screen. In this touch we are inside the histories of IT engineering and assembly-line labor, but also those of nineteenth-century loggers whose labor practices involved leaving the burned stumps of the trees they cut to then be taken over by myriads bacteria and fungi. The whole layered picture is also indebted to the California policy of the "green belt," an environmental measure wherein California cities resist the fate of ever-growing Silicon Valley. This measure prevented Jim's Dog from being bulldozed for Santa Cruz real estate expansion. Haraway decided to use Jim's Dog as the screen saver on her computer, as it helped her to think about the necessary responses to such a complex visual phenomenon, or about what she calls "becoming worldly."

We receive our daily data of images, texts, audio, and video on increasingly flat devices, and interestingly, they are increasingly difficult to disassemble. I recall a time when I was able to open my laptop or phone or even the screen and replace parts. Now their slimness connotes an impervious object that is just surface, and effectively, its parts are also mostly glued together. The device seemingly has no material depth; it is a mere surface, a screen held by your hand or another base. When you look at it from the side, it looks like one thin consolidated entity. But although a liquid crystal display is astonishingly flat, it consists of several layers assembled in a glass stack that help to make things visible on the screen and also to deal with similar problems like the ones traffic lights have to confront: diffusion, directionality, and conflicting light

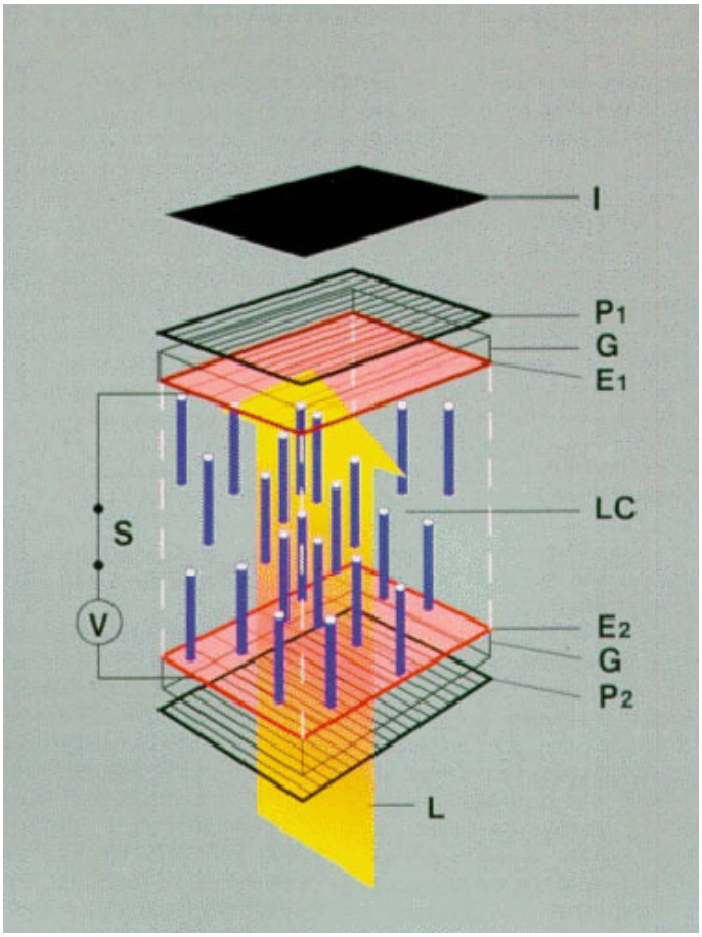
sources like the sun.

Despite its physical flatness, the display is eternally deep if you install the required software and apps that connect you to the stream of data provided in never-ending sequences by tireless algorithms. Exposing one's gaze solely to the frontal view of the device and to the hypnotizingly infinite stream of images, text messages, and other content on the screen, the experience of depth is magnificent. But any other experience, or, as Haraway would say, "touching," of depth is fairly intricate. Looking at my tablet from all sides, I suspect that this is intentional. I am supposed to remain in the belief that my device is flat and that the potentials it facilitates are infinitely deep.

Already our motionless posture in front of a screen suggests that we're experiencing a resurgent version of a flat-earth belief system—one that makes it hard, painful, and even dangerous to look beyond the firmament. You might fall over the edge or be expelled. However, looking straightforwardly at the device will let you forget about this abyss, as you're always busy with a new feed. But the abyss of other depths—like the one found in Jim's Dog—will not just go away if we simply ignore it. As Paul Virilio points out, the invention of new technologies is also the invention of new accidents. By inventing the plane, you also invent the plane crash.[5] Whether or not I want it to, the light on my LCD extends beyond the content on my screen and beyond the display's glass stack in both directions, towards me but also towards sources I can't trace with my eyes—the inventor or owner of the file format, the assembly line of the camera manufacturer, the room that hosts the server, the water that cools the data center, the nuclear accident that happened in the power plant, and so forth. A junkyard full of world-making stuff blows in my face when the light hits it, regardless of the image that shows on my feed.

In order to experience and grapple with the other depths beyond the flat device, I started to look for techniques—techniques of looking, and as Donna Haraway suggests, techniques of becoming worldly. Just like when I studied the refracting and reflecting properties of a signal lens, I quarry for the contact zones between my figure and other figures, between my body and other bodies, my eyes and visual events to seize the world-making entanglements that might constitute this other depth. Becoming worldly is a form of striving, an acknowledgement that looking is participating, touching is in fact an entanglement.

If I can't disassemble the device, I can start by taking apart my visual system. The necessary dispersion of my gaze starts by untying it from the image on the screen and shifting at least half an eye outside of the frame, examining the edges of the image and the peripheral areas of the screen in order to grapple with the image and look beyond content. In a second step, I can explore more complicated ways of looking, like bending and refracting my gaze in



An LCD schematic view of a TN liquid crystal cell shows the ON state with voltage applied (right). Illustration by M. Schadt. Copyright: Creative Commons.

front of a visual event. This can be challenging if done unaided, but using mirrors or glancing over the shoulder, deliberately looking awry, and crying are some ways to practice these techniques. Tears can be a major force in refracting incoming visual events like images or light beams. They enhance, warp, multiply, and redirect the visual perception of the seen.

I use all of the above techniques to develop contact zones with optical instances from the flat devices and with the depths beyond. They don't necessarily contain the harmful and leveling effect of scrolling the indifferent visual stream of images of decapitations, drone strikes, and cat stunts. Yet as the political sources of the blue light make clear, it is also the brutality of this specific light and not merely the images that hit or touch and even enter the body. The techniques also help to observe the effects of this light on me, as it also visualizes me, makes me and makes me visible, as much as it visualizes something for me, like the feed on my phone.

On the website Gizmag, the physicist Brian Dodson recommends scraping off the polarizing filter of one's

monitor in order to deal with the implications of visible and invisible layers of surfaces.[6] When the first layer of an LCD display is removed, the images disappear and only the light remains. Polarizing glasses can aid the eyes to still see the content of the screen if necessary. Even though Dodson's main motivation is privacy in public spaces, the intervention also serves another purpose. It's a first step to making the stack's depth tangible and to creating a contact zone with the light itself.

But how does this help with touching the depth beyond the glass stack in my display? A depth that some have described as a multilayered stack that structures the political geography and architecture that I as user and my address, my interface, the cloud, the data center, and eventually the planet are part of.

Brian Dodson demonstrates the process of removing the polarizing filter from an LCD display.

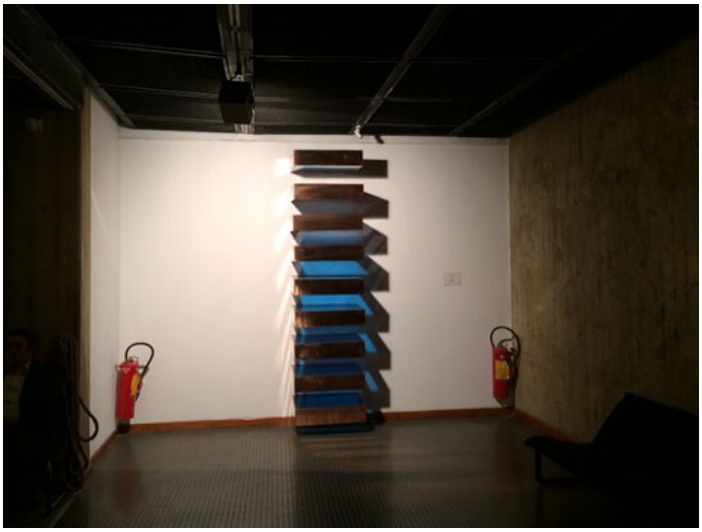
The Stack

I know stacks first of all from Donald Judd. One of them is dwelling in the museum of contemporary art in Tehran. Unlike most of the museum's impressive collection of modern and postmodern art, which is in storage most of the time, Donald Judd's *Stack* is on permanent display in the last corner of the course that takes you through the entire exhibition space. It is patiently sitting between two fire extinguishers: crooked, dusty, badly lit, the metal surfaces dented and stained from failed attempts at cleaning. It is completely removed from the controlling maintenance and display arrangements that you would normally find in a museum. Judd placed high value on ample dispersed daylight. He was really upset about mishandlings that would break up the uniformity of a flat surface, like fingerprints or scratches. I think of Eleonora Nagy, the chief expert on conserving Judd's work. She would certainly be desperate to bring this stack back on track. But for now it remains here in its bleak existence in the basement of the museum. I do enjoy visiting it here. I enjoy it much more than seeing its decent and proper cousins at any of the well-tempered environments like MoMA or Kunsthaus Bregenz.

This stack is a bit like the signal lens I had in my bag. It has been rid of its function, relevance, value. It is just an optical thing that helps you understand and discover seeing. You can physically sense and explore its surfaces and reflections as they struggle with dust and darkness. In this light and condition it helps me to understand what a stack is: a rather fragile, unstable proposition that needs continuous maintenance, control, and repair. It also allows me to see how surface is a continuous intense struggle for seamlessness and flatness, which seems so effortless when you see the stack elsewhere. I discover the same sticky black dust particles on the acrylic sheets of the *Stack* that also cover my window sill and my computer screen at home and basically all of Tehran as the polluted air of the city leaks into any space.

This is disco of the finest complex sort. I can contemplate various ambitions, failures, and depths, visually, spatially, and contextually without forfeiting the pleasure of looking at the tinted, refracted, and reflected lights that play with the different surfaces on and around the object. Analogous to the glass stack of my display, Judd's *Stack* is part of other stacks that involve geopolitical orders, histories, and possibly futures. It casts and refracts the light using plastic and metal elements. Both materials come from subterranean strata. Judd's *Stack* was acquired with petro-dollars before the Revolution. It is part of the most valuable collection of Western modern art outside of Europe and the United States. Yet it is neglected, like the traffic light on Ohlauer Strasse—still in operation but not directly representing the current order. But it is also a stack of another time. Judd's *Stack* was produced in the 1960s. It echoes a time of serial, industrial production: each section of the stack is a uniform unit of a sequence, and each *Stack* is part of a sequence. Today, a vast portion of production has shifted to planetary scale computing, and industrial production is accompanied and often replaced by other types of automations that are run by algorithms. Stacks look different now.

Benjamin Bratton has offered a comprehensive analysis of the territories and layers of the pervasive structure of planetary scale computing and what it entails.[7] He suggest the model of a stack to envision the structure, and he emphasizes that it is an abstract schema and at the same time a concrete technical machine, composed of physical spaces like rooms, buildings, cities, streets, and subterranean energy sources, but also of social and human layers of gestures and affects, and of digital software and hardware layers that include cloud computing, fiber-optic cables, data centers, and protocols. According to Bratton, the top level of this vertical stack is inhabited by the user or human/inhuman actant. Below this is the layer of the interfaces that facilitate and structure access to and from the stack. And below this are



Donald Judd, Untitled (Stack), 1966. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran. Photo: Maria Lind.

the other four layers that make up the stack: IP address, city, cloud, and earth. The message containing the JPEG that Jim sent to Donna would go down the entire stack and up again to arrive at Donna's inbox.

But known formations like geography, jurisdiction, and sovereignty are inconsistent in this stack. They appear distorted, refracted, partial, and sometimes contradictory. The way that places, things, and events correlate is reorganized in the stack and does not follow the established coherences. It even creates previously inexistent territories, for example via cloud computing. Who or what governs, who or what maps, regulates, or judges these new territories is partly unaccounted for. Human and inhuman actants can multiply as they appear and act simultaneously as consumer, producer, commodity, data, citizen, activist, hacker, and owner, and as carbon storage within the stack, changing their mode of involvement, status, and identity. To trace the refracting lights in this stack is to be violently scattered like shrapnel. It is to experience depth as a non-consistent space—at least not consistent in the way we have learned about geographies, nation-states, identities, and legality. Theoretically, I can appear several times as entirely different instances in the chain that leads from my display to your display. As Hito Steyerl ostensibly showed in her lecture "Is a Museum a Battlefield?," you can trace something like a bullet through the stack and end up at your own artwork. Invisible gunshot residue and bullet holes in the various layers of the stack show you the way.

Dispatching my gaze down the layers, I intend to use the various acquired techniques of refracted and bent looking as tools and protection at the same time. It is hard to adopt, as I sense a certain blindness or strain. I go back to training with the polarizing filter removed from my screen to get accustomed to the initial disorientation when content is invisible. As soon as my eyes don't expect a coherent recognizable picture any longer, I can allow my gaze to go down the stack and multiply and scatter to enter the succeeding layers. While the blindness was disorientating, the multiplied and scattered view of seeing all the conflicting, irreducible things at the same time and from different angles and perspectives is plain sickening. Jean Luc Godard recently issued a warning in his latest film, and first 3-D work, *Adieu au Language* (Goodbye to Language). He demonstrated how 3-D is actually meant to be applied,and he ripped apart the integrity of our visual apparatus. One eye is forced to go left, the other one has to go right to follow the secret agent and the dissident at the same time or the lovers who go opposite directions, and the effect is nausea. But we had better practice it, as this is the most actual and contemporary state of seeing; it does not smooth out irreducible antinomies and it does not stabilize the void that exists beyond flatness. 3-D is not watching the *Lego Movie* at a Cineplex. Nor is it any or other immersive experience of "being there"; it is rather a sickening gap in the next level of becoming worldly.

And what about the mess in each layer of and beyond that stack?

Parallax

The English word "pig" refers to the animal raised and sold by farmers, while the French-derived word "pork" refers to the edible meat from the pig. The gap between these two words relays the class dimensions of the animal, its producers and its consumers. The dual use of wording marks the distance between those who produce and those who consume: the prosperous Norman conquerors who could afford to eat *porque* from the *pig* raised by the underprivileged Saxon farmers. Japanese philosopher and literary critic Kojin Karatani refers to this very gap as the parallax dimension—a phenomenon that appears when we are confronted with irreducible antimonies and the opposed positions they produce. Karatani says that radical critique starts with asserting antimony as irreducible and renouncing all attempts to close the gap between positions. True critique, then, involves seeing things neither from one's own viewpoint nor from the viewpoint of others, but rather recognizing the reality that is the structural interstice between positions.[8]

Parallax is the reason why we have a perception of depth, why we see 3-D. It occurs when a thing is viewed or screened from two positions, like the position of our eyes. But what if the positions are further apart then our own eyes?

In disco, this is a standard technique of visual experience. Lights from different positions blink down on the moving bodies and make forms jump, change size, and multiply. It's a visual play that provides valuable experience of incoherent spaces, of interstices, and of worldly

entanglement.

What if this parallax is in fact the default experience of viewing—of staring at the irreducible antimonies the system constantly produces? The siege on Ohlauer Strasse had this parallax dimension, and not surprisingly, it was undecidable where inside and outside were. The positions are structurally so far apart that they cannot create coherent space together. For the time being, one has to endure the nausea that the parallax produces in order to see and formulate a radical critique of the system that produces such antimonies. Blocking the police siege made the space jump, change size, multiply. Together with the police line and the rooftop withdrawal, the irreducible gap became visible.

I am back at the corner of Ohlauer Strasse, but instead of facing a police line defending Europe's outside borders in the middle of my neighborhood, I am stopped by the traffic light whose red signal I awkwardly obey—not because I normally do, but because there is a police car right behind my bicycle. The light turns green and I continue my journey, cycling past the intersection along with all the other bicycles, cars, pedestrians. On the surface, the street corner has turned back to normal after ten days of an exceptional police operation and the protests that accompanied it. The refugee activists left the occupied school's roof after continuous, nerve-splitting threats of eviction and negotiations with municipal officials. All of this effort led only to a minimal agreement: officials would tolerate the remaining forty activists in the building, but they rejected the other demands concerning rights of residence and free movement. So in fact the state of exception that had been very visible and tangible a few days earlier was not resolved, but was rather folded in and tucked away behind the surface of normality. Underneath this surface, which lets traffic flow, shops open, cyclists pay attention to traffic lights, and which makes the neighborhood livable, rests a continuous state of exception in which mobility is not a human right. But this state has retreated back to another layer, one that is hardly visible even though the banners are still covering the facade of the school and the refugees have to show ID when they leave and enter the building. Even though the events that happened on the same surface a few days earlier have accidentally allowed a glimpse into the depths of the stack and revealed the parallax dimension of the European system, it is tempting to adjust your eyes back to the smoothness of restored order.

Twenty-eight seconds green
Two seconds yellow
Thirty-seven seconds red
One second yellow
and again
Twenty-eight seconds green

X

Thanks to Brian Kuan Wood, Haytham EL Wardany, Kaye Cain-Nielsen, Ashkan Sepahvand, and to my neighborhood, Kreuzberg

Natascha Sadr Haghighian's research-based practice encompasses a variety of forms and formats, among them video, performance, installations, text, and sound, and is primarily concerned with the sociopolitical implications of contemporary modes of world-making, especially in the field of vision. The text "Disco Parallax" is part of ongoing research into techniques of "looking awry." Rather than offering highlights from a CV, Haghighian asks readers to go to **www.bioswop.net**, a CV-exchange platform where artists and other cultural practitioners can borrow and lend CVs for various purposes.

1
See https://web.archive.org/web/20151103154556/http://refugeestruggle.org/en/about-us .

2
See http://www.kbrhorse.net/signals/lenses01.html . Another impressive collection can be found at →.

3
Peter Diem, "Die Symbole der Europäischen Union und der Vereinten Nationen" http://austria-forum.org/af/Wissenssammlungen/Symbole/Europasymbole .

4
See https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2014/mar/eu-frontex-wp-2014.pdf .

5
Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999), 89.

6
Brian Dodson, "How to Build a Stealth Computer Display," *Gizmag* , Nov. 10, 2013 http://www.gizmag.com/stealth-computer-display-lcd-polarizing-glasses/29700/ .

7
Benjamin Bratton, "On the Nomos of the Cloud," lecture at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam and at Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Malaquais, Nov. 2011 https://web.archive.org/web/20150217020743/http://bratton.info/projects/talks/on-the-nomos-of-the-cloud-the-stack-deep-address-integral-geography/ .

8
Kojin Karatani, quoted in Slavoj Zižek's "The Parallax View," *New Left Review* 25 (Jan.–Feb. 2004).

Tavi Meraud

Iridescence, Intimacies

There are more pressing matters than this potentially touchy matter of pressing close. The following story isn't so much an apology for intimacy or some kind of championing of it, but rather the modest suggestion that intimacy organizes our experience of space and especially of surfaces. As such, it is in fact not so trivial or delicate after all. These are notes towards a reconceptualization of intimacy in light of new ways in which we can think of the surface.

1. Iridescence

Iridescence begins, as it were, at the surface. For the most part, in the world at large, it is visible among animals, some minerals, and even some plants. It is not obvious what the proper preposition here would be—visible *on*, visible *in*, and so on. It is a trace or residue of the surface interacting with air and light, the mediums of vision. Let us consider iridescence as a *Denkfigur* for surfaces. What I intend here by invoking the *Denkfigur*, itself a contested term, is merely to underscore that the relationship being suggested between iridescence and surfaces is not one of metaphor, analogy, or exemplification. It is precisely a petering out into mere metaphorics and lyricism that this *Denkfigur* allows us to avoid when speaking of surfaces. It can be considered a navigational tool because it guides and organizes our thinking, indeed, configures our thought.

Iridescence is a visual phenomenon. The weird thing about it is that it seems to exist only insofar as it is seen. Essential to iridescence is its viewing geometry[1] —iridescence is the exhibition of "vivid colors which change with the angle of incidence or viewing due to optical wave interference in the multilayer structure present at the wavelength scale underneath the surface"[2]; it is the "visual characteristic attributed to surfaces that change in color with viewing angle.[3] This is what is meant by the claim that iridescence *is* only insofar as it is seen.

Iridescence is a phenomenon that has been formally recognized since as early as classical antiquity, as evinced by *poikilos*, a secular Greek word used to refer to dappled coloring, such as the skin of a leopard or the many-colored, indeed iridescent, scales of a snake. And throughout history, this phenomenon has recurrently caught the attention of the likes of Newton and Darwin.[4] But it is only recently that concerted, systematic efforts—across various fields—have been made to study this phenomenon. But here we are not so much interested in the scientific history of iridescence, but rather in gleaning from these observations new dimensions of this puzzling, dazzling, seemingly superficial play of light and color.

Just as much as iridescence scintillatingly seduces, this shine is also its cunning. It is precisely this element of iridescence that won it a place alongside *métis*, that

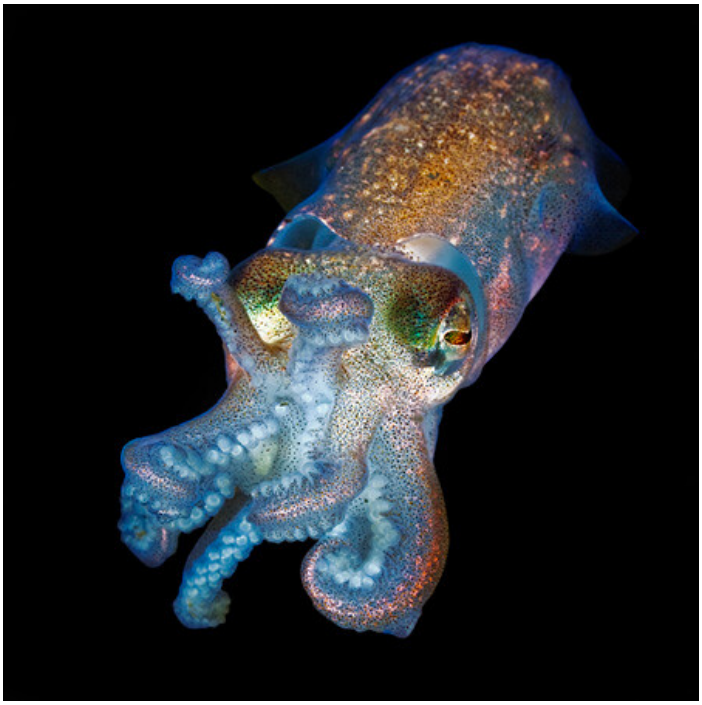
classical notion of the especially (most) cunning form of cleverness:

> This many-coloured sheen or complex of appearances produces an effect of iridescence, shimmering, an interplay of reflections which the Greeks perceived as the ceaseless vibrations of light. In this sense, what is *poikilos*, many-coloured, is close to what is *aioios*, which refers to fast movement. Thus it is that the changing surface of liver which is sometimes propitious and sometimes the reverse is called *poikilos* just as are good fortune which is so inconstant and changing and also the deity which endlessly guides the destinies of men from one side to the other, first in one direction and then in the other. Plato associates what is *poikilos* with what is never the same as itself.[5]

Detienne and Vernant also point out, for instance, that Aesop "remarks in a fable that if the panther has a mottle skin, the fox, for its part, has a mind which is *poikilos*."[6] What is being discussed here is basically the phenomenon of camouflage. Indeed, iridescence—as a phenomenon in Animalia— *is* a form of camouflage.

Consider iridophores, a class of color-producing cells that are found in a wide variety of animals, from crustaceans to bacteria.[7] Sometimes they are akin to a luminescent accidents happening at or just beyond the final layer of skin, fur, chitin—whatever that external-most layer might be. Consider the particular iridophores we find in the species of squid *Lolliguncula brevis*; here, iridophores are produced from within the flesh of the animal. Embedded within the flesh of this specific squid, but also found in similar instances throughout the animal kingdom, iridescence is always a marker of this interior-exterior negotiation. It is a kind of sign, secreted from within the being of the animal, working its way toward the external world.

Iridescence, then, as a particularly scintillating instantiation of camouflage, literally dazzling the potential predator, is a demonstration of a particular interior-exterior negotiation that ultimately results in a suspension of the appearance-reality distinction. The specific crypsis that is camouflage is so interesting because it is a rehearsal of the problem of the relationship between reality and appearance. It is the case when, indeed, this distinction appears to be suspended. In fact, it is imperative that this strict distinction somehow dissipates; otherwise, camouflage fails and the organism dies. The cunning of iridescence, however, goes beyond its deployment as an undermining of the apparent rigidity of the animal integument. Precisely as a mechanism of decomposing the mediums of vision, iridescence seems to mark the site where a surface begins to emerge, where a surface surfaces.



A stubby squid is found in the waters of British Columbia. Photograph by David Hall.

To witness iridescence is to encounter a phenomenon where the axis of reality is perhaps no longer the mundanely given but rather one that is shifted towards a heterotopic convergence of images with different degrees of reality, cohering into a single image: the apparent—the really apparent and apparently real—of the perceived shine. This is not an epistemological valorization of the purely experiential at the cost of all other possible perspectives of considering the apparent phenomenon at hand; but nor it is an argument to enhance the understanding of that peculiarly puzzling and seductive phenomenon that is visible, for instance, in the animal kingdom. Iridescence, as *Denkfigur*, allows us to constellate a conception of the surface precisely not as boundary, but as a scintillating site of intractable multiplicities. Iridescence, then, appears as a *Denkfigur* for surfaces surfacing.

2. Screening the Surface

Though a strict taxonomy might suggest that the screen is a mere instantiation of surface, let us consider the surface as screen. In so doing, it will become clear that the constellation of realities, which occurs at the site of the screen, is precisely a rehearsal of the reality problem at the heart of the surface. Of course many of the considerations of the screen that I have in mind deal with

Dom Sebastian, Digital Oil Spill, 2014.

the screen in the plain sense of a screen for projection, a screen on which something, namely a film, is projected. But as a site of projection, or rather upon which something is projected, the screen is freed to appear in a variety of manifestations. Here are some easy targets: consider the German word for screen in the sense of movie screen, *Leinwand*, which is also the exact same word for the canvas upon which one can, say, paint. But if we are going to indulge in word games, then there is of course that other just-as-prevalent definition of screen as blockage: the site of the absorption and reflection of luminance can also be a sight of exclusion and rejection. But of course, to have and to manifest that reflective potential, physically, there needs to be enough solidity/concretization as far as the substrate, the screen, is concerned. This is the alluring paradox of the screen agenda.

Screen talk seems to slip naturally into virtual *ity* talk (emphasizing this seemingly slight distinction between the virtual/virtual reality and virtual *ity* is my own intervention, which I will elaborate on shortly). Anne Friedberg's book *The Virtual Window* considers the evolution of windows and screens, from Alberti's theories of perspective all the way to the computer screen. In *The Virtual Window*, we see that the discussion of screens turns into a discussion of virtuality. Friedberg thematizes the two spheres, which were identified above, in terms of a tension:

> Another way of thinking about this tension between the material and the immaterial is by means of a question often asked in a spectator theory: "*Where* are we?" or "*When* are we when we watch film or television or sit at the computer?" The theorists have answered this in a variety of ways. The answer might be something like: *in a subjective elsewhere, in a virtual space, a virtual time*.[8]

"The space of the screen is a virtual space, an elsewhere that occupies a new dimension." The virtual here is juxtaposed with the real. This juxtaposition seems to be one of the basic tenets of virtual-reality talk—the virtual is opposed to the real in the sense of the material, corporeal, and so on. And yet—and this is what I want to draw attention to—it seems that one is also speaking of virtual *ity* to describe the effect that is produced by this sphere, as marking something like a quivering space or phenomenon or something *between* the real and the virtual. It is an effect on the real; it is a trace of the virtual. I take this to be the thrust of Elizabeth Grosz's argument in her book *Architecture from the Outside*, particularly in the chapter "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Real." While the discussion here initially begins by demarcating a kind of opposition between the virtual and the real, aligning the virtual with the realm of ideas (the unfeterred aspect of the imagination and fantasy), and the real with the body and the flesh, the clarity of this initial distinction quickly blurs:

> The very term *virtual reality* attests to a phantasmatic extension, a bizarre contortion to save not the real (which is inevitably denigrated and condemned) but rather the will, desire, mind, beyond body or matter: this is a real not quite real, not an "actual real," a "really real" but a real whose reality is at best virtual … The real is not so much divested of its status as reality as converted into a different order in which mind/will/desire are the ruling terms and whose matter, whose "real," is stripped away.[9]

Her account goes something like this: the virtual is ostensibly opposed to the real, but the real—fleshy bodies, for instance—persists; it coexists with the virtual because virtuality resides in the real. Yet Grosz ultimately emphasizes the dimension of futurity and potentiality as the link between the virtual and the real: "If virtuality resides in the real … this is because the real is always in fact open to the future, open to potentialities other than those now actualized."[10] As such, she claims, the virtual

expands the real. Virtuality, then, is the marker of the ways in which the firmness of the real gets a bit shaken.

In another consideration of screens, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Kate Mondloch traces the trajectory of screen presence in installation art. Focusing on a selection of artworks in each of the book's chapters, Mondloch ultimately considers the real space of virtual reality that is generated by the insertion of screens into installation art. This interweaving of real and virtual is best captured, Mondloch writes, by pieces such as EXPORT's *Ping Pong* or Peter Campus's *Interface*, because of "how they ask their spectators to remain fully present in *both* temporal and spatial realms," proposing a "dual-spectatorship," one that makes the spectator part of the illusionist representation while he or she remains very aware of the material conditions of the viewing experience.[11] Mondloch proposes a consideration of the simultaneity of two different spaces: the space in front of the screen and the representational space inside the screen. This view is clearly related to another conception, which she later cites—Oliver Grau's suggestion that the spectator of a computer screen is in fact in three different places at the same time: the spatiotemporal location of the viewer's body, the teleperception of the simulated space, and teleaction that happens when one manipulates a robot's actions with one's own movements. This multiplicity—or more specifically, this simultaneity—of being present in multiple realities suggests that the key issue here is reality and how it is defined, staged, and refined. It is not merely the simple binary of real versus virtual, but rather the kind of vibrating virtuality that is unconcealed precisely by the juxtaposition.[12]

3. Stereoscopy and Virtuality

If surfaces as screens and sites of virtuality are symptomatic of something moving towards transhumanism, we can backtrack a bit—not to human *ism*, but, more modestly, to simply the human and perhaps less modestly to the conception of modern man according to a particular story that can be traced across various representatives of Western philosophy (though, the danger here is that all these persons are involved in so incestuous a conversation that they might as well be mumbling to themselves).

Consider this proposal: surfaces are a distinctly human problem. What this statement is hinting at is that the beginning of modern philosophy (when man itself becomes a philosophical problem unto himself) is in fact a twinned birth: the birth of modern philosophy and the birth of the problem of surfaces. The following will try to constellate how surfaces are totally wrapped up with this particular conception of the modern human. This invocation of "modern"[13] can refer, as is perhaps most familiar, to the Cartesian intervention. This refers to different aspects of Descartes's philosophy, but for our story here we can identify him with inaugurating the philosophy of conscience, which has since become a perennial preoccupation. And it is in this story of the philosophy of conscience that we come across another key intervention, namely the Kantian, which further refines the focus on man.

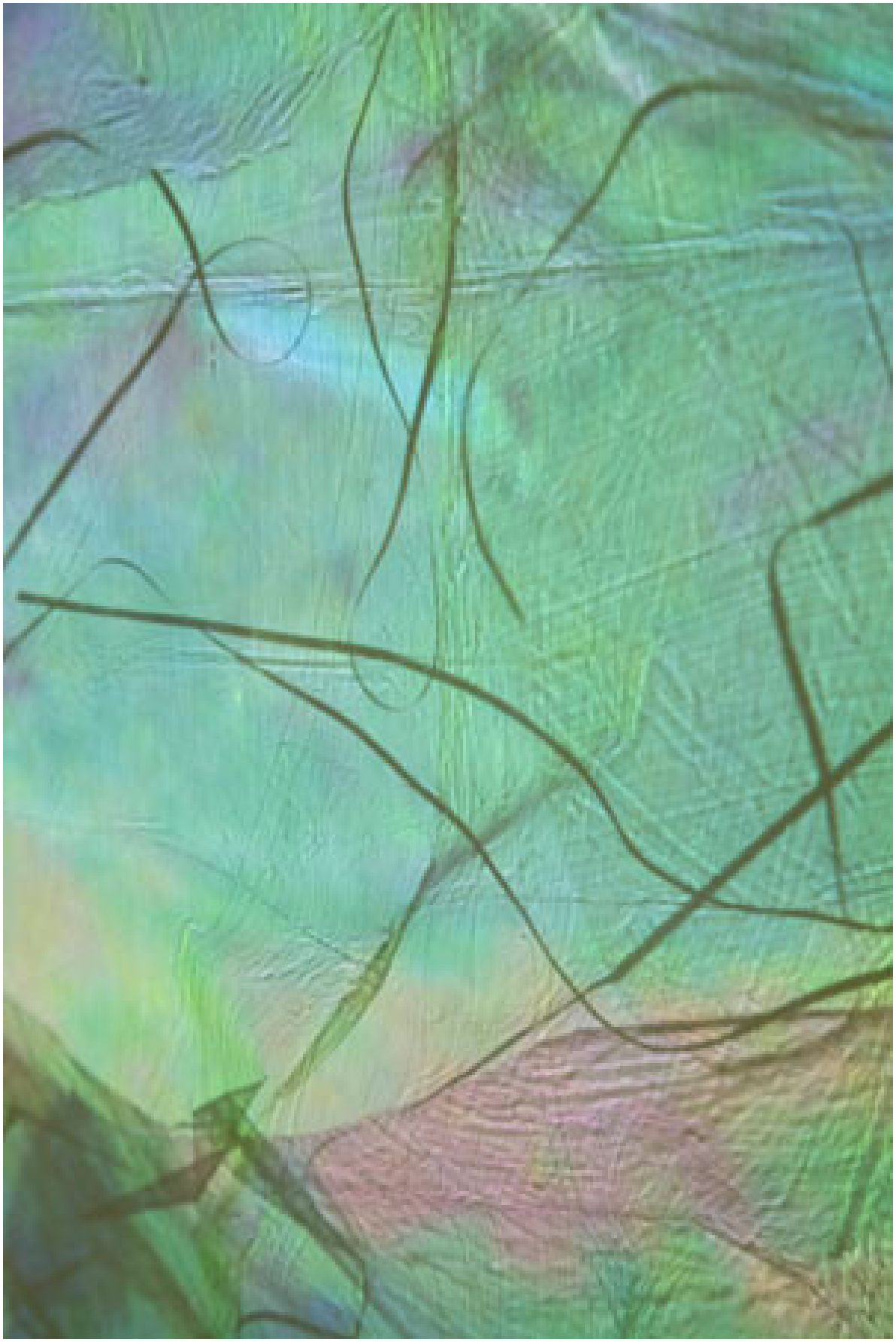
The birth of the "modern" human as we are using this term is marked by the event of man attaining something like another dimension—when consciousness becomes a problem because man seems to attain consciousness (and consciousness of this consciousness). To use "modern" in this sense isn't my original suggestion—here I have in mind, for instance, Foucault's account of the modern episteme, and the claim that what sets this period of knowledge (of the human relationship to and with knowledge) apart is precisely that man himself won a particular pride of place (and so many problems with it). According to Foucault's story, Kant inaugurates this other, problematic dimensionality of man, "modernity." What is inaugurated is the notion that, weirdly, in the afterglow of the sun being established as the center of our solar system, man becomes the center of the universe.

But—and this is the story I am trying to tell—what happens with this birth of the modern man, when the human becomes a problem to itself, is that not only does man itself attain another dimension; as this other dimension is attained, the division between theory and the everyday is also configured in a particularly perplexing way. And this configuration, in turn, is a rehearsal of this searching for the real. I will try to sketch this in the following.

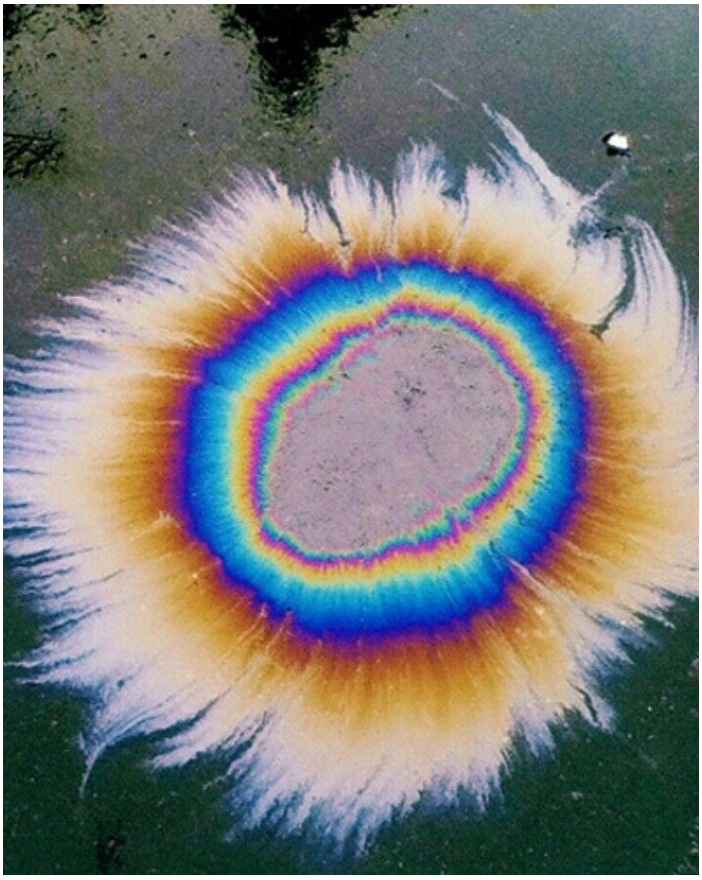
Consider the oft-heard pairing "theory and practice," and revise the latter term to be more deeply inflected by the notion of the quotidian. With the emphasis on the everydayness of practice, it begins to be possible to recognize the contours of something like different aspects of thinking: practice is the aspect of thinking as it forms in the everyday, and theory is the more removed or rarified aspect of this same thinking.

It is in this way that Edmund Husserl began his philosophical project of phenomenology. He identified something he called the "natural attitude" and contrasted it with what he called the "theoretical attitude" (later he went on to identify a third attitude, the "phenomenological attitude," but the three-way comparison is beyond the scope of the present discussion). Husserl writes that the transcendental problem, which we can understand as another way of putting the philosophical problem (par excellence for Husserl),

> arises within a general reversal of that " *natural attitude*" in which everyday life as a whole as well as the positive sciences operate. In it [the natural attitude] the world is for us the self-evidently existing universe of realities, which are continuously before us



Tavi Meraud, vitreous and occlusion, close up, 2014. Projector, iridescent plastic, shrink wrap, foil (dimensions variable).



A photograph by moonfuzzies on Tumblr comes with an accompanying explanation: "Found this walking to my car after a storm." #mine #anesthetic #puddle #rain #oil spill

in unquestioned giveness.

In a lecture Husserl gave in 1928, he offers another, slightly modified definition of the "natural attitude":

> [It is] the natural focus of consciousness, the focus in which the whole of daily life flows along; the positive sciences continue operating in this natural focus. In this focus the "real" world is pre-given to us, on the basis of ongoing experience, as the self-evidently existing, always present to be learned about world to be explored theoretically on the basis of the always onward movement of experience.

The relationship between what Husserl calls the theoretical attitude and the natural attitude is not so straightforward as was initially suggested; a closer look into his work quickly reveals that he took the theoretical attitude to ultimately belong to the natural attitude, and both get suspended in the phenomenological reduction. It is not my intention here to examine the problematic subtleties of this discussion. I only want to refer to the distinction, indeed the *reversal* (a "general turning around of our regard") as Husserl himself calls it, between something like the everyday orientation towards the world and the orientation that precisely begins to probe that undifferentiated landscape. The link to "the real" can be more easily recognized when one considers the philosophical trajectory to which the specific project of phenomenology belongs. It is important to recognize that the origins of phenomenology, specifically Husserlian phenomenology, differ in a crucial way from how this word gets most often deployed these days.

Today one hears the word "phenomenology" most often in conjunction with subjective experience or the experiential sphere; indeed, this word seems to often function as a stand-in for that sphere as such. What is obscured in this usage is that the original scene, so to speak, where phenomenology began to be developed was rather a rehearsal of the problems of the theory of knowledge and epistemology, of the debates on psychologism that were rampant at the time of Husserl's writing (a bit before and around the turn of the last century). The particular project of Husserl, then, can be considered—as he himself considered it—to belong to the tradition of transcendental idealism, that perplexing variety of idealism inaugurated by Immanuel Kant with his first critique. Recall that the revolutionary element of Kant's proposal is indeed schematically analogous to Copernicus's revolutionary suggestion—just as the sun no longer revolves around the earth but the earth around the sun, objects do not form our cognition of them but rather we form them. The locus of the production of reality has shifted.

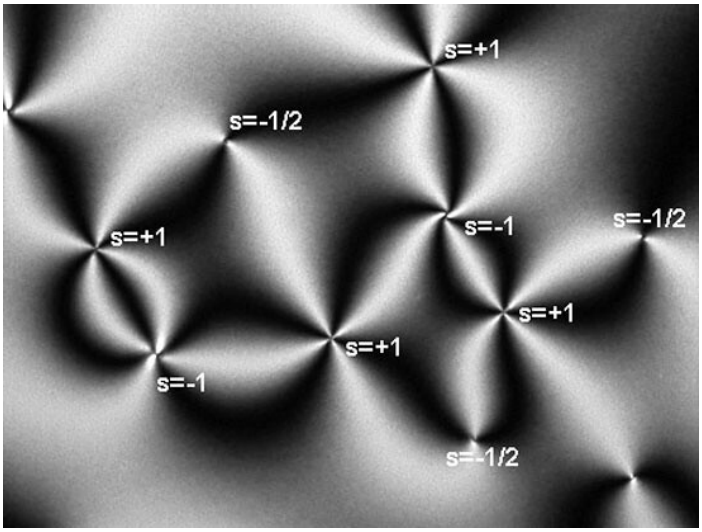
By positioning the subject in the transcendental configuration that is the core of the critique of pure reason, by making the subject be that transcendental locus of world-constitution, some account of what happens to that other side, the side of objects, was needed. Kant's famous suggestion is to abstain from worrying about the real—that infamous thing in itself, *Ding-an-sich*, that can never be knowable. This sets the stage for a truly histrionic struggle with this real that may or may not be knowable, that may or may not even exist, and so forth. The history of philosophy, then, since this transcendental eruption has been a recurrent, consistent—if not constant—struggle to escape the infernal tug of the transcendental sphere.

It is within this trajectory, this accumulation of concerns, that phenomenology is produced. And now knowing where it is coming from, so to speak, the urgency of the apparent tension between something like the natural attitude and the theoretical attitude, between these two spheres, can be better appreciated. The real is implicated in all this when we consider the locus, as it were, of where this reversal is occurring. It is in the mind of the thinking subject as such; we are still dealing with something like

the subjective, if not transcendentally subjective, sphere. In trying to establish the strategy, if not the technique, of achieving an understanding of the world with the greatest epistemic security, Husserl turns from the given, material world as such, towards the mind of the thinking subject. For it seems that we begin with conscience experience, we begin with an awareness of the world, and to begin to question the hows and whys of this awareness, to bracket all potentially dubious elements of that cognitive moment, it seems necessary to bracket everything that is foreign to consciousness. But then we ostensibly become stuck in the mind and cannot go back out to the world, the world that must be really out there. This is the problem that haunted Husserl, which one can recognize with a cursory glance comparing the early and late works of the thinker, specifically the fact that towards the end of his life, he dedicated his efforts no longer to philosophical but almost purely to anthropological concerns. This tension between how we negotiate between the sphere of the mind, populated by ideas and theories (in a word, Theory) and the real, the material world (the Practical) does not describe the isolated struggle of this one philosopher.

It is certainly beyond the scope of the present discussion to provide an account of the ways in which a later, American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, is related to our older Moravian founder of phenomenology. But in Sellars's famous essay "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," he discusses—similar to Husserl—different orientations toward the world, or in his language, different "images of man." Sellars's manifest image is precisely not the simply naive everyday conception of man. It is rather a conception that is already inflected a bit by the theoretical, to continue the language I have been using thus far—inflected insofar as this is the image of when "man first came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world." The relevance to the discussion above is that this manifest image is contrasted with the scientific image, which refers to the various conceptions of man provided by the different sciences. Sellars uses stereoscopy to refer to that phenomenon is which two images are brought into coherence. This is, then, one way of dealing with two spheres that initially seem too distinct to be properly unifiable. This is the stereoscopic back and forth, a dynamic stability—the scientific image conditions the revision of the manifest image and the manifest image conditions the enablement of intervening at the level of reality through the scientific image. What I tried to delineate with the screen can now be applied back to this Sellarsian discussion, and we can understand the screen as dynamic stability.

We can now constellate the different elements—of the multiplicity of images, and of the stereoscopic coherence possible between them—and bring into clearer focus the element of the real (the concern with seeking out the real, trying to achieve the real, delineate the real as such) wrapped within this talk of stereoscopy. The very phenomenon—or more accurately, the mechanism—of stereoscopy was developed as a technique for creating the illusion of three-dimensionality. But there is also an interesting, deeper physiological consideration behind this apparatus of mostly entertainment: we humans are creatures, among others, who are naturally susceptible or prone to stereoscopic vision because of the placement of our eyes. What is at stake when there is talk of multiple realities coming together, or when the stability of the apparent given reality (cf. natural attitude) is stirred and shaken by the insertion of a screen, is precisely stereoscopy.



This figure depicts liquid crystals forming a schlieren texture, occurring between crossed polarizers in a polarizing microscope.

4. Really, Apparently

What may seem like a digression into philosophy above appears to be much more a part of the fundamental scaffolding of the construction of our experience of screens. The potentially twisted implication of bringing together the philosophical story sketched above with the specific aspect of screens in the discussion of surfaces can be considered more of a chiasmic (than helical) twist. Does the screen/surface become an emblem for the philosophical story, or does the philosophical story become an enhancement of the screen? The urgency of teasing out chiasmic entanglements is implied in the coherence mechanism that I am trying to attribute to the screen.

Beyond mere mutual illumination or superficial affinity, one could say that according to the definition of modernity proposed above, the birth of modern man is twinned with the birth of the problem of surfaces. But I think the deeper consequence of bringing together these two disparate discourses—by dint of both being shot through with this concern with the real—illuminates, precisely, different

components of this reality problem.

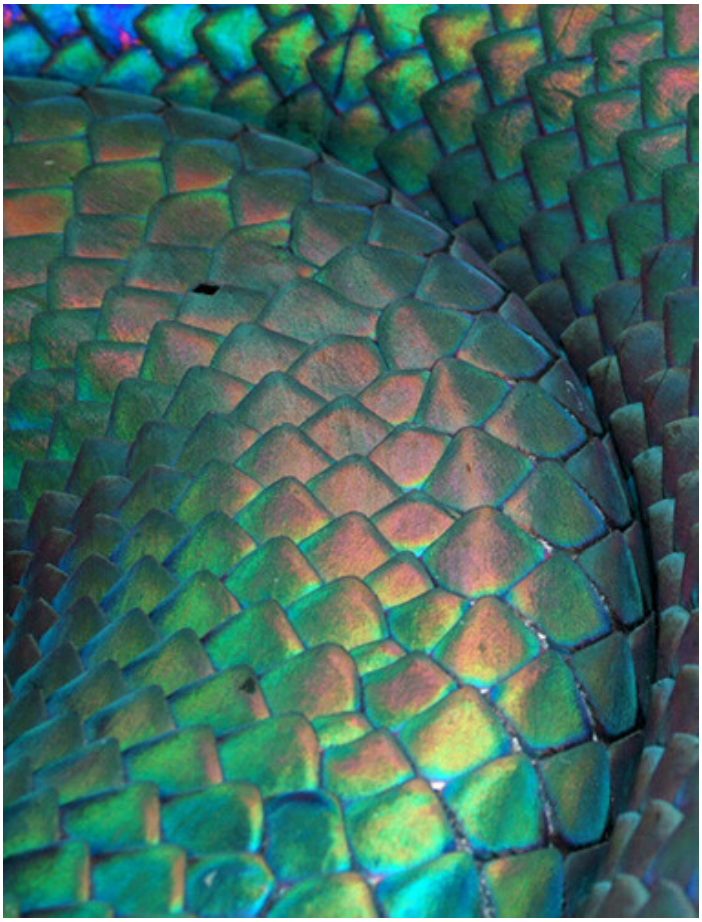
In my analysis I have only reached the point where I can suggest that it is not merely thematic resonance but an actual isomorphism that is going on. It is no trivial conclusion that in different aspects of our experience, of our being in the world, we are constantly stereoscopically negotiating between real and unreal realms. The designation of a realm, a layer—a surface as it were—as "the virtual" suggests a locality, in some sense, that has been firmly established. Though it seemed that the iridescent epigram initially oriented our thoughts to consider the surface no longer as a monolithic concretion but rather more akin to an *ac* cretion, now with the notion of virtuality, we seem to once again face something solid. It seems we have created an image of coherence (referred to above, occasionally, as dynamic stability) negotiating between the real and the irreal.

Virtuality shifts the locus of reality away from the thing in itself but not entirely back to the perceiving subject. It seems rather to suspend the issue altogether and rather suggests another locus of reality that is neither here nor there, which shimmers between revealing itself as thing-in-itself and purely experiential (subjective). What these considerations of virtuality ultimately suggest is that the difference between appearance and reality is not merely suspended, but actually collapsed.

For example, camouflage is precisely that. It is not merely perception being tricked, but in that instant of recognition—recognizing something as something *else* —it is rather that another reality has been momentarily illuminated. The locus of reality is no longer in the perceiving subject, nor is the reality of the perceived object itself altered. The blending of reality and the apparent is precisely the mechanism of camouflage.

This shifting of the locus of reality, then, has important consequences for our thinking about the surface. The surface *is* only insofar as we, the perceivers, encounter it. The surface *is* only so long as it is perceived. In this way, surface itself becomes a locality, a point of experiential densification. The experience of surface, then, is an experience of recognition—recognizing that shimmering neither here nor there. This means that surface is a kind of densification of information and material. It has accrued and calcified, hypostatized into a plane of perception—the surface. And it is in this way that the surface can be read as a symptom—as a precipitate, as a densification, as an accumulation in a particular, specific locality. Hence I began this section with the suggestion that the surface is not a monolithic concretion, but an *ac* cretion.

Our perception, we could say, is the analogue of the water strider's feet on the surface of the water. The moment our perception makes contact, the surface tightens into itself; it becomes. Our experience of surface, our experience of how the surface operates, is a localization of a densification, of multiple images/elevations/layers cohering in that moment of perception. This is the operation of surface tension, when the surface of the water becomes the surface. We may still encounter the surface as monolithic, as a solid integument, though it is in fact a series of elements brought together into a scintillating plane of perception.



5. Intimacy

Amidst all this talk of surfaces, I think the most urgent surface is the surface of the skin (for it is the closest to us), and thus of touching. And touch is the marker of intimacy. But beyond the necessary role of touch in our ontogenetic and phylogenetic survival, it has become something of a presiding metaphor in this talk of surfaces. It would thus be remiss to speak of surfaces without at least a passing glance at intimacy.

Intimacy is sex, maybe—it's hard to say definitively because this is a euphemistic deployment of the word, and I think a somewhat antiquated one at that. These days, "intimacy" seems most close to closeness, that ineffably singular experience of feeling connected to another person. When speaking of intimates, there is an emphasis on the proximal, in the emphatic, spatial sense of the

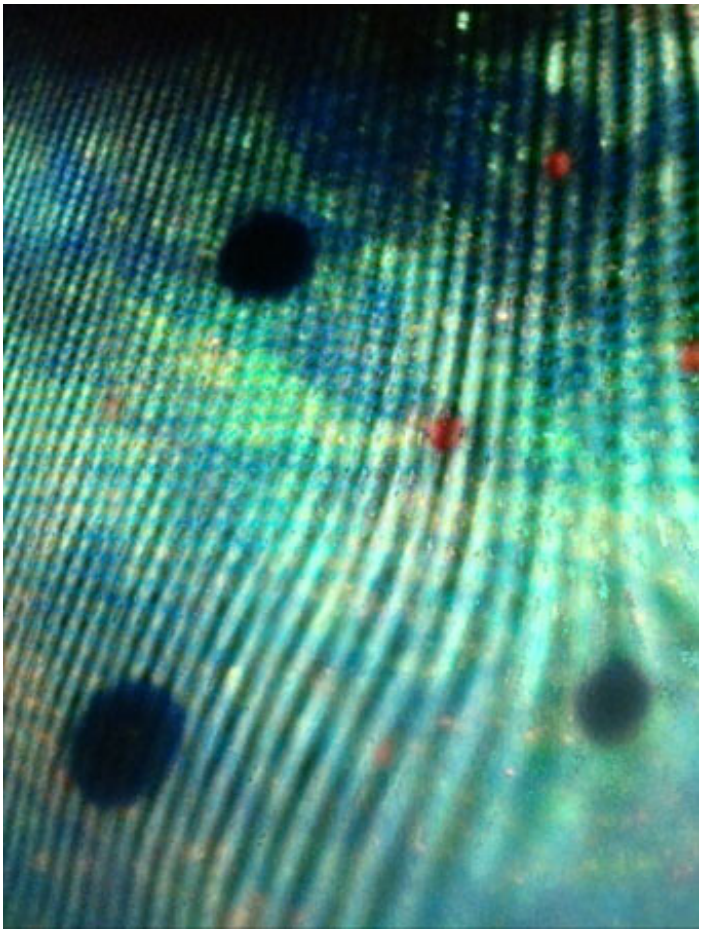
word—those who are close to one another, those who are close to me. It describes—in a phrase—the logics of proximity. This superficial closeness, literally proximity understood through the metrics of how much of my private sphere comes into contact with that of another, is rather a foil for an even deeper sense of spatiality, that of interiority.

Resuscitating this deeper sense of intimacy here is rather an attempt to highlight a tacit aspect of the earlier considerations of screens, surfaces, screening surfaces, and so forth—trying to enter the interiority, neither here nor there, of virtuality. This tacit element I now want to exhume is namely the *architectonics* of intimacy, or even more strongly: intimacy as architectonics, as fundamental, essential—as first architectonics. And it is as first architectonics that we should consider intimacy a heuristic of proximity and closeness, techniques of baffling the superficial. Surface negotiations are not merely just making contact, getting in touch, but rather a more consequential playing with the integument of reality.

If the superficial is itself a collation of so many layers, then intimacy would insist that it goes beyond these layers. Intimacy seems to insist on a realer real than the apparently given. Intimacy purports to access the realer real. If, then, the surface is already an issue of negotiating between the real and the apparent, what would the realer real mean here—to settle on the suspension between reality and appearance? Intimacy may apparently be an insistence precisely on the distinction in order to get to the depths of something, that is, insisting that the surface is merely superficial. (And hence the familiar insistence on touch, on the perpetuation and fulfillment of the haptic injunction.) However, we have established that the surface cannot be considered a site of monolithic concretion but rather at most a locality of perceptual density.

The suggestion here, then, is to recast intimacy, to reconsider its logics of proximity and interiority—its haptology—as the impulse, the drive to seek out, to identify the locus of the real. Intimacy is that drive to naturalize the other into a subject of our inner kingdom, to coproduce a trenchant reality, one that heterotopically blossoms in the "real" reality. This is precisely the rehearsal of virtuality as I have tried to sketch it above. Intimacy is that sphere of reality that is not quite the real of the mundane given, and yet could be considered to exude a more intense reality, in the sense that it is like the ultimate confirmation of the first, inner reality. Instead of becoming a mere idiosyncrasy, the intimate encounter is a confirmation of that reality, but due to its complicity, also, with the material reality, it emerges as that scintillating virtuality.

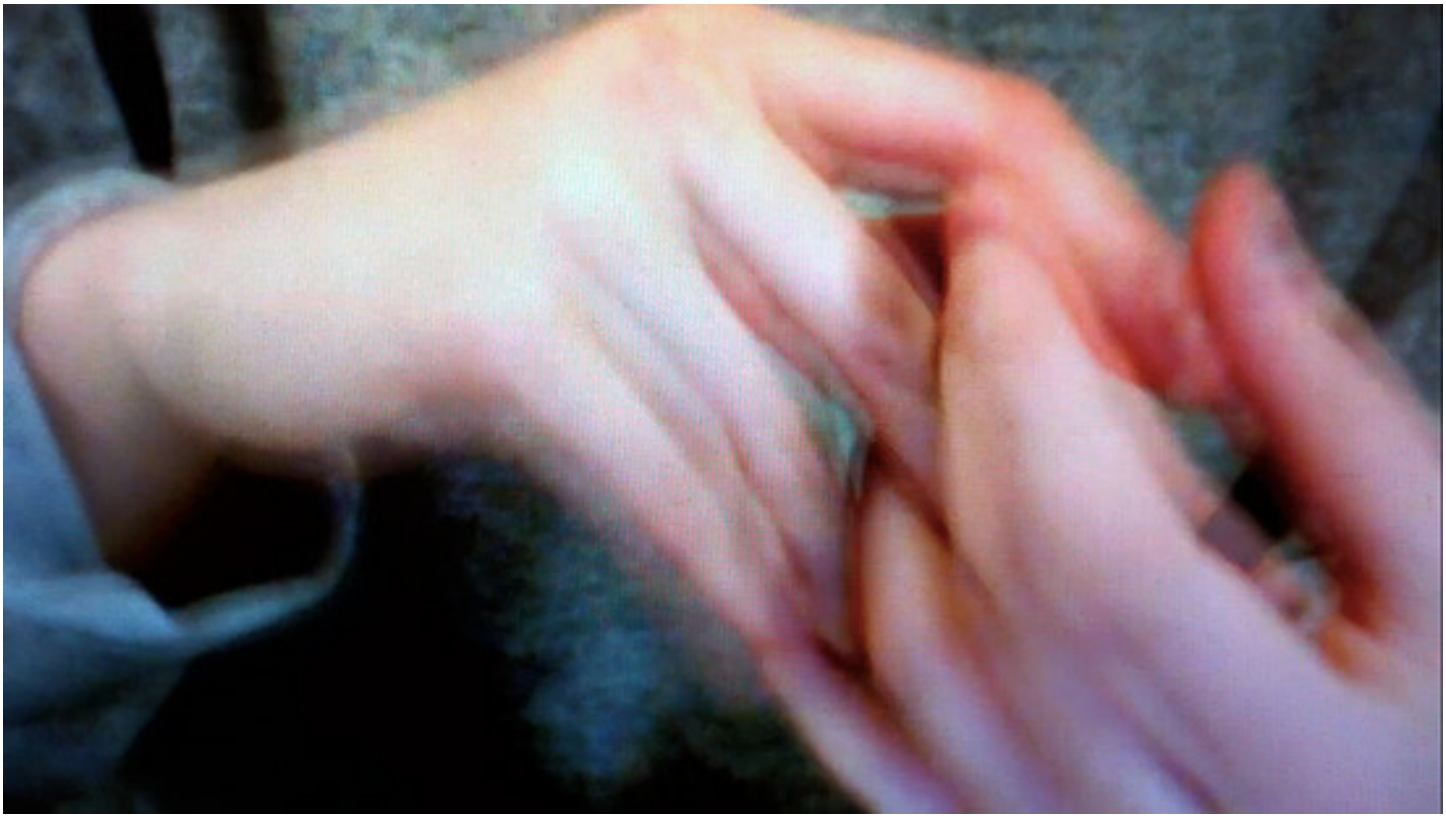
When we understand intimacy as this drive towards, this navigating for, the locus of the real, we begin to be able to see how intimacy becomes an essential component of negotiating surfaces as we have come to understand



brTavi Meraud, iridiphores, 2014. Image on monitor (dimensions variable).

them. Intimacy, understood in terms of degrees of proximity, is symptomatic of operating in a world where surfaces are taken to be boundaries, as monolithic concretions. But when we begin to see more clearly that surfaces are in fact these zones or localities of iridescently shifting, at-once-elusive-and-alluring shining—projecting into the space of the given reality and undermining its hegemony—intimacy becomes the drive towards palpating, recognizing, appropriating these heterotopic regions. Surface becomes a localization of stereoscopy, a site where the perennial problem of appearance and reality is rehearsed.

We live in a time of iridescence, of scintillation between the virtual and the real—an *iridereal* perhaps, where surfaces are no longer concretions to be encountered but rather sites of dazzling encounter. The very experience of touch must be conceptualized anew. Intimacy in a time of iridescence should go by another name.



brTavi Meraud, subcutaneous, 2014. Video still on monitor (dimensions variable).

6. Transintimacy

"Transintimacy" is not simply a neologism for the necessarily transformed forms of intimacy, or possibly intimacies, afforded by the configurations of space and surface suggested thus far. Though the earlier story on surface concentrated on screens, the intention has been to sketch the ways in which the surface as such should be reconsidered.

Intimacy becomes relevant when it is recognized that these negotiations operate according to a logics of proximity and haptology, which is the essence of intimacy. Transintimacy, then, is a proposal for something that should be for now understood as a catchall term. It includes the love of cyborg love. It includes the love that grows because I survey my love through screens; I can screen myself and project myself, and bask in the glow of the screened image of my love. But I think these are all relatively flat senses of enhancement, flat compared to the absolutely voluptuous possibilities indicated by the surface. These instances of electronic or techno-love, for lack of better word, have anyway been considered to be troubling, for these scenarios of contact precisely lack *contact*, cannot fulfill the haptic injunction decreed upon humanity. Consider transintimacy, then, as an iridescent intimacy, one that is no longer flat contact between two integuments, a closeness and possession negotiated through touch, but rather a more penetrative possession—possession in that doubled sense of to own but to oneself be owned, haunted.

We move from *Schein*, the appearance of things inflected by a sense of dubiousness, something deceptive, to being blinded by the shine, to now penetrating it to seek out what it essentially is—a dynamic coherence of multiple images, each operating at varying degrees of reality, brought together into a scintillating iridescence, resulting in a dissolution of the strict duality of reality and appearance and instead illuminating the virtuality that is the site of this negotiation.

I have tried to describe this movement, or more accurately this transformation, in terms of accentuating the inner aspects of intimacy, focusing on the drive towards locating the real implied by this interiority. Hence the very pointed proposal for another neologism, formed by the simple addition of the prefix "trans-," so that we may consider something like transintimacy as love in a time of iridescence.[14] A transformed intimacy which goes beyond a mere rehearsal and proselytization of haptology—ever negotiating surface as boundary—but rather the iridescent mechanism of, or drive toward, complicity or collusion with the very conditions of superficiality, namely the stereoscopic (perhaps even polyscopic) probing for the real. It is not the conquest of the superficial that we seek in intimacy, but rather the innermost chamber of reality. The surface becomes the locus where this is

rehearsed.

The experience of surface might not be a palpation of boundaries but a bounded palpation. Instead of us pouring vision out of ourselves and recognizing boundaries, our encounter with the surface is rather our perception beginning to hit upon, and be hit upon itself by, the different depths of the apparent surface—we become coconspirators of the iridescence glimmering. In inquiring into the nature of surfaces, one touches upon that perennial problem of what happens, what is to be found, between reality and appearance. The surface deepens in that it reveals itself to be not merely the apparent integument but a site of the rehearsal of the negotiations between the apparent and the real, where things at once operate through seeming to be and being that seeming, through the chiasmic intertwining of reality and appearance and the scintillating undermining of the hegemony of both. We are no longer subjects of and to touch, in the sense of blunt contact with the other, but rather in each experience of encounter, we are always already emitting the glow of our interiority and basking in the iridescently shared shine of transintimacy.

X

Tavi Meraud is a video and installation artist and is currently working on her PhD in the German Department at Yale.

1
I am borrowing this terminology, “viewing geometry,” from the definition set by Stephanie M. Doucet and Melissa G. Meadows. They also define iridescence as “colors that change in hue or intensity with viewing geometry.” See their “Iridescence: A Functional Perspective,” *Interface* vol. 6 (2009): 115–132.

2
Olivier Deparis et al. "Structurally Tuned Iridescent Surfaces Inspired by Nature," *New Journal of Physics* vol. 10 (Jan. 2008): 10.

3
Doucet and Meadows, "Iridescence," 116.

4
Ibid., 115.

5
Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* , trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 18.

6
Ibid., 19.

7
The equivalent in mammals are melanocytes, in part responsible for skin color in humans.

8
Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Aberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 178.

9
Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 80–81.

10
Ibid., 90.

11
Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 74.

12
A more recent book, one that concentrates even more intensely on surfaces— *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* by Giuliana Bruno—examines exactly the material avatar, as it were, of the screen. Bruno concentrates on the material substrate of the surface specifically by way of studying the screen and linking it to architecture literally through and with fabric, tissue. This insistence on tangible materiality points us toward a tacit aspect of these discussions on the screen, an aspect that needs to be made more explicit. I think that lurking among the layers of these discussions, very much like the iridophores waiting to activate and illuminate, is this tacit concern with what we could call the real, or more precisely, a search for the locus of the real.

13
This term is inherently nebulous and part of my aim here is to retain some of this ambiguity, as I am referring to the general aspect of when the human earns a certain pride of place within history. So I have in mind not only more canonical conceptions, such as from the history of philosophy, but also designations from other discourses, such as that not entirely uncontested geological term “Anthropocene.”

14
The choice of this particular prefix is a non-subtle reference to the “trans-“ of transhumanism, the prefix that flags that desire towards enhancement. Here, then, I am speaking of something like an enhanced intimacy.

Timotheus Vermeulen

The New "Depthiness"

> Just because it's fake doesn't mean I don't feel it.
>
> —*Girls,* Season 3, Episode 3

Fredric Jameson once noted that superficiality was the "supreme formal feature" of late twentieth century culture.[1] Whether it was in the philosophy of Foucault or historicist architecture, in the photography of Warhol or the nostalgia film, he suggested, an "exhilaration of … surfaces" had cut short the "hermeneutic gesture," the reading of a physical or dramatic expression as a "clue or a symptom for … reality," or as the "outward manifestation of an inward feeling."[2] Indeed, at the time, Jameson's suspicions of this "new depthlessness," as he called the development, were confirmed everywhere: Derrida discussed the withdrawal of the referent, Baudrillard lamented the waning of the real, while Deleuze celebrated the simulacrum. In art, too, superficiality and evidence of the "new depthlessness" abounded. Indeed, art critic Beral Madra even called this depthless abundance an "obsession": the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* and Weir's *The Truman Show* plotted simulations, the photos of Thomas Demand and Jeff Wall portrayed hyperreal scenarios where representation and reality were indistinguishable (that is to say, where they took place on the same ontological plane), while novelists Brett Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq described the shallowness of the human subject.[3] Like the Histories of ideology and the social before it, the History of depth, of the behind or beyond, too, it seemed, had come to an end—or at least was cut short.

Writing a decade into the twenty-first century, this History appears to have returned. In philosophy and art alike, notions of the behind and the beyond, the beneath and the inside, have reemerged. The speculative realists, for instance, think beyond the surface of the epistemological, while artists like Mark Leckey, Ed Atkins, and Ian Cheng make discoveries within the simulacral, uncovering unintended glitches or unexpected traces of other (hyper)realities: hereditary deficiencies in digital DNA, intertextual features that come to light through another focus, immaterial realities as blueprints for material possibilities. Others, such as the artists-cum-activists Hans Kalliwoda and Jonas Staal, or novelists Adam Thirlwell and Miranda July, study the simulation not as a model of/for reality but as a diagram of possibilities, creating self-enclosed scenarios informed by reality but enacted in isolation from it, whose conclusions offer radical alternatives. Importantly, these philosophers, artists, and writers, each in their own distinct way, do not resuscitate depth as much as they resurrect its spirit. They

Night paddle boarders illuminate the shoreline in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Photo: Julia Cumes.

understand that the depth Jameson referred to—dialectics, psychoanalysis, existentialism—has been flattened, or hollowed out. What they create instead are personal, alternative visions of depth, visions they invite us to share. Just as the Renaissance painters developed depth-models that differed from those structuring twelfth-century painting, replacing the metaphorical beyond with the perspectival behind, many artists today conceive of depth in another sense than their twentieth century predecessors. Many contemporary thinkers and artists leave the dead corpus of depth untouched, whilst trying to reanimate its ghost.

The New Depthlessness

Over the years, Fredric Jameson's notion of the new depthlessness has occasionally been understood to refer to a focus on, or proliferation of, surfaces. As far as I can tell, however, Jameson's depthlessness denoted less a quantitative development than a qualitative one. His point was not necessarily that there was more interest in surfaces in the 1980s—than in, say, the 1920s, or the mid-eighteenth century, or the Renaissance period, though there may well have been. Jameson's contribution to the history of surface attention was rather that by 1991, for instance, the interest was in the surface itself rather than the substance behind or below it—fascination and practice hyperfocused on the glass more than the display, the giftwrapping more than the present. Indeed, what Jameson observed, and what disturbed him, was that the very idea that there was a behind, a present, had seemingly been abandoned.

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he theorized the new depthlessness as the repudiation—sometimes called "discourse," sometimes the "death of the author," often "poststructuralism," now voiced by Foucault then by Derrida, then Baudrillard—of five distinct yet related models of signification: the dialectical model of appearance and essence, in which each material appearance is taken to be the manifestation of a providence, will, or an ideal essence; the existentialist model of inauthenticity and authenticity, in which behavior mirrors a self; the hermeneutic model of outside and inside, in which physical expressions are perceived as the manifestations of inward feelings; the psychoanalytic model of manifest and latent, in which bodily gestures are

the symptoms of psychological states; and finally the semiotic model of signifier and signified, in which a sign is read as a signification of a mental concept. Other flattenings pertained to affect, through desubjectivization, and history, through pastiche. In other words, when Jameson spoke about depthlessness, what he was talking about was not simply wrapping paper but a missing present; not a container without contents but a can of yogurt past its expiration date: whatever was once inside, it was no longer ingestible.[4] The new depthlessness denoted not a coincidence but a consequence, the effect of years of—depending on the discipline—obstructing, flattening, cutting off, or hollowing out.

For Jameson the history of art was exemplary of this development. Whereas modern art communicated a reality behind it, postmodern art reflected no such externality; or if it did reflect anything, it was only the reality in front of it, the reality of the frame, the white cube, and the spectator. Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887), Jameson wrote, expressed both, through its "hallucinatory" use of color, the artist's "realm of the senses" and, through its use of "raw materials," a world "of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, ... backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive marginalized state."[5] The painting, in other words,conveyed individual ideas, sensibilities, and social realities which continued beyond its borders. In contrast, Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) communicated neither an authorial voice, nor a personal attitude or affect, nor a sense of the world it supposedly represented. The black-and-white photograph, with its shiny, isolated aesthetic, Jameson suggested, could allude to glamour magazines just as well as to a memory of the artist's mother, to shoes left over from Auschwitz or the remains of a dance hall fire. If Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes pulled the viewer into another world of poverty and misery, Warhol's photo of pumps pushed the spectator out back into his own.[6] As Warhol himself is alleged to have said: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."[7]

Jameson, through his discussion of Warhol but also in other case studies concerned with cinema, literature, philosophy, and architecture, introduced the notion of a new depthlessness as an *exemplary characteristic* of late twentieth century culture, not as an *exhaustive criterion* (presumably in line with his understanding of postmodernism as a structure of feeling allowing for the coexistence of contradictory registers and styles as opposed to a paradigm or regime). He never suggested that depthlessness was, or would be, a feature of all art of the eighties and nineties. It is certainly true, however, that depthlessness was the "supreme formal feature," as Jameson put it, in that it was a signifier of a sensibility that was more manifest than others. Just think back to the hit music of the time, to the hedonism of the Venga Boys or the desperation of Nirvana; to the bestselling books, like Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), with its simulacral protagonist Patrick Bateman, "an idea, ... some kind of abstraction but ... no real [person]," in whose eyes the reader could gaze, whose hands could be shaken, and whose flesh could be felt, but who was " *simply ... not there*"[8]; or the popularity of artists like the YBAs and Jeff Koons, whose (in)famous *Rabbit* from 1986 reflected no reality except the one it was in. Recall, also, the ongoing discussions originating at the time about the End of History, proclaiming the decline of viable alternatives in general. Depthlessness may not have been everyone's cup of tea, but, sadly, it was definitely the best-selling beverage at Starbucks.

The New Depthiness

In his slim volume of essays *The Barbarians*, the Italian novelist Alessandro Baricco distinguishes between two experiential registers that in many senses mirror, and make manifest, Jameson's discussion of depth and depthlessness: diving and surfing. The diver, Baricco suggests, looks for meaning in the depths of the ocean. He delves into the water, sinking deeper and deeper in search of a particular coral, fish, or sea monster. This is the person, writes Baricco, who reads, who perseveres reading Proust or Joyce—that is to say, modernists, to use the vocabulary of Jameson. The surfer, "the horizontal man,"[9] on the contrary, looks for meaning on the surface, more precisely in the series of waves that form the surface—one after the other after the other, now left, now right, higher and lower. As Baricco puts it:

> If you believe that meaning comes in sequences and takes the form of a trajectory through a number of different points, then what you really care about is movement: the real possibility to move from one point to another fast enough to prevent the overall shape from vanishing. Now what is the source of this movement, and what keeps it going? Your curiosity, of course, and your desire for experience. But these aren't enough, believe me. This movement is also propelled by the points through which it passes ... [The surfer] has a chance to build real sequences of experience only if at each stop along his journey he gets another push. Still, they're not really stops, but systems of passage that generate acceleration.[10]

Unsurprisingly, if the diver is the person who reads Proust, Baricco writes, the surfer is the person browsing the internet.

The reason I introduce Baricco's metaphors here, kitschy as they are, is twofold.[11] The first is that these metaphors concretize Jameson's abstract notions of depth,

Can the snorkeler serve as a metaphor for a modality of new artistic imagination?

especially depthlessness, giving hands and feet to these amorphous bodies of thought. To say that something is depthless, after all, is not the same as suggesting that something is superficial. The first term acknowledges the possibility of depth whilst negating its actuality, whereas the second disavows it: though the make-up of the word "surface" suggests layers—the "sur-" and the "face"—it does not necessarily imply distance. By invoking the figure of the surfer, someone whose concern is not only to stand on the water but to avoid falling into it, going under, this duality is made manifest: to speak about depthlessness is to speak about the *extinction* of depth, not its nonexistence.

More importantly, by introducing the figure of the surfer, Baricco develops Jameson's notion of depthlessness from an experiential register to a modality of engagement. In order to stay above water, after all, the surfer needs to develop the skills that keep him on his board. One of these skills, one similar to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, is to perceive the ocean as a "trajectory" rather than either a territory (implying a mapping) or a *telos* (suggesting direction). (Indeed, Deleuze himself introduces the figure of the surfer in his "Postscript on the Societies of Control.") Here the surfer stays on his board by choosing one wave after the other, regardless of the corals he scratches with the tip of his board or the direction the waves take him in. He literally lets the waves carry him—he "lives in the moment." The second skill is the ability to constantly keep moving. If the surfer slows down or is momentarily stopped "by the temptation to analyze," as Baricco puts it, he sinks. He must progress, advance, experiencing each wave not on its own terms but as the medium, the catalyst for the next encounter, which is to say that each experience is experienced not in and of itself but in anticipation of the next experience, the next wave. What Baricco suggests, thus, is that the experiential registers of depth and depthlessness prescribe different modes of engagement: in the former you focus on one point in particular whilst in the latter you let your eyes scan over the surface; in the first you look for the special, in the second for the spectacular: the next wave, the next thrill. Though Baricco's metaphor of the surfer is both limiting and reductive and certainly does not define all art from the eighties and nineties, it manages to put into words a sentiment often shared between certain artistic traditions

and their audiences: the act of looking for a hint, not of what lies beneath, but rather of what lies ahead of us—the spectacle, the thrill, the controversy, the next wave we can ride and then the next, and the next.To return to Jameson's case studies, Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* implies another mode of engagement than Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*: in the former we are invited to look for traces of an experience; in the latter what we are left to see are points for discussion.

While cognizant of the limitations of this metaphorical vernacular, I would nonetheless like to propose that in the past decade, a third modality has taken hold of the artistic imagination: that of the snorkeler. Bear with me. Whereas the diver *moves towards* a shipwreck or a coral reef in the depths of the ocean, and the surfer *moves with* the flow of the waves, the snorkeler swims toward a school of fish whilst drifting with the surface currents. Importantly, the snorkeler imagines depth without experiencing it. "Where might that fish be swimming to?" he wonders. Or perhaps he thinks, "What might be below that rock?" He may follow the fish's direction, left, then right, then left again. But he will not, and often cannot, dive downwards; or if he does, then it is only for as long as his lungs allow. This is to say: for the snorkeler, depth both exists, positively, in theory, and does not exist, in practice, since he does not, and cannot, reach it.

When I refer to the "new depthiness," I am thinking of a snorkeler intuiting depth, imagining it—perceiving it without encountering it. If Jameson's term "new depthlessness" points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase "new depthiness" indicates the *performative* reappraisal of these depths. I use the term "performative" here above all in Judith Butler's sense of the word. Just as Butler writes that the soul is not what produces our behavior but is, on the contrary, what is produced by our behavior—in other words,not inside the body but on and around it,a surface effect—depth is not excavated but applied, not discovered but delivered.[12] Indeed, if the "gendered body has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality," depth, too, exists exclusively in its enactment.[13] Depth, at least post-Jameson, will always be a "depthing"—a making, actual or virtual, of depth. In this sense, depthiness combines the epistemological reality of depthlessness with the performative possibility of depth.

The term "depthiness" is a reference to both, as will be clear by now, Jameson's notion of depthlessness and Stephen Colbert's joke about "truthiness." The comedian invented the term to criticize politicians' tendency to bend the facts to fit their program. As he explained during his controversial speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006, where he took aim at then president George W. Bush:

> Do you know that you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. And now some of you are going to say: I did look it up and that's not true. That's because you looked it up in a book. Next time look it up in your gut. My gut tells me that's how our nervous system works … I give people the truth unfiltered by rational arguments.[14]

Colbert defines truthiness as the truth of the gut, unperturbed by empirical research or rational thought. It is a truth that feels true to me, or to you, but whose validity is not necessarily confirmed by science.

The similarity between Colbert's concept of truthiness and the notion of depthiness proposed here is that both describe a *contradictio in terminis*, or rather, perhaps, a recontextualization of terms. "Truthiness" expresses the production of a "truth" according to emotion instead of empiricism; "depthiness" articulates the creation of "depth" as a performative act as opposed to an epistemological quality. The difference between the two terms, however, is that whereas the former takes the affirmative category of truth as its reference, which suggests that there is a truth even if the suffix "–ness" implies that it may not apply to what is denoted; the latter adapts the negative label "depthlessness," which by contrast suggests that there is no depth, though here the suffix intimates that it may be perceived. Indeed, in this sense, it would have been more accurate to contrast truthiness with the equivalent of "truthlessiness": "depthlessiness." Truthiness puts the truth into question; depthiness raises doubts about depthlessness. Truthiness abandons the reality of truth as a legitimate register of signification; depthiness restores the possibility of depth as a viable modality for making meaning.

"Just because it's fake doesn't mean I don't feel it"

The premise of this essay is that over the course of the past ten years or so, the (sur)face of art has changed to resemble not the white caps of the surfer but the air pipe, or the bubbles, of the snorkeler. In stark contrast with the surface of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, which articulated no clues about the affections, localities, or histories behind it,the surfaces of photographs, sculptures, and drawings by a younger generation of artists once again hint at depth. As I suggested above, this is not the empirical or logical depth of the behind, but a performative depth of what one may call, in the absence of a more appropriate terminology, the "without." The without is an approximation of depth which acknowledges that the surface may well be depthless,while simultaneously suggesting an *outside* of it nonetheless. Van Gogh's surfaces were marked with traces of a behind. The surface of Warhol covered these traces up.

A deep-sea scuba-diver explores the depths of the ocean at night.

Contemporary surfaces, I would say, haven't uncovered them, exactly, but instead simulate them.

To be sure, simulation is by no means a novel concept. Quite the contrary. If depthlessness was the "supreme formal feature" of late twentieth century art and culture, then it is safe to say that simulation, the copy without an original, was its theoretical equivalent.[15] Throughout the eighties and nineties especially, simulation was a recurrent trope in exhibitions, films, and philosophical seminars alike. One can think here indeed of the proliferation of Warhol, or of a blockbuster show like *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* at the ICA in Boston in 1986, but also of Ruff's early *Portraits* (1981–85), the photographs of Demand, the paintings of Sherrie Levine, the videos of Sturtevant, or Koons's *Rabbit*, many of which developed scenarios whose veracity and origins were indiscernible. Even a mass-market film like *The Truman Show* (1999), which portrayed a man who unknowingly performs a part in a reality show, followed and expanded the simulation trend. Around this time, the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard ever more popularly convinced us that the real was an effect of the code. The Gulf War, he wrote to much controversy, did not happen. Baudrillard did not mean to say that there weren't two parties warring, at the price of international stability, the environment, and human suffering. His argument was that each of these costs—financial, political, public relational, human, and ecological (presumably in that order)—had been calculated beforehand by computers, through insurance software and virtual game plays. When the war took place, therefore, it played out, both in reality and in its representation in the media, a script that had already been written. The point, for many of these artists, filmmakers, and thinkers, was to demonstrate that there was no reality, no truth, no authenticity outside of the image or the model—and no humanity inside it. To emphasize this, many works at the time—perhaps most memorably the film *The Matrix* (1999)—visually equated simulation with computers and algorithms and especially with digital codes—with ones and zeros, languages themselves no longer referring to any realities outside of them, the final stage in a history of depthlessness.

Many contemporary artists, however, re-territorialize these languages of simulation to suggest not the final stage in a history of depthlessness but the first one in another chronicle of depthiness. They jump from their surfboards into the water, a snorkeling mask in hand. They cannot swim deep, but they can perceive depth. Take the Irish artist Kate Holton. Holton draws out the surprising and often unexplained similarities between the aesthetics of our networked (digital) civilization and nature. Her *Constellations* series resembles starscapes: bright white dots, in patterns pursuing a logic of their own, illuminate the black space around them.[16] In reality, however, the paint drawings depict satellite images of earth—the American Midwest and northern Germany. In another series of drawings, mold resembles road maps with long thin lines traveling decisively from spot to spot.

In one sense, Holton's images are simulations: they are copies of photographs which only by extension refer to a reality outside of them. Yet by drawing out the lines and dots on these photos, tracing by hand the patterns that culture and nature share, feeling out the cognitively inexplicable mathematical codes that they have in common, she integrates them into her own human experience. If Warhol's aim was to demonstrate that there was no reality outside of the image and no humanity inside of it, Holton shows that it may be precisely by forcefully reinserting humanity inside of the image (a frame, a point of view, a bodily gesture) that the possibility of an outside is restored.

There are several other artists whose works—drawings, sculptures, drawn sculptures, and otherwise—meticulously infuse humanity into the simulation, and as a consequence reintroduce the possibility of an outside. For example, Ane Mette Hol handcrafts three-dimensional simulations of everyday objects. Oftentimes the Norwegian artist simulates objects that people overlook, ignore, or discard, like cardboard wrappings, printing paper, and dust. In one particularly poignant piece called *Untitled (Artificial Light)* (2013), she uses a pencil to meticulously copy the automatized, mass-printed lettering that marks the cardboard wrapping of a TL light—the brand, the type, the voltage, and so forth. To spend such time and effort on something as insignificant as a copy of the wrapping of a TL light spells out an act of immense empathy. In these works, much unlike the sculptures of Koons, simulation is not what preempts history, locality, or personal affect, but precisely what returns it.

I am also reminded here of recent minimalist sculptures by

Monika Stricker, Untitled, 2013. Installation view, Artist's former studio, WIELS, Brussels. Courtesy: the artist.

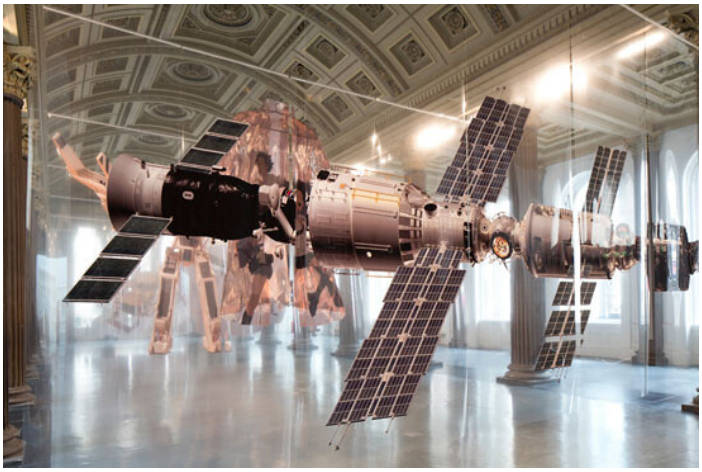
Monika Stricker, who smears buttermilk on modes of display ranging from spick-and-span glass vitrines and windows to shiny car hoods and rims. The act of applying buttermilk to these screens has the effect of mattening, of hiding them and making what they communicate—artworks, vases, the specific identity of a car—less visible. At the same time, this action is precisely what renders these materials themselves more visible. By spraying a car bonnet, Stricker defunctionalizes it—it no longer communicates that the car it was a part of is fast, safe, and sexy. But it also opens it up for other, yet-to-be-determined uses, many of which will be uninteresting to us humans. Stricker here visualizes optical noise, makes visible the cacophony of images we normally sound out, creating the potential of depth in all directions. She sees not just the waves but also the coral reefs that may have precipitated the waves, or the reefs that are scratched by the surfboard. Indeed, Stricker does not stand on the board as much as she floats just beneath it, taking in a whole ecology of twenty-first century civilization.

Holten, Hol, and Stricker pull down to a human, bodily level the abstract, often immaterialized processes behind the mathematical codes and algorithms that calculate the

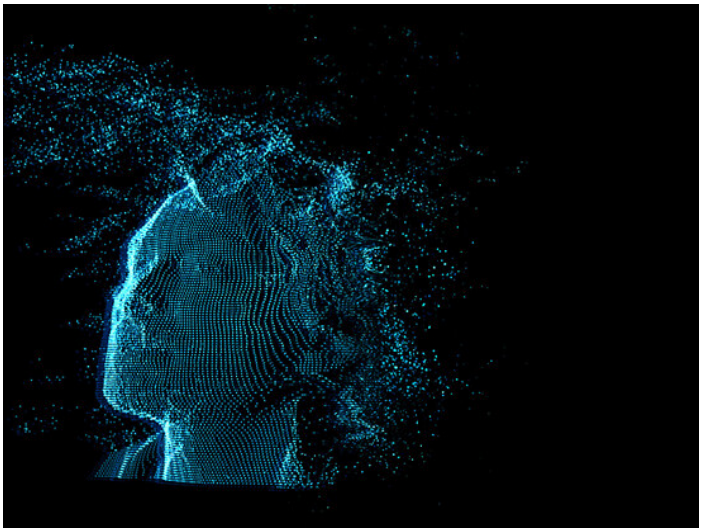
Ane Mette Hol, installation view, Kadel Willborn, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2013.

constellations of stars, that shape mass-produced objects lacking in exchange value, that determine invisible modes of display. Their drawings and sculptures are depthless in that they do not refer to a reality behind them; but they do intimate a reality of affection before, or without, them, even if, as is the case with Stricker's buttermilked bonnets, this is a reality of disaffection. In the traces of the chalk dots, the lines of the pencil lettering, and the sprayed milk, a reality of empathy, of caring for and participating in, becomes visible and sensible. These artists are snorkeling, feeling the wind on their backs while their eyes are pointed downwards. Indeed, what they make us see most of all, perhaps, is their backs, suggesting that though the surface itself may seem depthless, their efforts into it are not, indicating another realm of signification without.

In the sculptures and installations of Serbian artist Aleksandra Domanović, this depth of a without is restored in another fashion. Usually associated with the post-internet art movement, Domanović's work is often discussed in terms of recontextualization: of, for example,the relocation of the virtual to the physical, the Communist to the capitalist, East to West, the mechanical to the human, and so forth. Her recent exhibition *Things to Come* at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow (2014) can be seen in this light, though it will not be the one I will shine on it. Domanović created a series of seven large-scale sculptural prints on transparent foil, depicting objects from science fiction films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Gravity* (2013), and *Alien* (1979). The prints were modeled after 3-D models of objects used in the films; the transparent foil was intended to invoke celluloid. The artist installed the printed foils one after the other in straight rows so that visitors had no choice but to walk alongside each slide before turning to walk back along the next. Walking the entire length of the space in this way, viewers always saw the backs of the previous slide while seeing



Aleksandra Domanović, installation view, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow International, 2014. Photo: Alan McAteer. Courtesy the Artist and Glasgow International.



Visualizations of data from 3D plotting technology take shape in the music video for Radiohead's 2008 "House of Cards."

the next one set against the background of all the future slides.

The point of the show was to reflect upon the history of science fiction film, foregrounding the limited role women have thus far been allowed to play in the genre—mothers, love interests, but rarely warriors or time travelers. Domanović drew attention, through the foils, to the unequal history of animation: women were colored into the celluloid but were not allowed to draw the lines. Her prints were in many respects reminiscent of Sherman's photographs, except for one detail: organized in rows that both discouraged physical progress while stimulating visual passage, designating a path but allowing one to stray, Domanović's prints pulled visitors into the peepshow, requiring them to physically experience the history of women in sci-fi; Sherman's photos, by contrast, push viewers away, berating them for still looking. The distinction I intend here does not concern which strategy is better, or which aesthetic principle is worse. Both these strategies and principles are among the most powerful I have seen. What sets them apart, however, is their understanding of the relationship between the image and the outside: the first creates a depth within the simulation that points us to an outside, while the second does the opposite. If Holten, Hol, and Stricker show us their backs, in Domanović's performance of depth we see bubbles—bubbles in whose images a depth without is mirrored. She asks us not to look at her looking at the surface, or even at her back; she asks us to look *with* her, to join her in her virtual swim just below the surface.

These artists are not the only "snorkelers," of course. For further instances of performative depth—indeed, of depthiness—see Mark Leckey's solo exhibition at Wiels in Brussels, or Pierre Huyghe's retrospective at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, or Andy Holden's show *MI!MS* at the Zabludowicz in London, or Ed Atkins at the Stoschek Collection in Dusseldorf, or the oeuvre of Ian Cheng, or Ralf Brög, or Oscar Santillan, or Anne Pöhlmann, or Jonas Staal, or Hans Kalliwoda, or Paula Doepfner, and so on and so forth. The list is long, much longer than I could possibly outline here.

When I was growing up, in the mid-nineties and the early 2000s, I listened to Radiohead. On "There, There," they sang, "Just because you feel it, doesn't mean it's there."

A year or so ago, while watching the television show *Girls* (episode 3 from the third season), I was struck by a sentence that was at once reminiscent and completely different from that line from the early 2000s. "Just because it's fake, doesn't mean I don't feel it." The line from the Radiohead song that described our world as a hall of mirrors calls to mind Jameson's understanding of depthlessness as the last stage in a particular history of a particular flattening. But what the line from *Girls* hints at is that, just maybe, we are seeing the first stage in another history of another kind of deepening, one whose empirical reality lies above the surface even if its performative register floats just below it: depthiness.

X

Timotheus Vermeulen is assistant professor in Cultural Theory at the Radboud University Nijmegen, where he also co-directs the Centre for New Aesthetics. He is co-founding editor of *Notes on Metamodernism*.

1
Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 9.

2
Ibid., 33, 8, 12.

3
Beral Madra, “Dark rooms and national pavilions,” *Third Text* vol. 15, no. 57 (2001): 102.

4
Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 12.

5
Ibid, 7.

6
Ibid, 8.

7
Quoted in Robert Williams, *Art Theory: A Historical Introduction* , 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 241.

8
Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 376–77.

9
Alessandro Barrico, *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture* , trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2014), 111.

10
Ibid, 118.

11
A value judgment with which I imagine the author, judging from his self-depreciating Introduction, would be the first to agree.

12
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 135. I use the term "performative" here also with a nod to Raoul Eshelman's canonical conceptualization of "performatism." One of the first thinkers to develop a cohesive critical vocabulary for talking about post-modernism to refer to the creation of a frame (of mind, of painting, of theater) within which something can be true, wholesome, irreducible, and impervious to deconstruction, while outside of that frame, this something isn't, or cannot be, true, wholesome, or irreducible, let alone impervious to deconstruction. Another phrase he uses to describe this is "willful self-deceit": for a moment, you cheat yourself into believing in a reality that you know does not exist. Though I am not sure whether the below artists perform depth through such a dualism of inside and outside (or whether their strategies should be seen in terms of a Kantian as-if, a Romantic oscillation, Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, or Sloterdijk's sweet-and-sour sauce, in which opposites are present simultaneously), Eshelman's notion of performatism may provide an interesting point of departure for a more sustained analysis. See Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 2008).

13
Ibid, 136.

14
See →.

15
Williams, *Art Theory*, 239

16
Katie Holton, *Constellation (Earth at Night: The Midwest)* (2013) and *Constellation (Earth at Night: Germany)* (2013). Chalk and acrylic paint drawings on black canvas.

Adrian Rifkin

Yes, That's What I Think ...

It is. It's a grimly Adornian thought about now, about kitsch, the threat of the seductive, the wicked witch or some other smooth-talking phantom of consumerism's triumph, but yes, I do think this.[1] That the death of the matte screen for computers, TVs, tablets, or telephones is a terrible disaster. It's a vain and obscuring gleam, the gleam of a current vanity, but nothing so grand as a vanity of vanities, rather the vanity of not owning up to short sight or a slight deafness, of not seeing that we can't see the screen because we have come to believe only in its factitious and meretricious intensity, in its definition, some other unqualified quality. The gloss is even something that we might call the "inconsiderate," dressed up as transgression or self-satisfaction, which are much of a muchness in the funding regime of art now.

Troubling, because a lot of artists whose work I truly love—Liz Price, Ed Atkins, David Haines—work, in one manner or another, in video or in drawing, at the highest edge of definition, and I neither squint nor shade my eyes when I see their work. Rather I fall in with it, into it, and the ineluctable unfolding of its discomfort. In Atkins's *Ribbons* the definitional perfection of the avatar, its double definition that is both electronic and muscular, supposes a confusion in desire as such, in a relation between seeing and being, perhaps, but in its collapse, its deflation, it floats the Longinian notion of "divine afflatus" as an ironic afterthought of now and now's desires, puffed and deflated by the duplicity of shine and perfectibility, blown into kitsch as well as its negation.

In Haines the almost ascetic excess of his attention to the vast world of contemporary gay sexualities, especially chav, sneakers, scally, cheap drugs, and low-level filth and S/M and internet self-porn, the slow drawn-out conflation of the mark with iconography as such, generates a radical splitting of the signifier from an adherence to the perceived, a new kind of proposition.

While in Price, in her very different relation to an archive of motifs and techniques, sampling itself becomes a kind of metamedium of which video is no more than a possible support. The scrolls of text in Price's work, in *SUNLIGHT*, the scrolling dynamics of her soundtracks there or in *The Tent*, their counterpoint and strange harmonies, relegate Jenny Holzer to an age of the numeric-pastoral, a moment of too-literal an optimism and an optimistic literalism, rooted in a simple craft of lighting effects and an archaic sense of what *should* be said.

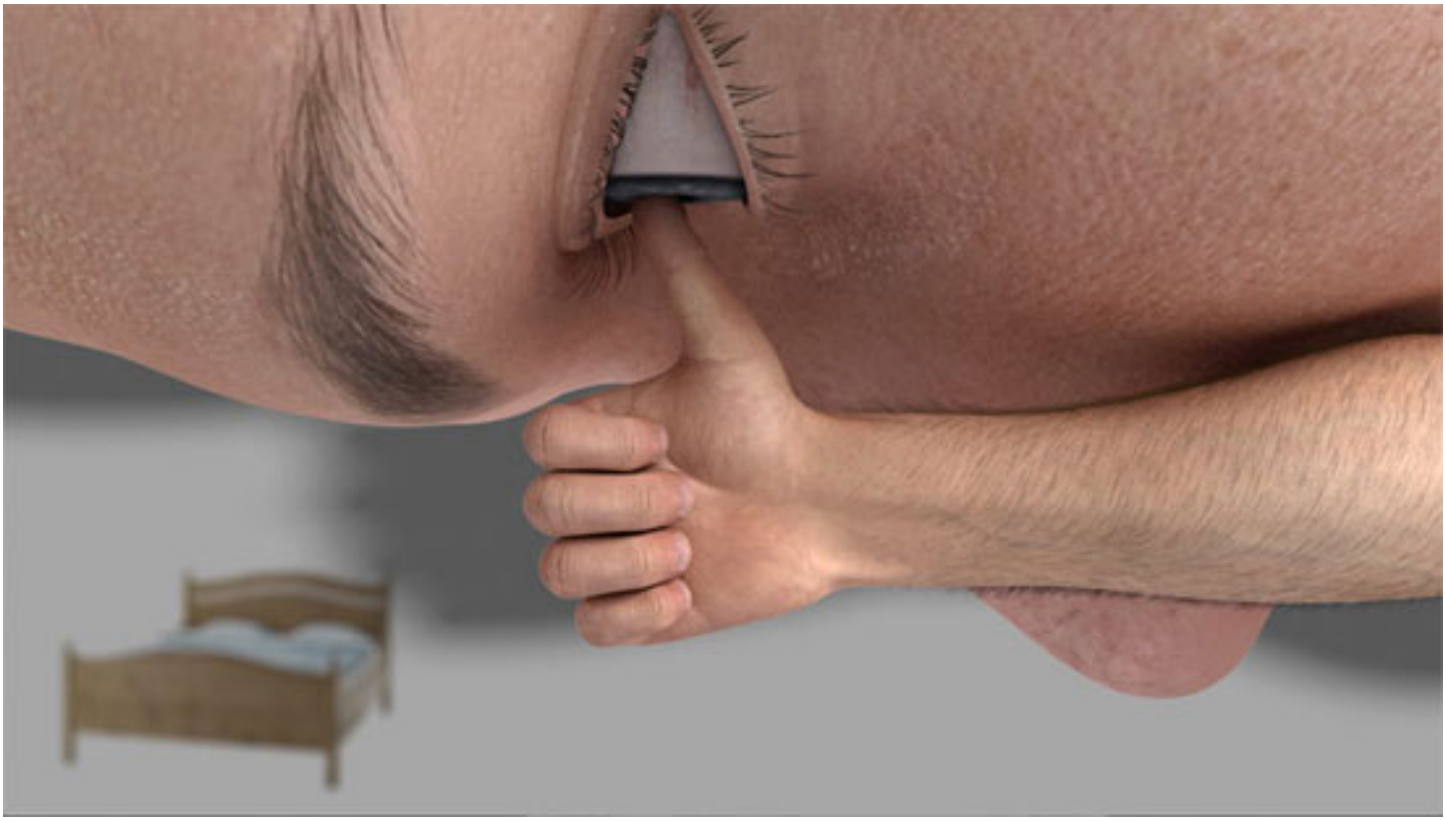
In Price, an inaugural snap of the fingers, seen and heard, in negative, yellow nails, "This is the sun [sun spinning] ... This is the sun's disc in K-light [hand rotating a cymbal, shimmering, the letter K, the rasping of the soundtrack], these are the first technical images of the sun, photographed in K-light [a stream of explanations], and roughly reanimated here." Packets of old photographs of the sun slipped one over the other at the speed of this light, of this video, a lurking disquiet that the sun's disc can

David Haines, Radiant Bodies and Unreal Aliens, 2013. Graphite on paper, 176 x 226 cm. Defares Collection.

be photographed in K-light, but only the sun itself cannot be photographed in sunlight, negative yellows and blues, on the nails of models from a Wolford catalogue. "Let us show you—let us show you." And we are shown, but this is not a performative; rather an iterated but inconsistent accompaniment of images, for these we are shown, over and over, shown, even when the screen does not say "let us show you."

So it is with Price, as with Atkins or Haines: an improbable definition and shine offer not more to see—the promise of commercial products—but rather a trouble with the signifier as such, so that the highest of definitions and the most smoothly constructed and shiny avatars might bring us up sharply into the fragility of subjectivation; the explanation of the sun and its accompaniment of figures and sounds might make no sense at all, like the odd movements and antigravitational effects, let us say, that are typical of Altdorfer's painting. In that sense, these works, resolutely, are not new at all. The shine is an alibi of the now, but this now is also the endpoint of negation that Adorno seeks in Schoenberg, the dolorous presence of art.

Very different is the hypertrophy of technical virtuosity in, for example, Isaac Julien's *North*, where the flashing between screens and scenes delivers the delusion of the commercial product as if it could be made real, really present. Yes, yes, I think that and he says so too, in a way, Adorno: "its product is not a stimulus at all, but a model for reactions to nonexistent stimuli." Not a bad line for working my way around some of the stimuli of the art world now, of the new promises of the shiny, the "Lovely, lovely soup. How you're going to enjoy it."[2] One risk of the



Ed Atkins, Warm Warm Warm Spring Mouths, 2013. HD video, 5.1 surround sound, 12 mins. 50 secs.

new shiny of the new culture industries is what I guess might be called a new field of vision, one in which the *point de capiton*, "une notion qui rend nécessaire le décalage du signifiant et du signifié," becomes inoperative and in which subjectivation itself is entropically put into suspense. And this despite the claim for technology's fluidity and unlimited processuality. Whatever, it seems like a contemporary debate on the relative wealth or poverty of the image.

Elizabeth Price, installation view of The Tent, HD video, 2012. Bloomberg Space, London

Here is a true story. When Elizabeth Price showed *The Tent* at Bloomberg in London in 2012, I went to see it with the painter Jeffery Steele, whose work figures very largely in the Whitechapel Gallery Systems Art Catalogue of 1972, on which the video works with image and sound. The systematic unpicking and reworking of the catalogue, the making visual and aural of its chromatic and structural notions in sound and figure, the transliteration of these into one another at different levels of intensity—not a synesthesia, but a translation in asymmetry—produces an effect of scraping, or rasping, at times hard to bear, at times quite balmy in its accomplishment. A kind of shine, you might say, dazzling and attracting in the register of an ambivalent affect. We watched three times, and then "Price" asked "Steele" what he thought of the animation of one of his works on the screen. I was dreading such a moment as, over the decades that I had admired this work, I had always thought of it as a rendering into a singular stasis. Oh, he said, it's great, it's just what I couldn't do. New, old, nothing new, nothing old, like sunshine.

Here is a story that might have been true. Many years ago a friend told me—he was a very subtle and minimalist systems composer—that he had, as a student, been standing before some terribly important painting on loan in a national gallery. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of one of his tutors walking towards the display, a man feared for his connoisseurial skills. Stricken almost speechless, my friend managed to say only, "Hello, big,

Elizabeth Price, User Group Disco, 2009. HD video, 15 mins.

isn't it?" To which the tutor replied, "Yes, and shiny too," and passed on without more than a glance at the supposed masterpiece. Was it a judgment on my friend's simplemindedness, or maybe on his incapacity even to have registered the shine? Or on the painting that was thus relegated to some storeroom of Adornian kitsch, even disqualified and misattributed, precisely on account of its shine, its over-varnish? A Caravaggio, even?

There is then shine and shine, rather than shine as such and its then and now and here and there. To steal again from Adorno, if one shine offers room service, another shine offers hospitality. It's we who first tell them and then tear them apart, and that's a happy enough politics of art.

X

Adrian Rifkin is a visiting professor at Central St. Martins, University of the Arts London, having previously been a professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths. He is currently developing forms of performed versions of the idea of a "bilder atlas" and writing short critical work. A collection of articles engaging with his work, together with eight artists' pages, and edited by Dana Arnold has just been published by I. B. Tauris as *Interdisciplinary Encounters: Visible and Invisible Explorations of the Work of Adrian Rifkin*, while a collection of some thirty of his own essays, edited and with an introduction by Steve Edwards, will be published by Brill later in 2015. It is entitled *Communards and Other Cultural Histories*. His website is **www.gai-savoir.net**.

1
Idly rereading Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978).

2
Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* 201.

Sven Lütticken

Shine and Schein

> Swathed in shining metal to conceal corrosion &
> appear to elude entropy on the whole.
> —Lawrence Weiner

One of the virtues of Tom Holert's long-running investigation into the concepts of glamour and shine is that it counters the increasing return to an ahistorical ontology among a certain subset of professional philosophers. In opposing the "Kantian reduction" of philosophy from ontology to epistemology, these speculative realists conveniently marginalize whole strands of post-Kantian thinking, particularly those that historicized the ontic. In this context, the production of shine can serve as a reminder of the historical mutability, instability, and *splitting* of being.

The philosopher Graham Harman has taken important cues from Bruno Latour's antidialectical, "anticritical" theory. Against Marxist theory in particular, Latour argues that the object is forever being interpreted as a fetish that is *both* too powerful and completely powerless; it has an uncanny power over the subject even while being a hollow illusion.[1] In parallel, Harman argues that modern philosophy sees the object as too superficial and/or too fundamental; it is variously being "undermined" by those who see it as a surface effect and "overmined" by those who regard it as being inaccessible to human cognition (the Kantian *Ding an Sich*). Whereas Latour attacks the (idealist and materialist) subject-object dialectic though concepts such as the *thing* that refuses to play the part of object to the triumphant subject, or the *quasi-object* that has subjective traits, Harman opts for a more extreme course: treating everything as objects. Whether fairytale characters, cars, or corporations: they are all objects insofar as "they are autonomous in two directions: emerging as something over and above their pieces, while also partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities."[2]

While this may be a satisfactory philosophical definition, the "ontological turn" in the expertly marketed new philosophical brand of speculative realism comes with a refusal to engage with most post-Kantian philosophy (except for Husserl and Heidegger), which is branded as "correlationist."[3] The new ontology is regressive in that it negates the historical turn of thought in German idealism, and later in materialist thought. Correlationist or not, thinkers such as Schelling, Hegel, and Marx historicized the ontic. At least in the case of Marx, this became a full-blown attack on philosophy as self-contained discipline—which is perhaps still too close to home, too near to the bone for certain academics. The

much-maligned dialectic of subject and object in both idealist and Marxist philosophy and theory was an attempt—crude at times, to be sure—to think being as being in motion, in history, as never self-identical. Object-based ontology is a distraction, and Harman's model of the "fourfold structure" of the object—encompassing Real Object, Sensual Object, Real Qualities, and Sensual Qualities—does not result in any meaningful articulation of relations as unfolding in time and history and as encompassing contradictions and antagonisms.

As Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt have argued, the identification with the object in art from Pop to the present is a response to the social and historical *split* between object and subject.[4] And in an involuntary manner, "[the] rush to dismiss the subject-object relation in favor of a 'flat ontology'" in contemporary theory "betrays the triumph of one pole of a broken dialectic: the willed unreflexivity of the subject-in-practice that has seen all forms of noncapitalist subjectivity stall and founder in the recent past, especially since the present crisis began."[5] The study of shine proposes a different flattening-out. Rather than producing virtuoso scholastic exercises in monistic object-based ontology, such a study examines "absurdly flat reductions of being to surface" in both consumer goods and humans, in sculptures, vacuum cleaners, and film stars, in shoes and shoe shiners.

The aim of such an endeavor is not to equalize, to create a system of equivalences, but rather to arrive at a differentiated analysis of historical processes of reduction, of becoming-equivalent, becoming-shine. Gilligan and Vishmidt argue that since the subject-object dialectic is

> a real reflection of the world of capital, perhaps a shift to the object in political thought can only go so far at present. We can only become nonpersonal nonsubjects once the absolute subject that is value ceases to be the metric of our subjectivity. How could this happen without a collective subject that breaks in some way from the ensemble of its determinations?[6]

But a nonpersonal nonsubject has in fact arisen, and it is neither human nor inanimate object. Nonhuman, algorithmic agents break open the erratic and ultimately looped dialectic of object and subject, inaugurating new forms of labor and new modes of shine.

1. The Sensuous Shining of the Commodity

The collapse of subjectivity into objecthood reached new heights in the Commodity art of the 1980s and early 1990s. It is not by accident that much of this art focused on polished, shiny objects, often in stainless steel, aluminum, or other metals. One can think of any number of objects on Haim Steinbach's shelves, or Sherrie Levine's 1991 bronze version of Duchamp's *Fountain*—which was anticipated in a much more explicitly critical mode by Hans Haacke's *Baudrichard's Ecstasy* in 1988. However, it was Koons's *Rabbit* (1986) that stands for the apotheosis of the polished and reflecting (though barely reflexive) commodity in the art of that period.

In a combination of established and nascent artistic positions that was only (albeit barely) credible at this precise historical moment, the 1986 New Museum exhibition "Damaged Goods" contained works by Koons and Steinbach as well as by Louise Lawler, Ken Lum, and Andrea Fraser, who did her first gallery talk as Jane Castleton in this context—the context in which Koons exhibited some of his *The New* vacuum cleaners and enlarged alcohol ads. In the "Damaged Goods" catalogue, Hal Foster sounded a critical note about the "cute-commodity art" of Koons and Steinbach, whereas Brian Wallis attempted to tie the disparate practices together by arguing that they all

> seek to operate at the core of the economic system, to signal its weakness through sly complicity. These works may legitimately be called "damaged goods" for, while on the surface they appear to valorize the brilliance and perfection of new consumer objects, they harbour an ambivalence, one which inserts doubt, introduces humor and absurd overproduction, dramatizes display, and provokes questions.[7]

Wallis's reference to the "brilliance and perfection" of consumer goods is immediately evocative of the mid-1980s' investment in the fetishism of the code as manifested in patently material yet shiny and almost unreal objects. Koons's work, from *The New* to *Rabbit*, is undeniably the locus classicus in this respect. In the New York art world of the period, Koons's work was read with Baudrillard in mind, as Foster's essay shows.[8] The sheen of works such as *The New* and *Rabbit* stands in the service of the fetishism of the signifier and the "codification" of the commodity: it becomes a patently physical yet oddly dematerialized apparition, engaging in phantasmatic relations with its kind. The posters of basketball stars in Koons's *Equilibrium* show and the enlarged ad of an aspirational black couple sipping Hennessy in *Luxury and Degradation* are the ethnically coded counterparts of the vacuum cleaners and bunnies, the sheen of the skin transmuting problematic subjects into signs of muscular prowess and consumption.

"Shine" is etymologically related to the German noun *Schein* (its near-homophone) and the verb *scheinen*. Both noun and verb are key notions in modern aesthetic theory. English translators of authors such as Nietzsche and

An inflatable replica of Jeff Koons's Rabbit was part of the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade in 2008.

Adorno habitually struggle with *Schein,* often going for "semblance" or "appearance." Hegel famously defined the beautiful as "das sinnliche *Scheinen* der Idee"—the sensuous appearance or "shining" of the idea.[9]

In historicizing art, Hegel was concerned with differentiating between various epochs in which art was able to achieve this sensuous manifestation of the ideal to a greater or lesser extent. In the "symbolic" art of Ancient Egypt, form remained mute and random, incapable of truly expressing its content; in Classical Greece, form and content were in harmony, but this equilibrium was fragile and was finally shattered when Christianity introduced a spiritualized conception of the world that could never be fully made sensate. While it was true that the abstract God of the Israelites incarnated in the material and visible form of Jesus, this was not the synthesis of the ideal and the real that the Greek gods represented. Rather, the tripartite Christian God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) was marked by a radical disjunction between the "idea" and the "sinnliches Scheinen."

Art could latch onto the latter, and often did so brilliantly. As Hegel put it in a passage in which he (the Prussian Protestant) both snubs the Catholic host and extolls the autonomization of art in the sixteenth century:

> It is one thing for the mind to have before it a mere thing – such as the host *per se*, a piece of stone or wood, or a wretched daub; – quite another thing for it to contemplate a painting, rich in thought and sentiment, or a beautiful work of sculpture, in looking at which, soul holds converse with soul and Spirit with Spirit. In the former case, spirit is torn from its proper element, bound down to something utterly alien to it – the sensuous, the non-spiritual. In the latter, by contrast, the sensuous object is a beautiful one, its spiritual form giving it a soul and containing truth in itself.[10]

Renaissance and Reformation both have their share in this

Willem Claesz. Heda, Still Life with Glasses and Tobacco, 1633. Oil on panel. The Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection.

emancipation of art, Hegel suggests, and ultimately the Renaissance is at odds with Catholicism just as much as the Reformation: Raphael's Madonnas received fewer offerings than third-rate kitsch paintings.[11] For Hegel, with Luther the Catholic Church became truly obsolete, as it remained enmired in superstitious attachment to form and matter ("the fettering of the mind to a sensuous object, a mere thing").[12] It is Lutheran Protestantism that can realize Spirit as subjective freedom, untrammelled by external form. This would be a boon to philosophy and science. In the process, of course, "autonomous" art itself slides into irrelevance as far as the development of Spirit was concerned—no matter how beautiful and gratifying its *Schein.*

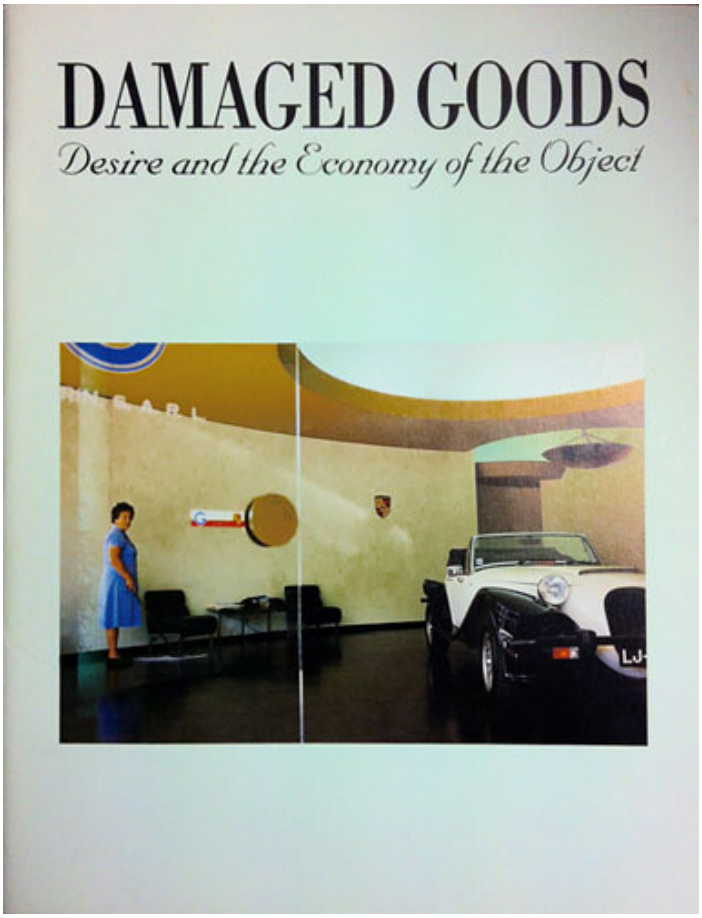
Hegel's philosophical aesthetics may seem far removed from any discussion of recent art, be it from the 1980s or from 2014. However, Hegel articulated fundamental aesthetic problems that are still with us. Or rather: we are still within them; we inhabit them. As Marc Shell has noted, some of the most influential proponents of philosophical aesthetics in Germany, including Hegel, were profoundly marked by economic theorists such as James Stuart and Adam Smith: "Monetary theory ties together symbol and commodity, as well as universal and particular, in a knotty conception of the relationship between thought and matter."[13] In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel analyzed paper money in terms of a dialectic of symbol and commodity. Thus even before Marx, who would politicize fundamental tropes of idealist aesthetic theory, German idealism thought the economic in aesthetic terms, not by "aestheticizing the economical" but by analyzing the dialectic of idea and matter, of sign and substance, of invisibility and appearance.

It is hardly a surprise that the notion of *Schein* would play a crucial role in the work of the twentieth-century Marxist whose work represents the most thorough theorization of the commodity-status of the modern artwork. Adorno defended aesthetic *Schein* against attacks on art as being nothing but wasteful expenditure and conspicuous consumption; in response to Thorstein Veblen's "attack on culture," Adorno argued that " *Schein* is dialectical as a reflection (*Widerschein*) of truth; to reject all Schein is to become its victim all the more fully."[14] But what, in modern art, is "truth"? Adorno of course resolutely rejected the

Hegelian version of the dialectic of idea and appearance, with its Platonic overtones. His truth is social, embodied—the truth of subject and object in industrial capitalism, in which both are subject to abstraction and commodification.

Adorno states that in modern art, "the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity."[15] As art becomes increasingly "autonomous," it paradoxically comes to resemble the commodity and its "theological whims" all the more. As Stewart Martin argues,

> Two forms of illusion are condensed in Marx's account [of the commodity fetish], the distinction of which is decisive for Adorno's account. One is the attempt to read value out of the sensuous qualities of commodities. This is an illusion of the commodity's sensuousness. The illusion is "seen through" by knowing that value is not sensuous, but abstract, a quantum of abstract labour time. But seeing through it does not dissolve it, since it is generated by the social relations of private labour. The other illusion, which is both the cause and the result of the first, is an inversion of subject and object. This is an illusion of the autonomy of the value-form, of the nascent attempt of capital to realize itself, as self-valorizing value, independent of its constitution by living labour. It is an illusion that is seen through by knowing that capital is dependent on labour, but this does not dissolve it; that requires an end to private (wage) labour.[16]

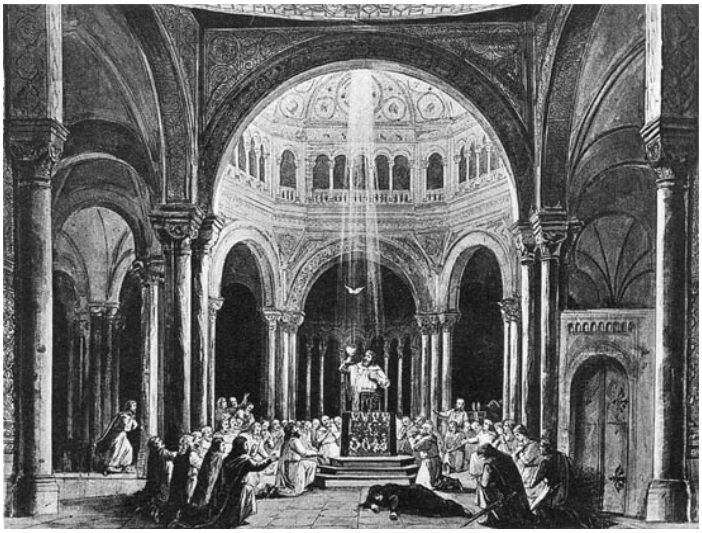


The cover of the "Damaged Goods" exhibition catalog features Barbara Bloom's photo Lisbon, 1985.

In Martin's reading of Adorno's aesthetics, Adorno sides with the illusion of sensuous presence over the illusion of the autonomy of value. "The autonomous artwork is an emphatically fetishized commodity, which is to say that it is a sensuous fixation of abstraction, of the value-form, and not *immediately* abstract."[17] Here we get back to the matter of *Schein,* and of shine. Whereas in his philosophy Adorno argues in favor of the "primacy of the object," in his aesthetic writings he stresses the need for the artwork—an object to begin with—to demonstrate a subjective mastery of the medium, of the material. For Adorno, one fundamental aesthetic problem with film was precisely its objectivism, its dependence on photographic realism.[18] But "sensuous fixation" on a commodity also means that the artistic commodity is highly subjectivized even when its pushes the mimesis to the *entfremdete Dinge* to the point of the ready-made and appropriation. It was precisely in 1980s commodity art that this development—the subjectivation of the object—reached its apogee in shine. To be attentive to the labors of shine would be to take Adorno's privileging of the pseudo-concrete fetish one step further.

Barbara Bloom's photograph on the cover of the "Damaged Goods" catalogue could be seen as a critical gloss on the Baudrillard-appropriating commodity art (discourse) of the period. Bloom's photo *Lisbon, 1985* depicts a car showroom, or perhaps the lobby of a car importer; we look through and past a glass door at a curved wall sporting a small Porsche logo. Against the wall is a small table and two chairs, and to the right is a classic black-and-white sports car, perfectly polished and shiny. To the left, next to one of the chairs, is a middle-aged cleaning woman mopping the floor, or pausing from mopping the floor—apparently noting the camera, and in any case not behaving like well-behaved worker à la Fried or Wall, completely absorbed by her task.[19] She introduces the labor of shine into the publication; the activity of shining, of producing the gleam of the alluring commodity fetish. If the Mulveyan reduction of actresses and models to seamless fetish-images is perhaps the classic instance of the production of shine, here the implication of feminine, reproductive labor in the production of shine is foregrounded. It is this labor that makes the phallic car, and the floor on which it stands, really shine; that make the car and its environment look as physical manifestations of platonic ideas.

Harrison Ford stares dumbfounded offscreen after finding the Holy Grail in the 1989 film Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.



End of Act III in the original 1882 production of Wagner's Parsifal, design by Paul von Joukowsky. Copyright: Wikimedia

2. The Multiple Grail

In his early essay on Wagner, written during the Nazi period, Adorno characterized Wagner's music theatre as "phantasmagoric" precisely because of its basis in commodity fetishism. In trying to create a seamless illusion and a dream-like atmosphere, Wagner prefigured later, more technologically advanced manifestations of the culture industry, while his *tableaux* on stage recalled contemporaneous displays of consumer goods. In the phantasmagoria, "wird der ästhetische Schein vom Charakter der Ware ergriffen."[20] Wagner's operas are dependent on the concealment of labor, a prerequisite of commodity fetishism:

> Richard Wagner's formal law is the concealment of production through the appearance (*Erscheinung*) of the product. The product present itself as self-producing: hence the primacy of the leading note and chromaticism. By no longer allowing any glimpse of the forces and conditions that produced it, the *Schein* of aesthetic appearance lays claim to the status of *Sein* (being).[21]

The Wagnerian scene becomes a series of tableaus akin to displays at world's fairs or department stores:

> In Wagner's day, goods on display were reduced to seductively showing their phenomenal side to the mass of consumers, while diverting attention from this merely phenomenal character— *from* the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, insofar as they are phantasmorias Wagner's operas tend to become commodities. Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display (*Ausstellungscharakter*).[22]

And is the grail not the ultimate phantasmagorical commodity? In Adorno's musicological analysis of Lohengrin's passage, he notes that "in that it gives solace, the phantasmagoria is that of the grail itself [als Trost spendende ist die Phantasmagorie die des Grals selber]."[23] In fact, one of Wagner's most blatantly phantasmagoric tableaus—though neglected by Adorno, who focuses on the brothel-like scenes of the Venusgrotte and Klingsor's garden—is the central hall of the grail castle, in which the grail magically lights up. In both the first and the second act of *Parsifal*, the audience witnesses the Grail ritual, in which the miraculous object reveals its life-giving powers. Wagner's stage directions state that the Grail exudes a purple glow, and in the final Grail scene at the end of the Third Act, when Parsifal has taken over as Grail keeper, a white dove descends towards the Grail. Wagner's use of lighting effects was highly advanced: electric lighting gave the Grail a technological halo. The staging is reminiscent of the display of luxury goods in advertisements.

It should come as no surprise that Wagner, steeped in the romantic socialism of the 1940s, latched onto the motif of the *Gral,* which had been placed on the cultural agenda by the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, and which conveniently concatenated the mystical and the material, the spiritual and the economic.[24] The medieval legends use the Christian Eucharist as the Grail's de facto model: like the host, the Grail is not what it seems.[25] It is an object, but on closer inspection it is a miraculous subject-object. It has an agency not found among ordinary bric-a-brac. As Marc Shell puts it, "The tales present the Grail as being a thing both of this world and not of this world, or as being a thing both homogenous and heterogenous with all things."[26] Shell argues that the motif of the Grail blends the eucharistic and the monetary:

In a publicity photo from the 1922 movie The Light in the Dark, a diagonal strip of light shines on the grail.

the theological and economic were closely intertwined. As Shell stresses, the earliest Grail authors lived in trading centers that were marked by the presence of Jewish traders and the Knights Templar—a crusading order *cum* banking empire.[27] This period saw once solid things melt into thin air, with an impoverished nobility being confronted with a rising merchant class and new forms of credit. It may be overly literal to present the Grail as "a literary species of the blank check, the Arabic *sakh,* introduced to Europe by Jewish merchants before the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 1099," but the larger point is no less crucial for that.[28] The Grail was always an economico-theological trope, becoming an economico-aesthetic one in modern culture. Its mythic *Schein* was always already a shine in waiting.

It is highly telling that in 1848, just before his participation in the Dresden Revolution, Wagner wrote an essay titled *Die Wibelungen*, which is a fanciful reading of medieval and post-medieval history. Its focus is on the Frankish kings and emperors, alias the Ghibelins or the Wibelungen—whose history Wagner thought had been mythologized in the *Nibelungenlied.* Later, Wagner would of course retcon that same *Nibelungenlied* by (re)introducing elements from Nordic mythology, resulting in the contract-obsessed *Ring des Nibelungen*. Already in *Die Wibelungen,* Wagner reads the *Nibelungenlied as* a repository of mythemes, focusing on the Medieval Kingdom as an afterlife of the Germanic *Urkönigsthum* and on the fictional *Nibelungenhort* (the Nibelung treasure) as a symbol of quasi-divine royal power. Friedrich Barbarossa, the crusader-emperor who in the nineteenth century was a mainstay of German nationalist mythmaking, was the last *Kaiser* to come close to realizing this ideal. Wagner avers that the legend of the Holy Grail appears as a kind of ideal substitute for

the Nibelungen Hoard at the moment when the *Kaiserthum* lost its purchase on reality.[29]

However, the Grail as an "ideal" offshoot of the Nibelungen Hoard had its counterpart in real, actual property: "The Hoard of the Nibelungen had evaporated to the realm of Poetry and the Idea; merely an earthly precipitate remained as its dregs: *real property*."[30] Under feudalism, property was in fact a loan from the king; now, with the first stirrings of capitalism in Northern Italy, where the foundation for the secularized post-Templar banking system was laid, property became transferrable and inheritable. Thus the *Nibelungenlied* ultimately leads Wagner to his reactionary-romantic-socialist critique of capitalism, which would take the form of the "contractual obligation" motif in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

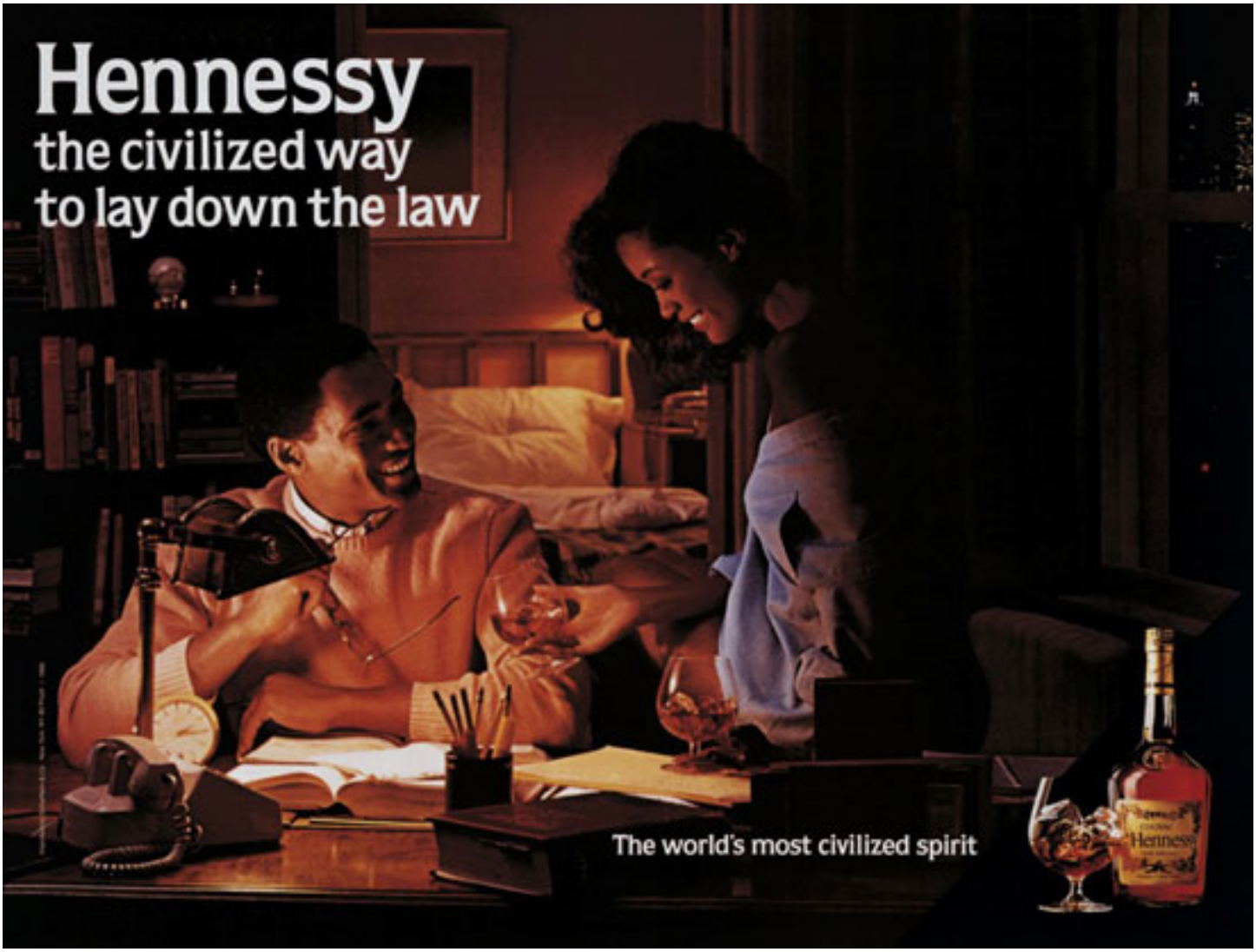
Terry Gilliam illustrated the inanimate star and object of desire of Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975).

Wagner's works, particularly the appearances of the *Nibelungenhort* in *Der Ring* and of the Grail in *Parsifal,* are crucial concatenations of aesthetic *schein* and commodified shine. In late-nineteenth-century productions of *Parsifal*, the Grail's appearance oscillated between that of a simple, bare cup and that of a more ornate vessel. Lit up electrically, by the latest technological magic available, this physical grail advertised its otherworldliness—saving it from becoming an arbitrary object. But for all its industrial light and magic, Wagner's *Parsifal* Grail is a first step towards a physical literalization of the grail. Throughout modern culture the grail is both present and absent, an unstable symbol that at times becomes a physical object, while at other times retreating into a purely spiritual existence.

In the Middle Ages and early modern period, the Grail had been a purely literary symbol. For all its theological underpinnings, it had and still has no status in traditional Christianity. "The Holy Grail" simply does not exist in Catholic or Protestant Christianity, as concept or as object. From the early twentieth century onwards there have been repeated attempts to identify "the Holy Grail" with some concrete vessel. One of the most famous of such Grails—the Antioch Chalice—is housed in the Metropolitan Museum, and earlier this year police raided a pub in Wales believed to be the location of another potential "Holy Grail" that had been stolen.[31] Monty Python drew the logical conclusion from this materialist grail by having an early draft of their *Holy Grail* screenplay end at Harrods: if Harrods has everything, the Holy Grail can surely be found at this temple of conspicuous consumption.[32] The objects of commodity art are so many real-life versions of this Pythonesque department store Grail.

Monty Python's film is of course also an example of a further iteration of the multiple Grail object: the cinematic grail. Wagner's grail, with its industrial light and magic, is already proto-cinematic in nature. If film is, or was, photographically bound to the physical and visible world, then the Grail could be a perfect vehicle for introducing a gleam of transcendence into the mundane; a quasi-religious glamour. The Grail proved to be a highly cinematic subject-object, starting with Lon Chaney's *The Light in the Dark* from 1922 (the same year as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which of course takes its imagery from the Grail Romances), in which a thief attempts to save a woman's life by stealing a cup believed to be the Holy Grail ("the phantom cup of Lord Tennysson's poem") to cure her. Later efforts range from *Excalibur* to *The Fisher King* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.* In contrast to Hitchcockian McGuffins, which are exchangeable and mere excuses for an action to take place, the Grail is a cinematic actor laden with a vague but insistent promise of redemptive meaning. The avant-garde valorization of the object in films from Man Ray and Hans Richter to Eisenstein and Vertov can be seen as a desublimation of the cinematic Grail that began in 1922, its replacement by objects whose agency does not follow a pseudo-eucharistic plot.

The cinematic Grail is somewhat uncomfortable as a special effect oscillating between symbol and matter, between *Schein* and shine. Largely doing away with the Grail's material side, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors such as Joséphin Péladan, Arthur Edward Waite, Jessie Weston (a source for Eliot), René Guénon, Otto Rahn, and Joseph Campbell latched onto the grail's nondescript meaningfulness by re-spiritualizing and psychologizing the Grail in order to counter capitalist "materialism."[33] This movement continued apace in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, with the grail at times taking on pseudo-feminist overtones, becoming identified with Mary Magdalene and some New Age "eternal feminine."[34] Wagner's Grail cup, which was the exclusive property of pure male knights who managed to resist temptation, was a fetishized counter-feminity in opposition to the sexual threat of Kundry; now a marginally different and seemingly progressive gender essentialism has replaced it.



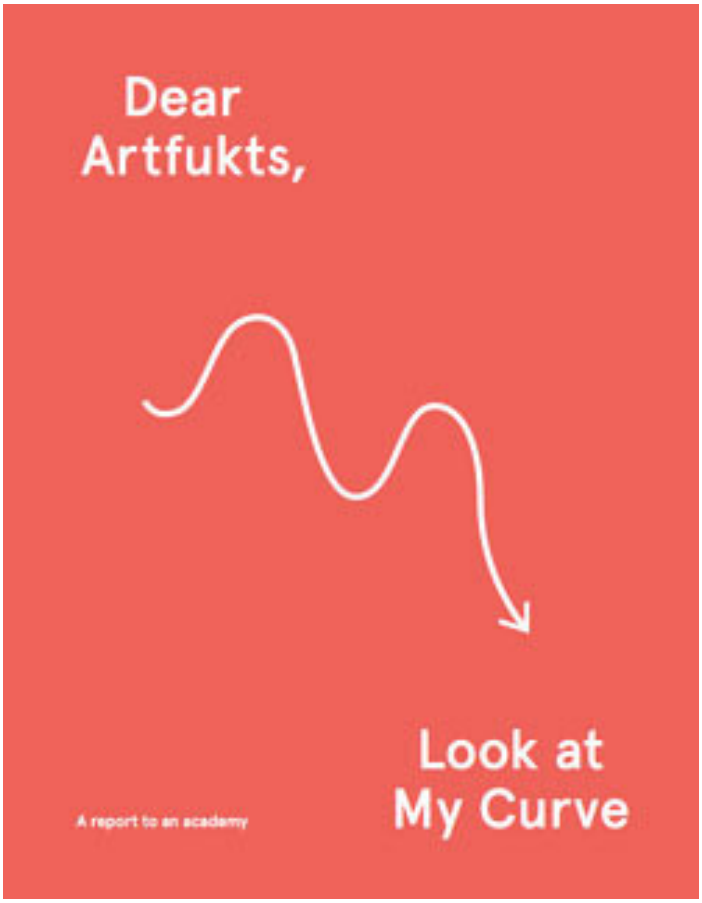
Jeff Koons's oil on canvas print Hennessy, The Civilized Way to Lay Down the Law (1986) appropriates the Hennessy ad in the image above.

The Grail succeeds as a commodity precisely insofar as it is a void, an empty but infinitely suggestive signifier that can be interpreted in numerous ways. But what does the esoteric and New Age "dematerialization" of the Grail—which, again, is a privileged object for the discussion of *Schein* and shine—mean for the production of shine? If the grail—i.e., value –is to be located in us, then which consequences does this have for contemporary shine? In the politico-aesthetic economy of the Grail, its increasing symbolization and occultation suggest that once again, all that it solid is in the process of melting into thin air.

3. Post-Visual Shine

In today's algorithmic cultural economy, as Jonathan Crary put it, "to be preoccupied with the aesthetic properties of digital imagery … is to evade the subordination of the image to a broad field of non-visual operations and requirements."[35] Is shine, then, now doubly superficial? Of course, the commodity fetish and its shine is always partly the result of nonvisual operations. This, after all, was the point of the "demystification" of the commodity fetish and the spectacle, and of Adorno's critique of Wagner. Is it not just as applicable to Apple and its shiny products, and their production in China? We could apply this kind of Marxian analysis just as well to the black athletes in Koons's *Equilibrium* ads or to the shine sold to Tiqqun's "Young-Girl" by lifestyle magazines.[36]

So what, if anything, has changed? The technological intensification of opacity has made the jump from merely quantitative to qualitative. Production of phones in China is one thing; algorithmic high-frequency trading impacting not only the value of companies but the fate of whole nations is another. Now that our political techno-economy is producing invisibilities to such an extent that we might polemically state that we inhabit a post-visual culture, images are no longer even fetishistic disavowals of



Cover of Natascha Sadr Haghighian's essay "Dear Artfukts, Look at my Curve: A Report to an Academy"

productive relations but rather means of production among others. Are films still made to be watched, or to watch us? Are products not already a kind of reconnaissance drones, smart Spimes (to use Bruce Sterling's term) that cannot only be tracked across networks, but that also track us in return, accruing information on their users?[37] What we need is not a neoscholastic ontology but a form of *psycho materialism* that acknowledges that the always instable and nonlinear dialectic of subject and object is now one of subject, object, and algorithm.[38]

The subject's shiny self-presentation aside; What about the diffused, scattered *shining* of likes, followers, Google analytics, and page views? What we need are new, counterintuitive concepts. What about *dark shine*, in analogy to dark matter? Is dark shine not what characterizes the world of server centers and of screens that could increasingly just as well go black, as the programs are increasingly autonomous agents making split-second decisions beyond human intervention?[39] Are we not already taken over by our own algorithmic doppelgangers, as Natascha Sadr Haghighian suggests in her essay "Dear Artfukts," in which she grapples with her descending curve on Artfacts.net?[40] Meanwhile, the system's engine is fuelled by a more literal kind of dark shine: our economy radiates with nuclear energy.

In a postvisual culture, the old strategy of revealing the hidden abodes of production, or revealing the production of shine, is insufficient. Shine is now a black box, and revealing its workings can—to the extent that it is possible—certainly be important, but it is ultimately more crucial to repurpose and reprogram it. Alexander Galloway has argued that in the age of "opaque technological [devices] for which only the inputs and outputs are known," we must invert the Marxian call to "descend into the hidden abode of production" (thus presumably demystifing the commodity): what matters today is no longer "illuminating the black box by decoding it," but rather "functionalizing the black box by programming it."[41] When Sadr Hahgighian creates alternate biographies with her Bioswop website or engages with her drooping career graph on Artfacts.net, these are modes of engaging with the invisible grail—with the dark shine—of autoproductivity and autocontrol, with life as data provider and algorithmic feedback loop.

X

Sven Lütticken is associate professor at Leiden University's Academy of Creative and Performing Arts / PhDArts, and he coordinates the research master's track Critical Studies in Art and Culture at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His most recent books are *Objections: Forms of Abstraction, Vol. 1* (Sternberg Press, 2022) and the critical reader *Art and Autonomy* (Afterall, 2022).

1
Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993).

2
Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester/Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 19.

3
The term was introduced by Quentin Meillassoux; see Harman's discussion in *The Quad ruple Object,* 136–137.

4
Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt, "Economic Subjectivities in Crisis," in *And M aterials and Money and Crisis* (Vienna/Cologne: MUMOK/Walther König, 2013), 98, 101.

5
Ibid., 98.

6
Ibid.

7
Hal Foster, "(Dis)Agreeable Objects" and Brian Wallis, "A Product You Could Kill For," in *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 17, 34.

8
Foster's most extensive discussion of Baudrillard is however relegated to a footnote—note 15.

9
G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I. Werke 13* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 151.

10
English translation adapted from https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/lectures4.htm . The original in German reads: "Es ist etwas ganz anderes, wenn der Geist ein blosses Ding, wie die Hostie als solche, oder irgendeinen Stein, Holz, ein schlechtes Bild vor sich hat oder ein geistvolles Gemälde, ein schönes Werk der Skulptur, wo sich Seele zu Seele und Geist zu Geist verhält. Dort ist der Geist ausser sich, gebunden an ein ihm schlechthin Anderes, welches das Sinnliche, Ungeistliche ist. Hier aber ist das Sinnliche ein Schönes und die Geistige Form das in ihm Beseelende und ein in sich selbst Wahres." G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte. Werke 12* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 488-489.

11
Ibid., 489.

12
"Gebundensein an ein Sinnliches, an ein gemeines Ding." Ibid., 493. English translation adapted from https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/lectures4.htm .

13
Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 151.

14
"Schein ist dialektisch als Widerschein der Wahrheit; was keinen Schein gelten lässt, wird erst recht dessen Opfer." Theodor W. Adorno, "Veblens Angriff auf die Kultur," in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Gesammelte Schriften 10.I,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 84. Author's translation.

15
"[D]as absolute Kunstwerk trifft sich mit der absoluten Ware." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am main, 1970), 39. I agree with Martin that translations of this passage that use verbs such as "merging" and "converging" are inadequate. Stewart Martin, "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity," *Radical Philosophy* 146 (Nov.–Dec. 2007): 24 (note 18).

16
Martin, ibid., 23.

17
Ibid., 19.

18
See for instance the essays "Im Jeu de Paume gekritzelt" (on impressionism) and "Filmtransparente" (1966) in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I* , 321-325, 353-361.

19
Jeff Wall's 1999 photograph of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, *Morning Cleaning*, in which the cleaner is male, reads like an interiorized, Friedean version of Bloom's image.

20
Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* in *Die musikalischen Monographien. Gesammelte Schriften 13* , ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 86.

21
"Die Verdeckung der Produktion durch die Erscheinung des Produkts ist das Formgesetzt Richard Wagners. Das Produkt präsentiert sich als selbst Produzierendes: daher auch der Primat von Leitton und Chroma. Indem die ästhetische Erscheinung keinen Blick mehr durchlässt auf Kräfte und Bedingungen ihres realen Produziertseins, erhebt ihr Schein als lückenloser den Anspruch des Seins." Ibid., 82. Translation adapted by the author from Rodney Livingstone's English translation.

22
"Wie die ausgestellten Konsumgüter von Wagners Epoche den Käufermassen einzig noch ihre phänomenale Seite Seite verlockend zukehren und damit ihren bloss phänomenalen Charakter, nämlich ihre Unterreichbarkeit, vergessen machen, so tendieren die Wagnerschen Opern in der Phantasmagorie zur Ware. Ihre Tableaux nehmen Ausstellungscharakter an." Ibid., 86.

23
Ibid., 83.

24
The Grail figured, of course, in the Arthurian Revival that was such a key characteristic of English Romanticism, for instance in Tennyson's work. In Germany, it was analyzed earnestly as an aesthetico-religious symbol in the context of Romantic and Idealist mythology by authors such as Joseph von Görres, the introduction to whose 1813 *Lohengrin* was read by Wagner. Note that in this section of the present text, I reuse some elements from my earlier essay "Grail for Sale," *HTV* no. 66 (Nov.–Dec.2006): 7–13.

25
See Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004).

26
Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* , 41.

27
Ibid., 42.

28
Ibid., 44.

29
Richard Wagner, *The Wibelungen* (1848), trans. William Ashton Ellis https://web.archive.org/web/20141023142203/http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagwibel.htm . On *Die Wibelungen*, see also Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* , 36–39.

30
Wagner, *The Wibelungen.*

31
See http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-mid-wales-28682102 .

32
Bob McCabe , *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam* (London: Orion, 1999), 48.

33
Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des troubadours: De Parsifal à Don Quichotte* (Paris: Sansot, 1906); Arthur Edward Waite, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal: Its Legends and Symbolism, Considered in their Affinity with Certain Mysteries of Initiation and other Traces of a Secret Tradition in Christian Times* (London: Rebman, 1909); Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1920); René Guénon, *Le Roi du monde* (Paris: Charles Bosse, 1927); Otto Rahn , *Kreuzzug gegen den Gral. Die Tragödie des Katharismus* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Urban, 1933).

34
The identification of the Grail with the "bloodline" of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) was taken into a quasi-feminist New Age direction by Margaret Starbird in *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1993), which was reiterated in Dan Brown's bestselling potboiler *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

35
Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 47.

36
Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* , trans. Ariana Reines (New York: Semiotexte, 2012).

37
Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

38
"Psycho Materialism" is the title of a symposium organized by Kerstin Stakemeier and Tim Voss in Worpswede.

39
See Brian Holmes, "Information's Metropolis: Chicago and the New Nature of Finance," and especially Karin Knorr Cetina, "What if the Screens Went Black? The Coming of Software Agents," both in Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, *Volatile Smile* (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2014), 28–53, 112–127.

40
Natascha Sadr Haghighian, "Dear Artfukts, Look at My Curve: A Report to an Academy," in *9 Artists* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2013), 4–19.

41
Alexander R. Galloway, "Black Box, Black Bloc," in *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggle* , ed. Benjamin Noys (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2011), 239, 244.

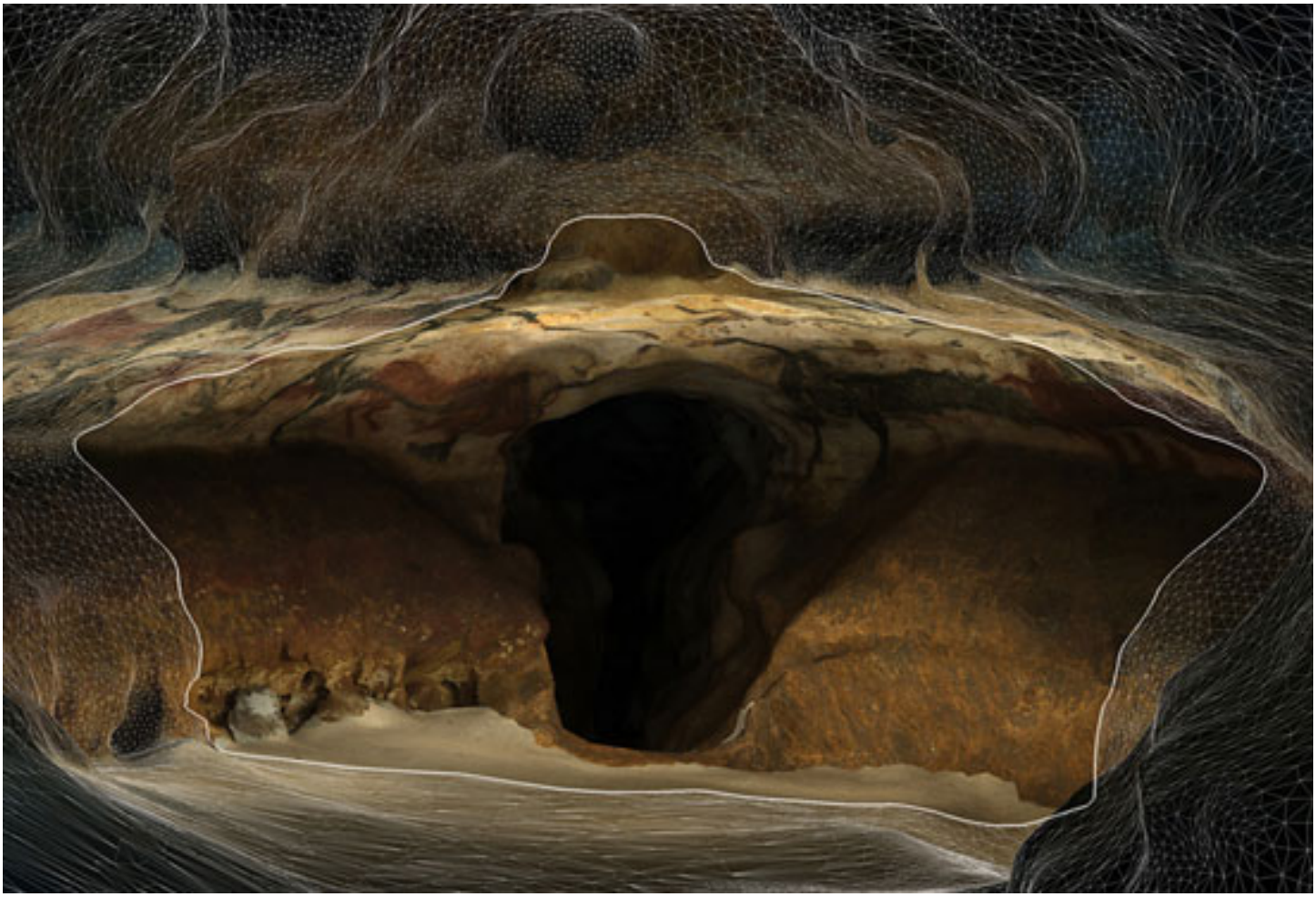
Brian Kuan Wood

Is it Heavy or Is it Light?

Even if we are to resign ourselves to thinking of artworks as produced by structural or economic conditions, we end up bumping into a larger problem of having a hard time locating the way structural or economic conditions actually work today. Maybe we are still inside the long historical tail of institutional critique trying to identify coercive structures when actually most of the institutions have already been defunded. Or maybe it's a new formal regime altogether, amplifying Lippard's pronouncement that conceptualism dematerialized art's formal language in favor of time-based systems and ephemeral events.[1] The material support, so to speak, became information. Only now we are dealing with a situation where the ephemerality of abstract concepts has become monstrous in its capacity to absorb financial values and meaning effects alike into a confusing soup of affective or speculative projections. And these effects decide the status and the fate of not only art objects, but entire cities, countries, and economies in a way that is difficult to describe or represent, and yet relies almost primarily on visibility and spectacle in order to transmit its information across the long distances of the planet. Under a regime of visibility that usurps older notions of substance, what figures can we use to affirm its surface effects, to understand its refractive powers, to crack open its hidden energies and make its calculus work for us and not against us? How has this new superficiality realized and flipped the politics of spectacle described by Debord? And why should we take a closer look at the sun?

In its time, the dematerialization of art carried a liberating spin—freedom from objects can be easily understood in idealist terms as a freedom from the burdensome worldly interests that surround material things, from scarcity and economic value. And of course critics of the way Lippard's claims have been inherited are always quick to point out how the art establishment had to then fetishize and archive the material artifacts of conceptual works, essentially stuffing the Idea back into its material support for an indexical historical record that restores the status quo of exhibiting objects as such. And while this is usually thought to show the conservatism of an art establishment with the market always in mind, it also offers a crucial instance where physical material and abstract information are shown to rely upon each other mutually. Yes, the works needed a material base in order to be catalogued, historicized, remembered, and sold, but they also needed a material artifact in order to be visible in the first place, whether as object or as information.

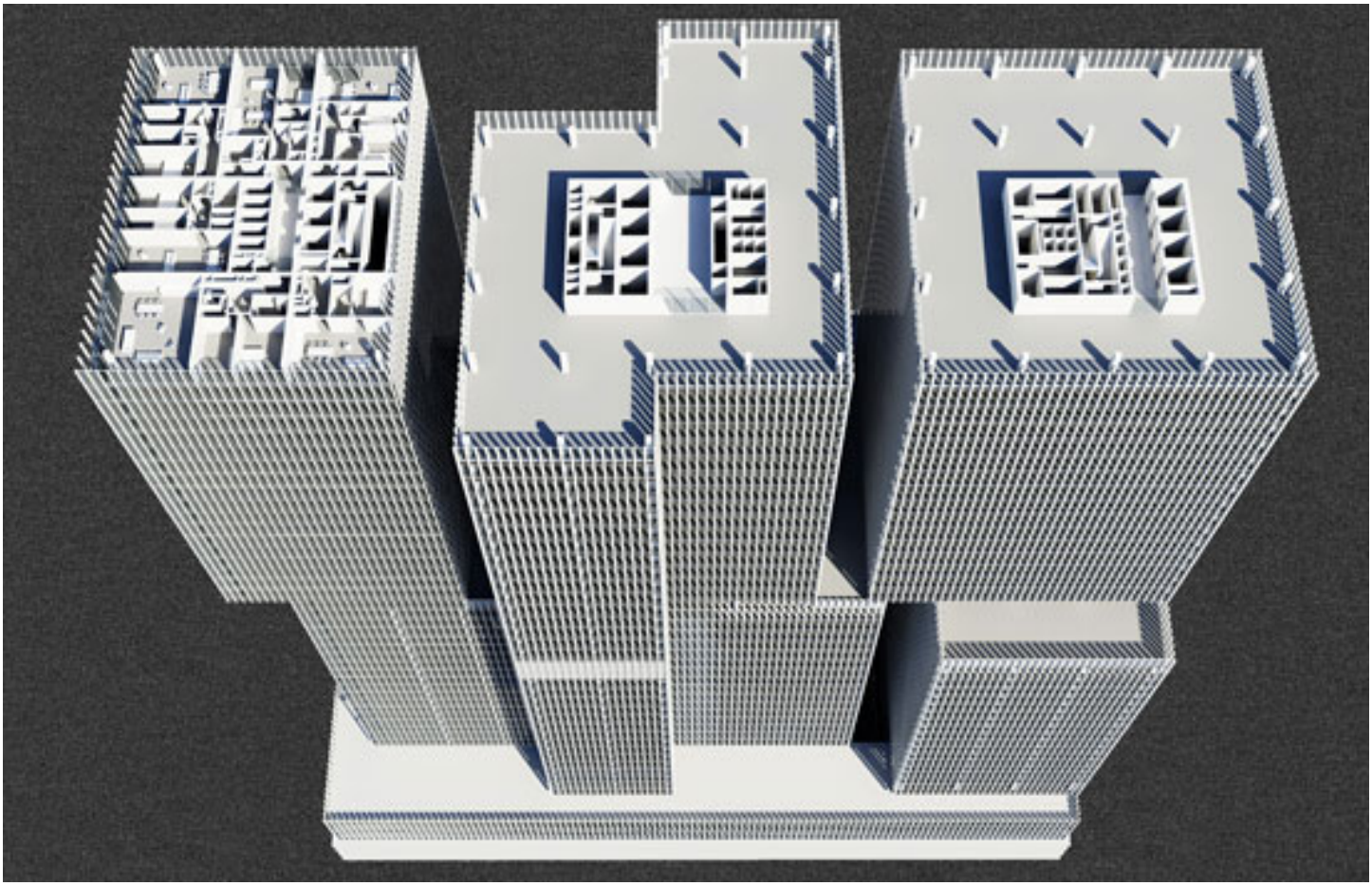
Now, for some time, information has been central to not only the development and distribution of artworks, but to their visibility as such. And the questions opened up by Lippard and conceptual artists in the early days of the information-based economy should not be understood as a happier road not taken in the development of a utopian, fully abstract artwork, but rather as the beginning of a road that has since been taken all the way to the end. The museums that preserved the artifacts of conceptual



Visitors with 3-D glasses will sit facing a giant screen at the Lascaux Centre International de l'art Pariétal Montignac-Lascaux where a scanned replica of the caves will provide a substitute experience to the rapidly eroding original.

works, and the galleries that sold them, knew very well that the material support of conceptual artworks, or immaterial ideas for that matter, are what makes them part of a global economy in which their visibility decides whether they exist in the first place. The question of visibility has become so important that notions of information or materiality become subordinate to the point of irrelevance. But it may be useful to rescue them in order to understand how an economy of visibility necessarily adjusts the status of material or information to suit its purposes in often paradoxical ways, by appearing to privilege their optical, emotive, or sexy qualities over, and often as, their substantial characteristics. We might say that we now function so purely in the realm of the idea that any substance becomes ephemeral regardless of whether it is art or not.[2] Heavy and light material come to be married by a logistical calculus concerned primarily with the amount of energy they can mobilize and release.[3] Or it becomes a matter of mood. Do you like it? Do you feel it to be heavy or light?

Today it seems almost impossible to reconcile the output of two forms of labor: one that arrests working bodies in space and time over the long term—over days, weeks, years, lifetimes, and generations—and another that takes place in an instant, in the time it takes for a camera shutter to snap or for a commercial spot to be shot and broadcast in all directions to project an instant of work across the earth. We are still trying to figure out how capital pools around commodities that can be copied and distributed at no cost. The models for doing so only become more fleeting as audiences become more vast and unpredictable. Interns exchange free labor for knowledge. But then someone like Eric Glatt, a former AIG employee who turned into a labor activist after being fired from AIG and taking on an internship as an accountant, put it eloquently: "I can't tell my landlord to give me free rent so he can gain experience as a landlord."[4] But a sharing economy booster might say that Glatt could have posted his apartment on Airbnb and turned a profit to subsidize his internship, essentially gluing together multiple extractive enterprises into a tangle that might look ethical or at least feel fair-ish. The distributed sharing economy now seems to show us that the property speculation that



Oma architects' De Rotterdam building (2013) is conceived as three interconnected mixed-use towers, shown here top-down. Construction started at the end of 2009 and reached completion in 2013.

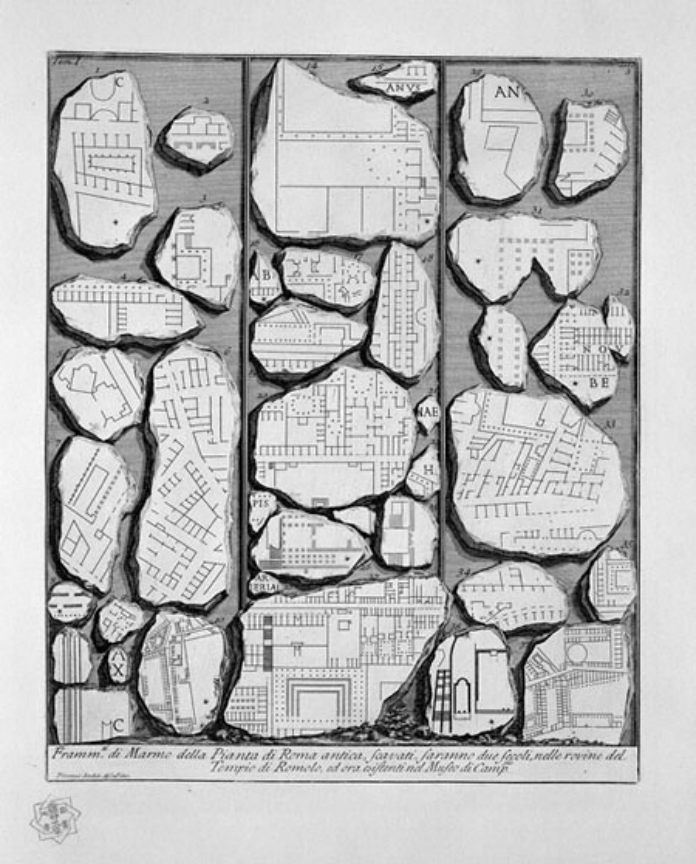
broke the markets in 2007–08 was actually no small matter at all, but actually a profound antimatter made out of regimes of visuality and visibility that are so sophisticated that we need technologies developed in the contemporary arts to untangle the meshing of their symbolic, informational, and economic values. And of course the contemporary arts are at the same time bound up in that same tangle.

Bubble Rubble

Take Rotterdam for instance, which after 2007 found a massive volume of its office spaces empty due to a sagging economy—around 600,000 square meters, which is really a lot for a small city like Rotterdam.[5] It's a problem in general for the Netherlands, but while a city like Amsterdam stopped its municipal building projects, Rotterdam accelerated construction with the idea that increased building activity would provide an economic stimulant. It was basically building more buildings for fewer people. The great example is Rem Koolhaas's De Rotterdam building, which was designed in 1998 but languished until construction began finally in 2009, actually at a moment when the market collapse lowered the cost of construction materials, making it possible for the developers to begin the 160,000 m2 building (apparently the largest in Europe).[6] The municipality basically guaranteed the developers full occupancy for ten years, so the city uses its pull to get businesses and tenants into the building, effectively guaranteeing rent so that the developers can cover their costs. And the city gets its trophy for its skyline.

Faced with a slumping economy, the city invested in building its image and its landscape. This is the logic of speculation: you simply trade a fleeting material for a blueprint, a disappointment for a promise. You trade depression for a fantasy. Decay for a dream. Depression into flash and glimmer. A dead end for a vision. Defeat for spectacle. But what they are actually building are buildings for no people. They are future ruins. They're still being built, but they've already come down. This is where we can begin to discern a very crucial characteristic of property speculation in which two timescales of future vision and material reality merge in a peculiar way, mashing desire with the laws of gravity to produce material anachronisms frozen in space. When the difference between building

and destroying disappears, we enter into a totally different sort of timescale in which you basically have to live through birth and death simultaneously, and over and over again, as if they are the same.[7] Or, consider Reza Negarestani's convincing description of *decay* as "positioning itself on the substratum of survival, in order to indefinitely postpone death and absolute disappearance. In decay, the being survives by blurring into other beings, without losing all its ontological registers. In no way does decay wipe out or terminate; on the contrary it keeps alive."[8]



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, The Roman Antiquities, t. 1, Plate III. Map of Ancient Rome and Forma Urbis, 1756. Etching.

With all this in mind it becomes interesting to revisit Guy Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle*, his treatise on mass visuality as collective desire, on spectacle as a kind of negative commons that affirms surface and appearance at the expense of substance—in particular, its passages on the way spectacle rearranges the status of life and death: "Even a 'youth-capital,' contrived for each and all and put to the most mediocre uses, could never acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital. This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life."[9] For Debord, the abstraction machine of spectacle was the very site of alienation and of the severing of labor from the source of that labor, the worker. And of course he was right—that's what spectacle is and that's what it does. But we have come a long way since then. And it hasn't gotten any better, just more interesting. Even Debord recognized that the forms of vision deployed by spectacle are not to be underestimated as belonging only to some dreamy imaginary. In fact they become concrete very quickly. As Debord puts it, "The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."[10]

This material translation of a world of vision is where Debord's description of spectacle begins to sound similar to the self-fulfilling prophecies of financial speculation, where projections of value produce value, essentially through feeling, through a vague form of calculation called emotion, unscientific and imprecise. The dictionary defines speculation as "the forming of a theory or conjecture without firm evidence."[11] As David Graeber has written, "unmoored from any legal or community constraints, [financial speculation] was capable of producing results that seemed to verge on insanity."[12] Speculation is a form of vision that produces a figure without a ground.[13] But crucially, within the sphere of capital it is a form of vision produced by desire, and it is according to this vision that those desires sculpt goods and commodities by way of wacky predestination. But to see only commodities as the concretization of this sphere of optics would be to underestimate the profound effects of financial speculation on the basic forces that orient our very sense of being in the world.

Spectacular Survival

Socialists and classical conservatives who regret the loss of social security and stability in general often criticize the waves of deregulation that liquidated institutional structures on a massive scale.[14] But what was the structure that went missing? Was it the welfare state, which Jan Myrdal, son of pioneering Swedish Social Democrats Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, celebrated when he glowingly described the lighting fixtures of his childhood social democratic paradise in ominously divinatory terms as casting "light without shadows"?[15] Was it to be found in the Third Way economics of John Maynard Keynes, who was anyhow the first chairman of what was to become Arts Council England following World War II, and who used his influence to ensure that the funding body reported directly to the Treasury rather than to any ministry in order to keep art at "arm's length" from government? Supposedly this was done to preclude attempts at turning artists into state propagandists and to preserve the artist's innocence as a somewhat moronic flaneur-liberal floating through the ether who "walks

Milton Friedman, associated with Gary Becker via the Chicago School, gazes at the freshly minted currency neoliberalism sought to deregulate.

where the breath of spirit blows him" and who "cannot be told his direction; he does not know it himself."[16]

Whatever the socialist background of such a Keynesian approach to arts funding, Keynes's very position as head of the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it was called at the time, was to anchor the objectivity of the funding body by distancing it from the state, but only by paradoxically placing it closer to capital, however public. It reflects a line of thinking that would take hold later, namely that capital freed from jurisdiction flows free of ideology. And his artist is nothing if not liberated, following the whims of wind and weather to the Abstract Expressionist canvas or megalomaniac space junk he deigns to dream up and submit to the council for dutiful approval or disproval based on its inherent merits and qualities, naturally.

But in the meantime many of the people who never related much to the nationalist or identitarian terms by which state structures became benefactors in the first place are quieter in their expressions of disdain. Immigrants and artists and deviants whose needs and desires were never reflected by the great society projected by even the healthiest welfare states knew instability before, just as they know it now. They were never really cared for that much, or they might have benefitted from the state not as citizens but as criminals extracting a benefit.[17] And in some strange way their knowledge of the welfare state's ebbs and flows has made many of them the exemplary survivors of its decay as much as its most expert navigators. And it seems likely that their shape-shifting adaptive abilities can now only shift from one parasitical register to another, only this time constitutive and definitive. Many people complain that there are no longer any courageous or radical artistic positions anymore, but at the same time, basically anyone who commits themselves in some capacity to art—and, for that matter, many who don't—is subject to a condition so precarious that they have to direct every single fiber of their being into generating the entrepreneurial gestures that guarantee their survival. Is this not radical? Yes, it doesn't register in any kind of public sphere or collective administrative or governmental grand project, but that is very simply because its medium is the borderline between life and death. We now have to speculate just to survive. Maybe we always did.

In the insurance business they have something called a "negative externality," which describes how the consequences or cost of a decision could compromise its foundation and render it inefficient and thus without utility. It is often used in environmental and climate change discourse to describe the mitigation costs of pollution. It is the deathlike waste product that comes out the other end. It is what scares off investors. It is the anger of the people or the blizzard that no one saw coming. The negative

Protected with Eclipse Shades to shield their eyes, inhabitants of Dhulia Gach village, India, look at a solar eclipse, date unknown.

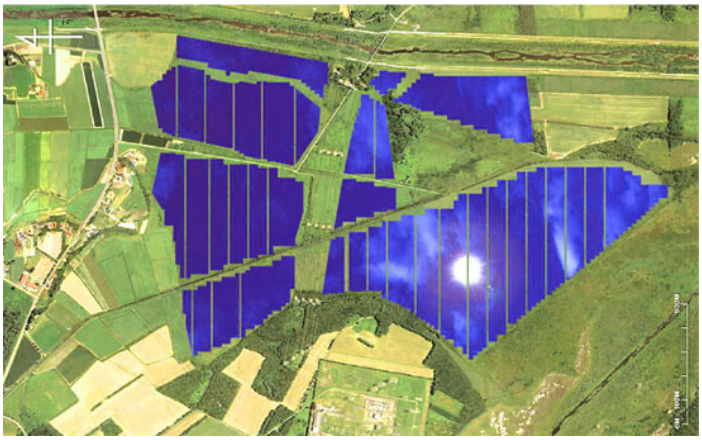
externality is the perpetually unstable and unknowable thing that insurance and social welfare alike exist to anticipate and buffer against. It is the exteriority that never goes away no matter what because it is always by definition beyond calculus and control. Instability by definition defers to these externalities and uses technologies of insurance to account for them.

Here it is interesting to note Foucault's fascination, only a few years after May 1968 in France, with US neoliberalism, most notably in his reading of the Chicago School neoliberal economist Gary Becker in his seminars at the Collège de France in 1978–79.[18] Noting the tendency among US neoliberals to apply the logic of economic calculus to pretty much everything, Foucault goes on to defend the role of economists as providing a solution for developing a theory of human behavior outside of legal or moral prescriptions capable of envisioning a new kind of liberty.[19] Key for Foucault was the distinction between Marxian abstract labor and the neoliberal redefinition of abstract labor in relation to classical economics. According to Foucault, the neoliberal view has it that it is not actually capital that abstracts labor but Marxian classical economic theory itself that cannot grasp a certain value that escapes quantification and rationalization due to the unstable factor of time, which cannot be fixed to labor.[20] The interesting thing here is that capital is never really understood to reconcile this instability, but rather refracts onto all of the factors outside of government or regulation that can't really be stabilized by anyone anyhow.

Solar Capital

But if the unfixed and unquantifiable, abstract aspects of value take over, what becomes of capital? Or rather, what does capital become? Unstable finance-based economies and information networks alike have taught us that it becomes a matter of whims and flights of fancy, of emotional projection, sentiment, hallucination, refractive surfaces, and illusions, of the sublimation of life and death into a symbolic order that supersedes organic processes. And meanwhile, geopolitical forces have for some time rearranged themselves not around ideological boundaries, but around organic sources of energy: in oil, gas, mineral deposits. Just as abstraction converts matter into spectacle and back, it repurposes power in a political sense as energy in the sense of electricity. Instability preys upon and simultaneously intensifies life forces, merging the function of fuel and capital. The present role of governments as economic managers may in fact mark a

transition to being managers, or rather hoarders, of vital energies and life forces that merge the applications of adrenaline-fueled software, knowledge, or image production with the harvesting of fuel sources from the earth, oceans, and atmosphere. What, then, is the supreme life force, the source of all energy for organic life? It is the sun.[21] This must have been what Michel Serres had in mind when he wrote that "the real, ultimate capital is the sun."[22]



Solar panels reflect the sun in the 111-MW SoftBank Tomatoh Abira Solar Park, Japan.

Serres points to a master regime of capital that emerges when the money system gives way to energy.[23] And while green economy enthusiasts might think of this as a positive step in which capital starts to assume cozy and warm naturalistic qualities, a more interesting approach might still reside in the question of who defends this capital and who opposes it. The sun is the cosmic dictator of this energetic regime, the material and structural limit we cannot cross, and the king that would need to be killed in order to claim a life and death not pegged to its light. As Reza Negarestani has written, "The idea of ecological emancipation must be divorced from the simultaneously vitalistic and necrocratic relationship between the Earth and the Sun."[24] But this is clearly a radical proposition—arguably even more than to kill God, which is an idea with a symbolic and mythical hold over life. But to kill the sun would seem to be a matter of utter self-annihilation, as it is, quite literally, the source of our own life. Donna Haraway has a very interesting passage in her *Cyborg Manifesto* where she suggests that the sun is not only the source for organic life, but also the substance of a postindustrial communication and exchange that exceeds and exhausts the capacities of people. For Haraway, sunshine is even responsible for artificial life:

> Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile—a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore. People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence.[25]

But actually one of the most crucial contributions to the insurrection of the sun was in fact Kazimir Malevich's own black square painting, the zero point and foundation of geometrical abstraction, coming six decades previous to Lippard's dematerialization. And while the material of the painting is dated by art historians to having been put on a canvas in 1915, in fact Malevich designated the origin of the painting as 1913, the year the black square first appeared as part of the opera *Victory Over the Sun*, for which, as set designer, Malevich collaborated with composer Mikhail Matyushkin and poet Aleksey Kruchenykh. The opera told of the sun's capture from the sky as a hegemonic timekeeper controlling the passage from night to day and the formatting of time. To defeat the sun and bury it in the earth would break its stranglehold over time and release a broader consciousness of nonlinear time, informed by the writings of P. D. Ouspensky and Charles Howard Hinton on fourth-dimensional time where past and present blur together and become a matter of perception. As El Lissitzky wrote in 1923: "the sun as the expression of old world energy is torn down from the heavens by modern man, who by virtue of his technological superiority creates his own energy source."

Malevich's black square was the sign of this eclipse, a pure negation of the sun's power and an image of the void that would replace it. Crucially though, the negativity of this void was meant to signal the courage of utterly destroying the symbolic power of an existing order, and the megalomaniac thrill of the chaos that would come after it. Following Serres, we can see Malevich's black square as an anticapitalist position fully resigned to the consequences of the collapse of the dominant order. The question today is really whether we need this courage to destroy the order, or to simply deal with the fact that it has already crumbled.

X

Earlier versions of this essay appeared in *IINN PPEERRPPEETTUUAALL PPRROODDUUCCTTIIOONN*, a newspaper published as part of SOLO SHOW, an exhibition by Robbie Williams at e-flux in 2013. Many thanks to Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Hito Steyerl, Tom Holert, Maria Lind, Mariana Silva, Kaye Cain-Nielsen, and Amal Issa for their crucial input.

Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

1
See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

2
See Joshua Simon's *Neomaterialism* book or Maria Lind's "Abstract Possible" exhibition. Also see Dieter Roelstraete's excellent essay on lightness and heft in artworks https://www.e-flux.com/journal/42/60252/the-business-on-the-unbearable-lightness-of-art/ .

3
Consider Timothy Mitchell's comparison between the logistical demands of oil and coal. As oil can be transported by water, it is more difficult to interrupt its flows between nodes than in the case of coal, which due to its weight must be transported by fixed rail line. See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* (London: Verso, 2011), 36–39.

4
Glatt interned with the production crew of the film *The Black Swan*, directed by Darren Aronofsky, about a schizophrenic ballerina http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/12/business/judge-rules-for-interns-who-sued-fox-searchlight.html?_r=0,%20https://twitter.com/ericglatt .

5
See https://web.archive.org/web/20140729005337/https://www.zus.cc/work/urban_politics/162_Schieblock.php .

6
See https://web.archive.org/web/20140531070721/http://www.ovg.nl/en/blog/de_rotterdam_verticale_stad_van_rem_koolhaas_op_hoogste_punt .

7
See the extensive work of Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture.

8
Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Victoria: re.press, 2008), 182.

9
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* , trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), 160. "The spectator's consciousness, immobilized in the falsified center of the movement of its world, no longer experiences its life as a passage toward self-realization and toward death. One who has renounced using his life can no longer admit his death. Life insurance advertisements suggest merely that he is guilty of dying without ensuring the regularity of the system after this economic loss; and the advertisement of the American way of death insists on his capacity to maintain in this encounter the greatest possible number of appearances of life. On all other fronts of the advertising onslaught, it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Even a 'youth-capital,' contrived for each and all and put to the most mediocre uses, could never acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital. This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life."

10
Debord, "Separation Perfected," no. 5 in *The Society of the Spectacle* .

11
"Speculation," *New Oxford American Dictionary* on my laptop.

12
David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 341.

13
See Hito Steyerl's "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/ .

14
There is already an accepted geopolitical and economic lineage in place to explain how we got to where we are, and it is not necessary to go too deeply into the continuum that stretches from Ayn Rand to Milton Friedman and the Chicago School to fiat currency and Bretton Woods to the 1973 oil crisis to Thatcher and Reagan and Deng Xiaoping to perestroika and 1989. It is also a bit misleading for having been assembled as a right-wing conspiracy convenient for sealing off all hope for a melancholic and impotent left that prefers all the heroic dramaturgy of fist-pumping denouncement to the darker arts of actual liberalism.

15
Thanks to Annika Eriksson for pointing this out to me. As quoted by Gertrud Sandqvist here http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.0/art.and.social.democracy Original source: Uno Ahrén, Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Gregor Paulsson, and Eskil Sundahl, acceptera (accept) *Manifesto on Modern Architecture* , Stockholm, 1931; reprinted 1980.

16
John Maynard Keynes, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 28* , ed. D. Moggridge (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 368. In the same volume Keynes also wrote, "If with state aid the material frame can be constructed, the public and the artists will do the rest between them. The muses will emerge from their dusty haunts, and supply and demand shall be their servants." Quoted in https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1028663042000255817 and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arts_Council_of_Great_Britain .

17
As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe the relation of today's student to the university: "The Only Possibly Relationship to the University Today Is a Criminal One," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Composition, 2013), 26–30.

18
See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 215–233, 239–261.

19
See http://www.law.uchicago.edu/files/file/401-bh-Becker.pdf .

20
In a conversation between François Ewald and Gary Becker at the University of Chicago https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olHF0xswbLY .

21
Thanks to Maria Lind for originally reminding me of solar energy.

22
Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 173. "The dam holds the water that comes from glaciers and from snow, from wind, clouds, heat, and cold. Coke, gas, or water power is stored heat in any case. A while back, the collection of capitals was converging on the rock made of signatures; these resources also head together toward one spot: the sun whence they come and to which they go. These reservoirs are only subsuns. Their source, far upstream, is the sun. The real, ultimate capital is the sun. Subcapitals are time functions, but our time is that of the sun. Our cosmological, astronomic, energetic, entropic, informational times, all cyclic and reversible, as well as the irreversible times of disorder and death, of life and order randomly invented—all of these intertwine in the sun. In matter of energy and of matter, only the sun creates and transforms. All kinds of materialism, and especially those that seek to account for real movement and its excess, join together with various energetics and perhaps idealisms here—they are, when all is said and done, all subcults of the sun."

23
Also see Matteo Pasquinelli's "The Contradiction of the Sun (and the Limits of a Molecular Revolt)," https://www.academia.edu/8301197/The_Contradiction_of_the_Sun_and_the_Limits_of_a_Molecular_Revolt_ .

24
Reza Negarestani, "Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss" https://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/77498/12830-solar_inferno_and_the.pdf .

25
Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 153 http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Haraway-CyborgManifesto.html .