

Editorial

01/02

In Poland, the Law and Order Party has fired a curator for promoting Jewish themes. A Catholic Nationalist is chief adviser to American president-elect Donald Trump. Hungary's right-wing government threatens the Lukács archive with destruction. Modi's BJP arrests a college student president for insulting "Mother India." Theresa May replaces paintings in 10 Downing Street with framed pictures of her own quotes.

The curtain rises on the second century since the Russian Revolution to reveal a lifeworld beset with problems shocking in their undead familiarity. It is true that the future is unknown and invisible, but not everything invisible and unknown contains the future. The invisible unknown includes both what hides backstage, waiting to emerge, and what persists silently outside the theater of our perception without becoming either past or future. For the urban form-of-life, the political rematerialization of the fascist program is horrifying in the proper, supernatural sense. Natives of an undiscovered country, the undead are only the unknown invisible made visible but still unknown. Maybe zombies are just what angels look like to those who are still breathing. Maybe worship is the safest kind of fear.

Montesquieu thought that principles were decentralized forces like electricity or heat: to the extent that we generate virtue, we live as a republic; to the extent that we generate honor, we live in a monarchy; and to the extent that we generate fear, we live under despotism. Defeating despotism means reducing fear – a process that begins by locating the necessary concept. Every horror movie knows this to be true: each monster-villain has a logic that, once deciphered, lets them be neutralized. Synthesizing images into concepts is how we work to keep each other safe. In this vein, Liam Gillick considers the derivative architecture of Trump Tower in Manhattan to emphasize its minimal familiarity.

Amelia Groom gives new meaning to the term "permanent collection" when she visits the Ōtsuka Museum of Art, where images of the art-historical canon have been printed onto indestructible ceramic plates. The militant corpse of reanimated nationalism insists on a similarly compulsive vitality, albeit with far more sinister intentions. Earlier this year, Hito Steyerl made the connection between contemporary art, hoarding, and the current fascist resurgence. In a very real sense, the art world is a form of international monetary sovereignty that does not answer to the national kind. Art is a sort of counter-distribution by global social fiat: a clear and present example of the irreducibly collective moment in any process of material validation. Art's inclusion in the hoard –

e-flux journal #78 — december 2016
Editorial

deep in the belly of the freeports – is evidence of an actually existing international socialism, however limited, corrupt, or unconscious. When value exceeds its grasp, capital makes war, as Maurizio Lazzarato and Éric Alliez address in their entwined history “To Our Enemies.”

The relative independence of the value-process is one reason why artists and intellectuals must resist the temptation to join the orgiastic production of fear – not because things are safe, but because they are so dangerous. Artists are empathy dealers, after all, as Kara Walker has recently reminded us. George Eliot insisted that we are only democratic to the extent that we generate empathy, because it is only by force of empathy that law can rule. Democracy is always available to us, in every circumstance; it is only as far away as the next moment of empathy. Étienne Balibar locates a similar, supplemental logic in the contradictory concept of equality lurking beneath the “Hyperbolic Proposition” that was the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. With “Geontologies,” Elizabeth Povinelli gives us a concept worthy of the reality, an effort to consider not the living and the dead, but the presence of both life and death on the one hand, and their total absence on the other. What does it mean to think the extinction not of a given species but of the categories of life and death *in toto*?

Decentering these figures means considering other forms of agency. In “The Coming ’17,” Franco “Bifo” Berardi argues that we cannot recreate the past century’s revolution, but must look to a new class of dispersed digital laborers for the architecture of emancipation. In this spirit, Geert Lovink interviews Yuk Hui about the status of the digital object and what the phenomenological tradition can teach us about how we stage our understanding of data. Kirsty Robertson observes a different kind of hybrid object in the trajectory of “Plastiglomerate,” the strange material made when beach bonfires fuse sand and plastic garbage. Are these personworks Mother Earth returning Smithson’s favor? Has Gaia already begun making art from residual human matter?

×

02/02

e-flux journal #78 — december 2016
Editorial