

Mari Bastashevski
The Perfect Con

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e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Mari Bastashevski
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The perfect con is one where everyone involved gets just what they wanted.
– *The Brothers Bloom* (directed by Rian Johnson, 2009)

For the longest part of the voyage, the twenty-six people on board the *Zim Qingdao*, a ten-year-old, 261-meter-long, 50,689-ton-capacity, Chinese-built container ship under a Liberian registration, included one Israeli captain, four Israeli officers, four Russian-Ukrainian-Israeli engineers, one Russian-Israeli electrician, one Bulgarian boatswain, seven deck workers – three from Sri Lanka, three from Ukraine, and one from Myanmar – one Sri Lankan and one Bulgarian fitter, a Bulgarian cook, two stewards – a Sri Lankan and a Russian-Ukrainian – a cadet from Israel, and a passenger whose duty cannot be publicly disclosed. The ship sailed through the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca, calling at the ports of Odessa, Istanbul Ambar, Haifa, Nhava Sheva, Port Klang, Da Chan Bay, Pusan, and Shanghai.

The announcement that an artist was coming on board reached the crew by fax, a one-way communication that was printed out and taped to the wall of the galley on B-deck, between the garbage disposal rules and an e-mail warning of the grave financial consequences for publishing images of the Suez Canal.¹ Arriving the same day was a mournful warning about impending food rations. It had come to the attention of management that the chef could make do with fewer vegetables than he had requested. Management would appreciate his economizing in these difficult times for the company.

In keeping with corporate protocol, no one had asked the crew for their opinion on the addition of the artist and they didn't pay much attention to the memo. At a supplemental briefing, the captain announced that "a woman artist" was coming aboard for "an exciting project sponsored by ZIM, which will be leveraged for public relations and marketing purposes." Two weeks into the trip the steward pointed at the head shot of the artist on the memo. "You are her?" he asked skeptically, "No way!" As someone less exposed to what constitutes a "celebrity," he couldn't reconcile the print version with the real person.

ZIM was founded in 1945 and quickly made a name for itself by transporting Jews to the land of Palestine and by offering luxurious sea cruises. In 1972, it entered the container shipping industry. For years the Israeli government steadily exercised more and more control over the company because of its perceived strategic value, but sold off its shares



Tableware is one of many commonplace, household items labelled with a company logo on board of Zim Qingdao.

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ANTI PIRACY SITREP MSG: P042/2016

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THIS BROADCAST WARNS SHIPS OF PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY PRONE AREAS IN WATERS OF EAST AFRICA, THE INDIAN SUB CONTINENT, SOUTH EAST AND FAR EAST

WARNINGS/OVERVIEW:
SOMALI PIRACY

ATTACKS RELATED TO SOMALI PIRATES HAVE GREATLY REDUCED. HOWEVER, THE RISK OF BEING APPROACHED OR ATTACKED STILL EXISTS. VESSELS ARE ADVISED AND ENCOURAGED TO REMAIN VIGILANT AND COMPLY WITH ALL BMP4 PROCEDURES. THE THREAT OF THESE ATTACKS STILL EXIST IN THE WATERS OFF SOUTHERN RED SEA / BAB EL MANDEB, GULF OF ADEN, INCLUDING YEMEN AND THE NORTHERN SOMALI COAST, ARABIAN SEA / OFF OMAN, GULF OF OMAN AND OFF THE EASTERN, AND SOUTHERN SOMALI COAST. IN THE PAST VESSELS HAVE BEEN ATTACKED OFF KENYA, TANZANIA, SEYCHELLES, MADAGASCAR, MOZAMBIQUE AS WELL AS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND OFF THE WEST AND SOUTH COASTS OF INDIA AND WEST MALDIVES. INCIDENTS HAVE ALSO BEEN REPORTED CLOSE TO THE EAST AFRICAN COASTLINES. SOMALI PIRATES TEND TO BE WELL ARMED WITH AUTOMATIC WEAPONS AND RPG AND SOMETIMES USE SKIFFS LAUNCHED FROM MOTHER VESSELS, WHICH MAY BE HIJACKED FISHING VESSELS OR DHOWS, TO CONDUCT ATTACKS FAR FROM THE SOMALI COAST. IT IS ADVISED TO MONITOR, KEEP CLEAR OF ALL SMALL BOATS AND REPORT ALL SUSPICIOUS SIGHTINGS. SHIPS ARE ALSO ADVISED TO MONITOR THE IMB PRC WARNINGS THAT ARE TRANSMITTED VIA INMARSAT SAFETY NET SYSTEM. A STRICT 24HR VISUAL AND RADAR WATCH WILL ENSURE EARLY DETECTION AND ASSESSMENT OF AN APPROACHING THREAT AND ALLOW MASTERS TO RESPOND AS ADVISED IN BMP4 AND

During the passage through the gulf of Aden a telex on piracy news is resent up to three times a day to all ships in the area.

in 2004 to the Israel Corporation, then under the ownership of the Ofer Brothers Group.²

The Ofer brothers – Sammy and Yuli – founded the group in 1956,³ and at the time of their deaths were counted among the richest men in Israel.⁴ However, as part of a debt restructuring arrangement in 2014,⁵ Idan Ofer⁶ became CEO of a new entity, Kenon Holdings, registered in Singapore, which now holds a 32 percent interest in ZIM.⁷ The rest of the company was divided between a band of faceless bankers and shipyard executives.

At present, ZIM has no Israeli registration. Until 2014, most of the Offers' businesses were operating under UK tax laws,⁸ which saved the Ofer family "tens of millions of shekels a year" in Israeli taxes.⁹ The company initially managed to weather the global recession, but has done poorly in recent years, reporting a net loss in the first quarter of 2016.¹⁰ And so the employees don't make professional plans ahead of their short-term contracts.

At first, the crew suspected that I was a corporate insider, placed to surveil and report back to management. They cordially kept their distance. It wasn't until four days into the trip, well into the Black Sea, that their icy diplomacy began to thaw. The electrician, hearing that I missed club soda, left a full pack of it by my cabin, and the chief officer, Meir Dizraeli, taught me how to make a monkey's knot after I remarked on his exceptional rigging skills.

"I'm ... what's the word? Perplexed?" said one of the Sri Lankan deck workers. "Why would the company sponsor an artist? And give the proceeds to charity?¹¹ Isn't the company experiencing financial difficulty?" His monthly salary is \$400.

"What will the sailors get out of this exactly?" wondered an officer. "Can we at least see the artwork somewhere?"

"Aren't you pretty critical of the company? How will it be good for PR?" inquired the kitchen crew.

"It doesn't matter if her work is critical or mediocre, her audience is too narrow anyway," said an engineer whose mother was an art critic and who took on the task of translating between art-speak and sea-speak for me. "In the end all that matters is the artist's name next to the name of the company. That's what they are paying for and that is what will be remembered."

The Offers' investment in PR is considerable. The family gave £10 million to the Tate Modern in 2013 and £25 million to the London Business School, the largest gift in its history.¹³ They poured millions into restoring the famous clipper ship *Cutty Sark*, which among other acts of maritime preservation earned the late Sammy Ofer a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II.¹⁴

When *The Shakshuka System*, an independent documentary that detailed the privatization process in Israel, placed special emphasis on the Ofer-ZIM arrangement, the Offers spent half-a-million shekels to produce a counterpoint cartoon.¹⁵ Claiming to have been slandered, they also sued the filmmakers, a suit that the judge dismissed.¹⁶ No Israeli TV network, save for the national public broadcaster (IBA), aired *The Shakshuka System*.¹⁷

By these standards, the Container Residency production budget is a drop in the ocean. It would barely cover the costs incurred by a one-hour delay in the ship's schedule. ZIM's office did not initiate the project – it was conceived by a team of resident curators – but the company has control over it. ZIM's contract with the resident artist ensures that the residency is a perfect PR opportunity for a company with a longstanding history of engaging with cultural initiatives and many years of experience in the kind of marketing that entails rubbing shoulders with persons of note.

"Well, if you decide to protest against my being here, I'll support you," I said to the deck workers pondering the relationship between the company and the artist. "Don't say that – even jokingly," warned Alex, the night-duty officer. "More than two conspiring on board a ship constitutes a mutiny and can lead to very serious consequences!" Implausible accounts of one-man riots followed, growing more dramatic with each recap. A female officer, Angela, once sued for sexual harassment and won, after a deck worker threatened to throw himself overboard out of love. Either that or she rejected his offer of money in exchange for sex. A bold Israeli cadet celebrated his graduation by jumping overboard from the seventh deck while the ship was in motion, wearing a full safety suit with his passport and a radio and managing to activate the ship's emergency alarm. Later, in court, he argued that it was an accident rather than sabotage, and was allowed to stay on the job.

Life on a container ship is highly choreographed and hierarchical. Each seafarer is under someone else's command, but each also relies on the others. The day-duty officers depend on night-duty officers for shift wake-up calls, and on the stewards for maintaining silence on the floor during diverse sleep patterns. The engineers and deck workers depend on the officers for shore leave. Everyone depends on the electrician with the keys to everything, and on the common sense of the captain to take notice only of what's crucial to the welfare of the ship, while pretending to be resting for the bulk of the voyage. The crew has no choice but to dance with each other, hands roped together, knots all the way down.



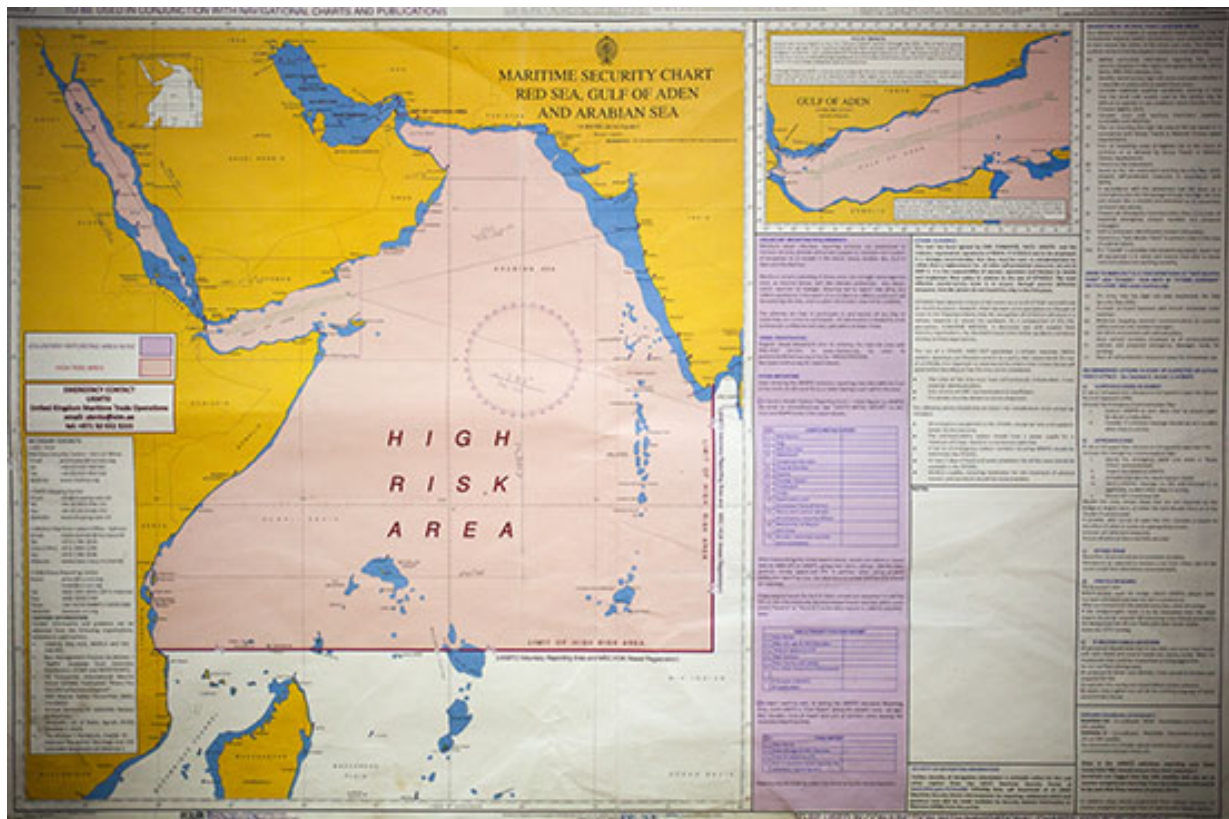
Conference room at Zim Shipping Head Office, Haifa.



A photograph of the bas-relief *Friendship* and its author hangs next to the woodcarving on the hallway of Zim Head Office in Haifa and “commemorates ZIM’s involvement in the creation of a national cargo carrier in Ghana, the Black Star Line, founded in 1957.”



Sunset in the gulf of Aden, as witnessed during the weekly barbecue on g-deck.



A decommissioned MSCHOA (The Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa) map outlines risk areas for potential piracy attacks.

The written hierarchy of the ship, which has its functional purpose, prescribes an order and submission in accordance with rank. Confined in a locked-up environment, this submission extends well beyond already “extensive” work hours, into a life order that is balanced by complex power rituals that serve no immediately apparent function. Many of these rules are unwritten: No one must ever sit in the captain’s chair. Whistling is strictly forbidden, as it will summon Neptune, angry god of the sea. The steward will always apologize. The electrician may swap favors for random stuff, of which he often accumulates a mysterious surplus.

No violation of these customs passes unnoticed. Before the ship arrived at the port of Pusan, the chief mate offered \$300 to anyone who could catch a rare bird that had been traveling with the ship. He was ecstatic when the young Ukrainian OS (ordinary seaman) chased the white egret around the ship and caught it. But when the OS decided to let the egret go instead of selling it to the chief mate, the latter got so furious that he tasked the OS with meaningless and humiliating trash-removal tasks. “Woman on board is bad luck,” remarked the chief mate, aware that the bird was freed on my suggestion, a person outside of the power structure. Throughout the trip these subtle power games were rarely interrupted, and then with only varying degrees of success.

At the beginning, I was assigned a seat in the canteen next to the captain – at the top of the ship’s hierarchy – but it forced me to turn my back on the others and so I only ate there once. Afterwards, for two weeks, I swapped chairs daily. This irritated the steward, for which he apologized. Eventually, without meaning to do so, I developed a mutually amicable relationship with the Russian-speaking Israeli seamen. We fell into a synchronized table routine until one of them remarked that I was “becoming table trained,” and a deck worker dared me to sit with the mix-race deck crew, at the bottom of the hierarchy. I accepted the dare and kept rotating tables regularly after that.

Work flowed around mealtimes like a river around rocks. The day began with a 6:00 a.m. breakfast, which I usually missed due to lack of self-discipline. Lunch was at noon and dinner at 6:00 p.m. The week, in turn, was divided by port arrivals, emergency drills, a Thursday bar night, a Saturday pause for Shabbat, and the occasional weekend sunbathing.

“Routine maintenance” became a collaboration among us, one that was disrupted only by port maneuvers and the rituals invented to mark the fluctuating hours, days, weeks, and months of the crew’s contracts. I was allowed into all parts of the ship, including the control

room, and invited to all after-work activities, which usually consisted of poker and a multitude of popular first-person shooter video games populated by “heroes” and “assassins” in equal measure. I was called to the bridge to see dolphins and a whale, and I used flying fish to explain gender fluidity to hyper-heterosexual men. “Is this a fish or a bird?” the men asked. “Well, remember how you mentioned that women should be behaving as women and men should be behaving like men and I said it’s not always so clear cut? Flying fish would be a good example of the ambiguity. Sometimes it is more like a bird and sometimes it is more like a fish.” A white lie so perfect that we never had to debate gender norms again.

Seldom trying to make sense of my *art-ing*, the crew nevertheless assisted with moving my installation *ZIMtm* from place to place. This was a 140-pound prison-mirror aquarium which was designed to survey each deck of the ship, taking mundane low-resolution images every five minutes with an automatic camera. The rules of the installation, which were printed on the tripod box, invited the crew to pose for a photograph in front of the box, move it, hold a message in front of it, cover it up to prevent photographs from being taken, or break it with the tools provided by the artist. The crew renamed it “the robot” and took care of it whenever I wasn’t around. When it got over 50°C in the heart of the engine room, first engineer Andrei warned me that the circuits inside the automated camera in the installation box wouldn’t survive the heat and humidity. While interested in knowing how the work *worked*, no one really cared to engage with it.

Those who misheard “an artist” for “an actress” admitted to having been left in suspense, anticipating some kind of performance. Not wanting to disappoint, I did an awful impression of Tallulah Bankhead clutching her precious ring in the 1964 film *Lifeboat* on the bridge one evening, followed by an even worse butchering of Monica Vitti’s African dance in *L’Eclisse*. I was sent away by the night team duty officers Alex and Genadi to educate myself on the Russian movie hit of the moment, *The Best Day Ever* by Zhora Kryzhovnikov and Toomuchproduction.¹⁸ They implied that the only difference between my movie stash and theirs was that mine pretended to be highbrow. “Just convert it to black and white,” suggested Alex, when I complained that *The Best Day Ever* was too realistic.

Our employer certainly fancied itself a highbrow operation. ZIM’s seventieth anniversary advertising book, *ZIM 70*, is something of a hagiography, and would have the reader believe that people and culture are at the heart of the firm’s ambition.¹⁹ The book is lined with historic

photo spreads abstracted from the fearsome and complex annals of twentieth-century Jewish migration history.²⁰ These rest comfortably next to a heart-warming message from the current president of Israel, followed by similar texts from the minsters of transportation and intelligence.²¹ Playful, illustrative, and dated drawings produced for the company in the past by both Israeli and international artists are accompanied by newer, faux-documentary images of the contemporary corporate narrative, which includes portraits of sea-women professionals, ZIM's first captains (among their number a Basque communist and a retired British Royal Navy officer), spies, and mentions of "the first Hebrew ship" ZIM's Kedmah. Today all of ZIM's ships are maritime citizens of Malta and Liberia.

The book makes elaborate references to the warm relationship the company has had with celebrities from all fields: the architects Al Mansfeld and Dora Gad, the singer Naomi Shemer (who, it states, composed a song for the company in exchange for a trip to France), and countless artists including the playwright Eugène Ionesco, the poet Avraham Shlonsky, and the painters Emmanuel Mané-Katz and Marc Chagall. Beyond the advertising, the nature of the relationship between the company and the artists is a mystery.

The accompanying texts foreground *experience* as the prime product and currency of the company: always romantic, exciting, and daunting, like a continuation of David Ben-Gurion's 1937 speech "Going Down to the Sea" on building a "Jewish boat settlement," a maritime kibbutz.²²

When I showed the book to the crew, most were upset that they didn't get a copy. Debating the book's quality, we entered into discussions about authors who write on art, capitalism, race, ports, militarization at sea, and conflict logistics. The sailors called Renée Green's wallpaper "pretty" and accused Keller Easterling of resentment and cynicism when I described her essay "Believers and Cheaters." "I suspected you would be a heretic, that's why I didn't mention God until now," added Genadyi, a zealously religious officer. Their favorite was an anecdote relayed by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Franz Kafka. In it, the Russian chancellor Potemkin is in the midst of a serious depressive episode and refuses to sign any of the documents piling up on his desk. Since any mention of his illness enrages the Empress Catherine, the other counselors are beside themselves in trying to figure out what to do. Then, a low-ranking clerk, Shuvalkin, simply takes the papers into the chancellor's room, forces a pen into his hand, and has him sign all of them. There is much

rejoicing until someone realizes that the chancellor has signed the documents "Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin." The officers on board the *Zim Quingdao* loved this story and compared it to the ever-present stamp of Monrovia that appeared on all the paperwork for the Israeli ship. "When we're forced to sign it, we sign it with a made-up name," they crowed, "as if to mock those who impose the rule."

Once, wondering if the engine does in fact keep anyone awake, I recited from Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. The paragraph draws a comparison between the speed of an engine and a human heart on amphetamines:

And thus the general spirit of the ship was one of mournful and weary anticipation of unemployment, heightened by a pervasive insomnia caused by the vibration of the low-speed Hyundai-Sulzer diesel running at 100 PPM, the speed of an amphetamine-driven human heart.²³

"It's the other way around," said Andrei, the Russian-Israeli engineer. "It is the heart of the engine that will follow mine and slow down once I fall asleep right next to it." The first part of the quote rang true, however, given that the company has reported declining profits for quite some time.

This information is consistently absent in *ZIM 70*, it is as if it was removed deliberately by someone familiar with Easterling's "Cheaters and Believers." Instead, the book mixes anecdotal and factual information about the company to produce a utopian and sterilized chronicle, with short stories and brief texts spun to advance a narrative of uninterrupted progress. The text skillfully positions words like "floating museum," "art," "luxuries," and "advertising" next to each other in the same sentence. It is dizzying, dazzling, and an altogether brilliant example of the logical laws of advertising and writing in the language of power.

But while the company has rubbed shoulders with the crème de la crème of high culture, the real reason it has sustained itself for so long is that it is deeply entrenched in the politics and economics of not one but several conflicts – matters that appear in the pages of *ZIM 70* only if you know where to look. For example, this is how the book comments on the company's strategy in the 1970s:

The opening of ZCS was accompanied by an extensive advertising and branding campaign in the three continents which the line connected. The ZCS logo was displayed on the sides of the route's ships and ZIM produced advertising fliers to promote the

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innovative service and describe its advantages to potential clients.

Left unmentioned is the fact that the Israeli Navy painted its intelligence-gathering vessels the same colors as the ZCS logo. Operating at the height of the Cold War, the most important of these intelligence ships was the *INS Noga* (נהוג), aka the *Leah* (הלל), an electronic communications “snoop ship” that was also used for wet ops, such as the successful plot to kidnap nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu. ZIM’s trademark seven stars were sometimes painted on the *Noga/Leah* in the port to avoid drawing scrutiny.²⁴

In the same vein, ZIM 70’s official company history notes that the freighter *Dolphin* was sent to breach the Egyptian blockade of the Suez Canal in 1967.²⁵ It failed, but did succeed in passing through the Straits of Tiran on June 7, 1967 after Israel had taken control of the entirety of Sinai. In fact, the *Dolphin*’s planned Suez transit was intended as a provocation against Egypt, and the tanker was carrying an IDF detachment aboard.²⁶

And what about the actual artworks commissioned or donated to the company by artists mentioned in the company book?

An impeccable woodcarving decorating the lobby of the company’s headquarters spells “Friend-ship.” Credited to “P. Savage,” I was told that the piece commemorates ZIM’s involvement in the creation of a national cargo carrier in Ghana, the Black Star Line, founded in 1957.²⁷

The name “Black Star Line,” drawn from the 1920s “Back to Africa” movement, was meant to evoke the diaspora’s “coming home” now that independence was secured.²⁸ Ultimately dismembered by the government, the line was used to transport peacekeeping forces to Liberia during the 1989–96 civil war. The woodwork on display seems more appropriate the more one knows about ZIM’s history of shipping timber out of West Africa.²⁹ The “Friendship” display outlives it all: the Black Star Line, the artist himself – who seems to have fallen into obscurity – and the era of bonhomie between Israeli and postcolonial African leaders that collapsed in the 1970s as Israel came to be seen by these states as just another colonizer rather than a postcolonial ally.

A similarly well-made maquette of the vessel *Patria Monrovia*, exhibited in the main window of the head office, commemorates not one but an entire series of ships for which separate shell companies were created. One such ship, *Roniz*, ran between Iran and Israel in the 1950s and ’60s; the name spells “pipeline” backwards in Hebrew.³⁰

By the crew’s account, before ZIM

privatized it was an extension of the Israeli Navy, participating in active military operations on a number of occasions. It morphed quite naturally into a licensed transporter of dangerous cargo worldwide, including weapons that are today still exchanged between the governments of the US and Israel. And much like in the past, while our ship that is “officially” Israeli makes no stops in any Arab countries, many others chartered by the company enter every port. Since going private the company has adapted to the regime of global capitalism. Its company branding now promotes patriotism and tradition alongside multiculturalism and impartiality, but the secret marriage of business, oligarchs, state, and war didn’t disappear with the false flag of the *INS Noga*.

I can’t help but wonder what work of contemporary art will commemorate the “Irangate” scandal that shook the Ofers in 2011, in which a bizarre series of events led to claims that the company’s ships were docking in Iran with the Mossad’s approval to allegedly provide cover for infiltrators or for picking up agents.³¹ And if the cargo container ships we’ve been sailing during this residency someday become a “floating museum,” which real museum – and which real history – will be nesting underneath the advertisement?

By the halfway point of the trip, the crew and I had accumulated a joint cache of formidable rituals, including weekly barbecues on G-deck. The tradition continued well into the Gulf of Aden, right between Yemen and Somalia, except on that particular night we wrapped ourselves with barbed wire and turned on both the bright outdoor projector and the water canon. That same evening, the “secret passenger” on board showed up and tried to park his weapon between the tightly positioned plastic chairs, to the amusement of the crew.

The secret passenger is one of many competing actors in the hybrid military-contractor industry that sprang up in the wake of the new war on piracy launched in the 2000s.³² China Ocean Shipping Company, Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics, Torm A/S, and Maersk have all hired armed guards to accompany their ships. The policy is incentivized and supported by insurance companies that offer premium rates to ships traveling with private military contractors, and supplemented by the navies of independent powers and of the multinational Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) based out of Bahrain, where the United States docks its Fifth Fleet. The extraordinary expansion, history, and root causes of the militarization of the Gulf of Aden is described in incredible detail by Debora Cowen in *The Deadly Life of Logistics*:

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Artist's personal space on board Zim Qingdao.



Artist's personal space on board Zim Qingdao.

The growing reliance on private security not only provokes conflicts regarding what officially counts as violence, who can legally kill whom, and who can be armed where; it is also a central pillar in a broader recasting of the relationships between space, law, and state sovereignty.³³

The public long-wave radio on board regularly attested to the accuracy of Cowen's account. Now and then the unidentified male voice of our defender would burst out of the radio, threatening to shoot a boat unless it returned to Berbera Port, which he mispronounced as "bArbara," as if the port was a jilted wife and he her avenging brother.³⁴

"Why is he threatening the boat?" I asked, after this warning had interrupted our picnic for a fourth time.

"There must be a reason," responded the chief mate. The officers didn't bat an eye.

"I understand that pirates are people too and that it's their job to target us, as it is mine to protect us. But I don't really care for the politics of it. Or politics in general to be honest. I just want to do my job and go home to see my girlfriend," said the secret passenger. It is the only conversation we share.

While the chief mate took the threats seriously, Alex, a skeptic among the officers, wore a shirt bearing a popular rendering of a pirate for the duration of the passage, occasionally adding a rhetorical question or two: "All the warships and security and they can't even kill a few pirates?!"

But that would defeat the purpose. Imperial military power at sea is defined by its ability to convince the world that it can contain all real and imagined terror, while simultaneously maintaining these dangers indefinitely. And so the bridge receives an automatic telex about the ever-potent threats every evening, while the radio announces, "We got this!"³⁵ It is a complete system, moving from threat to response, threat to response, without requiring us to intervene.

At rare times during the voyage an unidentified prankster on the radio uttered, "Meep meep ... meep meep ... meep meep" These occasional meeps continued to pierce the waves of channel sixteen, long after the Chinese coalition warships on which the prank was blamed were nowhere in sight, and the security telexes had stopped. Bored and with no enemy to defeat, our secret passenger triangulated the radio intruder and determined that the meep-meep signal was coming from inside the ship. He quietly circulated the news over lunch, hoping to catch the sneaky roadrunner red handed, but the crew just shook their heads and kept eating. Disappointed that no one seemed to care, he left

the table early.

A ship will guard its fragile and destructive myths³⁶ – ship myths, like all myths, make the chaos and inequality more tolerable for a populace who will fight wars over these same stories. At sea, they are the motivational fuel for surviving the underpaid routine. Discussions on race, politics, and religion are rare and quick. But the consensus on why the oligarch loves a contemporary artist so much was overwhelming amongst believers of all stripes: it's all about "a pretty picture" and an image of the artist next to the captain for the company's next PR book. Or as Hito Steyerl has put it: "It just works for him."³⁷

It works for him at a distance in a gallery, in a freeport storage box, and at the worldwide grand openings for which he is rubber-stamping approval, at the advice of an enthusiastic marketing manager. It works for him in spite of the crew, who step over the Indian port workers that sleep on the bare deck and carry the artwork up and down the ladder. Or perhaps because of them.

Towards the end of the tour, I set up a exhibition along the corridor leading to the canteen – for crew eyes only – gave away all my prints, and was saluted off the ship in Shanghai.

A month later, during a burst of sea-legs melancholy, I wrote to the bird catcher, who has become a friend, to inquire about the legacy of my residency. "You know, I'm a bit disappointed, I was expecting scrutiny and rumors, but no one said a thing. It back to usual boredom here and everyone moved on. It is as if you were never here." He sent this response from a satellite e-mail service, economizing on adjectives and punctuation to save precious e-mail coins.

The presence of artists on container ships, at first bedazzling, has become the new norm within the logistical routine of global commerce, of which the container ship itself is a living exhibit. Having been on a circular route for ten years, the cargo ship I sailed on, and any other ship like it, has surely amassed a vast permanent collection on the subject. This collection could constitute a floating museum, or rather an extraterritorial floating museum complex.

A museum of the ideal citizen, with a particularly strong selection of archives on the trajectory of the Ukrainian-Russian-Israeli engineer-mechanic who today occupies so many engine rooms on ships.

A museum of the flawed concept of time. The time of day doesn't just shift back and forth as the ship sails. Rather, the very concepts of time and value change amidst different nationalities whose work contracts operate on different terms, at varying pay rates unadjusted for inflation since the nineteenth century.

A museum of objects for hyper-productivity, of institutional design, with each cup carefully labeled, each drawer positioned exactly in accordance with rank.

A museum of a relational order-space, a space that is defined by the coexistence of the things it contains. A space in which nothing is allowed to be useless or out of place. An order that follows the militant power system on board, which actually extends into a twenty-four-hour lifestyle.

A museum of imperial cartography, of military geography, of private security industry booms, past and future.

A museum of indifference; of boredom and casual racism; of pornography, etymology, cultural relativism, and the “nominal” family of men, all formed through shared meals and video games, without women; of chameleon flags of convenience, creative bureaucracy, and the drum beat of Hyundai engine techno music drenched in sweat and blood and crushed bones.

Unfortunately, this museum would never have any visitors, except for the port authorities, the sailors’ wives, and a few select enthusiasts willing to wait for the ship for twenty-four hours only to be immediately rushed off the premises because everything must get where it is going as fast as possible. And now artists-in-residency.

At the heart of the Container Residency lies a promise of opportunity: to explore this museum, to be at once in a spectacular space and an anti-spectacular place. The opportunity for access and direct participation. The opportunity to rest, or perhaps to ride from point A to point B, as one sometimes takes the ferry to work. More importantly, the opportunity to be paid to work as an artist unrestrictedly. But is this promise actually realized?

The potential problems – the agendas and conflicts of interest – presented themselves long before we set sail. The cultural buffer zone that is usually part of a residency – that is, the curator, museum, or cultural institution that facilitates it – was absent, and the contract was offered directly by the company. The contract demanded, in multiple bullet points, the artist’s total collaboration with the company’s PR initiatives, to which the artist must lend his or her name without hesitation. Detailing the perceived duties and obligations of the artist in an authoritative, legalistic tone, the document was clearly drafted by someone skilled at contact writing and yet unfamiliar with – and indifferent to – the discourse of contemporary art. The contract also included a nondisclosure agreement, serving as catchall insurance against any possible unforeseen contagions.

The nondisclosure agreement effectively rendered the artist’s access to the ship and its

crew meaningless – you may observe but not share. This is a solipsistic privilege usually reserved for state officials and corporate industry insiders.

While art shouldn’t necessarily rely on the didactic methodology of gathering facts obtained through access, art that capitalizes on the ambiguity of the situation to conceal the nuances of its production in accordance with corporate demands isn’t the same as art that willingly chooses to avoid the banality of explanation. It’s like committing a crime under the cloak of diplomatic immunity: while you might not get away with murder, small transgressions like speeding are certainly okay. Everyone does it, and you’ll never get anywhere if you don’t. But such capitulation is unbecoming in the extreme.

Sure, many art initiatives today are manufactured with the aid of oligarchic sponsorship. Some of the more elaborate “art-washing” initiatives of the recent past include opening a Louvre in the UAE while the Tate and MoMA pleaded with the Emirati government to stop barring artists and academics from entering the country.³⁸ Art residencies are a modern form of advertising. Sponsoring art is perceived, much like recycling and sending memos denouncing sexual harassment, as a signifier of progressive politics. It provides a great smokescreen for government initiatives and commercial ventures of all kinds.

Each of us participates in commercial exchange, no matter how much we might desire not to. Artists simply cannot produce art locked away in towers, and we are undoubtedly part of the same social ecosystem as the sailors, curators, and museum-goers.³⁹ And I agree that the institutional critique of the 1970s and ‘80s has itself become an institutional product.

But to reject all institutional critique entirely is premature and defeatist. Accepting the status quo inhibits any progress the discipline might make in the future and diminishes what has been achieved in the past, including what has made most art residencies possible. If parrhesia – speaking truth to power – is at the heart of institutional critique, then the rejection of all institutional critique assumes that we’re all equal now, and that provocation is no longer necessary or effective.

The question is not *whether* to participate, but *how*. An expanded institutional critique need not be a scandal-product, nor another *Fountain* signed by R.Mutt. Rather, it could offer a studied look at the corporate sponsorship of art, and could facilitate direct dialogue among artists, curators, and institutions, paying particular attention to the demands made by sponsors.⁴⁰ It could also generate discussions on how art produced under these financial arrangements is

evaluated, and by whom. It could launch a debate about the complexity of residencies that take place in an environment where it is very difficult to negotiate the competing exigencies of politics, war, commerce, and art. At a minimum, an expanded institutional critique could foster a discussion about what is actually advertised by an artist for an oligarch, and what is made secret.

As it stands, when an artist is invited to sail aboard an armed container ship and trusted to turn the event into PR, she is indeed an actress playing an artist in an advertisement, a reality exhausted by its commercial function. A container-ship residency extends the logic of containerization to art, artists, and their easily transported institutional critiques. Putting things in readily stackable boxes limits the ability of artists and dockworkers alike to interfere with the accumulation process.

And that's the con in the "perfect con." While such opportunities might provide a temporary fix for an artist, the means of their production prevent the creation of a work of art. Instead, "experience" is accepted by all parties as the interchangeable currency of the arrangement. Any artwork is a byproduct, an escapist entertainment infamous for the crew for exactly a week until it is discharged for a sequel. This byproduct – however provocative, radical, or ambitious – is secondary to the PR effort, and to the contractual fine print in which the artist not only tacitly agrees with questionable business practices, but also elevates them, usually for far less than what is promised by a "like-for-like" market exchange. And we're told so to our faces, if not by our ever-forgiving and confused audiences, then by the sailors and the art-loving oligarchs themselves.

x

Thank you to the crew of the Zim Qingdao for the many poignant conversations, especially the team of engineers and deck workers, and officer Alexander Shapiro, whom I promised to credit in bold red font. Thank you to my indefatigable, brilliant research assistant and fact checker, Paul Mutter. Thank you to Laleh Khalili, Sveta Libet, Daniel Trilling, Emma Beals, Elisha Baskin, Marian Kaiser, Adrien Cater, Hester Keijser, and Isabelle Darrigrand for your time and a sound advice, to the Hackquarium collective and Kunstbetrieb, and to Kostiantyn Strilets and Shaw Xu for technical and logistical assistance. All images copyright of the artist.

Mari Bastashevski is an artist, writer, and researcher. Her installations – the result of extensive field and data research – combine texts, photographs, and documents, exploring how secrecy within systems of state and corporate power contributes to the perpetuation of armed conflicts. She was one of the six artists selected for Container Residency 01. She is currently a world fellow at Yale. You can reach her at mari.bastashevski@yale.edu, maribastashevski.com, or by tweeting @maribst.

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The Perfect Con

1
In the memo, the management of the ship had stated explicitly that all photography was forbidden during the passage through the Suez Canal. However, according to the captain and the crew it appeared that only photographing sensitive operations, the offloading of dangerous cargo, and military installations was truly prohibited.

2
"Legacy," [zim.com](http://www.zim.com/about-us/pages/legacy.aspx)<http://www.zim.com/about-us/pages/legacy.aspx>

3
"About XT Group," [xtholdings.com](http://www.xtholdings.com/#!about-us/c17bj), 2015 <http://www.xtholdings.com/#!about-us/c17bj>

4
See 2016 profile of Idan Ofer at [forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com/profile/idan-of/) <http://www.forbes.com/profile/idan-of/>. In 2006, Forbes ranked Yuli Ofer as Israel's twenty-seventh richest person http://www.forbes.com/lists/2006/81/biz_06israel_Yuli-Ofer_QQIM.html.

5
John Reed and Mark Odell, "Zim agrees restructuring with creditors," *Financial Times*, January 23, 2014 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/58e5ff40-8440-11e3-b72e-00144feab7de.html#axzz4A9TPDYHV>

6
Reut Shpigelman, "רענוס: הלשוןארהונעברדיספהלחזמים," *Calcalist*, May 30, 2016 <http://www.calcalist.co.il/markets/articles/0,7340,L-3689168,00.html>

7
"Israel Corporation Approves Ship-Off of Kenon," sec.gov, 2015 <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1611005/000119312515005166/d846607dex991.htm>

8
"As Zim sinks, Ofer family's UK shipping cos prosper," *Globes English*, February 2, 2014 <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-as-zim-sinks-offers-uk-shipping-prosper-1000914096>

9
"רפועתבזממסהדסה:" הנשביםנייליתורשע," *ynet*, April 9, 2013 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4365721,00.html>; "הליה," *ynet*, April 8, 2013 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4365210,00.html>; John Reed, "Idan Ofer: Fleeing Israel's New Populism," *Financial Times*, April 12, 2013 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/36ce978e-a294-11e2-9b70-00144feabdc0.html>.

10
"לישקנדהספה: סודאבמים" וןשאהרהונעברליונילי," *Port 2 Port*, May 29, 2016

<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en/print>

11
For the ZIM container-ship residency, the resident artist signs a contract with ZIM requiring him or her to provide one work created during the residency to an auction, the proceeds of which will be donated to charity. This is also the case with shipping company owners Philip Niarchos and George Economou, who hold their art in a warehouse until it appreciates in value. Art is a lucrative side gig and thousands of works are stored away. The value of some of these collections eclipses the GDP of some small countries. Also see J. L. Holzgrefe and R. O. Keohane, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal, and Political Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

12
In 1609, Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* defined trade as the foundation of the international maritime order. Freedom of the Seas is a concept founded on colonial expansion, capitalism, and the extraterritorial absence of a rule of law.

13
"Eyal Ofer Family Foundation gives £10 million towards Tate Modern's new development," [tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/eyal-ofer-family-foundation-gives-ps10-million-towards-tate), July 2, 2013 <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/eyal-ofer-family-foundation-gives-ps10-million-towards-tate>; "25 million gift for London Business School's Old Marylebone Town Hall," [london.edu](http://www.london.edu/news-and-events/news/landmark-25-million-gift-for-london-business-schools-old-marylebone-town-hall#VzLC2ZMrKYV), September 26, 2013 <https://www.london.edu/news-and-events/news/landmark-25-million-gift-for-london-business-schools-old-marylebone-town-hall#VzLC2ZMrKYV>.

14
Anshel Pfeffer, "Israeli Shipping Tycoon Sammy Ofer to Be Knighted in London Next Week," *Haaretz*, November 13, 2008 <http://www.haaretz.com/israeli-shipping-tycoon-sammy-ofer-to-be-knighted-in-london-next-week-1.257124>

15
"להבוגתהונטרספרועתבזממסהדסה:" סבולג – "מיפוצהתהעטמ" *Globes*, July 26, 2009 <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000484057>

16
"ההתאבועלןוונכתמרפועדע," *ynet*, April 8, 2013 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4365210,00.html>; "לצנתיאלטנוריקי," *The Marker*, February 15, 2010 <http://www.themarker.com/law/1.568298>

17
"הקושקהתהיש'תארדשנ: ראלקש," *ynet*, September 15, 2008 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3597138,00.html>

18
The trailer for *The Best Day Ever* (Самый лучший день) can be viewed on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9HF1Pl5Pg0&list=PL2By_FFaVw5Saad1Wq6

19
ZIM 70 is a PR book produced by the company to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of its founding in 1945 <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2862198-annivers-arybook70.html>

20
"Above all, you had to find a ship." Claude Levi-Strauss reached safety out of occupied Europe on the *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle*, chartered by the Emergency Rescue Committee in 1941. See <http://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/entry.php?rec=154>. Also on board were Anna Seghers, André Breton, and the novelist Victor Serge. Walter Benjamin committed suicide only one day short of getting on board a ship, although according to Hannah Arendt, he didn't see a solution in Israel nor in the United States. A monument to Benjamin was, by coincidence, erected in Spain by Dani Karavan, an artist whose murals now figure prominently in the seventieth-anniversary publication. See <http://walterbenjaminportbou.cat/en/content/lobra>.

21
ZIM's relationship to clandestine operators is made quite clear in the company's official history when it notes that ZIM's ships and personnel helped run the "Aliyah Bet" operation, which secretly transported Jewish passengers to Israel under the nose of the British Mandate. For more on the operation see <http://www.palyam.org/English/HaMossad/mainpage>.

22
This speech was written in the wake of the great Arab unrest of 1936 that included a massive strike at the Port of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. See Z. Ra'anan, "Israel – Bridge or Bridgehead? Some Regional Transportation Aspects and Trade Effects," *Israel Studies Forum*, vol. 18, no. (Spring 2003): 107–26; 113 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41804924>.

23
Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), 74 https://issuu.com/polinecia/docs/fish_story._allan_sekula.

24
P. Hounam, *The Woman from Mossad: The Story of Mordechai Vanunu and the Israeli Nuclear Program* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 1999), 75–76; N. Mann, "מיחסיאטנלירב," *ynet*, December 30, 2000 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3192074,00.html>.

ZIM operated its own freighter named *Noga* that was built in the 1960s in France. The *INS Noga* was built in Holland in the 1950s, so they only shared a *name* and *flag* of course not the same vessel.

25
But from 1967 to 1975, fifteen other freighters – all from Europe or the US – rusted at anchor in the canal's Great Bitter Lake, unable to transit the route at all. It was dubbed the "Yellow Fleet" for the sand that piled on the ships' decks over the years. See Ken Jennings, "There Once Was a Country in the Canal of the Suez Canal," *Condé Nast Traveler*, February 22, 2016 <http://www.cntraveler.com/stories/2016-02-22/there-once-was-a-country-in-the-middle-of-the-suez-canal>.

26
For a brief account of Israel's seizing of the Sinai, see <http://www.itnsource.com/showlist/RTV/1967/12/14/BGY506140252/>. See also M. B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156, 165. The crew of the *Dolphin* was released after the episode failed to produce resounding condemnation by the UN, and Israel and Egypt reached an impasse regarding the circumstances under which Nasser would let oil tankers flying flags of convenience past the blockade in exchange for certain security guarantees. See M. B. Oren, *Origins of the Second Arab-Israel War: Egypt, Israel, and the Great Powers, 1952–56* (London: F. Cass, 1992), 54–55. Absent from *ZIM 70* is the account of the freighter *Inge Toft*, another "test case" for the blockade that ended with the vessel and her Danish crew impounded by the Egyptians for almost a year between 1959 and 1960.

27
I. Lewis, "Nkrumah Was a True Visionary: A Genuine Pan-Africanist," *The New Crisis* 45 (July 1998): 44–46 <https://books.google.com/books?id=ZlKEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA45&lpg=PA45&dq=black+star+nkrumah+garvey&source=bl&ots=SuhfVUnHa&sig=XQOmgyS-FUGsGqUmXjhi0TE5kA4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjFkq2S-OPMAhVE8j4KHYSAYQ6AEIUTAL#v=onepage&q=black%20star%20nkrumah%20garvey&f=false>

28
The original Black Star Line, active from 1919 to 1922, was founded by the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the US. It carried passengers and cargo between American and African ports. As the first steamship line owned and operated by African-Americans, it inspired the Ghanaians to adopt its name, and the black star itself for their own flag. See "West Africa: Black Star Line's Role in Ecomog," allAfrica.com,

September 14,
2001<http://allafrica.com/stories/200109170419.html>.

29
Danny Zimrin,
“הקירפאות הירוקות,” February 1,
2012
<https://dannyzimrin.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/%D7%96%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%A7%D7%94/>

30
Interview conducted with the company in Haifa on March 29, 2016. The *Patria* and *Ronitz* are also named in Appendix B of Uri Bialer, *Fuel Bridge across the Middle East: Israel, Iran, and the Eilat-Ashkelon Oil Pipeline, Israel Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2007): 29–67
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245672>. Other ships named on the list, such as the *Siris* (lost in 1973) and the *Nivi* appear in the pages of ZIM’s anniversary book, though without mention of their involvement in the Israeli-Iranian pipeline venture. For a further listing of ZIM tankers from this era, see Danny Zimrin, “השקב, אלמליי,” March 17, 2012
<https://dannyzimrin.wordpress.com/2012/03/17/%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%9C-%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%90-%D7%91%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%A9%D7%94/>; and Yossi Melman, “Inside Intel: The Story of Iranian Oil and Israeli Pipes,” *Haaretz*, October 11, 2007
<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/inside-intel-the-story-of-iranian-oil-and-israeli-pipes-1.230884>. The entity controlling EAPC was registered in Lichtenstein in 1959 with 10 percent Iranian ownership.

31
“What’s the mysterious story behind the Ofer Brothers’ ‘Iran-gate?’” +972, May 31, 2012
<http://972mag.com/whats-the-mysterious-story-behind-the-ofer-brothers-iran-gate/15484/>; תוניסבן ריאורבוסוסניס; “רפועתחפשמלש,” *Mako*, June 1, 2011
<http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-d43f142b11a4031004.htm>; Ryan Jones, “Report: Israeli commandos operated inside Iran,” *Israel Today*, June 5, 2011
<http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/178/nid/22814/Default.aspx>.

32
John-Clark Levin, “Maritime Mercenaries or Innovative Defense? Private Security & the Evolving Piracy Threat,” *War on the Rocks*, September 29, 2014
<http://warontherocks.com/2014/09/maritime-mercenaries-or-innovative-defense-private-security-the-evolving-piracy-threat/>; Hazel Healy, “How the war on piracy became big business,” *New International*, September 2013
<http://newint.org/features/2013/09/01/pirates-keynote/>.

33
Debora Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: The Economics of Piracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 157.

34
Berbera Port is the maritime economic entrepôt of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland.

35
The IMB Piracy Reporting Centre uses three threat-level indicators: 1 means that vessels should be on the lookout for danger, 2 indicates moderate risk, and 3 is a full alert denoting extreme risk.

36
About terrorism, Israel and Palestine, war in Ukraine, Neptune, women, masculinity, the origin of religious rituals.

37
“Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive? One guess: the production of art presents a mirror image of post-democratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm. It seems unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by inspiration and genius. Just as any oligarch aspiring to dictatorship might want to see himself ... Both models operate within male bonding structures that are as democratic as your local mafia chapter. Rule of law? Why don’t we just leave it to taste? Checks and balances? Cheques and balances! Good governance? Bad curating! You see why the contemporary oligarch loves contemporary art: it’s just what works for him.” Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010). <http://journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>.

38
Javier Pes, “MoMA and Tate directors urge UAE to lift artists’ travel bans,” *Art Newspaper*, June 1, 2015
<http://theartnewspaper.com/news/museums/director-of-moma-and-tate-modern-urge-uae-to-lift-artists-travel-bans/>

39
Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* (Brooklyn: Melville House), 3.

40
In “Politics of Art,” Hito Steyerl writes: “But now we need a quite an extensive expansion of it. Because in contrast to the age of an institutional criticism, which focused on art institutions, or even the sphere of representation of large, art production (consumption, distribution, marketing, etc.) takes on a different and extended role within post-

democratic globalization. One example, which is a quite absurd but also common phenomenon, is that radical art is very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in the rhetorics of the city marketing, branding, and social engineering.” See also Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,” 2006
<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en/print>: “If institutional critique is not to be fixed and paralyzed as something established in the art field and confined within its rules, then it has to continue to develop along with changes in society and especially to tie into other forms of critique both within and outside the art field, such as those arising in opposition to the respective conditions or even before their formations. Against the background of this kind of transversal exchange of forms of critique, but also beyond the imagination of spaces free from domination and institutions, institutional critique is to be reformulated as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice.”

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