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Editorial – "The New Brutality"

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Every December, dictionaries and language societies across the globe identify the “words of the year” – words that resonated widely during the previous twelve months. In the mid-2000s, these lists were populated with words like “contempt” and “quagmire,” “ambivalence” and “conundrum.” A few years later, dominant words included “trepidation” and “precipice” and “fail,” “vitriol” and “insidious” and “bigot.” The *OED*’s word of the year for 2012 was “omnishambles.” 2016, however, was for *OED* the year of “post-truth.” Merriam-Webster selected the word “surreal.” In the wake of Brexit and the US elections, Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and Turkey’s disregard for journalistic freedom, fake news and ever more puzzling hacks, and violence, all that violence, we are no longer just nervous about the state of the world: we are perplexed – bewildered in a wasteland of signs that were once familiar but no longer make any sense.

At what point did the balance of public discourse tip in favor of “post-truth”? When did lying, boasting, and bullying become the rules of the political game? The term “populism” does not even approximate the bad-faith tribalization and base savagery these developments elicit, or the racism and xenophobia they inspire. The degradation of the rights of women and members of the LGBTQ community is constitutive and fundamental to the cruelty and destructiveness that have run wild the past few years. Taking our cue from online discussions about “brutalism” as a sociopolitical attitude, but with a distinct awareness of the term’s architectural legacy, in this issue we propose the new brutality.

Whether one lives in the US or in Egypt, Russia or the UK, The Netherlands or Brazil, we are confronted with a public sphere that is rapidly devolving, its privileges dissolving. Consider the proto-fascism of all those extreme right movements and the spineless political opportunism of the “centrist” right. Consider the corresponding intransigent puritanism of some popular leftist factions. As the political parameters stretch, ideological positions stiffen. These zero-sum views surrender reality to the domain of statistical overlords and data-as-opinion, capitulations which are especially worrying in the context of the alt-right affect: pirates angrily plundering those postmodern achievements of intersubjectivity, deploying bots and fake news to radically undermine (for political purposes as much as for profit and fun) the “fourth estate” – the press, traditionally the last resort for checking power before an uprising or militant upheaval. In the midst of this, governance by parliamentary representation is replaced by the tyranny of popular referenda. Grassroots interest groups echo the neoliberal

reiteration of the rights of the individual. Public debates are increasingly indistinguishable from the rough and gullible “democracy” of the screen – we’re thinking here of the manipulation of algorithms through satellite websites as well as the social media echo chambers of outrage and shame. Experts are not just censored but effectively banned from the public sphere.

Indeed, all those facts liquefied into “flows” in the past decades now harden – if only for a moment – into pulp fictions, from Hillary Clinton’s pizza sex ring to the Flat Earth Society to the baseless incriminations of refugees in Germany. In times where even quality newspapers have foregone reporting in favor of opinion, their headlines churning with indeterminate snark, we no longer compete only with sensation, but with untruth itself.

What we once called civil society has fractured into countless pieces, small and hard – with little civility left between them. For whatever their material particularities, these discursive animatronics share a wholesale rejection of complexity. They induce a systemic leveling-down, a flattening of structural distinctions; they encourage a reduction of subtlety and intelligent or imaginative ambiguities in favor of monosyllabic sound bites, simplifications, and a readiness to insult and humiliate interlocutors. The new brutality is bewildering in its ability to consolidate individual, irrational, and antisocial preferences. The gangsterization of the social sphere by way of structurally rewarding and even monetizing bloodlust and naked cruelty leaves little room for argument. Politics is reduced to picking your own tribe and following a leader who could easily be a sociopath or a pyromaniac. Loyalty is a visceral issue, not a matter of reason: right or wrong, “he” is our man (as the fuss about Trump and Macron’s handshake demonstrated, the gender in this saying is certainly not accidental).

The purpose of this issue of *e-flux journal* is to take a firm stance on the new brutality, a stance beyond critical bewilderment. We declare our faith in the persistence and power of critical intelligence. We want to both reflect on the ramifications of this new brutality for cultural practices, and contemplate the extent to which the arts and humanities in the wider sense might interfere in this imaginary, dismantling it, perverting it, altering it. We have invited thinkers from across the disciplinary spectrum: new media studies and philosophy, psychoanalysis and art history, critical theory and film studies. These contributions offer strategic points of interference, positions from which to reterritorialize the debate beyond the rule of the bullies currently running it into the ground – by all appearances intentionally. The battle lines are

manifold: language (James T. Hong, Nina Power), memeticism (Geert Lovink), the gaze (Shumon Basar), child psychology (Aaron Schuster), trauma theory (Steffen Krüger), neuroplasticity and algorithms (Bifo), and even reality (Erika Balsom). If the brute operates through the fist, however tiny that fist may be, the subject theorized here comes to the debate with an open hand – the hand of Foucault’s judoka, trusting and compassionate, but always ready to take over and redirect the energy elsewhere.

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