

Editorial

01/02

In the first *e-flux journal* issue of 2023, the Ukrainian researcher and curator Kateryna Iakovlenko points our eyes at images of forests. The first is from the site of a mass grave outside Izium, a city on the Donets River in eastern Ukraine. The bodies were gone by the time the photo was taken; instead, the photographer shows medics and the surrounding woods. Another is a nineteenth-century photograph of a forest in Tasmania picturing lush trees, which on close examination conceal colonizing British officers. A more recent Instagram photograph shows a feminist Ukrainian Army volunteer living, with others, among the trees they are protecting. A final photo was captured by an occupying Russian Federation soldier's camera moments before his death outside Izium's woods. His body remains out of view; his unambiguous vantage point of the exploded forest landscape remains.

"Like a vulture that feeds on the body of a dead animal," Iakovlenko writes, "war feeds on the pain of other people." In an argument that engages the usual suspects (Sontag) and, more pressingly, Oraib Toukan's 2019 essay in this journal on what she termed "cruel images," Iakovlenko insists that certain photographs – and writing about photographs – can help those acutely feeling the pain of war become agents, narrators toward their own freedom. "For me," says Iakovlenko, "the lens of the camera has disappeared in my experience of seeing this war. And as a result, I can speak about my tragedies, loss, and pain without fear of being hurt. The only fear that exists is the fear of not being heard."

Jörg Heiser takes a hard look at certain acts of desperation carried out in the context of today's constant and concurrent crises. Heiser sees the awkward "aspect of apocalyptic messianism" visible in some of the more publicized, theatrical protests carried out in art contexts. He asks: "Whom or what do they actually disrupt in order to exert pressure on whom?" But Heiser does not condemn action. Indeed, he argues, "The messy, radical, pragmatic business of transforming our economic and social system has to start now."

For those of us who have managed to survive until now, how do we start this transformation? And what is the state of our bodies and minds? Franco "Bifo" Berardi tells us that the pandemic "has completed the process of the de-sexualization of desire that had been underway for a long time." This long stretch in time, Bifo remarks, began "as soon as the communication between conscious and sentient bodies in physical space was replaced by the exchange of semiotic stimuli in the absence of bodies."

e-flux journal #133 — february 2023
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In this issue, bodies include celestial entities and national corpses as much as human ones. In an essay organized by astronomical headings – Portuguese names for stars comprising the Southern Cross constellation – the artist Thotti, who is from Rio de Janeiro, points to a light “only visible at the very edge of the world.” This light, which Thotti says surely revealed the decayed body of Magellan, is “a torturous cross rather than fire or flame, this light hurts more in its distance than its encounter – already impossible without a name for summoning it.”

In “We Too Were Modern,” part one of a three-part essay series, Thotti confronts the strange impulse to return to a lost Edenic world that can be seen in colonial modernity, revolutionary thinking, and Jair Bolsonaro’s blind pyromania. Through Bolsonaro, like many right-wing populist leaders recently, Brazil experienced “not a conservative counterrevolution but,” Thotti says, “a late distorted Jacobinism, which, rather than confronting an *I* and a *now* with a lost world, instead manufactured such a lost world by convincing itself that the Terror is actually a restoration.” Prior attempts may be linked, as Thotti maintains, to Robespierre and Jacques-Louis David’s pamphlets urging French citizens to spruce up their homes at the height of revolutionary violence. These pamphlets, written for the 1794 Festival of the Supreme Being, consist “in one of the most naive demonstrations of nostalgia in the bosom of culture.” The revolutionaries urged fellow *citoyens* “to beautify their homes with flowers and wreaths in a clumsy attempt to turn the blood of the guillotine into a trail back to a new garden of Eden.” One pole of a national body’s constant transit, Thotti says, is an object without belonging.

In his inaugural essay as a contributing editor to *e-flux journal*, Serubiri Moses reads – and illuminates with an opening toward expanded apertures – two decades of the critic David Teh’s writing on video art in Southeast Asia. Teh, as Moses explains, challenges “the relevance of the ‘nation’ as a paradigm for thinking art.” Teh writes that “in Asia at least, the frame of national modernity has done less and less to illuminate the work of contemporary artists intent on stepping beyond it in various ways,” and holds that a contemporary counter-history of the modern should account for today’s “supranational” contexts. Moses explains the stakes further: “This notion of the ‘supranational’ appears in Teh’s writing as a salve or balm for the chaotic entrapment of state capture within which *all* history remains. But,” as Moses crucially asks, “what is this *all*

history?”

To turn again to images: what is a still, or moving, or “sensitive” image’s place and its current modes of action in this “*all* history” – or counter-history, or any other way of telling the stories of art, death, love, survival, cosmologies, and so on – including, as Iakovlenko points out, the history that is actively being created by wars and other competing realities? Beny Wagner, in these pages, also urges us to look at the material substrate of moving as it evolves. As Wagner says, “The logic of consumption has been continuously reinscribed onto the boundaries of the camera-body-screen nexus.” In a text on operational images, following Harun Farocki, Jussi Parikka advises everyone who reads images as operational to look for detail, for nuance. Today we have to resist what Parikka classifies as “the temptation to pack all sorts of abstractions – and abstract images of technical and calculational use – into one box, implying a kind of Enlightenment gone awry, a stream of violence and extraction that is merely about military power in the restricted sense of warfare.” We should continue to look at “the operational violence of capitalism” and “the colonial uses and functions of measurement and their neocolonial forms,” Parikka maintains. But standing against abstraction just for the sake of taking a stand is misguided, “leading us to insufficiently nuanced readings about technical images.” In a landscape that includes “environmental imaging, remote sensing, AI, and platform culture,” Parikka writes, “we can no longer afford to miss the more detailed high-res insights.”

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