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Editorial

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What does the democratization of image production really accomplish beyond opening channels of communication? Ironically, the liberation of the voice as a means of announcing oneself and one's views can be seen as a way of absorbing the brunt of more pressing questions concerning the distribution of actual material resources, as an escape from the pursuit of more equitable relationships with regard not just to representation, but also to the distribution of property and knowledge – the power to determine one's own circumstances. At stake is really a way of liberating the means to decide one's own way of living, of being at home or making a home in the world.

When a central authority, such as a state or corporate body, controls the production of images, it makes sense that those images be treated as contested sites, as emblems of ideological activity. But when the means of production become widely diffused, democratized, the contested site seems to split, prompting firstly the question of what conventions invisibly determine what is seen and what is not, and, secondly, of how these widely available means of production alter the material of the images themselves. In their cheapness, they serve as insignificant documents of reality, but in a coordinated, aggregate volume, they constitute an indisputable political force.

Hito Steyerl defends the material of the poor, low-resolution image – the 35 mm cinematic spectacle or obscure video essay that has resorted to marketing its body as a cheap preview on the roadside of broadband Internet connections. A shadow of its original self, this “Wretched of the Screen” meets demand at the expense of its original resolution, gaining velocity and losing quality as it travels. But at the same time, the poor image reflects and even surpasses earlier calls for “imperfect cinema,” grassroots distribution, and a public sphere outside state control and copyright law.

Paul Chan questions whether the field of art, in attempting to speak to the urgent concerns of the world, has given up its own grounding in exchange for a functional role “as the embodiment of an inhuman social process becoming conscious of its own legitimacy as the expression of human progress.” In search of a useful role in addressing the social and economic forces that propel the world, does art become a redundant – even complicit – form of window dressing for the status quo? In seeking to belong, does art itself become “possessed”?

Thinking about how to liberate shared space from the creeping and semi-visible hand of commodity value, Céline Condorelli looks to the British Commons as the site of a struggle over

what it means to create exceptional spaces around private property, to share resources and make resources available for equitable, public use. As an already existing model for sharing resources, even the Commons were, in a ghostly way, converted to landscapes for leisurely contemplation and freed time rather than sites of work. How can we then begin to think in terms of retaining rather than releasing the surplus value provided by such spaces?

Perhaps public space is simply a raw material waiting to be privatized – not economically, but through a *détournement*, through a reclamation (reading) of public space through the private events that take place within it. Sherif El-Azma documents the activities of the hermetic and near-invisible Cairo Psychogeographical Society: an informal group of urban wanderers whittled down to one remaining member. It even seems possible that the group itself may only exist as a front for this last member to find a language for identifying with urban space.

In the second installment of his two-part series, Luis Camnitzer looks to forms of expression and communication suppressed by authoritarian practices deeply embedded in pedagogy and art education. While vernacular oral traditions bypass formal educational institutions in passing knowledge from generation to generation, so do “personal spelling” and experiments with the subjective use of voice in formal language speak to the learner’s need to communicate, rather than the teacher’s need to indoctrinate a student in the process of language acquisition as a code. As Camnitzer suggested at the beginning of “Art and Literacy” in issue #3, a good way to start decolonizing language may be for it to learn from art: rather than supposing that one should learn to read before being allowed to write – to consume before being able to produce – why shouldn’t the student first learn to write, and only afterwards develop a language to read what was written?

Beginning with Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi’s appearance in Rome wearing a small image on his uniform featuring Omar al-Mukhtar, leader of the Libyan resistance against the Italian colonial regime, Peter Friedl lays out a dense account of Italian colonial history through a detailed series of events, figures, and incidents. From Le Corbusier to Pasolini, Marinetti to Sophia Loren, all can trace a line back to Il Duce and out to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and the Dodecanese Islands.

And Hans Ulrich Obrist reflects on the life and work of Nancy Spero, who passed away last month at the age of 83.