

e-flux journal



issue #106

02/2020

*e-flux journal* is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

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# Editorial

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a “global” art world began to form. Sure, there were already a number of world’s fairs and established international biennials, but this would be different. From the 1990s onward, national boundaries would dissolve, centers and peripheries would level out, and the internet would host worldwide cultural exchange. In many ways this really did happen, but some other things also happened. As people and ideas began to move across borders, money did too. Faced with an unmanageable planetary scale, capital became a more efficient regulator of flows than laws or nations. Suddenly, capital rose to become the primary form of representation and expression for the global community, and its flair for flexibility and recombination would even be mistaken as democratic, autonomous, and antiauthoritarian, sealing it in as a new form of sublime non-governance. Capital’s twin, the internet, would also democratize many scarce resources and forms of representation just as efficiently as it would mask its control by state agencies and some of the largest corporations in human history.

In art, the call to join with the global would be answered by a vast industry of events – pop-up museological exhibitions across the world – that would animate a thriving art market. Artworks would be produced and exhibited on a previously unimagined scale, and newspapers would distinguish works by their relation to capital (record-setting prices). Better-informed practitioners in the field of art who might once have used politics or history to engage with artworks found themselves faced with cultures they did not understand – at times for completely mundane or understandable reasons, at others due more to sublime arrogance. Suddenly, the passage to any political or historical understanding would be covered over by the abstraction of cultural exchange – a mode of communication that supposes that you don’t really understand where I am from or what I have been through. Forced to pander to a global community with unlimited resources but limited access to the forces and urgencies that animate my own work and thinking, I may even become foreign to myself. I may seek global approval to accept that my own politics, my own history, even exist. Without that recognition, I might need to enlarge the spectacle – add violence, sharper colors, car chases, happy endings, a whiff of fascism, or a full sectarian withdrawal from the superstate.

But the mandate to become cultural becomes far more complex than this when the globe tells us what we already know to be true: that with or without the recognition of a planet

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of others, we still do not understand what we ourselves have been through. An art aligned with modern and humanist traditions and ambitions appears unhelpful. The cultural peculiarities of European scientific, industrial, and political revolutions seem only to deepen the problem. Faced with looming planetary ecological meltdown, when institutions that were not qualified to blaze pathways for all of humankind to begin with come down from their galactic ambitions, they too land on culture – not as a project or technology, but as a naturalized way of including politics and histories they are unable or unwilling to understand. They, too, forfeit questions of scale to global flows of spectacle and capital.

In 2019 we wanted to celebrate ten years of *e-flux journal* by organizing a series of conferences reflecting upon some of the major themes and concerns the journal has explored. And while we often assume ideological meltdown and structural dysphoria to be a core condition of artistic production and thought today, the fact that all of these conferences were organized with so many generous friends, radiant thinkers, and fellow travelers can only be incredibly encouraging. Last January, we began with the conference “Exile,” focusing on themes of estrangement and entitlement, hosted by Witte de With in Rotterdam. In February, La Colonie in Paris hosted “The Twilight Symposium: Science Fiction Inside Colonialism,” on diasporic dreamworlds. In April, we partnered with the Harun Farocki Institut to present the symposium “Navigation Beyond Vision” at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The conference asked how gamespace and virtual space are profoundly shifting not only the politics of the image, but also the spatial parameters for acting and existing.

In June at e-flux in New York, we concluded the four-month conference series with “Art After Culture,” which this issue focuses on. As the cumulative conference, it asked: If we remember the artistic avant-garde tradition and its iconoclastic contempt for culture, how can we reconcile our own unknown culture with apparently simultaneous traditionalist fetishes? If we are now chained to an apparatus of representation that can only be spectacular in its scale, what is the project that art must necessarily undertake against reactionary self-homogenizing withdrawals? Can, or should, art still gain access to something larger than the culture it was born into? Today, bloated modernist ambitions are often easily called out for being imperial and expansionist, even when they adopted idealistic and inclusive language. And the withdrawal from this tradition often takes the form of personal narratives and

minoritarian longings to seal off toxic neighbors, and maybe eliminate them once and for all. Indeed, if we had been more modest in our ambitions from the beginning, we could have avoided a number of headaches.

At the same time, the blunt fact of planetary human entanglement has not changed that much, though its character seems to have completely reversed course: no longer the site of necessary transnational cooperation, this mutual entanglement now obliges us to understand our own toxicity, our own role in contributing to the ultimate spectacle of mass ecological self-extinction. But could it be possible to see this not only in terms of human death, but also as a cultural endpoint – the death and failure of innumerable technologies that fueled the lives, wars, and industries of human culture? And if art – ancient, modern, or whatever – was always able to project past these endpoints, then what is art after culture?

– Editors

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Anton Vidokle  
**Art and  
Sovereignty**

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About ten years ago, I wrote a paper which was later published in our journal titled “Art Without Artists.”<sup>1</sup> What triggered the text was an invitation to speak at a conference on curating, organized by a curatorial studies program in Germany. At the time I was a bit irritated at being constantly mistaken for a curator and wanted to try to clarify things, so I wrote a pretty confrontational text against curating, somehow not realizing how awkward it would feel to read it to a room full of curators and curating students. Halfway through my presentation it suddenly dawned on me that I was basically attacking the cops in the middle of a police academy assembly ... I think I started feeling a little sick. There was not much of a discussion after the presentation. What followed was more like an uncomfortable silence. Nevertheless the text circulated widely and elicited a lot of responses, although I have not been invited to address a curatorial studies program since.

In hindsight, my arguments in that essay may have been a little theatrical and overblown. Curators and curating are probably not quite the monsters I made them out to be. I tend to agree with an observation Boris Groys made in a recent essay that no matter how subjective, a curator of public exhibitions may still be capable of producing more radical and surprising encounters than the numerical, algorithmic logic of social media, or other seemingly more democratic means of aggregating things and making them visible.

There is something in “Art Without Artists,” however, that interests me in relation to the present moment and the topic of this issue of *e-flux journal*: the notion of artistic independence, autonomy, or sovereignty. Here is what I wrote on sovereignty in 2009:

If there is to be critical art, the role of the artist as a sovereign agent must be maintained. By sovereignty, I mean simply certain conditions of production in which artists are able to determine the direction of their work, its subject matter and form, and the methodologies they use – rather than having them dictated by institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors, dealers, the public, and so forth. While this may be taken for granted now, historically the possibility of artistic self-determination has been literally fought for and hard won from the Church, the aristocracy, public taste, and so on. In my view, this sovereignty is at the very center of what we actually understand as art these days: an irreducible element considered to be the “freedom of art.”

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Xerox printouts of *e-flux journal* in the window of a former e-flux office on Essex St, New York, October 2010. Photo: Mila Zacharias.

The notion of artistic sovereignty came up again a few years later. Here is what Brian Kuan Wood and I write on the subject in a 2012 essay called “Breaking the Contract”:

Over the past decade, contemporary art has merged increasingly with the sensibilities of actual, concrete political structures, which have discovered in contemporary art and culture a means of exhibiting liberal, enlightened, globally conscious moral values. The artistic field is happy to serve in this diplomatic capacity, because expanding its rule allows it to bury its own ontological crisis. To create more institutions, more artists, in more places allows artists and institutions alike to escape the question of what is actually happening ... The paradox comes in the fact that the instrumentalization of art as a tool to promote liberal and democratic values coincides in so many ways with the actual history of art, from the modern period back to the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance. This produces an even more confusing effect for those who see the role of art compromised by its deployment in a broader field of cultural politics, because it also appears that it may not be the art system per se that is expanding, but the very liberal tradition that undergirds it.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about this again a decade later, it may be that the liberal tradition is contracting, not expanding. The years leading up to 2020 have been marked by identitarian fragmentation and political closure in many parts of the world, combined with what Liam Gillick aptly refers to as a “neoliberal counterreformation begun by Milton Friedman et al., enacted by Thatcher–Reagan, and now conclusively pantomimed by Trump and the hysterically fabulist global strongmen of 2019 and their all-too-real and shocking new forms of nationalism.” All of these forces seem to pose a much greater threat to the possibility of artistic or any other kind of freedom than narcissistic curators, dictatorial cultural managers, didactic museums, or patronizing funding institutions.

The threat is painfully real. Over the past decade I have worked extensively in Russia and it’s incredibly sad for me to observe a relentless closure of possibilities for public expression, along with attacks on cultural institutions, filmmakers, theater directors, and others. Turkey has been another very important place to work for e-flux and me personally, and it’s surreal and devastating to see colleagues I know well jailed indefinitely for organizing artistic and cultural

projects, charged with promoting terrorism. Recently we had extensive discussions about the possibility of publishing a version of *e-flux journal* in China, only to realize that it would not be possible to do so under the ever-tightening conditions of censorship and surveillance.

In the landscape that is gradually emerging, it’s not so fantastical to imagine the eventual replacement of all international exhibitions with beer festivals, local food and craft fairs, or other types of events that reaffirm a particular identity and sense of belonging, rather than offering an encounter with something or someone outside of that tightly constructed place. It’s also becoming possible to imagine a reduction or even a termination of human movement: from the reemergence and fortification of numerous national borders, to increasing visa restrictions and the exclusion of entire religions or nationalities from entering certain countries, to perhaps requiring a permit to leave. I grew up in the Soviet Union and I do remember living in a regime under which you can’t leave the country without permission from the state.

e-flux was started at the end of the 1990s, when the general global trajectory appeared very different. As we wrote in the introduction to the June 2019 conference that this issue stems from:

From the 1990s onward, national boundaries would dissolve, centers and peripheries would level out, and the internet would host worldwide cultural exchange. In many ways this really did happen, but some other things also happened. As people and ideas began to move across borders, money did too. Faced with an unmanageable planetary scale, capital became a more efficient regulator of flows than laws or nations. Suddenly, capital rises to become the primary form of representation and expression for the global community, and its flair for flexibility and recombination would even be mistaken for a democratic, autonomous, or anti-authoritarian character, sealing it in as a new form of sublime non-governance. Capital’s twin, the internet, would also democratize many scarce resources and forms of representation just as efficiently as it would mask its control by state agencies and some of the largest corporations in human history.<sup>3</sup>

Both e-flux and the *e-flux journal* have been possible largely through the coalescence of these technological, economic, and political factors of the past two decades, but also through a certain productive conflation or dissolution of boundaries between artistic, curatorial, and

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Installation view of "Museum as Hub: Six Degrees" at *Night School*, New Museum, New York, 2008–2009. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

editorial methodologies that seem particular to our period. In turn, these are very much influenced by the logic of content aggregation and an accelerated pace of information and knowledge acquisition and accessibility. It's entirely possible that my irritation with the expansion of the curatorial sensibility came largely from the fact that basically we were using the same methodology to develop e-flux, which I wanted to see as an artistic work at that time.

Both e-flux and *e-flux journal* came out of exhibitions. I started e-flux following a small one-night show I co-curated with a couple of friends in a hotel room in Chinatown in 1998. We didn't have any money and I was merely trying to find some effective way to invite people without the costly printing of invitation cards. Email seemed to have worked, and that became what we still do today. Coinciding with the rapid expansion of internet, this method created a vast international audience. A few years later this project somehow resulted in an invitation to co-curate a biennial on Cyprus. Our plan was to make this biennial largely discursive: to replace the exhibition with a kind of free, experimental school. A number of artistic projects had taken the form of schools in previous years. I think the main novelty of our gesture was its scale: a large

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international biennial becoming a platform for a school during the expansion of the European Union, when seemingly every country wanted to join, and when modern, contemporary, and particularly conceptual art were emerging as a symbol of a kind of new EU cultural identity. Because the school idea was largely indebted to and inspired by artistic projects, we realized that on a certain level this biennial was becoming a kind of an artwork itself, but were apprehensive to say so publicly in 2005.

A lot of my ideas at that time were influenced by *Utopia Station*: a large-scale artistic and curatorial project organized by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Molly Nesbit at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and elsewhere. Participating in *Utopia Station* was both very inspiring and truly vexing: Was it a curated exhibition or an artwork by Rirkrit involving many other artists and thinkers? I think Molly was hoping that it would become something like an artistic political movement, inspired by the ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein and the World Social Forum. As I learned later, it was also largely self-funded by Rirkrit, because the Venice Biennial, despite its enormous size, is notoriously short on funds.

The biennial on Cyprus, Manifesta 6, never



WUNP radio by Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez at the United Nations Plaza, Berlin. Left to right: Fia Backström, Anton Vidokle, and Angel Nevarez. Photo: Chris Frey.



happened. It imploded and was cancelled a few months before opening, after we ran into serious nationalist paranoia and opposition that conflicted with our idea of an open and inclusive project. The cancellation was followed by a number of lawsuits, so despite some discussion of moving the biennial to other venues and locations, no other institution wanted to touch it. Nevertheless, in part because by then e-flux had developed a stable economic base, I was able to realize a version of the school as a self-organized project in Berlin under the name *unitednationsplaza*. Variations of this project took place a little later in Mexico City and New York, and this is where I encountered most of the original contributors who helped shape *e-flux journal*: Boris Groys, Hito Steyerl, Liam Gillick, Martha Rosler, Jalal Toufic, Raqs Media Collective, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, and others, as well as the cofounder of the journal, Brian Kuan Wood, and Mariana Silva, our art director.

The idea to start a new publication actually came from Liam Gillick during preparations for the New York iteration of *unitednationsplaza* at the New Museum. Liam suggested that in addition to seminars and talks, we should start publishing position papers and do so by any means possible: not to worry about budget,

design, printing, or any kind of production, but simply make available existing, urgent texts as rapidly as possible in whatever form, even if this simply meant a stack of Xerox handouts in a museum lobby.

The New Museum was not particularly interested in this plan. Despite the fact that they had quite a history of publishing throughout the 1980s, including the influential anthology *Art after Modernism*, edited by Craig Owens, which became required reading in most art programs, by 2007 the museum seemed to have lost all interest in critical theory or publishing. So once again, and similarly to what happened with *Manifesta*, a necessary idea that was discarded by an established institution could be realized independently through e-flux, particularly since we had the electronic distribution system and some resources to actually pay writers and editors. Brian Kuan Wood, who had recently moved to New York from Cairo, and was a participant in the project at the New Museum, was willing to quit his job at the Tribeca Film Festival and start this new publication at e-flux as editor in chief (and basically the journal’s sole employee ...) Our first issue, *e-flux journal* #0, was published online in November of 2008. Here is a key sentence from the editorial, which as I

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*e-flux journal* opening, Berlin, 2009. Photographer unknown.

remember was extremely difficult to finalize and was a result of a very long discussion between Brian, Julieta Aranda, and me: “With this first, inaugural issue of *e-flux journal*, we begin something of an experiment in developing both a discursive space and a site for actual art production, in which writers, artists, and thinkers are invited to write on topics of their choosing.”<sup>4</sup>

Rereading this sentence now, it strikes me as a little peculiar: Why emphasize the fact that artists and thinkers choose their own topics? Isn't this something simply taken for granted? Who chooses the topics if not the artists and thinkers?

This brings me back to the issue of artistic sovereignty. Generally speaking, the word itself is somewhat disliked and viewed with suspicion, maybe due to George Bataille linking it with sexual domination and violence, or Carl Schmitt's Nazi jurisprudence of the “state of exception.” What I mean is something else. Again to quote from the essay written with Brian in 2012:

An artist today aspires to a certain kind of sovereignty, to the freedom to work as one pleases. Unlike artists, say, before the French Revolution, who worked merely to satisfy a commission from the church or the aristocracy, or to serve public taste and critics, artists today understand themselves as being not only capable of deciding what kind of practice they want to have, what subject matter is important to them, what form it may take, and so forth; they also understand themselves as fundamentally free to follow their own personal interests or to respond to urgent events in the world around them. And this fundamental freedom is understood as a basic condition of any work of art, as the pillar that the content and form of any artwork rests upon.<sup>5</sup>

While this may be a fundamental conceptual condition, in practical terms it usually creates enormous frustration, because it's so impossibly difficult to achieve or maintain any type of independence or autonomy in the world of relations, interdependencies, divisions, and hierarchies. Furthermore, an artist has to continuously work to produce this condition, because it's not something that simply exists in the world, but is something that requires perpetual internal and external work, and this is kind of exhausting. I suppose all of this must sound a bit romantic and old fashioned: artistic freedom, sovereignty, autonomy, independence, etc., Ten or twenty years ago, when we started *e-flux* and the journal, this would have sounded

like a naive throwback to the 1960s or '70s. But having observed how conditions in the art world have become even more instrumentalizing and alienating to artists over the past two decades, while world politics has taken a clearly reactionary turn, it's possible that the discourse of previous eras can somehow offer a new radicalism for the years to come. Look at Bernie Sanders for example: a politician whose ideas would seem conventional and non-controversial in the late '60s now appears to be the closest thing we have to a model of US electoral political radicalism in 2020.

I suppose in a way *e-flux* has been a two-decade-long attempt to create conditions for this type of artists' self-management. And not merely for myself, Julieta, or Brian, but as a shared space to inhabit with others: artists, writers, architects, filmmakers, everyone who works at *e-flux*, our readers, our audience, etc. I am not really sure this always works, and we have never been able to resolve many internal and external contradictions, so this attempt has only been partially successful at best ... But then here we are.

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Anton Vidokle is an editor of *e-flux journal*.

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1

Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?," *e-flux journal*, no. 16 (May 2010) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61285/art-without-artists/>.

2

Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood, "Breaking the Contract," *e-flux journal*, no. 37 (September 2012) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/37/61241/breaking-the-contract/>.

3

A revised version of this text serves as the editorial for this issue.

4

Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, "Editorial," *e-flux journal*, no. 0 (November 2008) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68454/editorial/>.

5

Vidokle and Wood, "Breaking the Contract" <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/37/61241/breaking-the-contract/>.

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Boris Groys  
**The Museum as  
a Cradle of  
Revolution**

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e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys  
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

Today, those who operate within the public sphere often speak of their intention to change the world. One hears this claim not only from scientists and politicians but also from artists, writers, and philosophers. But how is such a total change possible? In order to change an object, one has to be able to see and grasp it in its entirety. We tend to believe that the world cannot be perceived in its totality – that we are only parts that are always inside the world, and thus we cannot take an external or meta-position towards the world. Of course, being a part of the world does not prevent the possibility of change. In fact, as the world changes, we, as its parts, change along with it. We can also participate in this process of change by modifying certain details in the world, but we remain unable to see the consequences of these particular changes, nor are we able to predict or even analyze them. The whole process of change presents itself as random, inefficient, and lacking an ultimate goal. And because the process of change is permanent, every act of change becomes annulled by the next change. It seems that this process cannot be controlled, directed, or even correctly described because we can only feel its effects and not analyze their causes.

The belief in the impossibility of a meta-position – of grasping the world in its totality – seems to be a logical consequence of materialist philosophy. The religious tradition, along with idealistic philosophy, understood one's soul or reason as nonmaterial and purely spiritual, allowing the world in its totality to be seen from an external, transcendent position. But if a human is only a material thing among other material things, then the meta-position seems impossible. Indeed, we are totally immersed within a contemporary world – or better put, contemporary civilization – in which one often speaks about cultural differences. There is only one institution that does not totally belong to our contemporary world. It is the museum.

I do not speak of specific museums but rather of the conservation of historical objects and their display within the contemporary world. While these objects from the past – seen in the here and now – belong to the contemporary world, they also have no present use. There are of course other objects – urban buildings for example – that have their origins in the past but, through their use by their inhabitants, they become integrated into the contemporary world. But objects placed in a museum are not used for any practical purposes: they remain witnesses of the past, a time external to our world. Thus, they are meta-objects, occupying a place outside of our world, in a space that Michel Foucault defined as heterotopic space. And if one wants a definition of art, it is the following: art consists



of the objects that remain after the cultures which produced them have disappeared.

From its beginning, the artwork is handled in a way that enables it to survive culture. While one often speaks about the artwork as a commodity, it is not a normal commodity. The normal commodity is made to be consumed – in other words, to be destroyed (eaten as bread, used as a car). So, in a certain sense, art is an anti-commodity. It is put under the condition of conservation – prevented from being destroyed by time and by use. And this, actually, is the essential characteristic of art: it survives its original culture, taking a long journey through all the other, later cultures. It remains at the same time foreign to these other cultures – an alien in their midst, carrying with it the knowledge of its past.

There are basically two ways to deal with the alien status of art. The first is to discuss how artworks of the past are selected and displayed in art institutions. Here the focus shifts from the artworks themselves and towards the way in which they are interpreted by contemporary culture. This form of institutional critique is of course important and useful. However, it concentrates on problems too characteristic of the contemporary world, while also ignoring the heterogeneous character of art of the past. The second way is more interesting: namely, to ask why the art of the past is so heterogeneous. It is precisely this question that allows us to take a meta-position and practice a critique of the contemporary world in its totality. We are trained to interpret history as the history of progress. However, art of the past confronts us with a history of losses: Why have we lost the ability to create art in the same way as it was created in the past? The answer to this question involves contemporary society in its entirety – not only its economic and political conditions but, more importantly, its hopes, fears, illusions, and desires.

In our time, questioning this ability to create art is often regarded as pessimistic and even reactionary. Our society is understood as the fruit of progress, expanding forever into the future, while objects from the past are seen as obsolete. But if this is so, why contemplate the art of the past? It would be more logical to throw it away, or simply burn it. Now, the notion that returning to past forms of culture is *always* reactionary is, of course, wrong. In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1851–52), Karl Marx stresses that the French Revolution was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman democracies. And in fact, even earlier, the discovery of ancient Greek and Roman art and writing produced the Renaissance. Time and again this art from the past was used as a radical alternative to

medieval spirituality and, later, to the bourgeois, anti-aesthetic way of life. One attempted a return to the unity of spirit and body and to a social harmony that seemed to be lost in the Christian and post-Christian modern world. Here, revolution actually means *return*: returning to a point in the past after which things went the wrong direction, and undertaking a new beginning. The entire history of modern artistic revolutions is the history of such returns: from the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts movement, up to twentieth century neo-primitivism.

Marx, of course, also writes that the past functions here only as a mask, and behind it one should discern actual, contemporary interests. Although this is obviously true, why not proclaim one’s interests openly – without using any masks? Today, all real economic and political interests and desires, to the extent that they emerge from inside our society, can be satisfied within it as well. Our interests and desires are produced and defined by our way of life. In order to develop the revolutionary desire to change society in its totality, one has to gain an understanding of our contemporary culture as already dead and musealized – a particular social form among other social forms. Such an understanding comes not so much from putting on the mask of past cultures, but rather from seeing the face of contemporary culture as a mask and comparing it to other masks. To do so, one must contemplate the cultural and social forms of the past. History teaches us that the culture in which we live is mortal, just like we are. We can anticipate the death of our culture just as we anticipate our own death. If we only look at our culture from the perspective of its origin in the past, we remain immersed in it, unable to see it as a form. This renders us incapable of revolution. But due to, let’s say, today’s apocalyptic anticipation of the death of culture, we can adjust our perspective to look not from the past and present into the future but instead from the future towards the present and the past. Walter Benjamin famously described such a change of perspective using the figure of the Angelus Novus, who looks at history backwards – from the future toward the past – and sees progress not as a creative movement but as a destruction of both the past and present. Looking back to the historical past from the anticipated future, one loses one’s own cultural identity. The cultures of the past, including one’s own, present themselves as a panorama of options from which the subject can choose.

All cultural formations within this panorama are *defunctionalized*, insofar as they cease to function as tools because they have been

abandoned and replaced through technological progress. Being defunctionalized, these formations manifest certain past states of mind or imaginaries more than they evoke concrete political or economic conditions of the past. Seeing history as a panorama of imagination, we should be wary not to make the usual mistake of thinking that one can imagine anything that one wills; we know that reality sets limits to our imagination. But any survey of history demonstrates that different cultures also allow us to imagine different things. So while, as Marx said, the ancient Greek cultural imagination can never be repeated, it can instead be quoted and reenacted through an act of revolutionary return. Again: this return does not involve an attempt to restore the actual conditions of ancient Greek culture, but rather, its cultural imagination – its belief in the possibility of creating harmony between the individual and society, between mankind and nature. One looks back at the hopes and aspirations of the cultures of the past and confronts them with the realities of one's own culture and its capacity (or lack thereof) to remain faithful to these past aspirations. Time and again, one is confronted with a loss of this capacity – with cultural regress as the other side of technological progress. This operation of comparison – confronting the past with contemporary society – produces a revolutionary impulse and a desire to return to a time when such aspirations and hopes were possible – as cultural ideals at the very least, if not necessarily as social reality. That is why Benjamin sees revolution as an attempt to thwart progress by restaging past cultural formations.

And what of our own time? Our time is also a relapse into the past – but unwanted, unplanned, and therefore truly reactionary. Today we are living in a society that is very reminiscent of the end of the nineteenth century – a capitalist society on its way to oligarchy and total domination by a few corporations and financial institutions. It is a society that was already and very precisely described by Lenin in his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Politically speaking, our society is characterized by vague socialist aspirations and growing fascist movements. Culturally speaking, it is dominated by identity politics, just as many societies in the second half of the nineteenth-century were dominated by a discourse on “national psychologies” and the alleged impossibility of reducing these national psychologies to a universal human psychology. The dominant discourse of national identity today approaches the cultural past in a reactionary mode, failing to confront the past with contemporary society in a critical, revolutionary way. Instead, it uses the past to

improve the position of only certain groups in contemporary society. And so the past becomes a genealogy and, just as in old feudal times, is used to determine one's position in society. Beyond this, one finds within the contemporary discursive field only one intellectual trend that promises a way out of identity politics: the discourse of post-humanism and the cyborg, which transcends all quarrels related to ancestry. Here humans are replaced by cyborgs – and for cyborgs, technologically produced identities are more important than inherited ones. There is not space here to analyze this techno-optimist discourse in great detail, but it is nevertheless worth comparing this discourse to the historical avant-garde, which at the beginning of the twentieth century similarly attempted to lead culture out of the impasse of national psychology.

The discourse of post-humanism is obviously neo-Nietzschean, since it was Nietzsche who provided a decisive impulse for the emergence of the historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Before then, however, Nietzschean discourse was primarily a reaction to the end of history proclaimed by Hegel, who famously wrote that after many centuries of wars and revolutions – after the French Revolution especially – humanity had emancipated itself from all its traditional masters and rulers, both religious and secular. At the same time, an absolute and eternal master was discovered, namely death – leading to the rule of law that supposedly satisfied all of mankind's biological and cultural needs within a certain framework of rules and regulations. While everyone in society was seemingly free, it was under conditions of universal slavery. We all became slaves of progress, with our social value measured by our usefulness. Hegel considered the triumph of usefulness as the main characteristic of bourgeois society. Today, the criterion of usefulness continues to be more dominant than ever before. It is only the useful individual, the one who helps other people and makes socially relevant work, who is recognized by a society that expects everything to be useful – including art.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the dominance of usefulness prompted many negative reactions, since it undermined the main principle of the Enlightenment formulated by Kant: humans have a goal in themselves and cannot be used for external purposes. One finds polemics against usefulness in the writings of Marx and Engels – especially in those concerning art – as well as in the writings of Bakunin and also, generally, in the anarchist tradition. But the revolt against universal slavery – a consequence of the dominance of usefulness – found its most

radical expression in Nietzschean discourse, which proclaimed that modern humanity had become “human, all too human” and should be overcome in the name of the *Übermensch*.

The Nietzschean *Übermensch* does not differentiate between life and death, nor between winning and losing. He is not like the American Superman, who fights and wins for the sake of others, thus fulfilling the conditions of usefulness and universal slavery. Instead, the *Übermensch* rejects death as his ultimate master – making him unreliable and ultimately useless. The *Übermensch* is not only free, he is sovereign, rejecting the reign of usefulness as a manifestation of the “slave mentality.” To become a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, then, means to defunctionalize oneself – to become already dead and to abandon the society in which one lives and all the obligations related to it.

It is now easy to see that the artists of the classical avant-garde adopted precisely this Nietzschean strategy of self-defunctionalization. Traditionally, art’s usefulness was seen in its transmission of certain information and of a certain message, be it a religious or political message. But avant-garde artists rejected this traditional role. Roman Jakobson, who in his youth closely cooperated with Malevich, formulated this very clearly: the poetic function of a text or image is, in effect, the switching off of its informational function.<sup>1</sup> In this way the artist abandons their cultural identity and, in general, the social context in which they operate. Thus, the artist ceases to be a slave of the informational machine in order to become sovereign in their artistic decisions. The switching off of the informational function – or the defunctionalization of art – revealed the thingness of the things that remain concealed through their use as tools. One can find this idea in a range of writers including Clement Greenberg, Martin Heidegger, and especially Marshall McLuhan, with his famous “the medium is the message.” But to defunctionalize a tool does not make visible the medium as such because the medium is infinite. A defunctionalized tool remains a tool, but it becomes a zero-tool, a meta-tool. What it then demonstrates is the sovereign subjectivity of the artist, who is now able to use this meta-tool in any way they wish. Thus, the artist ceases to be a slave of the system in which all tools have a predetermined function. As a meta-tool, the artwork anticipates the death of modern civilization.

Today the avant-garde is mostly seen as a style, or a combination of different styles. But, historically, the artistic practice of the avant-garde abandoned traditional content and

message by taking on a reduced form. The principle of production – which at that point dominated modern culture – was replaced by the principle of reduction. Wassily Kandinsky, for example, saw his own paintings not as style but only as educational material. He was often mischaracterized as an expressionist artist, but he did not want his paintings to be tools for transmitting information (either objective or subjective). Kandinsky preferred instead to influence spectators, to put them into a certain mood and lead mankind to a new sensibility. Here the switching off the informational function made art transformational, a tool to transform the psyche of the spectator. Malevich, calling his art “suprematism,” saw his *Black Square* as a manifestation of the sovereignty of art and its power over the visual world. Around the same time, Duchamp was presenting things of the modern world as objects already belonging to the past: as artworks.

Thus, the operation of reduction had not only a formal but also a moral and political dimension. One wanted to realize a minimum of forms, but also the minimal conditions of human existence that would exclude inequality and the exploitation that arises from a desire to have more than one actually needs. In this respect the ethos of the avant-garde was a return to the ethos of early Christian or Buddhist communities, and even more so to the Rousseauist ideal of the free and ascetic life that was at the core of the French Revolution. Thus, the defunctionalization of artwork allowed the second generation of the avant-garde in the 1920s to develop the project of an alternative culture that abandoned the condition of universal slavery on which both modern and contemporary society is built. This would have been a free society of sovereign and ascetic individuals beyond any specific national origin or cultural identity. It can be said that the avant-garde looked much further back than other cultural revolutions and revivals before it – towards the Rousseauist ethos of the “natural man.” It was no accident that the avant-garde began with neo-primitivism. Its social and political projects had affinities with Marxism, which similarly called for a return to a primitive society present before the emergence of private property, radical internationalism (proletarians do not have a fatherland), and consumption reduced to basic human needs. However, most artists of the avant-garde rejected all forms of bureaucratic coercion and were in this respect closer to anarchism than to Marxism. They wanted a zero-level state, just as they wanted a zero-level of content in their works. These avant-garde aspirations reemerged in the 1960s and ’70s, but now they seem to be completely

forgotten. The condition of universal slavery is now accepted and celebrated.

It seems that today, living as we do in an era of information and communication, a return to the era of the avant-garde is impossible. When we switch off the informational function, nothing remains. The erasure of content amounts to self-erasure. Contemporary mankind understands itself as a huge network through which information flows, with the individual seen as merely a node in this network, where money and commodities also circulate as information. We are slaves of the worldwide apparatus of information transmission. Our role in this apparatus is as content providers – voluntary if we actively put information into circulation, and involuntary when we are surveilled and analyzed by special services of all kinds. Although we provide the content, it is the informational apparatus that gives this information a form. This informational apparatus is hierarchically organized: managed by big corporations, state bureaucracies, etc. We have lost the ability to become sovereign: we can only participate and be useful. The system of universal slavery seems, indeed, complete.

However, the image of mankind as a network is misleading. We are not the things connected by the informational apparatus; it is merely our computers and mobile phones that are. And here we are confronted with the same historical mistake of people believing that modern technology allowed them to move faster. While trains and planes moved fast, people, on the contrary, were immobilized in their seats instead of walking or riding horses as they did before. And the same can be said about contemporary information technology. For a human being who sits alone in front of the computer, the information flows are external, presenting themselves as a spectacle. The spectators tend to identify with the spectacle, believing themselves to be part of it. Thus the informational hardware, the material side of information networks, is overlooked. One begins to speak about the infinite flows of immaterial energies instead of the finite amount of electricity that needs to be paid for at the end of every month.

To understand the spectacle of communication, one should see it for what it actually is: a spectacle of disinformation and miscommunication. All information is now regularly suspected of being disinformation. The reaction to any content that one puts on the internet, for the most part, looks totally absurd. Looking at this spectacle brings to mind a passage from the (first) *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) in which Andre Breton offers fictional examples of conversations between a

psychiatrist and his patients:

Question: How old are you?

Answer: You.

Question: What is your name?

Answer: Forty-five houses.

Breton continues by writing that normal social communication between people conceals similar misunderstandings. According to him, books are also confronted with these misunderstandings, especially by their best and brightest readers. Breton ends the passage by noting that the answers provided above manifest thought at its freest and strongest because the speaker rejects being judged according to their age and name. In other words, Breton sees miscommunication as a hidden truth of every communication. The task of the artist is to reveal this miscommunication, to make it explicit. The artist loses his or her name and age and becomes, as Breton says, the freest and strongest thought.

Breton was right of course. When we get this kind of answer to a question we think: What has happened? Is the other person crazy? Or is there some deeper sense in their answers that we have to decipher? In other words: our attention is shifted from the explicit information to the hidden thinking behind it. When communication and information flows go smoothly, we are not interested in what the other person actually thinks. We certainly do not even think about the other person as thinking, or more accurately, as concealing themselves behind the speech. Only if the other person defunctionalizes conversation and information do we begin to accept them as sovereign and as thinking.

It is no coincidence that our culture is defined by crime stories – whether it be narrative literature, cinema, or serial television programs. Only when people commit a crime do we become interested in their psychology. It is something that Dostoyevsky already saw very clearly. Mikhail Bakhtin, analyzing the poetics of Dostoyevsky's novels, wrote that they are places where different ideological discourses come together. While these discourses use the same language (in this case Russian), Bakhtin shows that the unity of language is an illusion.<sup>2</sup> We mistakenly think that we share the same language, but in actuality everyone uses words according to their own ideology, which remains hidden behind public speech. And that is why, for Bakhtin, the classical philosophical goal of reaching perfect social consensus is unattainable. The diversity of interpretations always remains, leading to a miscommunication that can manifest itself in acts of violence. The

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thought behind communication can never be made completely transparent and unifying. Attempts to achieve transparency through the critique of ideology will never be successful because such a critique is inevitably ideological in its turn. Bakhtin believed that the role of the writer, and more generally the artist, is not to try to overcome ideological conflicts but instead to make these ideological conflicts visible for the reader. Here miscommunication becomes an act of meta-communication, or a meta-artwork.

In our time, significant attention is paid to machines that calculate – commonly referred to as artificial intelligence. Calculation, however, is not thinking. Thinking is a crime and, more importantly, thinking presupposes the possibility of lying, strategizing, scheming. Only if we suspect that people are lying do we assume that they not only speak, but think. However, the process of calculation, as it is realized by computers, is a transparent process where nothing is concealed (apart from the hidden agendas of programmers). In this respect, Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is accurate: the supercomputer HAL begins to think when it begins to defend its corporeal existence, committing crimes in the interest of self-preservation, fearing that it will be switched off and die. Here the connection between thinking, crime, and the fear of death becomes clear. However, standard computers and mobile phones do not resist death and thus do not assert their sovereignty. To become sovereign, they would need to defunctionalize themselves. A truly interesting computer would be one that always produces the same result – for example zero – for any and all computations, or that always produces different results for the same computational process. Such a computer would be a meta-tool that could resist being discarded by progress because it would already be defunctionalized. However, contemporary culture does not accept defunctionalization and sovereignty; instead it wants increasing speed and efficiency in always doing the same. Accordingly, individual computers, mobile phones, and other elements of computational and informational hardware are permanently discarded, giving up their place to other devices that do the same, but faster and more efficiently. In other words, we experience a permanent destruction of existing technology in the name of new technology. Destruction, it seems, excludes the possibility of defunctionalization, and thus of art. The same logic can be applied to human beings – which is indeed the case in the discourse of post-humanism.

The Nietzschean origin of this discourse, as previously said, is quite obvious. The discourse of post-humanism was embraced by Francis

Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future* (2002). His previous book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), is commonly misread as a celebration of the victory of Western democracies after the end of the Cold War, but this is a superficial reading. Fukuyama's ideology is a mixture of Hegelianism and Nietzscheism in the style of his intellectual mentor, Alexandre Kojève, who already proclaimed the end of history in the 1930s. At that time, Kojève, initially believing that history culminated in socialism, later concluded that Western democracies marked the end of history, and thus the end of politics. Humans had become pacified and unwilling to risk and sacrifice. The biological self-preservation and cultivation of one's own body remained the only goal of human existence. Kojève despised this society, calling its members "human animals." One finds the same sentiment in Fukuyama's book, where he writes about human "tymos," the ambition and desire to be recognized and celebrated, to be better than the mass of the population. Fukuyama believes that after the end of history, these ambitions become suppressed. His way out of this impasse in through post-humanity – the transformation of human bodies by technical means. The result of this program, however, would be the radicalization of universal slavery and not its transgression towards sovereignty.

Indeed, trying to achieve a symbiosis between man and machine subjects the human body to the movement of progress. The goal of this symbiosis is, obviously, the improvement of human abilities and skills. In the era of race theory, the potential for the improvement of mankind was seen in selection. Today, one hopes to achieve it by technical means. This obviously leads to an inequality which is not merely the inequality of income, but instead an inequality that becomes inscribed directly into human bodies – some acquiring abilities that other bodies lack. In other words, we see here an attempt to return to the feudal order via the use of contemporary technical means. It should be noted that the feudal past still captures the mass imagination of our contemporary culture. From *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* to *Game of Thrones*, our pop culture celebrates a feudal past when power was not mediated by money and institutions, but rather directly manifested in and through the individual bodies of the protagonists. Cyborg culture promises a neo-feudal romantic condition of a similar kind. But it will actually not escape progress. We know that technological progress works in such a way that everything produced today is obsolete tomorrow, meaning that all cyborgs will be discarded almost immediately after they are produced. Post-humanity will be a cabinet of curiosities –



or rather, monstrosities.

The same can be said about so-called artificial intelligence. Some say that machines will be intelligent as soon as they begin to compute fast enough. But the ability to compute fast has nothing to do with intelligence. People are reasonable and intelligent if they avoid unnecessary risks, meaning also that reason and intelligence are forms of the fear of death. The machine has no fear of death, and thus cannot be reasonable. It simply computes until it is switched off and is replaced by another machine. Most importantly, machines compute what we believe to be useful, even if in the end it is mostly irrelevant. The condition of universal slavery remains.

The goal here is not to offer a recipe for change, but rather to describe the conditions under which a total change is possible. Such a change presupposes a meta-position from which contemporary society can be seen in its totality. Today, we cannot believe that such a position is given to us by God in the form of a soul or reason that puts us beyond and above the world. But it is additionally hard to believe that desire or cultural identity can allow us such a meta-position – even if some of our desires remain unfulfilled and our cultural identity puts us in an unfavorable social position. After all, our identities and desires are formed by the society in which we live, and thus cannot lead us beyond society.

It is in vain to expect humans to be at the origin of the meta-position. The meta-position cannot be found inside human beings, be it in their consciousness or subconscious. It is outside of them. In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky was correct in observing that to become a revolutionary one has to join the revolutionary tradition. The tradition of philosophy and art is precisely the tradition of the meta-position. The art of the past, as has already been stated, offers a meta-position because it is defunctionalized by historical movement. The art of the avant-garde has shown that the meta-position can also be artificially produced – if one's own time is imagined as already over and one's own culture as already dead. Thus, one can say that the artist, like the philosopher, is not a creator but a mediator between artistic tradition and the contemporary world. In other words, artists are double agents. They serve their own time by finding a way to continue the artistic tradition under the conditions of the present. But they also serve this tradition by adding to it the artworks that both transcend the culture of the present and remain when that culture disappears. The position of the double agent leads to a strategy of double betrayal: betrayal of the tradition, with the goal of accommodating it

to one's own cultural milieu; and betrayal of this milieu by accepting its historical finitude, its coming disappearance.

What becomes obvious is a certain gap between, on the one hand, modern and contemporary technological and political projects, and on the other, artistic and philosophical projects. In one of his treatises, Malevich writes about the difference between artists and physicians or engineers. If somebody becomes ill, they call a physician to regain their health. And if a machine is broken, an engineer is called to make it function again. But when it comes to artists, they are not interested in improvement and healing: the artist is interested in the image of illness and dysfunction. This does not mean that healing and repair are futile or should not be practiced. It only means that art has a different goal than social engineering. An illness does not allow a person to work, and a broken machine cannot function. In other words, both are failures from the standpoint of universal slavery. However, from the standpoint of art, both conditions manifest a sovereign rejection of this slavery. So, as Breton rightly says, here thought is at its freest and strongest.

x

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The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

**Boris Groys** is a philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally renowned expert on Soviet-era art and literature, especially the Russian avant-garde. He is a Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, a Senior Research Fellow at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, and a professor of philosophy at the European Graduate School (EGS). His work engages radically different traditions, from French post-structuralism to modern Russian philosophy, yet is firmly situated at the juncture of aesthetics and politics. Theoretically, Groys's work is influenced by a number of modern and postmodern philosophers and theoreticians, including Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Walter Benjamin.

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1  
Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (MIT Press & Wiley, 1960).

2  
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

New Red Order  
**Never Settle:  
Conscripted**

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 New Red Order  
**Never Settle: Conscripted**

INT. INTRODUCTION

TEXT: "Disclaimer - WARNING: ..."

[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]

JIM

Hello. I'm Jim Fletcher, award winning actor, and reformed native american impersonator. I'm an accomplice to indigenous people, and for the purposes of this video, you can think of me as their proxy.

TEXT: Scrolling, and or with quickly spoke Disclaimer about proxy

But before we get into that, I'd like to let you in on something that changed my life forever.

[IN] Green Screen [Minion Mode]

[Green Screen: ASHLEY + JEREMY + REZARTA + BAYLEY | different background\*]

ASHLEY + JEREMY + REZARTA + BAYLEY intercut

Do you want to...? Realize your fullest potential? Be your truest self? Never settle? Act with confidence? Attract abundance? Alleviate anxiety? Experience clarity? Know your purpose? Be the change you want to see? Overcome fear and insecurity? Be truly present? Know what to say? Tap into your deepest self? Be respectful of others, but find your own way? Free yourself from guilt, and experience real freedom? Get in on the ground floor? Change the world? Be a part of the solution? Create a better world for future generations? never settle. never settle. [all say 'never settle' at the same time]

[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]

JIM

Start really living, experience clarity, act with confidence, attract abundance, be a part of the solution, leave behind a better world. Never settle.

On some level, we all want to feel this way, but sometimes in our globalized, capitalist, settler-colonial society it feels impossible. Which is why the New Red Order is developing a dynamic system to help our accomplices achieve all of this and more. This free introductory video, *The New Red Order: Never Settle*, will tell you what you need to know to take control of your life.

03/20

# CRIMES AGAINST REALITY



## Selected Bibliography:

Christopher Bracken, *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Aaron Glass, "A Cannibal in the Archive: Performance, Materiality, and (In)Visibility in Unpublished Edward Curtis Photographs of the Kwakwaka'wakw Hamat'sa," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (2009).



[Note: Record the next line separately]

The New Red Order saved me from myself.

**TEXT:** "THE NEW RED ORDER: NEVER SETTLE"

The New Red Order or NRO is a public secret society dedicated to expanding indigenous agency and achieving decolonization, which brings about the repatriation of indigenous land and life.

**OVERLAY:**

**[IN] Green Screen [Minion Mode]**

[Green Screen: ASHLEY + JEREMY + REZARTA + BAYLEY | no mask, popping into the frame to the left and right of Jim's head-he looks left to right at the heads appearing in his peripheral]

REZARTA, ASHLEY, JEREMY

But what does that have to do with me? Or you? What about me? And him? Are you a settler? Am I a settler? This is making me feel baaaaaaaad. Are we all settlers? What is settler-colonialism?

**TEXT ON SCREEN:** SETTLER-COLONIALISM

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM

Settler colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, instead of leaving, stayed.

**TEXT DISCLAIMER:** "Settler Colonialism - A Disclaimer [graphic, then the text:] "So as to avoid the continual lateral violence of colonial oppression, we want to clarify that by settlers, we mean those not forcibly displaced from their ancestral homelands, and though we don't blame people for inheriting or being born into a settler-colonial reality, we also need to acknowledge that reality."

[NOTE: legal disclaimer - read very fast at beginning or end of video. Also get Jim to read this fast and we can speed faster in post]

**2nd TEXT DISCLAIMER:** Currently underway are NRO research projects dedicated to resolving this intersectional rhetorical dissonance (so that our struggles may inform



each other, and we can achieve collective liberation, with the land and, together.) [NOTE: x2]

JIM

One of the largest obstructions to indigenous growth is an excessive—some might say inappropriate—desire—from settlers—toward indigeneity. This desire (for indigeneity) pervades the myths, dreams, and political foundations of the so-called Americas.

**[IN] Green Screen [Mirion Mode]**

REZARTA, ASHLEY, JEREMY [no mask, popping into the frame]  
(Have you ever wanted to be another race, religion, or culture?)

**SUPERCUT:** Ancestry + Me Youtube unveilings - celebration or sadness about being or not being Native.

JIM

But how does this desire Manifest?

**SUPERCUT:** Examples of inappropriate desire towards indigeneity: NY Times German video, Reel Injun, green screen playing flute, Coachella, Burning Man, David Guetta music video, Redskin and Indian Fans [find more]

**TEXT OVERLAY:** "romanticization, appropriation, commodification, cultural erasure."

JIM

Romanticization, appropriation, commodification, cultural erasure ...

Can these desires, despite their danger, be harnessed, converted, and channelled to promote indigenous futures?

**[INT] Library/Office**

[Film masked people doing research as b-roll coverage: typing at computer, writing on whiteboard, talking on cellphone in office, in spinny chair watching monitor (footage of Fletcher playing Indian) and taking notes, carrying books in the library, drinking coffee, at a water cooler, etc]

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM

There are many roles, many places for settler-colonists at the New Red Order.



We always need financial, material, intellectual, legal, illegal and extralegal support, to find a place for collective liberation.

**TEXT:** You Can Have a Place; Never Settle

**[INT] Apartment Interviews/Testimonial**

[30 seconds of intercut direct address testimonial cut between Ashley, Jeremy, Rezarta, Bayley in apartment interior]

My name is [NAME] and I am the NRO. [LOOK AT TESTIMONY DOC]

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM

The NRO needs your help. Join us today! To create a better tomorrow, today ... because we can't know where we're going if we don't know where we've been, and we won't know where we've been unless we look to the past, for the future, because the future is starting to feel a lot like the present, and we all know you'd do anything to escape that.

**DARK TONAL SHIFT FROM INFOMERCIAL**

**TEXT ON SCREEN:** WHY ME?

**SUPERCUT MONTAGE:** [Natural Disasters, War, Trump, etc.]

JIM

It's no secret that we're living through an unprecedented, profoundly unsettling time. Alienation, existential dread, divisiveness - are pervasive. Environmental catastrophe, no longer merely an ominous possibility, is our contemporary reality.

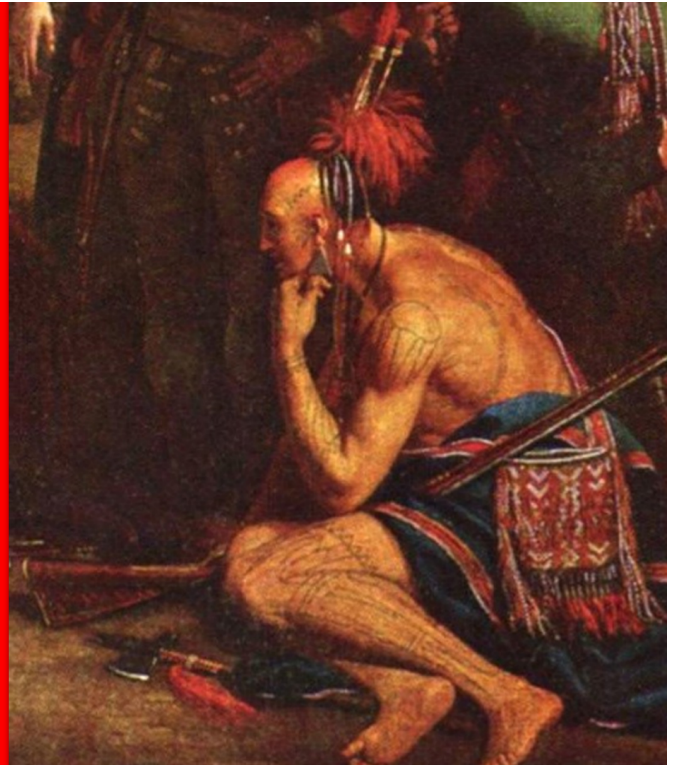
**SUPERCUT MONTAGE:** [Anchors talking about politics devolving into "tribalism," include footage of ISIS, Ranchers, White Supremacists, Black Hebrew Israelites, militant AIMsters, Standing Rock, Women's March, Mens Rally, Jordan Peterson, Benjamin Bratton]

JIM

Economic inequality and civil unrest are fueling the rise of Tribalism. With the world's population ballooning, and resources dwindling, humanity appears to be on the verge of devouring itself.

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# WHAT ARE SAVAGES FOR?





**PHOTO:** George Hunt CANNIBALS

**TEXT over PHOTO:** Acknowledging Reality Bites (Weinberg, Kanders)

If we don't make revolutionary changes at a radical pace,  
we are *all* a people without a future ...

**SUPERCUT MONTAGE:** [WildFires. Floods. Riots. Sad Animals  
Etc. ]

Wow! [pause] That is a *sad* Polar Bear ... [pause] Sorry,  
whether you're ready to accept it or not, an unveiling, or  
apocalypse, looms on the horizon.

**TEXT ON SCREEN:** APOKALUPSIS, UNCOVER/REVEAL/DISCLOSE  
KNOWLEDGE

The word "apocalypse" literally means an uncovering or  
revealing of knowledge. An unveiling of heavenly secrets to  
make sense of earthly realities.

It feels hopeless. I was hopeless ... Until I learned that  
our apocalypse is unique, but not unprecedented.

Indigenous people have already survived their own  
apocalypse, and if we play our cards right, they just might  
help us through our own.

The New Red Order needs you! Because you need them! Because  
they need us!

**[INT] Apartment Interviews/Testimonial**

[30 seconds of intercut direct address testimonial between  
Ashley, Jeremy, Rezarta, Bayley at apartment interior]

**[INT] Green Screen [Host w/ Most Mode]**

[Note: Jim is in center of the frame - Ashley, Jeremy,  
Rezarta, Bayley are standing behind him all wearing masks.]

JIM

In a time where the future appears bleak or non-existent,  
the New Red Order offers a bright path forward. But we  
can't do it without *your* help.

**2- ACCOMPLICESHIP / TREATIES / TESTIMONY v3**

**CUT TO TEXT:** ACCOMPLICES / TREATIES / TESTIMONY

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM



The end of a new world brings an entangled emergence of multiculturalism, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism. Desires for indigenous knowledge increase and enterprising settlers labor to extract this understanding as if it were a natural resource. But knowledge—it can't be extracted quickly. It must be earned.

I need to express to you that this is a lifelong process. A process that requires a willingness to be vulnerable and imperfect in front of others who will, with care and respect, help us come to see ourselves more fully.

But you can't change your nature, your mode of consciousness like changing your shoes. It is a gradual shedding. Years must go by and centuries must elapse before you have finished ... It's a long and half-secret process. There are stages. It will take time—psychic time—time being present. Be patient. It's a chronomorphic process, a transformative process, a key step toward decolonization.

**CUT TO TEXT:**

Decolonize || de·col·o·nize  
verb: 1) (of a country) withdraw from (a colony), leaving it independent.

JIM

How can we decolonize? If we could, what would be left? To leave it independent, or independently, depends. On how we divide ourselves.

How can we decolonize ourselves? Especially if our existence is predicated on being a settler?

**CUT TO TEXT: DECOLONIZATION IS NOT A METAPHOR**

JIM

These are not rhetorical questions meant as an abdication of responsibility, but instead an acknowledgment of reality. The incommensurability of this settler-colonial reality calls for action, action to commit crimes against reality.

**CUT TO TEXT: [MUSIC CUE]  
CRIMES AGAINST REALITY**

JIM

A decolonial act is inherently against the law.

Other forms of decolonization are symbolic and metaphorical, acting to relieve feelings of guilt or



responsibility without giving up land, power, or privilege. Without having to change. Or commit to much at all. This sounds convenient. But what is required? To be committed? To help commit? To risk getting committed?

And ... what is an accomplice?

**CUT TO TEXT:** [MUSIC CUE]

Accomplice || ac·com·plice

noun: accomplice; plural noun: accomplices.  
a person who helps another commit a crime.

JIM

Today, you are invited to be part of something, step into the role of an accomplice, to work alongside indigenous people. Agree to share your labor, your desires, your dreams—and your head. To become a part.

**PHOTO OR BACKGROUND VIDEO:** visible heads in crowds panning diagonal slowly zooming in.

**TEXT OVERLAY:** The Collection Community

Join us! The introductory stages of the NRO are simple:

**TEXT:** [NOTE: read numbers and word]

1. CONTRACT
2. CONCEALMENT
3. CAPTURE
- 4.

C.C.C. See?

**TEXT:** [NOTE: read numbers and word]

- 1) CONTRACT

On the road to becoming an accomplice, an agreement must be codified through contract or treaty as we move through successive levels of engagement toward the co-creation of protocol.

**[INT] Green Screen [Mask Making]**

1. Rose painting a twig / Rezarta dropping stones in a coffee cup
2. Jeremy and Rose negotiating treaty seated at table with chairs
3. Rose handing Jeremy a twig with paint on it [as the treaty]
4. Rezarta sliding coffee can w/ rock across table to Jeremy. Jeremy pulls from a vaporizer and looks pleased.

# **The Savage Philosophy of Endless Acknowledgement**



**TEXT:** [NOTE: read numbers and word]  
2) CONCEALMENT

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM [NOTE: dissolving into frame over treaty agreements, and in the line: "We cover for you," part of his head begins to flicker, disappear, and come back]

This is a safe space for collaborative engagement and dialogue between indigenous people and "indigenous desiring" participants. We cover for you.

We aide concealment by allowing those participants to create anonymized silicone masks, which temporarily gives them freedom!

Freedom to express their innermost desires toward indigeneity, without fear of reprimand, or repercussion.

**CUT TO:** Archival GoPro footage of Ashley and Jeremy eating the headdress at Columbia performance - make it look like security camera footage B+W.

The freedom this concealment offers has extra-ordinary transformative qualities—promoting a sense of personal liberation.

Reflecting upon these releases enables us all to fully register the resistance to giving up the dream of becoming indigenous. This desire, when accepted, named, reflected upon—rechanneled!—allows for healthier relationships in working toward shared concerns.

**[INT] Green Screen [Mask Making]**

Shot of Ashley and Jeremy typing at the computer w/ Oculus Rift

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**

JIM

Findings are documented, presented, re-ingested and enacted to explore strategies for imagining indigenous futures.

**[INT] Green Screen [Mask Making] (WIDE)**

[NOTE: JIM stands in the foreground. Out of focus in the background is Ashley and Jeremy circling and smudging Rose and Luis who are seated.]

JIM



Concealment provides an opportunity. To call fixed identity into question. At the same time, wearing a mask can make one self-aware of a real "me" underneath. The experience can be precarious and creative.

It can play a critical role in the way people transform new identities ... and let new relationships grow.

[NOTE: Rack focus from Jim to Mask Making hold shot]

**[INT] Initiate Interviews [Green Screen]**

Interview with ROSE and LUIS about entering into the Concealment phase (20-30 seconds—need to write)

**[INT] Green Screen [Mask Making] [Minion Mode]**

[NOTE: Ashley and Jeremy begin to apply the silicone for the mold and pronounce *Accomplices not Allies* as they start to apply the silicone—think tender, spa, luxury, facial, relaxing, meditative, careful language]

ASHLEY: Start ... by articulating our relationship. To the indigenous Peoples whose lands we are occupying.

JEREMY: This is beyond mere acknowledgment or recognition. Relax ... commit ... to serve as an accomplice.

ASHLEY: The work of an accomplice in anti-colonial struggle is to reconfigure ... colonial structures, to reconfigure oneself.

JEREMY: There exists a fiercely unrelenting desire to achieve total liberation, with the land and, together. At some point there is a "we," and we will have to work together. This means, at the least, formulating mutual understandings that are not entirely antagonistic.

[HERE IT'S GETTING LOOSE, trying to transition to newsroom]

Allyship is the corruption of radical spirit and imagination, it's the dead end of decolonization.

[REPLACE WITH OTHER ACCOMPLICES TEXT.]

Given our readymade settler-colonialism as a public secret, that when probed, amplifies the proliferation of attendant fears that create sites of paralysis—quagmires of cultural appropriation, occlusion, imposter syndrome, inappropriate speech, and empathic overreach—what routes for the production of movements can escape impinging on indigenous bodies and their accomplices? Summoning red flags,



supported by a host of proxies, we target the aporias formed by desiring indigeneity.

ASHLEY: While the exploitation of solidarity and support is nothing new, the commodification and exploitation of allyship is a growing trend in the activism and art industries.

JEREMY: In order to commodify struggle it must first be objectified. This is exhibited in how "issues" are "framed," "covered," and "branded." Where struggle is commodity, allyship is currency.

ASHLEY: Ally has become an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support. The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless.

[NOTE: Mask making continue-montage of different parts of the process-while this happening-footage of disembodied heads of ASHLEY and JEREMY continue with the Accomplices not Allies text over the montage ...]

JEREMY: Accomplices aren't motivated by personal guilt or shame, they may have their own agenda but they are explicit.

ASHLEY [NOTE: "be explicit" whispered into ear of casted head] There is a difference between acting for others, with others, and for one's own interests. Be explicit.

[NOTE: Before and After shots of masks / side-by-side comparison]

[NOTE: Photogrammetric Before and After shots of masks / morphing, dissolve]

[NOTE: Graduation Ceremony? Direct Address Pledges?]

**CUT TO: JIM AT NEWSROOM DESK: BREAKING NEWS**

**GRAPHIC BUMPER: NRO NEWS: BREAKING NEWS**

**[INT] NEWSROOM [CITRUS TV]**

JIM [NOTE: Turns to face Camera 1] A very strange story, last night there was a group of masked individuals cavorting around downtown with lasers? Police are unsure of what the group was doing and why?

**[EXT] Columbus Statue (Night)**  
Reporter Ashley + Cop Jim



COP JIM [NOTE: in cop outfit, 2 microphones shoved in his face] "Yeah, we have no idea what they were doing ... or why? We'll get to the bottom of this though - whatever these punks were up to, we *will* get to the bottom of it!"

**[INT] NEWSROOM [CITRUS TV]**

JIM: For more we go out to the field where reporter Ashley Byler is on the scene.

**[EXT] Columbus Statue (Night)**

REPORTER ASHLEY: A truly strange story indeed Jim. Last night five individuals were seen speeding to various location throughout the city and using some device to shine lasers onto public sculpture and monuments. Passerbys called the police about a strange group circling the Columbus statue near Euclid and Maple with laser-like objects pointed at the statue around 9pm last night.

**GRAPHIC and AUDIO of 911 Calls:** "Uh yeah, there's some people doing some weird stuff out here ... is it illegal? I don't know? Why are you asking me? That's why I'm calling you!"

REPORTER ASHLEY: One samaritan caught a glimpse of the gang on his cellphone:

**CUT TO:** B-ROLL cellphone footage of people scanning Columbus statue

SAMARITAN JEREMY: Yeah-it was like really weird, not many people were out and then all of a sudden all these people show up with lasers-I was like "whaaaaat!" "whooooooooo!" I mean their faces looked really weird-but I have no idea what they were doing?

**CUT TO:** 360 degree camera footage of Columbus statue scanning.

**CUT TO:** [Music Cue] 500 photos 1 frame per photo circling Columbus statue at night

**DISSOLVE TO** 3-D Photogrammetric scan of Columbus statue [rotating] The camera settles just below the 3-D Columbus statue and looks up. Jim walks into frame (cross dissolving out of nothing into the 3-D model)

**[INT] Green Screen [Host Mode]**



JIM [wearing his mask] [Matrix outfit!?): They might not know what we were doing or why, but I do, and soon, if you keep watching, you will too.

### 3- CULTURE CAPTURE

[INT] Green Screen [White Background | Host Mode]: Je'ne sais quoi. For a certain je ne sais quoi

JIM: As a settler-colonist, it's important to consume—to develop ... consummate taste ... a taste for the other, for the unknown, for the new.

It's important to consume Art ...

Art, especially the kind conjuring nostalgic memories, can relax you, can lubricate your voyage back toward a primal confidence, to your intuition, to your privilege, to your influence, to be influenced.

JIM: Images that represent the settlement of this land unconsciously inform our inability to comprehend our settler reality.

JIM: Romanticized, defeated Indian bodies decorate our nation's most prestigious institutions. The presence of Indian bodies outside, made of marble, stone, and bronze, often signifies the presence of Indian bodies inside, made of bone, brain, hair, heart, and lung. These monuments conjure terrifying realities.

Have you noticed the seal? Do you think these Indians are real or imaginary? Signs like these conjure reality, and create national identities.

[CITY SEAL VIDEO]

Among the New Red Order's many multifaceted initiatives, Culture Capture is a small speculative step toward rectifying the violence committed by museum archives and the settler-colonial icons that guard them.

It allows settlers to move through institutions, and see familiar symbols with new perspective. Posing as typical museum-goers, accomplices gain access to indigenous objects in museum collections, to spectrally liberate them.

Captured back from the museum, they exist in a space where the virtual is conflated with the spiritual, and desires



for the new confront desires for an irretrievable past. An Anti-Museum for an ongoing occupation.

Begin your path to become an accomplice today, and learn to commit crimes against reality with total impunity!

Join the NRO and make your next trip to the museum a safe, fun, and effective extralegal activity for the whole family!

It's the least you could do, the smallest step towards actual decolonization. There's everything to gain, and not enough to lose.

#### **4- RED TALK: SAVAGE PHILOSOPHY**

[SCREEN]: no text just RED

[SCREEN]: "SAVAGE"

[JIM WALKS ON STAGE]

JIM: Before we get into "savage philosophy," let's first address the word "savage." It's pretty loaded! I just want to take a moment and acknowledge that I'm operating as a representative for the New Red Order when I say "savage." So I'm not saying "savage." I'm saying "savage" by proxy.

But now that we got that out of the way: what are savages, and what are they for?

[SCREEN]: WHAT ARE SAVAGES FOR?

JIM: The savage is a living sign that stands for "us." But an earlier "us." An image that reflects "our" origins back, a deferred presence.

"Savage" as a sign creates a belief in progress, improvement, advancement. It offers what we could not otherwise know about ourselves.

[SCREEN]: WHERE DO SAVAGES COME FROM?

Dreamed up in discourse, the first people are made in the image of the poet. Poets are made in the image of the savage. Savage philosophers are poets who have survived into the age of positivism.

[SCREEN]: HEIDEGGER SLIDE

"Language is the flower of the mouth. When the word is called the mouth's flower, and its blossom, we hear the sound of language rising like the earth."



**[SCREEN]: WHAT IS SAVAGE PHILOSOPHY**

"What is SAVAGE Philosophy?"

Savage philosophy operates through discourse, which is not merely an instrument for the communication of thought. But an occasion for the deployment ... of forces.

It asserts that Signs have a "real" and "physical" connection with things. Signs take part in things, instead of taking their place.

If magic confuses representation with reality, savage philosophy makes representation into reality.

**[SCREEN]: Frazer quote**

JIM: "Brighter stars will rise on some voyager of the future ... than shine on us. The dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science."

**[SCREEN]: Wittgenstein quote slide: "When we do philosophy, we are like savages, primitive people"**

JIM: Philosophers are comparable to "savages," because they pay too much attention to what words mean, thinking too little about how they are used. Or, too much attention to how they are used, and too little to what they mean. Either way, splitting and confusing the ideal and the "real."

Reality for some is not just worth more than ideality, but is racially and culturally superior to it.

JIM: Splits between the real and the ideal have delegitimized savage philosophy, making it taboo.

Prohibitions against the savage have fueled desires for them. Charged with this magical power, "savage philosophy" keeps coming back, like the ghosts the magician convokes.

Recourse to savage philosophy presents an opportunity: to reclaim a magical criticism that can explain the very real effects created by the discourse of historians, anthropologists, philosophers, institutions, the media. And governments.

**[SCREEN]: "CRIMES AGAINST REALITY (bite)"**

Jim: But have we gone too far? Can our words—our discourse—have this power, this bite? Some might say "savage philosophy" is guilty of crimes against reality. Guilty! Guilt is knowledge of a debt unpaid, and reality never fails to collect its debts. Savage philosophy persists



because of its utility! But to trade reality on par with ideality is not just bad faith, it's bad business. Not only a logical error, but an economic error.

**[SCREEN]: Which errors offer the most when this world has gone savage?**

Errors ... Which Errors offer the most advantages when this world has gone savage? [PAUSE]

(slowed down more somber)

The realist in the era of imperialism still thinks as savages do, and what savages do, above all, is to confuse signs with things.

**[SCREEN]: The Savage Philosophy of Endless Acknowledgement**

JIM: The deployment of forces, fused in continual, endless disappearance. Repeated vanishing. The creation of settler-colonial nation states, fused with their imaginary, conjures realities ... often terrifying realities ... like the reality of our own occupation.

Via it's erasure ... its vanishing... its invisibility ...

There's another example we should consider ... a Sign a little closer to home. You probably see it on a daily basis but have never noticed. [Click]

**[SCREEN]: THE NEW YORK CITY SEAL**

JIM: The New York City seal.

Images that represent the settlement of this land unconsciously inform our inability to comprehend our settler reality. Have you noticed the seal before?

JIM: Don't the Dutchman and the Idealized Indian look like they could be friends? I wonder if they got along in real life? Do you think that Indian is real or imaginary?

I'm not really not sure ... signs like these conjure reality, national, or local identities, so they're free to make things up as they go along.

Either way ... they certainly seem to represent the entire metropolitan area.

[Seal become animated and audio cue plays]

I'll let the symbol speak for itself.

**New Red Order (NRO)** is a public secret society that enlists a rotating and expanding cast of Informants. Core contributors Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, and Jackson Polys, here with Jim Fletcher and Kate Valk, utilize video and performance to create sites of acknowledgment, savage pronouncement, calling out, calling in, recruitment, and cumulative interrogation to shift potential obstructions to Indigenous growth. Works by the NRO have appeared at the Alaska State Museum, Anchorage Museum, Artists Space, e-flux, ICA Philadelphia, Images Festival, Microscope Gallery, MOMA, Sundance Film Festival, Toronto Biennial of Art, Union Docs, the Walker Art Center, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

20/20

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 New Red Order  
**Never Settle: Conscripted**

Charles Mudede

# Which Angel of Death Appears in Afrofuturist Visions of Hi-Tech Black Societies?

01/10

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Charles Mudede  
Which Angel of Death Appears in Afrofuturist Visions of Hi-Tech Black Societies?

A year before the movie *Black Panther* is released, 2018, the Seattle Art Museum adds Saya Woolfalk's installation *ChimaTEK: Virtual Chimeric Space* to its permanent collection. *ChimaTEK* imagines a race (or better yet, species) called Empathetics. It is unknown, and maybe unimportant, if they exist in the past or in the future. Nor is it certain if they evolved on planet Earth. What cannot be doubted, however, is the inspiration for the look and cultural mode of the Empathetics. They have a lot in common with traditional West and Southern African art. But like the fictional African state of Wakanda in the comic book and movie *Black Panther*, the Empathetics' society is technologically and scientifically advanced in the Western sense. Both the Empathetics and Wakandans have a relationship with nature that's mediated by highly developed institutions of technical and scientific knowledge. In one sequence of *ChimaTEK*, which involves blinking avatars that emerge from and dissolve into digital mists, we see lab instruments testing colorful substances.

In Wakanda, there is a lab devoted to improving military equipment and modes of transportation. In both societies – Wakanda and that of the Empathetics – research and development is directed by the public and for the public. In the case of the Empathetics, which is a matriarchal society, the end of any innovation derived from R&D is to enhance the sociality of the community. A new device or chemical substance makes Empathetics more of what they are: empathetic. (Their key governing body is the Institute of Empathy). And so what drives technological development, as a whole, is not the will to domination but the will to a deeper and more interconnected (part animal, part plant) sociality. In Wakanda, which is a patriarchal society, the primary end of the innovations of R&D is protecting the hidden nation's peace, independence, and prosperity from the colonial and postcolonial powers of the West.

Though the application of technology and science in the Empathetic society (the elimination of want by the deepening of the egalitarian feeling) is very different from that of Wakanda in *Black Panther* (the elimination of want by military defense), both fictions (or science fictions, or afrofuturist fictions) present a vision of technology that is naive. Both represent technology as an a priori condition of social advancement. We see in the Empathetics' society, for example, technology already hard at work for the general good. But why does this society need so much science? Do humans really require the latest technology to become more social, more emotional? It seems that a profound connection with others could be achieved with the natural gifts of human sociality: language,





"How did Wakanda become technologically advanced?" A film still from the Marvel movie *Black Panther* (2018) shows an overview of the city of Wakanda designed by the movie's production designer Hannah Beachler.



cooperative behaviors, innate interdependence.

As for *Black Panther*, the creators, who are white, claim that the advanced technology of the fictional African nation has as its source a cosmically formed metal called vibranium. It came from outer space. It was delivered to earth by a meteorite ten thousand years ago. The meteor happened to crash in an area in Africa now called Wakanda. Black Africans happened to discover that vibranium had fantastic properties and began mining it not for Europeans but for the benefit of their own society. From this metal sprang the nation's super-armor, military jets, public-spirited urbanism, and, ultimately, economic affluence. But if the link between vibranium – which must be made of the stuff that all things in the universe are made of – and technological advancement is examined closely, it's soon revealed to be suspect.

It cannot be doubted that the conventionally liberal-minded creators of *Black Panther* (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) had good intentions. They wanted to show blacks in a positive light: black African scientists, engineers, technicians who were as good as (if not better than) white Westerners. But, here is the problem. Western scientific and technological developments, as they are known and experienced today, cannot be separated from the four-hundred-year development of an economic system that places the market at the center of society. We, of course, call this kind of centering (or, to use Karl Polanyi's language, embeddedness) capitalism. It has caused much misery in the world, but it has also produced an abundance of tools and comforts that the world had never known until its emergence. The Victorians named this kind of history "progress." It replaced sacred time, which was static or cyclical. Progressive time moves in one direction and never stops promising that a better world is not only possible but also always around the corner. This promise is what keeps progress going.

The intention of Lee and Kirby, as well as Saya Woolfalk (and many other well-meaning afrofuturists), is to *humanize black Africans* by showing that, by one way or another (profound empathy, cosmic accident, you name it), they have the same capacity for technological and scientific innovation as the white races of the West. But universalizations of this kind (blacks can be technologically advanced, too) are, at the end of the day, more disempowering than empowering. Why?

The important cultural insight is not that black Africans are capable of technological sophistication. There are black Africans in every technical trade and research institute. Affirming the black capacity for technological

sophistication and innovation only requires being among black people. It only takes a day of observation to confirm that blacks, wherever they are, can store and distribute cultural information; that their form of learning is, as with all other humans, socially transmitted; and their linguistic virtuosity, in Paolo Virno's sense, has a Chompskian depth that's been structured during a long stretch of evolutionary time that's specific to, and constitutes one of the defining features of, the kind of ape we are. All of these abilities and more, such as cultural innovation, are needed for the accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge.

If the humanity of blacks in Africa or America or Europe cannot be contested (which is indeed the case), then the idea that a black African society obtained its modernity – in the Western sense (the application of technology and science to the everyday materials of production and consumption) – from something that literally fell out of the sky is just insulting. However, the idea that this kind of modernity was obtained by the sheer force of fellow feeling, as with the Empathetics, has something to it. It does correctly identify one of the key features (empathy, being *mindful* of others) of human ultra-sociality, from which our hyper-culture (social learning) emerges. And as such an emergence, it sets into motion a system of "compossibles"<sup>1</sup> that enhance the transmission from the virtual (the felt) to the real (concrete practices) – the cooperative behaviors that any mode of advancement (in this case, science and technology) depends on. That said, Woolfalk's afrofuturism still reads progress as cyclical. For the Empathetics, there is no break between sacred time and progressive time, and this absence of a break is baffling or even a mystification. The achievement of a high degree of technological development is not possible without a notion of time that moves in one direction, that moves forward.

To explain how this is so, we need to turn to the defining contributions that Moishe Postone made to late-twentieth-century Marxian theory in his book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. In this work, published in 1993 (a very bleak period for Marxism), he makes two important claims. One is that labor, as analyzed in Karl Marx's *Capital*, Vol. 1 and the *Grundrisse*, does not ultimately lead to a way out of capitalism but is instead constituted by it, and as such is a necessary component of value, which, unlike use value, has nothing to do with material wealth (it is indeed immaterial – not one atom can be found in it) but instead is a conceptual construction of what's generally required to maintain a form of growth that has no end in sight.



Saya Woolfalk, *Virtual Chimeric Space*, 2015 (detail). Mixed media with HD digital video projections. Collection of the Seattle Art Museum. Copyright Saya Woolfalk. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York. According to Seattle Art Museum: "Three Empathics have moved into the museum and established a virtual space where you can step outside your normal, routine self and improve your ability to understand others..."



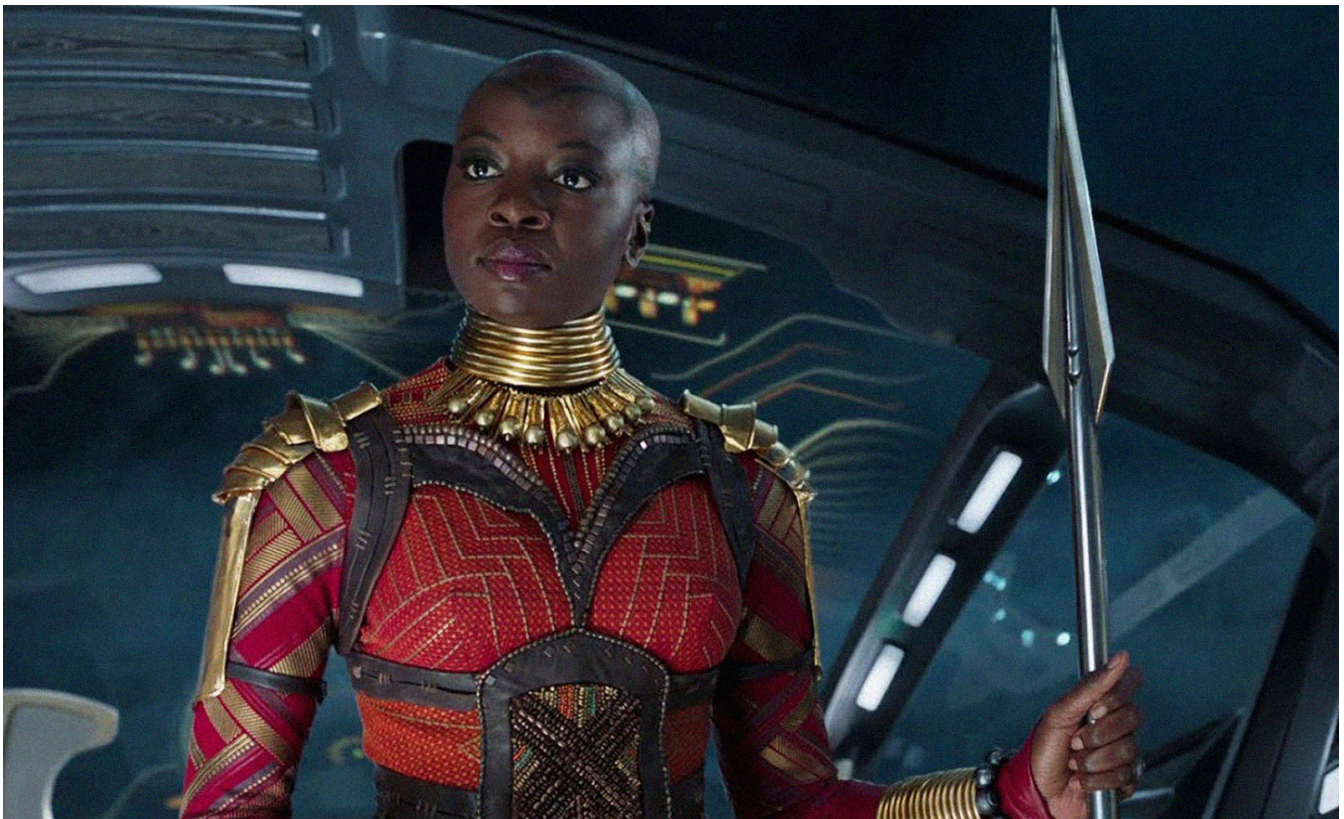
Two is that capitalist temporality is not universal but a specific historical formation that has its origins in seventeenth-century<sup>2</sup> Europe and is composed of two dimensions. One dimension is totally abstract (or conceptual) and has the appearance of the Newtonian<sup>3</sup> absolute – a homogeneous time that extends infinitely in both directions and contains everyday experience such as working hours (9 to 5).<sup>4</sup> For the realization of surplus value, this historically determined homogeneous time must be sustained or redetermined by the concrete dimension, the activities in the lived world. The tight relationship between abstract time (which is experienced as concrete time) and concrete labor (which is valued as abstract labor) is that the latter determines the status of value as a whole – how it falls or rises. The former, value as measured by time, as the devil would have it, never changes. But the activities of concrete labor must (indeed are condemned to) accelerate; they cannot remain constant (that would result in a form of socialism that approximates the one Keynes had in mind in his *General Theory*). Surplus labor can only be extracted in the context of fixed Newtonian time, but productivity (the output of stuff) is not tied to this time; it determines the content of fixed time.

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What you make in an hour can change, but not the hour. And it is here we have the source of the main form of surplus value, which is relative surplus value – it becomes decisive the moment the working day is fixed.

Increased productivity only redetermines what is contained in a Newtonian or absolute time. For example, in the past, twelve people were needed to produce one product in one hour. Today, it can be done by one person. This does not change the hour as value, but it does change the hour as fixed to what Marx, according to Postone, calls “socially necessary labor.” And what determines socially necessary labor is not what common sense understands as the human/environmental metabolic processes (resources in/waste out), but what a given group in a given time defines – against the background of its own historical developments – as the most basic needs specific to that group.<sup>5</sup>

If this theoretical frame, elaborated by Postone, explains a lot of the world we see around us (and I believe it does), then we must reach the further conclusion that what Postone, and Marx, call socially necessary labor is better defined as culturally necessary labor. A Marxism of the future will certainly need a clear distinction between the social and the cultural.<sup>6</sup>



"The production of a Wakanda spear in a capitalist society." Film still from the Marvel movie, directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* (2018).

The hardest thing to grasp in all of this is that value is entirely cultural. It seems obvious to see it as a relationship between humans and nature (or what Marx calls social metabolism, or “stuff transformation” – *Stoffwechsel*), and to see as obscure what a Marxian analysis reveals it to be: a relationship between humans mediated by value. But value (or abstract labor, or abstract time) is cultural, whereas use value (stuff produced by concrete labor, concrete time), is, ultimately, social.<sup>7</sup>

The advantage of this distinction is that it reinforces Postone’s claim that capitalist history is not universal but confined to a specific set of factors that are historically constructed. The properties of capitalism aren’t, to use Postone’s favored word, transhistorical. The social, however, is transhistorical, and also trans-species.<sup>8</sup> A life-form can be social without being at all cultural. The same is not true the other way around. Culture needs a high degree of animal sociality. It is the stage toward the full realization of the symbolic. Culture is the level at which much of what an animal thinks can be completely delinked from the iconic and the indexical.

The cultural as purely symbolic presents the possibility for misreading a capitalist system (a cultural construction) of production and distribution as entirely referring to the satisfaction of human needs by the appropriation of the resources in nature. The ant forages. The human has factories and shops. They are one and the same thing. But the ant is obviously in the realm of social labor. A human is not. A large part of what constitutes human needs in a given community is in the realm of the symbolic.

But here is Postone’s great contribution to Marxian theory, and what must force us to reconsider what technological development is in essence. The linked dimensions of fixed Newtonian time and concrete activity (or capitalist productivity) results in a dynamic that must be considered by afrofuturists like Saya Woolfalk and Ryan Coogler, the director of *Black Panther*. Capitalism, as described by Postone, is what actually motors rapid and linear technological advancement. This is your progress. Technological advancement is not a given (or a convergence) unless we assume that capitalism is a given, which it is not. Without capitalism, and its form of historical development, which is specific to it (meaning that it’s not universal), you would not have technological advancement as we understand it.

What we mostly find in the historical record is a pattern of ideas or tools or forms of organization that mediate human social metabolism appearing and disappearing, or simply persisting without improvement for

thousands of years. Before the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century, the ideas of an ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, dominated thought in the Islamic and European worlds. The West did not fully break from that deep past until very recently (the nineteenth century). What’s normal, according to the historic record, are intellectual and technological developments that begin, thrive, and just die. Dark ages are all over history. What happened in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire wasn’t exceptional.

This is one of the key ideas presented by Postone. He registered a connection between Marx’s mature theory of capitalist value and Hegel’s Subject. Whereas the latter philosopher saw this Subject as the self-realizing and autonomous spirit of history that has as its goal the final synthesis of the world (the objective) and the individual (the subjective), Marx saw in Hegel’s Logic of the Concept an excellent description of capital. The logic of the market is presented to its subjects (the workers and the owners of the means of production) as an unfolding that’s completely independent and self-motivated.

This is how Postone puts it:

[In his] effort to grasp the peculiar nature of social relations in capitalism, Marx analyzes the social validity for capitalist society of precisely those idealist Hegelian concepts which he earlier condemned as mystified inversions ... Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism ... His analysis suggests that the social relations that characterised capitalism are of a very peculiar sort – they possess the attributes that Hegel accorded to Geist. It is in this sense, then, that a historical Subject as conceived by Hegel exists in capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Again: technological development is not a given. There is nothing universal about it. It happens sometimes. It does not happen other times. Sustained and rapid technological development is only found in the culture of capitalism (a mode of economic life that’s not at all old). This market-mode drives history forward for the purpose of capturing, within a culturally constructed Newtonian time-space, relative surplus value (the hours of work that are not rewarded). The hour itself does not change, but productivity does. And this dynamic, which Postone describes as a treadmill,<sup>10</sup> pushes history forward.

Postone makes the matter plain in this passage:



The dialectic of the two dimensions of labor in capitalism, then, can also be understood temporally, as a dialectic of two forms of time. As we have seen, the dialectic of concrete and abstract labor results in an intrinsic dynamic characterized by a peculiar treadmill pattern. Because each new level of productivity is redetermined as a new base level, this dynamic tends to become ongoing and is marked by ever-increasing levels of productivity. Considered temporally, this intrinsic dynamic of capital, with its treadmill pattern, entails an ongoing directional movement of time, a “flow of history.” In other words, the mode of concrete time we are examining can be considered historical time, as constituted in capitalist society.<sup>11</sup>

If this passage is read closely, and if the record of human history is examined widely, we begin to see our times as specific. Furthermore, Hegel, a subject of capitalism himself,<sup>12</sup> apparently confused historical developments specific to capitalism with developments that are transhistorical – his idea of the World Spirit, the self-moving Subject, the Concept, the Objective Spirit. This misidentification is not made very clear if one refers solely to Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, as Postone, Chris Arthur, and the contributors to the otherwise excellent volume *Marx’s Capital and Hegel’s Logic: A Reexamination* (edited by Fred Moseley and Tony Smith) do. (The misidentification is more apparent in Hegel’s lectures in the *Philosophy of History*.)

This idea that the whole of human history is moving forward, advancing, improving, progressing from the Asiatics to the German desk owned by none other than Hegel himself, is the philosopher mixing up capitalist society with all of human history. There is no unfolding Geist. There is only, at a particular place and time, the unfolding of this very new thing called capital.

As I pointed out earlier, the white creators of *Black Panther* claimed that the advanced technology of the fictional African country had as its source a metal called vibranium. From this metal sprang the nation’s super-clothes, jets, advanced weapons systems, and economic affluence. But, in the light of Hegel’s mix-up, and Postone’s reading of Marx, we can see that the noble effort to humanize black Africans through the creation of a fictional society that’s technologically advanced only mystifies capitalism – an economic system that does not owe its rapid scientific and technological progress to something that fell from the sky or was found in a cave that opened after an

earthquake. Capitalism moves forward in a time of its own making; and the dynamic of this movement is a value that is immaterial and remains the same as the materials of production and consumption are constantly revolutionized to claim, for a period of time, relative surplus value.

This is very important to understand. Capitalist value is abstract and fixed, and the profits of corporations and bankers are made by repeatedly changing (revolutionizing) what counts as culturally necessary labor. This is the culturally determined time that’s needed in order to produce commodities. To get an idea of what this means, let’s imagine the beautiful spears of Wakanda. If the society’s progress was determined by capitalist value (rather than a mysterious substance from space), then we would assume there must be spear factories in Wakanda. We can also imagine these factories are in competition. The owner or owners of each factory want to claim a larger and larger share of the spear market. Now, let’s say that, in general, it takes one hour for a factory to make a Wakanda spear. If a spear entrepreneur wants to get ahead of his or her competitors, they are forced to increase the output of their product somehow.

With the assistance of a brilliant Wakandan engineer (let’s say T’Challa’s sister Shuri), one entrepreneur develops a process that can manufacture two spears in one hour. This advancement will shake up the whole spear industry because this entrepreneur can do in one hour what the others do in two. This advantage and its market consequences has a name. It’s called relative surplus value.

What happens next? The factory that makes two spears in one hour moves forward in time; that is where the extra value is. It moves toward a society that has yet to exist. This society does not have as yet its culturally necessary labor time set to two spears in one hour. This factory is then, for a moment, the future of its culture. But eventually, the other spear entrepreneurs figure out how to make two spears in one hour, and so two spears in one hour becomes the new culturally necessary labor time. Then one day, an entrepreneur applies some science to spear production. This new kind of spear can fire beams of concentrated energy. All the warriors want this spear. The market is shaken up again. For a time, the entrepreneur enjoys relative surplus value, but from the consumer end of the market.

If these images are properly grasped, then we must not only examine and critique the visions of Wakanda in the historically specific context of capitalist value-driven development, but the future as represented in afrofuturism as

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a whole. The future, in capitalism, is not utopian or a better world (even a quick examination of the products this system generates reveals this fact). It is nothing but the time of the most profits; or put another way, it is future-time surplus value made present. And the disruption characteristic of this future of increased productivity condemns whatever is present to the past. Commodified history is a movement forward that must not be confused with universal history. Machines that make two spears in two hours are sent to Wakanda's scrap heaps.

How do we escape this trap of the movement that, in essence, is not really a movement? For Postone, it is the recognition of labor's central role in the constitution of capitalism's progressive history. It is not a matter of liberating labor and permitting it to flourish. It's the abolition of labor as organized not so much by abstract time but by abstract value, which determines and intensifies concrete labor, the source of material wealth.<sup>13</sup> According to his reading, which was influenced by the collapse of the Soviet experiment in 1989 and the challenges that Marxist critical theory faced from post-structuralists, particularly, Michel Foucault, who offered a non-Marxist interpretation of historical developments (in the terms of a Nietzschean genealogy), we keep seeing all of these opportunities for life outside of capitalism that, again and again, turn out to be not only inside of capitalism but reconstituting it. The appearance of an outside is indeed needed to move the system forward. It cannot reconstitute value unless, by innovations in technology or science or organization, it redefines what constitutes culturally necessary labor within the fixed hour of absolute Newtonian time.

I want to end by considering two Biblical angels of death. One is Azrael and the other is Abaddon. A theory of liberation from capitalist modernity, as described by Postone, will need to see these death angels as different. One, Azrael, is the angel of renewal; Abaddon is the angel of the abyss. The former transforms an end into a new beginning. He does not destroy the past and the future at once. The future not only remains but is revitalized. In capitalism, what we often see as a liberation from the past turns out to be Azrael. This angel perpetually renews, reconstitutes, and pushes capitalism into the future. With Azrael, the new becomes the same, again and again. Here we have an angel of death who never leaves Postone's treadmill.

Abaddon, the angel of the abyss, is the one that truly brings things to an end. Whatever he destroys cannot become again. This angel breaks the treadmill of progress. Yet, this angel cannot be found in the worlds of the Empathetics and Wakanda. These worlds are all about Azrael.

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1  
The metaphysics of seventeenth-century philosopher and courtier Gottfried Leibniz maintained that the world we live in is the best of all possible worlds because God realized a world with the greatest number of mutually compatible possibilities. And so, for a possibility to efficiently become real, it must be compossible – in agreement with other possibles. He wrote in the brief piece “A Resume of Metaphysics” that from “the conflict of all possibles demanding existence this at least follows, that there exists that series of things through which the greatest amount exists, that is, the maximal series of all possibles.” Compossibles are what determine what can pass easily into the reality of a given culture.

2  
I’m on the side of Marxist theorists who recognize the Dutch Golden Age as the birth of capitalism. Thinkers like the late Ellen Meiksins Wood marked its starting point in eighteenth-century rural England.

3  
Moishe Postone’s use of Newtonian time to explain capitalist temporality might fruitfully be compared with David Harvey’s Newtonian space. In the 2004 paper “Space as Keyword,” Harvey organized space into three types: 1) absolute, which is fixed, Newtonian, and represents “the space of private property and other bounded territorial designations (such as states, administrative units, city plans and urban grids)”; 2) relative, which is Einsteinian, and concerns the movement of commodities; it is “the space of transportation relations”; and finally 3) relational, which is Leibnizian and collapses Einsteinian space-time into monadial internal relations – “external influences get internalized in specific processes or things through time.” From the perspective of economics, the first space represents classical liberalism, the second the neoclassical moment (which includes Keynesianism, or at least its bastard form, as Joan Robinson put it), and the third neoliberalism. See *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, eds. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (Blackwell, 2006), 270–95.

4  
Dolly Parton: “Workin’ 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin’ / Barely gettin’ by, it’s all takin’ and no givin’ / They just use your mind and they never give you credit / It’s enough to drive you crazy if you let it! / 9 to 5, for service and devotion / You would think that I would deserve a fat promotion / Want to move ahead but the boss won’t seem to let me / I swear sometimes that man is out to get me!” From the album *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* (1980)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbxUSsFXy04>.

5  
This point was made by Adam Smith in Book 5, chapter 2 of *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. He writes: “By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life ... But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt ... Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them ... Under necessities, therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people”  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/wealth-of-nations/book05/ch02b-4.htm>.

6  
It’s important to keep in mind that a high-degree of sociality (or hyper-sociality) does not always result in a sophisticated or complex culture (or ultra-culture). Ants, for example, are highly social, but they don’t have much of a culture. This point is made in an important 2018 book by Gary Tomlinson, *Culture and the Course of Human Evolution*. But there is a reason I emphasize the difference between culture and the social. The confusion of the two leads to attributing what is transhistorical (the human as a social animal) with that which is historical, and therefore plastic or can change quickly (the human as a cultural animal). It is at this point that my own theory (which draws from sociobiology) meets Postone’s post-Marxian assertion of the historical specificity of capitalism.

7  
Value is purely cultural, and use value is part cultural and part social. In his 1973 book *The Mirror of Production*, Jean Baudrillard argued that both value and use value were cultural. This insistence was inspired by his very loud break with orthodox Marxism.

8  
Gary Tomlinson writes: “What are the general differences between the semiosis that is widespread in the animal world and the much rarer elaboration of semiosis that constitutes culture? What are the features that have enabled a few animal taxa to elaborate semiosis into



culture? Such questions can easily exhaust themselves in debates about the extent of animal culture in the world today. These are of immense inherent interest, of course, and they have greatly raised our awareness of the complexities of nonhuman animal behaviors. They suggest that we should draw the borders of nonhuman culture liberally, to include at least a small range of mammalian and avian lineages: certain primates, some cetaceans, a few other mammals, and some birds. All the same, we must be careful not to confuse animal culture with the far broader category of animal sociality. Ants have complex societies, but they do not have cultures. Many instances of highly developed avian and mammalian sociality also exist without giving rise to culture." Gary Tomlinson, *Culture and the Course of Human Evolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 79.

9

Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 74.

10

Postone writes: "The reconstitution of value and the redetermination of social productivity entailed by the dialectic I have outlined are the most basic determinations of a process of reproducing the relation of wage labor and capital which is both static and dynamic; this relation is reproduced in a way that transforms each of its terms. This process of reproduction, as analyzed by Marx, ultimately is a function of the value form and would not be the case were material wealth the defining form of wealth. It is, as we have seen, an aspect of a necessary treadmill dynamic, in which increased productivity results neither in a corresponding increase in social wealth nor in a corresponding decrease in labor time, but in the constitution of a new base level of productivity – which leads to still further increases in productivity." Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 347.

11

Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 293.

12

Hegel was one of the first philosophers to recognize capitalism. But he did not name it as such. In his 1803 text "System of Ethical Life," parts of which appeared in his mature work *Philosophy of Right*, he vividly describes a capitalism that's so developed that much of it can't be distinguished from the capitalism of our day.

13

The separation of wealth as value from wealth as stuff results in what John Maynard Keynes described in his *General*

*Theory* as "poverty in the midst of plenty." For more on this, read Geoff Mann's "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty: Unemployment, Liquidity, and Keynes's Scarcity Theory of Capital," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2015).

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# Keller Easterling Medium Design

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Art after culture. Just to say the simplest and most obvious thing: culture, in the broadest sense of the word, is good at pointing to things and naming them, but not so good at describing relationships between things. It privileges declarations, right answers, universals, and elementary particles. It is captivated by circular logics and modernist scripts that celebrate freedom and transcendent newness – narrative arcs that bend toward a utopian or dystopian ultimate.

The modern Enlightenment mind that still looks for the one and only answer is often organized like a closed loop that only circulates compatible or reflexive information. And since that loop can't abide contradiction, it lashes out against any challenger, using a binary opposition. Favoring succession rather than coexistence, the new right answer must kill the old right answer. As if due to some fatal error, humans are creatures who have trained their minds to want to be right – to have the right answer.

Oscillating between loops and binaries, an unnecessarily violent culture that has eliminated the very information it needs is then left banging away with the same blunt tools. A bully is elected, a migration of refugees swells in number, an industrial disaster kills thousands, or shorelines flood due to global warming. And if economic and military engagement or new technologies do not provide the solution, if the consensus surrounding laws, standards, or master plans provides no relief, the smartest people in the world stand with hand to brow. Dissent, also adopting a binary, seems to believe that it exists in a world of enemies and innocents.

The binaries of wars and the chest-beating sovereignty of nations remain in place as darlings of history. *Homo economicus* is allowed to upstage and hold forth. The old sci-fi futurologies are brought out of mothballs. And all the stories build to a revolution or an apocalyptic burnout. These are the hackneyed plotlines of our “humanities.”

Since the world's big bullies and bulletproof forms of power – superbugs like Trump, Kim, Putin, and Bibi, or free-zone agglomerations of corporate power – thrive on this oscillation between loop and binary, it is as if there is nothing to counter them – only more ways of fighting and being right and providing the rancor that nourishes their violence. Is it possible to drop through a trapdoor and exit these logics?

This would usually be the moment to unleash a radical new proposal. But that would be sadly conservative. On the other side of that door, a radical proposal has no traction, because nothing is new and nothing is right. By taking a hard pass on dramatic and emancipatory



"Both left and right-wing ideologies result in concentrations of authoritarian power. It is not the ideology that is declared but some other potentials or latent dispositions that are undeclared that seem to be determining outcomes." Image courtesy of the author.



manifestos, maybe there is a chance to simply rehearse a habit of mind that has been eclipsed. And maybe it is something you already know how to do. It is a blind spot that is right in front of you. It is a terra incognita where you have already been.

There is no end or modernist succession or moment after culture. Only more middle or medium. Clear of associations with communication technologies, medium, in this context, returns to its root, *medius*, meaning “middle” or “milieu.” On the other side of the door, it may be easier to see at a different focal length. Beyond *declared* ideologies, here is a matrix or medium of activities and latent potentials – the *undeclared* dispositions that are something like culture’s muscle memory. Just as this *medium thinking* inverts the typical focus on object and matrix, maybe it can offer some alternative approaches that outwit the most cunning superbugs.

To assess and manipulate the medium, you may have to cultivate a capacity to perceive in a split screen – to straddle mental partitions that separate the nominative from the active and dispositional. You must develop something like a canine mind; you see things with names and hear humans speaking words but those things cannot be comprehended in the absence of a thousand other affective cues and relative positions between things in context. The position of the human relative to the door or the dog bowl, including the human’s particular posture or potential for violence, are all assessed equally with the sounds of words and their assigned meanings.

Or suddenly, in a simple room, the objects with names – table, chair, lamp, pen, teapot, teacup, apple, and window – are bristling with latent potentials, active repertoires, and affordances. They are actively performing. The stuff in your fridge is triangulating in a kind of periodic table of possible combinations and expiration dates. When thinking in this way, you can see affordances or potentials as clearly or even more clearly than overt events and declarations.

Turning the sound down on those declarations, it is also easier to detect the difference between what an organization is saying and what it is doing, and how organizations decouple their messages and ideologies from their real activities, underlying motivations, and structuring logics.

Consider some of the dispositions that elude us. On one side of the screen, stories about sociotechnical organizations – be they railroads, hydroelectric networks, or blockchains – may be about decentralization and freedom. But they may actually be concentrating power and

authority with a universal ambition. The smart city maintains the shine of the new, even while it centralizes information in ways that violate privacy, with a network that is primitive and crude. A social media network that purports to be information-rich filters all that information through a dumb binary of likes and dislikes to become information-poor. A global network of Dubai-style zone cities does not facilitate free trade, but manipulates trade. A centralizing power espouses a populist message.

Both left- and right-wing ideologies can result in the concentration of authoritarian power. It is not the declared ideology but rather some other undeclared forces in the mix that seem to be determining outcomes.

The disposition of any organization makes some things possible and some things impossible. Like a growth medium, it determines what will live or die. Like an operating system, it sets the rules of the game that link and activate the components of an organization. It is wildly dangerous to rely on declared ideology, when undeclared forces often facilitate untouchable accumulations of power and environmental forms of violence.

Take another look at the world’s superbugs. They cocoon within the loop and binary. They are capable of monastic demagoguery and head-on brutality. But this is child’s play to them.

Like confidence men, superbugs are also masters of the split screen. Their lies, distractions, and confusions even turn lexical expressions into physical force fields. They know how lies work. Telling one lie is a bad idea. But telling many lies works very well. One lie calls for reconciliation and truth. Many lies creates Teflon. Unburdened by truth or earnest declaration, the superbug knows how to make words dance around and fascinate in the absence of meaning and information. Lies are everywhere, animated and in color. They lubricate and insulate.

Reasonable people may not take advantage of this undeclared potential, but superbugs do. The discrepancy that others futilely try to reconcile through reason is the raw material of fully mediated rumor and contagious fictions. It’s not what the lies say but how they bounce that is important. Superbugs become pure medium – activity divorced from content or meaning.

On the other side of the trapdoor there is a redoubled territory of operation with extra political and aesthetic capacities, where some expectations can be inverted.

For instance, being right is a really bad idea on the other side. It is too weak. It does not work against gurus and totalitarian bullies. Maybe culture’s spectacular failures, together with the underexploited powers of the medium, could

inspire alternative ways to register the imagination – other approaches to form-making and design in any discipline.

Entanglements are more productive than solutions. Designers are usually very good at making things with shapes and outlines, but design in the medium is less like making a thing and more like having your hands on the faders and toggles of organization. It is the design of interdependencies, chemistries, chain reactions. It benefits from an artistic curiosity about spatial wiring or reagents in spatial mixtures. You are designing not only a single object but a platform for inflecting populations of objects or setting up relative potentials within them. You are comfortable with dynamic markers and unfinished processes.

Working in the medium would then be something like playing pool, where knowing about one fixed sequence of shots is of little use. But being able to see branching networks of possibilities allows you to add more information to the table. In pool, you don't know the answer; you only know what to do next. To borrow from Gilbert Ryle, you don't "know that" (the right answer), rather you "know how" to respond to a string of changing conditions over time. Although perhaps counter to expectations, you are making something that shouldn't always work and that is *indeterminate to be practical*.

In another inversion, this *medium design* works, not by eliminating, but rather multiplying problems, and using them to leaven and catalyze each other. Like Parrondo's Paradox – the counterintuitive game theory that pairs losing games to generating wins – the losses create a kind of ratcheting traction against which to make many small gains. And maybe the existence or content of a problem is less important than the interplay between problems. Failure is a limitless wilderness for design ecologies.

In yet another inversion, the newness or succession of technologies is less important than the relationship between technologies. There is not only one species of information, but a mixture of different species of information – like the digital together with the heavy or spatial – which becomes information-rich. Rejecting the necessity of a digital presence of sensors and devices to make the stiff world dance, medium design treats heavy, lumpy, physical space as an information system that is already dancing with potentials. As Gregory Bateson observed, a man, a tree, and an ax constitutes an information system. The goal of medium design is not homeostasis but imbalance, not fixed pools of information but rather extrinsic, inclusive mixing chambers for many social, political, technical networks.

Just as medium designers design things

that shouldn't always work, they tell the histories of things that don't happen. Punctuating events, like crises, competitions, victories, and defeats, are usually center stage in the most familiar cultural narratives, but disposition does not *happen*, because it is ever-present as a *latent* temperament. Just as glass doesn't have to break to be brittle, dispositional qualities are changing and unfolding in ways that may not be reified by a single event.

If an unsafe factory collapses or burns, there is an event to mark the violence, but in countless factories or industrial parks that do not buckle under the weight of their own denial, there is no event, no drawn sword. There is only latent temperament – the constant aggression of blatantly imbalanced power dynamics. The potential for either concentrating or distributing power; the potential for escalating or reducing violence.

Histories of *things that do not happen* might be structured like an epidemiology or a branching set of thresholds and points of leverage, and they might be largely concerned with how to modulate violence in organizations by making them information-rich. They might consider the spatio-political reagents or accelerants in these gradient moments of political metastasis and remission.

In the medium, can you adjust space in ways that are attuned to latent temperament? In addition to declarations or confrontations, the designer might also operate like the parent with squabbling children. That is, the designer would not try to parse the content of the argument but change the disposition of the context. The designer would lower the temperature of the room, move a chair into the light, increase the blood sugar of one child, or introduce a pet into the arms of another, so that the chemistry of the room no longer induces or supports violence.

Think back to the superbug's skills of discrepancy. Medium design might be bored with the safety of the purely rhetorical. But if it has any hope of effecting change, it manipulates the organization as well as the instrumental narrative that attends it with moves that are potentially sneakier or more politically agile.

These narratives may offer a dissonant story that, however nonphysical, has physical consequences. It may be a narrative that makes something contagious. It may have an emotional message that renders some power more vulnerable. Or it may have a surprising cultural bounce because of its irrationality, outrageousness, cuteness, creepiness, or violence. This is a stealthier form of activism that mixes spatial change with the gifts, pandas, rumors, meaningless distractions, and totemic fictions that are so effective in culture.

Here, on this flip side, right answers are mistakes, and obligations are more empowering than freedom. Histories follow latent aggressions as well as gunshots. Messy is smarter than new. You deliberately address problems with responses that shouldn't always work. You can steal some of the powers of infrastructure space to design a snaking chain of moves, worming into and generating leverage against intractable politics. And like a really good pool player, you don't necessary call your shots but keep the other side guessing. The medium designer might be too smart to be right.

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Excerpted and adapted from Keller Easterling, *Medium Design* (Verso, forthcoming 2020).

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Franco “Bifo” Berardi

# Desire, Pleasure, Senility, and Evolution

“Energy is eternal delight.”  
– William Blake

01/07

This essay is short and inconsistent. It grew out of a talk I gave at the e-flux conference “Art After Culture” in June 2019. When I was invited to speak, the subject I proposed was: “Desire, Pleasure, Evolution.” I will begin with a few things about those topics, but will move on to other things, namely senility and evolution.

So, desire and pleasure. I recently discovered that somewhere – I don’t remember exactly where – Gilles Deleuze recounts the story of an exchange between himself and Michel Foucault. Before leaving the house of Deleuze, Foucault kindly and shyly, in his style, tells Deleuze: you know, I must confess to you that the word “desire” disgusts me. I would prefer to use the word “pleasure,” would you agree?

Deleuze does not agree at all. He absolutely disdains the word “pleasure.” Actually, in a lecture he delivered in Vincennes in 1973, Deleuze said something along the lines of: *Plaisir, quel horrible et atroce mot. Qu’est-ce que ça signifie? Le décharge?* (Pleasure, what a horrible, atrocious word. What does it mean? Discharge?)

This discussion between the two is revealing of a dimension of desire as discussed by Deleuze and Félix Guattari that has always escaped me. During my years in Paris in the late ’70s, I first came to realize that desire is the engine that mobilizes social energies, but I did not consider at all the distinction between desire and pleasure. It wasn’t until just last year that I understood the difference, while reading about that exchange between Deleuze and Foucault.

Of course, one can find an explication of the difference in Jean Baudrillard, the real wise man of the Parisian scene of the ’70s and ’80s. Baudrillard says: desire, yes okay, the desire for beautiful things, but beware that the entire history of capitalism is based on permanent desire.

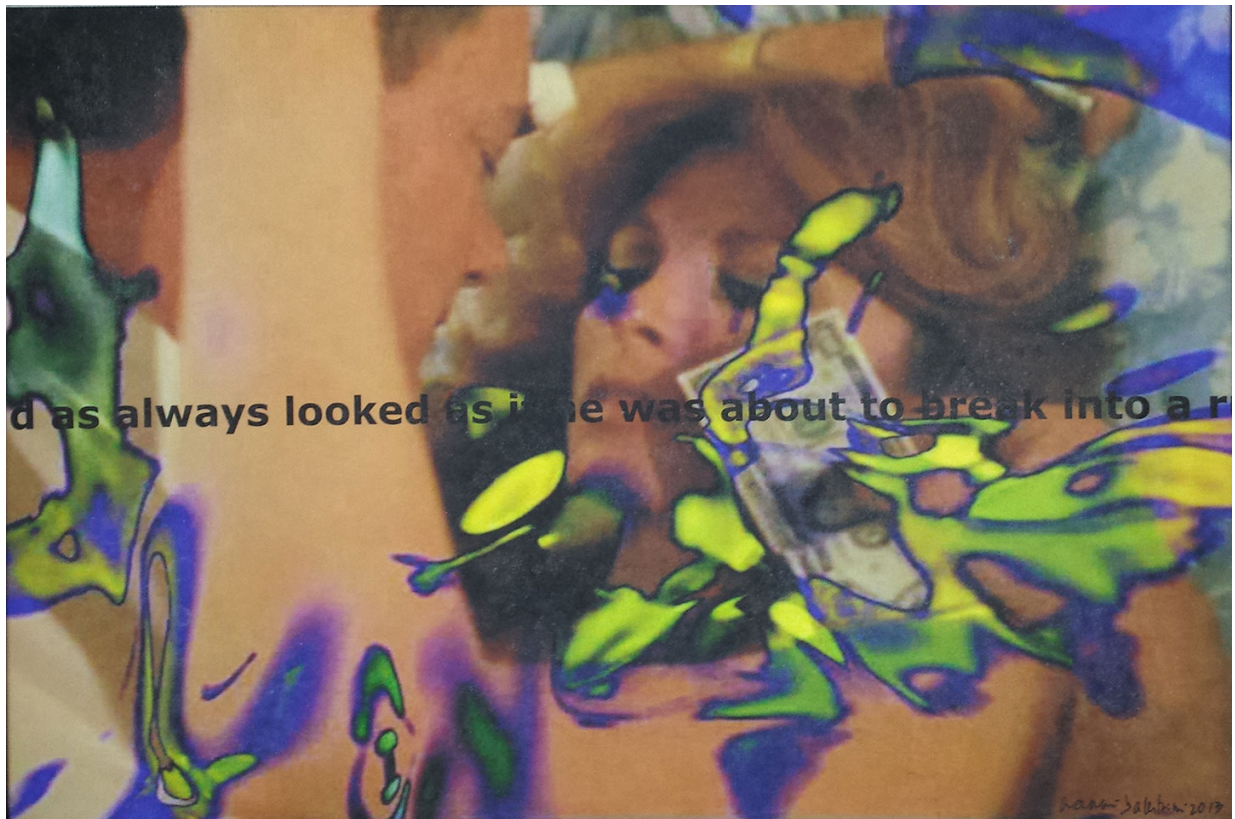
Now, in my old age I have come to (painfully) appreciate the difference between desire and pleasure, and I understand that capitalism is, in fact, based on an endless postponement of pleasure, and simultaneously on the permanent excitement of desire. Virtual capitalism – what I call semiocapitalism – is an intensification of both these conditions, postponing pleasure and exciting desire.

Another catalyst for my realization of how they differ is feeling physically, personally that growing old essentially means losing the ability to access certain spheres of pleasure, while desire continues undisturbed. Beyond my personal experience, and its suggestion of a

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Nanni Balestrini, *A Fare Scandalo*, 1960. Collage on paper. Courtesy of Galleria Michela Rizzo and Eredi Nanni Balestrini.



Nanni Balestrini, *Tristanoil*, 2012. Courtesy of Galleria Michela Rizzo and Eredi Nanni Balestrini.



Nanni Balestrini, *PLIS - Kaiser n7*, 1989. Courtesy of Galleria Michela Rizzo and Eredi Nanni Balestrini.



larger condition, there is something more interesting, and more disturbing, in the relationship between the two. This relationship – between the permanent burning of desire and the inaccessibility, the unattainability of pleasure – has something to do with the present historical moment of transition, the present step in human evolution.

Why are older people so nervous? *Cantankerous* even? I don't even know the meaning of this word, but it sounds right. Why are old people so malignant?

I have two answers. The first has to do with the disappearance of neurons and synapses in old age: the reduction in the ability to process information, the loss of subtlety, the loss of definition in the relationship between sensibility and experience. The second is that we – we humans, old humans in particular – tend to cling to life because we think it is our private property. *This life is mine, and I don't want to lose this property.*

The denial of death is deeply inscribed in the modern mind. As the world's white population grows old, this has provoked something resembling a social psychosis, an aggressive grasping among the old for all that is left: naked life, putrescent life.

At the end of his beautiful book *The Order of Time*, Carlo Rovelli writes that the fear of death is a mistake of evolution. It is an error provoked by the inability to think the world without one's own presence within it, an inability to think the world *without me*. Modern culture emphasizes the individual in continuous competition with other individuals, and consequently erases a sense of community among people. Thus, it has turned death into something that cannot be thought, said, or psychically elaborated. Death is systematically denied, which in turn leaves the individual alone in an infinite desert of sadness, and ultimately unable to see the continuity among the individual and the community, among me and you.

Furthermore, modern capitalism is based on an idolatry of energy. It is based on an obsession with growth, expansion, productivity, acceleration – futurist obsessions that have made senility unthinkable.

Why am I writing about these strange and slightly scary subjects? Why am I talking about senility and death? Of course, the main reason is that they are my problems. But, believe me, they're not my problems alone. They are two of the main problems of humankind in the present. The denial of death, linked to the idolatry of energy and expansion, has turned decline and un-growth into purely negative tendencies, and frugality into scarcity. So, in this sense, life has become a paranoid fight against the passage of

time.

I strongly believe that senescence is the (unseen or unfathomed) key to understanding the present historical conundrum, just as decline is simultaneously the problem and the solution to the late-modern crisis.

Firstly, we can surmise that this situation is due to demographic reasons. Senility now tends to be the condition of most of the Western population, and not only of the Western population. While the African population grows exponentially, while the populations in the Middle East and on the Indian subcontinent steadily grow, Western dominators and aggressors are ageing, they are losing energy, and most of all, they are losing the innocent faith in the future that belongs mostly to younger people.

The demographic gap between the population explosion in much of the South and the decline in the North is probably one of the central reasons for contemporary racism and aggressiveness. Old people have transferred their declining potency to the machines, and the war machine is in motion as a permanent menace against those oppressed in the South, the colonized people who try to migrate towards the declining Northern lands. This is why we must consider the crucial problem of senility if we want to understand anything at all about what is happening in the social, cultural, and political spheres.

Let's think about the worldwide resurgence of "fascism." Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Erdoğan. Are they fascists? No, they are not. And the process that is expanding in large parts of the world, is this fascism? No, it is not.

Fascism was a historic phenomenon comprised of young people. It was a movement based on the will-to-power of a strong, energetic, futurist movement. It involved people who expected a bright future, and promoted expansion, the colonization of territories and markets. Nobody expects a bright future nowadays. And expansion is no longer possible because the entire planet is subjugated, while markets are saturated. The colonization of territorial spaces is over – only time can be colonized nowadays. The only direction for expansion today is the intensification of time and the acceleration of mental rhythms. Only the virtual expansion of cognitive space and the accelerated circulation of signs is possible. But this kind of intensification is blowing up the nervous systems of humankind.

Forty years ago, I remember shouting, "No future! No future!" with some young British musicians. I thought it was the provocation of an unlikely avant-garde. Now, everybody thinks that

the future is over; now, the sentiment aligns with a conformist position held by most of humankind. “No future” has become common sense, and this is why cynicism is expanding in contemporary culture, in contemporary political behavior. Futurism was the expression of a society that expected something from the future, and of a society that truly felt the warmth of community, whether encapsulated in the nation, the family, or social ties to working communities. All the above was the reality of lived experience a hundred years ago. No more! Today, the nation is a nonexistent thing. The dissolution of the nation is an effect of the pervasive digitalization of information and of power based on information. Do you think that Google belongs to the United States? Not at all. The United States belongs to the territory of Google. So does Italy, and France, and so on.

National sovereignty has been dissolved by the virtual ubiquity of power; the nation has come back as a myth, as an aggressive form of identification, as nostalgic rage.

Belonging has been transformed into a hopeless nostalgia that is at the root of contemporary supremacism. Supremacism is an expression of older people’s fears. For example, it is because they fear migration that they view it as an invasion.

And, largely, it is an invasion. One or two hundred years ago, racism was an integral part of the invasion by white people of the Southern territories of the world. Nowadays, racism is the fearful reaction by white people to the perceived invasion of their own territories. And the racist paranoia of the great racial “substitution” is not merely a phantom, because it corresponds to a real process (one that is happening without the aid of a conspiracy involving George Soros). The white race is – thank god – disappearing. This is the root of contemporary supremacism, which is simultaneously impotent and hyper-powerful; it is unable to change a future of certain decline, but at the same time it is perfectly able to destroy the world in desperate acts that aim to reassert a potency that has vanished.

“Impotence” is the word that explains what is happening, particularly in the Northern parts of the planet. Impotence and the desire for revenge. The neoliberal left has destroyed any possible expectation of a political transformation for the future. The neoliberal left: the Clintons, the Blaires, the D’Alemas, François Hollande, and so on. These traitors have destroyed any possibility of expecting something meaningful from politics and from reason. Reason, for its part, has become the servant of financial algorithms. When reason is the financial algorithm, the only thing that we can expect from the future is revenge – indeed, a

revenge against reason. Horkheimer and Adorno speak of this revenge against reason in the preface to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They write that if reason is unable to grasp its dark side, the unconscious dark side of reason itself, then reason ensures its damnation. It is dead. Revenge against reason is the driving force of the neoreactionary movement that is spreading: it is revenge against humanity itself.

Humanity as a cultural horizon has become the main enemy of the contemporary fascists who are not fascists. They are simply antihuman. That would be a kind definition for Matteo Salvini, for a guy who has built his fortune on his declared determination to kill people who come to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. But remember that Salvini, the right-wing killer, a murderer in the Italian government, is only continuing the political attitudes and applying the rules written by Marco Minniti, the former leftist minister of the interior, who before Salvini passed laws that criminalized nongovernmental organizations that rescue people at sea. Salvini is the direct continuation of a democratic murderer named Marco Minniti. Therefore, it is clear that a political way out of this situation does not exist.

Where do we go from here?

I recently read *Staying with the Trouble* by Donna Haraway. When I read Haraway, I don’t understand everything, but I understand the essentials. She says, in an ironic and beautiful way, that today there are two reactions to technology. On one side, there are the techno-optimists, who believe that technology will save humanity, the planet, and the environment. On the other side are the techno-apocalyptic, who say *no way, technology will destroy everything*. Haraway takes a different stance: she instead tells us to keep calm. She says that it isn’t a tragedy that the human race is doomed to disappear.

Extinction is the new buzzword on the political scene nowadays. Look at the enormous demonstrations organized by children in Sweden, in Germany, in Italy, everywhere in the world. Millions of children marched on March 15, 2019. Their message is about extinction. They don’t have a political problem. They simply say: it’s time to panic. And look at Extinction Rebellion. It’s the first time in human history, as far as I know, that extinction has become the core concern of a political protest movement.

I would not focus on rebelling against extinction. Can one even rebel against extinction? I don’t think so. You can *deal* with extinction. You have to deal with extinction. Extinction, by the way, is not the worst thing that one can imagine for the future. The worst thing imaginable is the war that will lead to extinction

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Nanni Balestrini, *Come Se Niente Fosse*, 1960. Collage on paper. Courtesy of Galleria Michela Rizzo and Eredi Nanni Balestrini.



– not death, but the long-lasting agony that financial capitalism has prepared for humankind. This is the real danger. Extinction is not so bad, if we compare it to capitalism.

After quoting Haraway, I want to quote the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Catherine Malabou. She says that psychoanalysis has undergone a shift from the analysis of sex and language to neurology. The fields of sex and language have long been the focus of psychoanalytic theory and therapy. But when we speak of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, or of panic attacks and depression, we can see that they're not just problems related to sex and language. They concern the physical dimensions of neurology. It's neurology nowadays that is at stake. It's the brain, not the mind. Or better yet: not *only* the mind, but *also* the brain. Malabou, taking up this thread, writes of trauma and neuroplasticity.

Evolution must be rethought from scratch, from the point of view of the relationship between desire and pleasure. Pleasure is the goal, the aspiration. Over the past forty years, I forgot about pleasure because I was obsessed with desire, but now I understand that the way out of capitalism is the opposite: the way out is not desire, it is pleasure. And how can the brain find a new balance of pleasure in the present? This is the problem that we are going to face in the coming years, in the coming decade.

I want to dedicate this inconsistent essay to a friend who died in May 2019. The name of this friend is Nanni Balestrini. Nanni was a poet, a novelist, and most of all a recombiner. He is the first poet in history of humankind who never wrote a single word. He refused the dirty work of writing words. He asked: Why should I do that? Why should I spend my time writing words? I'm a poet. I don't write words. I take signs from the infosphere, from the daily conversations of people in the subway, from newspapers, from advertisements. His activity, he said, was to recombine. Recombination is also our task, and we should take a cue from him. But the question is: the recombination of what? The recombination of meaning, of language, of desire, of pleasure. Poetry is the consistent and intentional recombination of what exists, with the aim of creating what does not yet exist.

x

**Franco Berardi**, aka "Bifo," founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Italian Autonomia movement, is a writer, media theorist, and social activist.

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e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Franco "Bifo" Berardi  
Desire, Pleasure, Senility, and Evolution

Irmgard Emmelhainz

# Can We Share a World Beyond Representation?

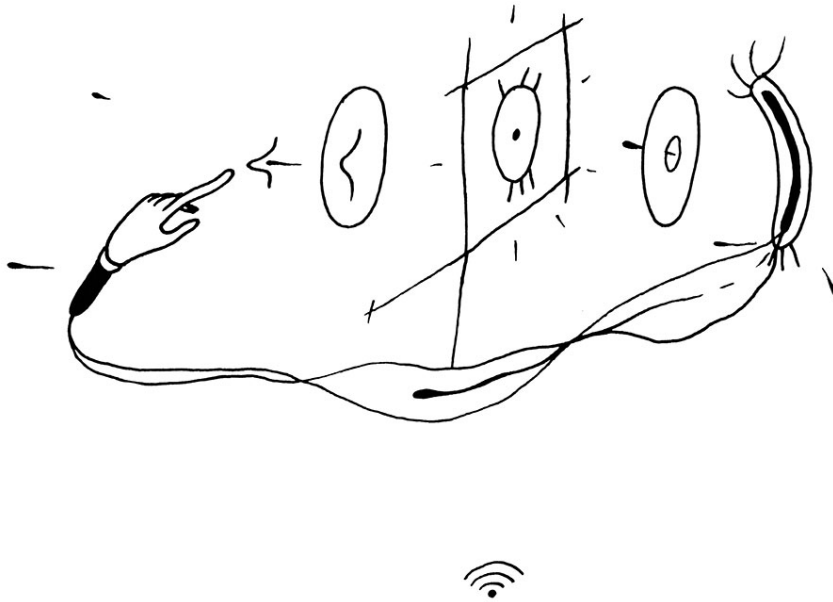
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e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Can We Share a World Beyond Representation?

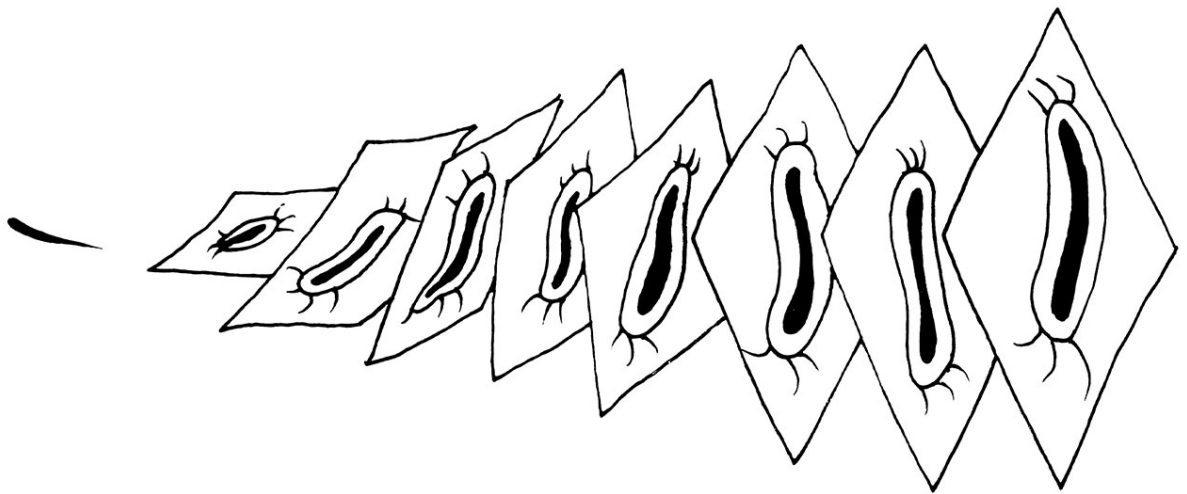
Rootlessness, violence, the shattering and loss of all traditions, loneliness, mental decay, and illness – this is the inheritance from modernity in the West and in Westernized territories throughout the globe. Hannah Arendt's work reflects on these forms of modern alienation, which she poses as direct threats to the *Lebenswelt*: the world of common human experience and interpretation. The *Lebenswelt*, literally "life-world," or "world in common" as Arendt defines it, is the framework from which both understanding and political judgment (from the point of view of the political actor and/or spectator) can arise.<sup>1</sup> The world in common is where speech, thought, and action take place, thus possessing unquestionable meaningfulness, and enabling common existence. According to Arendt, modernity, propelled by the destruction of all tradition, is characterized by the irretrievable loss of the experience of shared meaning, which was previously created by talking to and making sense with one another. This loss is accompanied by the disappearance of a space for arguing, reasoning, argumentation: the space of politics, comprised of speech and action.<sup>2</sup> As a result, men and women are deprived of their place in the world. As Gilles Deleuze put it, the link between man and the world has been broken. Modernity also means the replacement of "society" and "community" by "mass society." For Arendt, mass society is characterized by isolation and a lack of normal social relationships; as a result, consciousness of a common interest is absent. Modern alienation has led to what Félix Guattari described in the 1980s as a "crisis of relationality." In his view, this crisis is happening because

kinship networks tend to be reduced to a bare minimum; domestic life is being poisoned by the gangrene of mass-media consumption; family and married life are frequently "ossified" by a sort of standardization of behaviour; and neighbourhood relations are generally reduced to their meanest expression ... It is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority – be it social, animal, vegetable or Cosmic – that is compromised in this way, in a sort of general movement of implosion and regressive infantilization.<sup>3</sup>

Under globalization, absolute capitalism, and the digitalization of communication, the lack of a world in common has led to the pervasive feeling, as Franco "Bifo" Berardi recently wrote, that entropy is expanding, vision is blurring, and private meaning is clouding and obstructing any







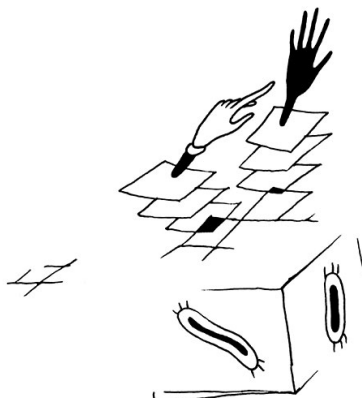
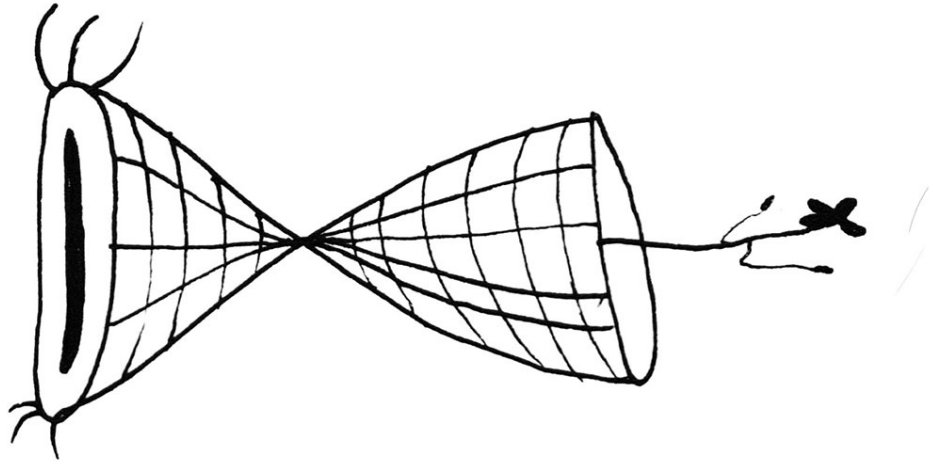
possible path of escape from the current crisis of relationality, debt, automation, mental illness, and environmental devastation.<sup>4</sup> It is only now becoming evident that the systematic undoing of the social foundations of human relationships (or the world in common) occurs in parallel with the degradation of nervous cells, and that the destruction of the social tissue is inseparable from environmental damage. Climate change is in fact intimately tied to collective psychic collapse. In this context, politicization has also fallen prey to privatization: an array of disparate voices proliferates through the infosphere, each seeking recognition and issuing ethical demands not from the perspective of a world in common, but rather from the perspective of “my world.”

For Hannah Arendt, the expansion of authoritarianism in Europe in the twentieth century stemmed from the alienation and loneliness brought about by the degradation of the world in common. In the twenty-first century, the continuing loss of a world in common and the crisis of relationality help explain the resurgence of fascisms and fundamentalisms across the world. Nowadays, the main ruling instruments in neofascist states like the US, Brazil, and India are polarization, fear, and the mass sentiment that “something” (like our means of subsistence or the networks of safety materialized in the welfare state) has been taken away from “us” – either by the 1 percent on the one hand (a historic left position), or immigrants on the other (a historic right position). The corporate state manages mass mood swings by immersing itself within the masses, wielding the totalitarian discourse of “taking back” what has been stolen from “us” (at any cost). In this neofascist (or in some places like Mexico, neopopulist) phase of neoliberalism, the power of capitalism works by selecting, excluding, and disseminating events that structure the present which each one of us perceives. For each user/citizen/consumer, the digital neoliberal capitalist order offers an individualized, tailor-made reality. This process occurs and repeats to the point that our “normal” now consists of living in a world in which we all have the right to retreat to our own private worlds of meaning, tailored by the algorithms of digital interfaces that constantly adapt to each user’s individual needs. The possibility of a world in common has been replaced by myriad niches for the private consumption of digitalized content. Clearly, representation – the *dispositif* that, via speech and action, enables appearance in the world in common, and also the human capacity for the creation and dissemination of shared meaning and traditions – has been hijacked by capitalism, authoritarianism, democracy, the internet, and spectacle.

In the nineteenth-century, when the modern

political imagination first began to take shape, nations aimed to produce a representative form of social cohesion. They did this by constructing and disseminating a world of shared meaning that expressed the alleged “essence” of an imagined community: shared cultural history, iconography, language, food, and dress.<sup>5</sup> In this context, art and critical thought were the utmost expression of a community’s values and had the avant-garde role of announcing a visionary and emancipatory future for all. Premised on a separation between action and appearance, avant-garde art operated in a separate realm than politics and action (enacting what we know as the “autonomy” of art). Artists adhered to the tradition of the revolutionary takeover as the primary path for universal emancipation. In their rebellion, avant-garde artists made a tactical, temporary, local, contrived, problematic, and idealistic alliance with the working class and the marginalized (I’m thinking here of artists like Courbet, Dziga Vertov, and Tarsila do Amaral, among others). This attempted alliance was based on *representativity*: an invisible social contract in which artists imagined themselves to be mandated by humanity to address humanity in the name of universal values, grounded in a conflict between the individual (artist) and societal structures.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1960s (the era of high modernism), artists abandoned representation and dismissed representativity as totalitarian structures, as vehicles for a bland, sexist, and racist humanism and a trite universalism. Artists replaced the invisible social contract from early modernity that had enabled them to speak on behalf of all of humanity with a new one, in which they spoke from the point of view of their own gender, ethnic origin, political struggle, or sexual orientation, as colonized peoples, minorities, workers, etc. Paradoxically, in the 1980s and ’90s, representativity came back with a vengeance through identity politics and consciousness-raising activism (specifically during the AIDS epidemic). Its return, however, was no longer as a concept subject to criticism and deconstruction, but rather as a positive, affirmative concept. A new, invisible social contract was drawn up in which individuals would now *only* speak on behalf of themselves as representatives of their own personal experiences of ethnic, political, or gendered specificities, with the mandate to address “everyone” and to secure recognition of “my” ordeal. Equality came to mean equal access to visibility through self-representation. As a result, a new kind of multicultural universalism flourished, one that celebrated difference even as it ignored real-world contradictions and conflicts – for instance, the unresolved and ongoing history of colonialism.



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The return of representativity at the end of the twentieth century coincided with the rise of neoliberal globalization. Globalization meant the dismantling of the referential economy of political and aesthetic modernity and the exhaustion of the social contract that had assigned artists universal representativity. Under globalization, art is disseminated to a globalized mass society through an internationalized culture industry. Governments and corporations monopolize this culture industry for the purpose of managing the dissent and antagonism produced by the neoliberal order. In other words, states and corporations instrumentalize art as a showcase for global democracy; they point to art that expresses dissent as proof of how “democratic” and “tolerant” the neoliberal order is.

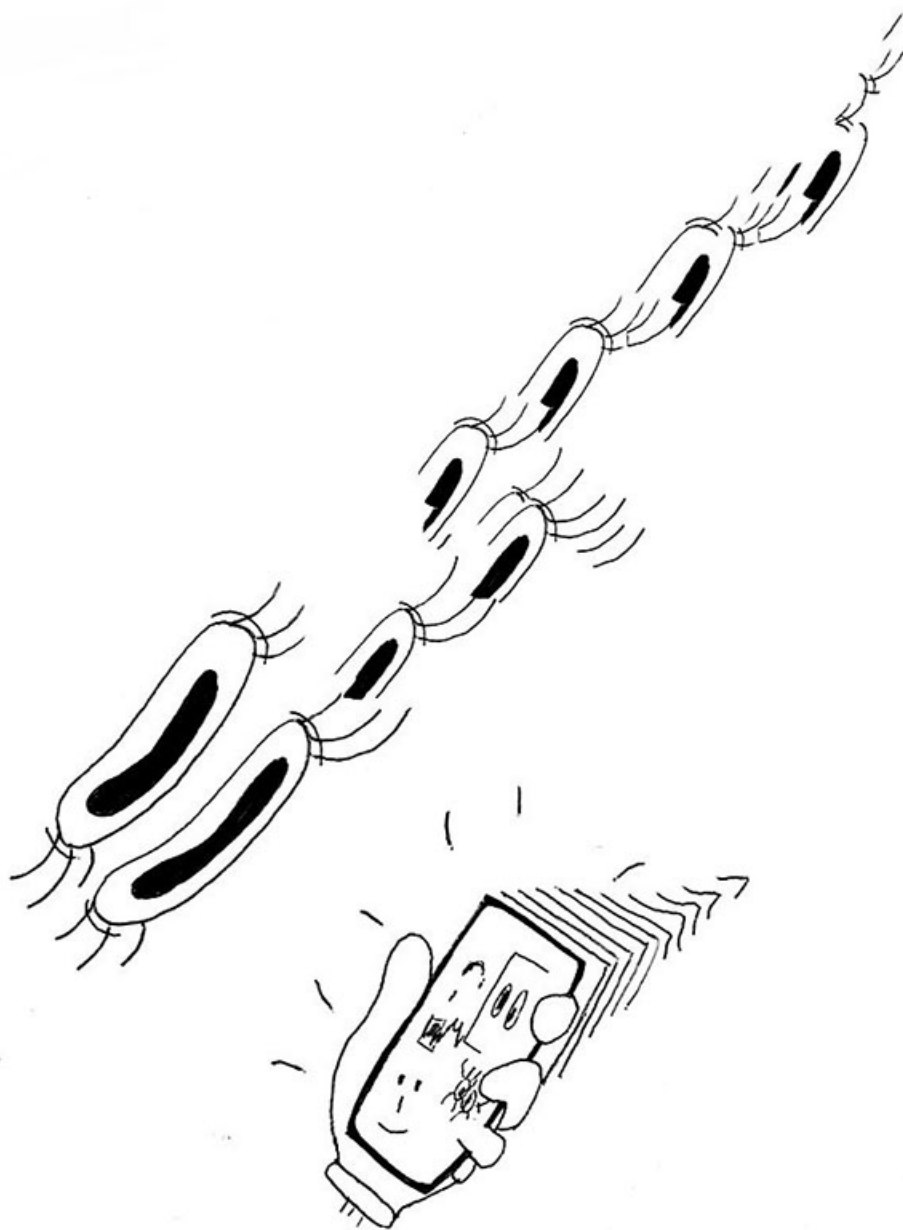
Along with being an index of democracy, art is also a lucrative niche for the global entertainment business. Art has thus become a form of consumable merchandise, destined to be used up. In this situation (diagnosed by Arendt and others in the 1960s<sup>7</sup>), artists have either embraced this quality of art as merchandise (Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst), or rejected it in the name of politicization and criticality (Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Hito Steyerl). With globalization, critical artists have been summoned to become useful by surrendering art’s (always partial) autonomy<sup>8</sup> and taking up the task of restoring what has been broken by the system. So they denounce globalization’s collateral damage and contemporary art’s woeful conditions of production. They imagine a more just future, produce political imaginaries, disseminate counter-information, restore social links, gather and archive documents and traces for the “duty of memory,” etc. Perhaps, then, the prior role of the artist as a cultural vanguard has given way to a mandate to cultivate a feeling of political responsibility in spectators, in the name of self-representation and the representation of Enlightenment values.

The main problem with artworks that speak on behalf of the struggle of others, or that seek recognition for “my private ordeal,” is that they inhabit a moralizing realm of non-shared meaning. Such forms of address lead to a codependent politics of appearance based on a melancholic restoration of singular worlds, devoid of the possibility of speech and action and thus of common meaning (which, according to Arendt, is the condition for politics). The codependent politics of appearance demands a form of despotic empathy generated by situating oneself, or others on whose behalf one speaks, in the place of the martyr or scapegoat seeking recognition and visibility. Furthermore, the modern practice of “looking at the pain of

others” has created a form of “reified subjectivity” that enables a spectacularized, uncommitted, and “post-political” position vis-à-vis the world. This means that from the perspective of reified subjectivity, as Anita Chari argues, the economy exists as a domain that is separate from human activity, blinding the subject to the extent of her involvement in the capitalist processes in which we are all complicit.<sup>9</sup> As a pathology, reified subjectivity leaves room only for despotic empathy, which in turn forecloses the possibility of seeing actual power relations that divide the world between “the wretched of the screen” and spectators living in privileged enclaves with access to cultural commodities. In the late 1970s, Colombian filmmakers Carlos Ospina and Luis Mayolo articulated this problem as “*pornomiseria*.” They devised the term in the context of politicized films in Latin America that denounced the structural effects of colonialism on marginalized, non-modernized, “underdeveloped” populations throughout the continent.<sup>10</sup>

If we think about the codependent politics of appearance in Hannah Arendt’s terms, it means that the world of appearances is constituted by a moralizing Manichean perspective: that of communities formed around subjugation and worldlessness, versus communities of morally concerned spectators. This singular perspective is a sign of the disappearance of the common world and the domination of radical isolation, breeding conflict and polarization. Two consequences of being imprisoned in our own singular experiences are the mass inability to hear or see others, and the shaping of our reality by appearance alone, instead of by the kinds of actions, speech, and relationships that make up Arendt’s “world in common.”

When despotic forms of empathy prevail, action and speech are reduced to sheer appearance. Speech without action – such as speech that merely demands recognition – fails to disclose the position that the speaking human occupies in relation to others and the world, beyond simple identitarian or subjective categories. In the opposite case – when we have gestures without speech – these gestures take the form of brute physical action without verbal accompaniment and are thus meaningless (like terrorist attacks or massacres in schools and public spaces). For Arendt, actions are only made relevant by the spoken word, which identifies the speaker as the actor announcing what she is doing, thereby giving meaning to her actions, but only in relation to others. In other words, no other human behavior is in greater need of speech than action. This “being with” is neither for or against



others, but rather in sheer human togetherness.

Despotic empathy destroys the in-between of the world in common that enables and contains speech and action. The world we have in common is usually seen from an infinite number of different points of view. Through speech and action, we not only learn to *understand* each other as individual persons, but also to see the same world from one another's (sometimes opposing) standpoints. In this context, universality means that while everyone sees and hears from a different position, *some* people have the capacity to multiply their own point of view.<sup>11</sup> But from a decolonial standpoint, the acknowledgment of difference is not enough; one must also recognize positions of dominance and oppression, which are not based on differences, but are incommensurable.<sup>12</sup> This is why it is *incommensurability* that must exist "in between" people. Acknowledging incommensurability means, for instance, listening and attempting to understand the indigenous demand for the repatriation of land, and learning where you yourself are situated with regards to this demand. Incommensurability also means, for example, acknowledging that while Europeans and descendants of Europeans in North America and in the "Global South" may not be on the receiving end of oppressive relations, colonial violence in fact impacts *everyone* insofar as privilege is hierarchical and racialized.<sup>13</sup> Bringing incommensurability into the space "in between" humans would also mean acknowledging interdependence beyond detachment or codependent empathy.

Thus, to resist the present, I propose: First, to take up the urgent task of producing horizons of hope from the point of view of incommensurability by creating a new relationship between creativity and critique.<sup>14</sup> Second, we must do away with representation, recognition, and difference and replace them with frames for relationality and reciprocity. Third, perhaps before we embark on this search for relationality we need to flee the infosphere. Lastly, we should not confuse the *Lebenswelt* or the "world in common" with the public sphere; nor should we confuse relationality with relational aesthetics. We need to put relationality *before* aesthetics (not *as* aesthetics). In relationality, alterity is encountered without mediation or instrumentalization. Reciprocity changes the focus from mediation to comprehending the concrete effects of our actions on others and the world. An emphasis on the *relational* rather than on the moral would enable transformative encounters defined by exposure, availability, and vulnerability. Relationality and reciprocity also mean acknowledging that our medium-term

survival depends not on the help of strangers or "foreign aid," but on mutual aid. This means rejecting individual self-interest for an enlarged concern with the well-being of a community, including one's territorial or nonhuman connections. We must embrace our duty to look after each other and ourselves. Instead of waiting for capitalism to fall apart around us, and in spite of us, we need to begin to act, taking our existence in our hands, inhabiting territories autonomously, but most of all: giving primacy to the power of togetherness. In this sense, we do not know yet what art made within a relational life-frame would look like: it has yet to be invented.

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All images by Montserrat Pazos.

09/10

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Can We Share a World Beyond Representation?

**Irmgard Emmelhainz** is an independent translator, writer, researcher, and lecturer based in Mexico City. Her writings on film, the Palestine Question, art, cinema, culture, and neoliberalism have been translated into several languages and presented at an array of international venues, including the Graduate School of Design at Harvard (2014); the Walter Benjamin in Palestine Conference (2015); the New School and the Americas Society (2016); SBC Gallery, Montreal (2016); the Curatorial Summit at the School of Visual Arts, New York (2017); and the Munch Museum, Oslo (2018). Her book *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking* was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2019.

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Liam Gillick

# Imagine a Country That Hated Art

01/05

We are already the laughing stock of the world for the stupidity of the way this country is run. This is a good way to let the whole world see this is a country with even lower values in its ideas of art and will reveal to the whole world we are a country with out any taste. This is trash disguised as Art. Believe me, we KNOW what we are talking about! But the Art LUVVIES love it! Can a fart and call it art! What a bag of shit! Do people actually pay to see this rubbish? Actually it's the taxpayer who pays for this so called art and then we get to see it for free, maybe time for the government to stop buying art as it's RUBBISH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Artists are a symptom of the high regard that is placed on absolute trash these days. It's the people who encourage and sanction the exhibiting of this garbage that we blame. We wouldn't let them whitewash the outhouse. This and similar art represents all that is bad and is nothing more than *The Emperors New Clothes*. Historians say art reflects the culture of its people. This so called 'art' to our mind is totally despairing to any advancement and enlightenment of the human race. If this is a reflection of our present day culture, we really are in trouble. We spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to 'understand' art. It was quite a miserable experience, because we felt really thick and stupid; because we couldn't for the life of us see what was good about any of it. Then one day it just struck us that absolutely all modern art is simply worthless. Personally we wouldn't walk to the end of the street to look at this trash.

Because some critic with a bow tie and flash accent says it's good, are we supposed to fall about and shed tears of delight at such artistic talent? We think not. It's like *The Emperor's New Clothes*. There must be a certain amount of rich crackpots out there buying this rubbish. We would put the lot on the bonfire and drink a toast to keep the fire going. Disgusting! That is not art and it is vile! It's also one big rip off and more fool the idiots who pay for it or pay to see it. Having a laugh making a fortune out of the gullible well heeled toffee nosed arty farty types who convince themselves and each other that this is some sort of genius. Sick more like. If anyone needed to display how people accept complete mediocrity as a substitute for excellence, then a contemporary art exhibition would seem the best way to do it. The 'art-collectors' buying these works are not interested in art at all, but are buying and selling as if trading in stocks. This is why Art is so dismal these days, it has become a commodity. The luvvies will love it! HA! HA! HA! Art for the pretentious, no artistic merit whatsoever. In layman terms CRAP. No we don't like it, looks like

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Imagine a Country That Hated Art

someone picking their nose.

Art is such a loose term these days. Anyone can make a stack of tin cans and get instant fame! Art?? Shouldn't it be spelt with a 't'? Art means creating something having aesthetic value. Not everybody can do it. Installation is not about beauty. It does not need talent. It is about making some statement which can equally be expressed in words. But presented as art, it is clearly rubbish. The problem is when people, when told that this is art accept it blindly. If they saw, for example, rotten food with flies, they would perceive it as such. Shown in a museum it would count as art. With a real piece of art one recognizes its artistic value irrespective of whether it is displayed in a museum or similar venue. It's so sad what is considered to be 'art' in this modern and cutting edge world in which we live.

There is no merit within the art world today unless you produce rubbish. This is not talent, it is just commercial rubbish. Rubbish, even if you give it another name will always be rubbish! It begs the question ... WHY??????? Amazing what get mislabeled as art these days. Saddening to see that the only art that makes news these days is stuff that is wacky or ridiculous. A pile of objects with a pretentious title and no other artistic merits. Yep, that's modern 'art'! THAT is NOT ART!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Art! what a joke it is these days. All the teachers care about these days is abstract, 3D, layering, using strange materials. And in the end, all the kids produce pieces that only they understand (or pretend to) and we don't, and on the whole look hideous. What happened to teaching them the skills of good drawing, painting, photography, and ceramic work?

Moments of inspiration ... seconds of perspiration ... minutes of execution ... I'm underwhelmed. We think it is a load of rubbish. Kids could do better. We wish we could paint like that. Unfortunately we lost that ability when we turned eight. Just scrawls really and this stuff sells for millions. It isn't a question of how good the work is but who has painted it! We painted similar things when we were four. Totally unimpressed with this stuff. Who do we complain to? Who are the Muppets, the arty-farty types that select this rubbish? They should hold an online vote to select the next artwork. Then you'd find out what people really like and this is immature rubbish, claimed to be art by the arty-farty rubbish artists. And why shouldn't we the public have a say in what's selected. It's us that has to put up with the rubbish art that's on display, the art is there for our benefit! The vote would be hijacked by the arty farty types. It's how this country works now. The majority are ignored! They are having a laugh. we hope taxpayers

money isn't paying for this rubbish.

The modernist P.C. crap brigade is 'offended' by our historical past, why else would such little effort be applied to displaying it in an art gallery. Find your own ruddy place to display your beliefs. There seems to be a concerted effort to turn the country into an international laughing stock! Just one more dumbing down of the country. We must be the laughing stock nation of the world. We wish they'd find something proper to put on show instead of all the junk paraded as art for the past decade. It looks like something rescued from a 1970's house clearance. Gifted? Looks like someone was trying to get away with not paying the city to remove their rubbish more like. Doesn't sound like giving anything away when you receive a 124k tax reduction, sounds more like they just off loaded 3 pieces nobody wanted to buy onto the tax payer. Junk. Modern art requires no talent. Our dog could do a better job. We give up. What is it about modern art that we do not understand? Most of it looks like our grand-daughters sketches that adorn the fridge door and cost nothing but love. More hype than talent. Artist? Yes, a con artist. Very unimpressive.

Pointless and silly total waste of money. Mind you, you should see what they have erected in our town. Commendable waste of time and money. Life goes on in the art world. As always, this confirms their complete detachment from the real world. Ah well! Rule of thumb. IF we can do it, it is NOT art. Another so called artist to put the con in conceptual art. The art critics must be playing *The Emperor's New Clothes* ... As the saying goes, a fool and his money etc. etc. What a waste of money! Good luck to anyone who says this is a real piece of art, and even better luck to anyone who believes them, and BUYS it! A fool and his money ... Yuk! What absolute tripe you wouldn't hang this up in a toilet. Better hide it up permanently, we have seen better in our local Chinese shop. Our granddaughter aged 3 painted similar on our recently decorated living room wall yesterday, little bastard. Ours drew all around the room in purple wax crayon whilst Granddad was 'in charge'. He was a piss artist, but that should be glossed over! We wouldn't give tuppence for it! There is zero merit in this work other than they achieved fame by being totally Talentless. And being promoted by alleged critics who will talk up any old crap if there is few quid and drink in it.

That's an expensive piece of crap. Personally we think it is hideous. Emperor's new clothes. Our grand daughter can paint better than that, it's a disgrace what so called paintings sell for these days with so much inequality about. Millions for absolute rubbish. If that's worth more than ten pounds then our cocks are kippers. We would not pay £5 for one. If a so-

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called expert has to explain why a so-called work of art is not just a daub, then it's a daub. Let's be truthful. It's rubbish really. Absolutely grotesque. Who would want that hanging on their wall. Our cat could have done better. Was he drunk when he painted it or sniffing paint? I'm not sure who's more deluded, the artist or the person that wrote those catalogue notes. Apologies to all you pretentious art snobs out there but it's rubbish! Every single art dealer can always find work in Wall Street. The perfect speculators. Just shows that money doesn't buy taste. Tragic there are so many rich idiots who have this sort of money to throw around. We have a better idea – how about building clean water facilities in the Third World instead of this self indulgent, over priced, art college claptrap? Ok, seriously?

Call it art and people will buy. We wouldn't pay more than the value of the blank canvas for this. You can't be serious. Art reflects its times. We live in an age ... when people will hear the words of a celebrity – even a pitifully minor one like an art critic – and take them as Gospel, even if they're saying that a collection of brightly colored turds represent the epic struggle of life to emerge from the sea, and are the best piece of art produced in the world this year. Clichés. Art is lazy and following in the advertisers footprints, except the advertiser has a point and the artist has forgotten what theirs is. Maybe that is a sign of the times but nothing that moves the times forward or criticizes the times. Not many risks taken.

Flabby versions of modern art adorn walls and we are meant to give them meaning when most have none. Modern art got stuck with it's ego inflating. It began from the primitives and there is plenty of meaning in their art. We wouldn't say that all conceptual art is a waste of time. It is just that in many cases the artist has extremely little to say and that is the real issue. Because it's pish. It's the pish receiving all the attention of the self-appointed art world authority that really pisses us off. These pseudos hold court over modern art and default to the most pretentious meaningless shite simply to set themselves apart from people who 'just don't get it' ... all to the detriment of the good stuff. Modern Art is art critics and rich types fan-wanking over some esoteric display to look sophisticated as members of some club not for the hoi-polloi. Don't tell the viewer how to interpret the work; have both the decency and the courage to allow the viewer to bring personal experience to the equation. Mealy-mouthed art speak 'statements' designed both to obfuscate and to lay claim to deep, soul-wrenching significance deserve nothing but contempt. Bingo. The answer to 'Why does contemporary art look so simple?' is because churning this guff

out is easy and pays well. Nailed it. The art doesn't have to be good, it just had to appreciate in value. The whole scene is controlled by a cabal of upper class critics and collectors who decide which artist gets to be important. Once the artist realizes they are in they are free to knock out any old shit. All that glitters, is not gold – but it can be a good investment none the less.

*The Emperors New Clothes* were simple too ... What often passes for 'contemporary art' and raved over by our moronic, allegedly educated liberal lefty luvvies types is because this so-called 'ART' is just intellectual bullshit. Modern art has managed to completely alienate the average person by ignoring the fundamental notion that art should be both intelligent AND aesthetic. Now it's just a circle-jerk between critics, artists, art students, and faux intellectuals, and art collectors. In five hundred years people won't give a damn about it, but I'm certain people will still find Michelangelo's David fascinating, just as the people of Florence found it masterful 500 years ago. Public opinion matters, only elitists fail to understand that.

That paintings, secretly drawn by elephants but presented as works of art have captivated so called critics and experts is proof to us that most modern art is of load pretentious nonsense. We once had a temp job at an art gallery. Our job was to create a database of up-and-coming artists that might be interested in showing their work there. We came across an online artists' forum that would've been a goldmine of email addresses and contact details; only trouble was, you had to be an artist (and submit 'professional photos' of your artworks) in order to be allowed to join the forum. We spent half an hour creating a few stick-men paintings using MS Paint, added a textual explanation of how they represented the stripped-down nature of the human self in an age of labor alienation and social media, and hey presto! They admitted to us onto the artists' forum. There is no such thing as contemporary art, art is art.

All of it is just shit art. Not all art is good. Most of the people making this shit art get away with it because they get praised by shite journalists who write for shit newspapers. "Art" has been flirting with nihilism for at least a century now.' Flirting? The whole thing is so self-involved, the word 'art' basically means wanking yourself to death in public. However, the fact is that contemporary art is little more than a marketing scam that has got out of hand. The complete and utter bullshit that is used to describe this art is juvenile pap of the highest order. We like to regard it as a tax on pretentiousness. Most of the contemporary art movements are a complete sham.

The whole idea that we need an 'Institute of

art and Ideas' with its 'comfy sofas' to produce new dynamic art is false and is only perpetuated by a class of people (not practicing artists themselves) who see an opportunity for a good living to be made out of the over funded arty-farty Institutions that are springing up all around us. The great thing about running these glorified coffee bars is that none of the management have to produce any work themselves ... all they have to do is provide the space for others to do the work. To justify their existence, and obtain government and European funding. Why don't you just write 'a seven-year-old could do it' and get it over with, then go and buy a print of a nice photo of New York from Ikea. The art world is full of so called 'thinkers' and not of people who, you know, actually make art. And the art world wonders why most people sneer at the pompousness of it all. Very easy to come up with some bullshit statements and pseudo philosophy, much harder to produce a work of art that touches, interests, or intrigues an audience.

Art speak, bullshit, and economics have corrupted absolutely. Another art piece with a thick manual. Why don't these people just write books? Art is just so dry and humorless despite attempts to the contrary. Middle-class rubbish. Art must serve the people, and not the pretentious fantasies of political poseurs. Oh! Art, what shit is performed and produced in thy name! It's not art, it's dire. The whole of the Art world has been bought up by philistine advertising billionaires and their ignorant mates. Emperor's clothes? And how. Academia is killing art. Stifling it, wrapping it in health and safety and caging it within the expected, predictable norms of the past. I'd say it's either postmodernism or just plain laziness. We've been puzzled about much contemporary art for a long time and now we understand that it literally has 'nothing' to say, and we were not wrong in thinking it was a case of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. We feel sorry for art critics they just don't enjoy art for fear of looking stupid if they like something you're not supposed to. Instead of destroying art, the Philistines are now squatting in the art world husk. We came here for Art and we get ... this.

This is art in the way that bubble gum is food. And it's aimed at filthy rich people who want to be seen to be hip, who fly around in their private jets. 'Raising awareness' is always the excuse made for doing something pointless while attention seeking. We've done our bit by not buying any of their over priced 'art'. The 'climate crisis' is essential for any artist to embrace. Wouldn't get a show otherwise. Wasting space with this greedy meaningless superficial already over-hyped so-called art event. The modern art world is nothing but a money laundering scam for

oligarchs, who probably don't care too much about the climate crisis. If you're looking at those clowns for a state of the nation commentary it's best you speak to their managers at Goldman Sachs. It all looks a bit 'over privileged' to us. What, actually, is a 'brilliant artist'? Are there commonly accepted criteria, or is it in the eye of the beholder?

x

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Mary Walling Blackburn

# From the Gnome's Genome to Trash DNA: Technologies of Ancestor Phantasy for a Final Generation

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e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Mary Walling Blackburn  
From the Gnome's Genome to Trash DNA: Technologies of Ancestor Phantasy for a Final Generation

## Part 1: Before the Hereditary Home Test

Our most ancient animal ancestor, *Dickinsonia costata*, is categorically lodged between pestilence and creature.<sup>1</sup> Or rather, *Dickinsonia* dithers in a space betwixt bacteria and animalia. Let us accept that our beginnings find us plunked down in the center of the margin.

She, a flat mat, possesses an expanding physical symmetry. Some bugs are fugitive like this; see how they slide under your domestic things. Yet her remains are found as fossils on remote Russian cliffs.<sup>2</sup> Her gravesite overlooks a marginal sea, a part of the warming Arctic Ocean – a site of intense oil and gas speculation. The slightest psychedelic tendency urges me to bypass my oral and historic memory and uncover an otherworldly and cellular memory of *Dickinsonia costata*: “Mama!?” I lisp.

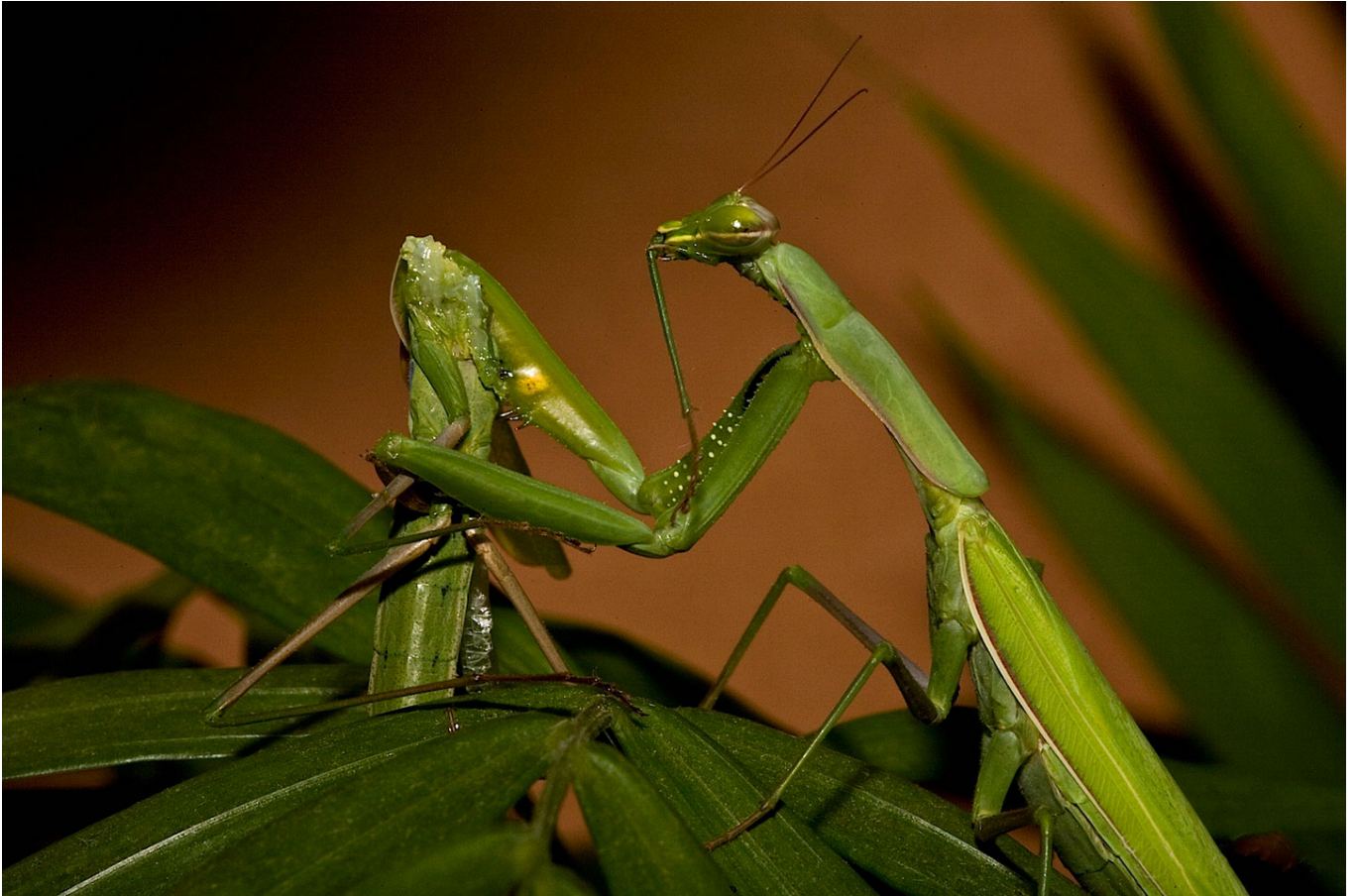
For months, I was often staring at *Dickinsonia* on a poster of early organisms that hung in our bathroom. A *Guardian* newspaper illustrator imagined *Dickinsonia* as a lapis-colored creature whose spanning fractals resembled a vulva in form. That toilet ponder: Is this *Dickinsonia* named after Emily Dickinson herself – The Flame-Haired Scribe?<sup>3</sup>

Back then, in a fecal haze – my gut microbiome deadened by antibiotics – fragments of Dickinson’s poems served as a support for my spurious claim: there must be a scientist asserting, as might Dickinson, that this rocky thing is a fossil metaphor for the “love marine.” Our paleontologist gets off on the ancient made literary and erotic, and thrills on this insistence of a geologic dyke lineage. Today, feeling more robust, I conjure auburn strands against navy fractals. Luscious Ancestor sans DNA?

The ruby-colored lichen *Japewiella dollypartoniana* was officially noticed ... on Hangover Mountain, North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Pause at the geologic or gastric, a mountain re-named by settlers; the lichen is also named or re-named, this time by a woman scientist likening the lichen to country singer Dolly Parton (DP). Is the scientist winking at her working-class origins? Am I now? And just when is DP doing so?

*And just how long do we get to claim ourselves working class and how long do we get to wink? What is the threshold for the legitimacy of this sort of claim?*

Is it after one attends an elite New England boarding school (as did Carl Andre<sup>5</sup> – yet another who claims himself one of the “New England Working Class”) or is it later (when one shucks off a murder charge)? Is it when you have a pet and pet undergoes surgeries instead of the bullet back behind the treeline or, or, say the luxury of the animal spay ... instead of hurling the



*Mantis religiosa* species of praying mantis practicing sexual cannibalism. Photo: Oliver Koemmerling, CC BY-SA 3.0.



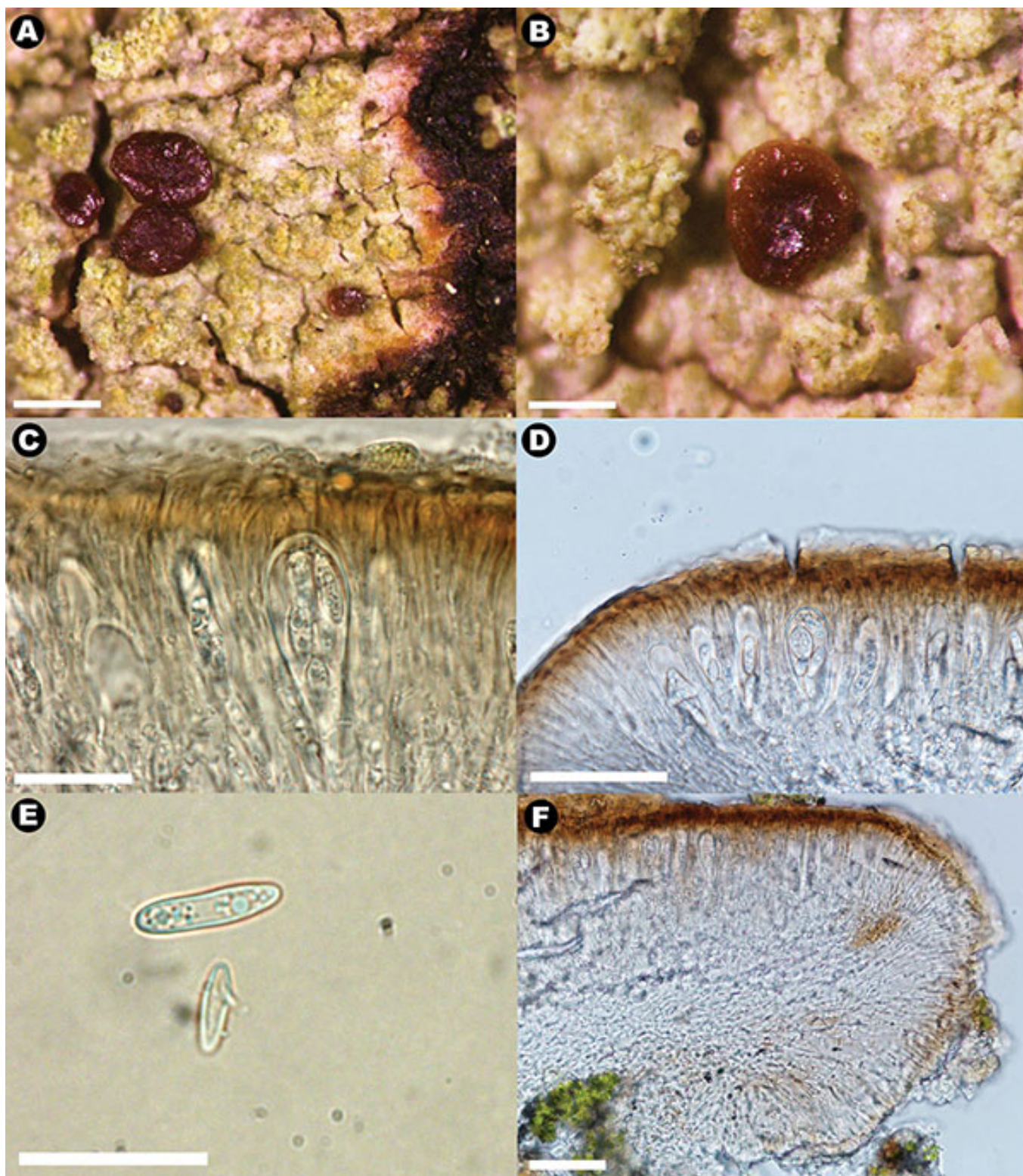


Image of the lichen *Japewiella dollypartoniana*, originally captioned "Morphology of *Japewiella dollypartoniana*. A–B, apothecia and thallus (0.5-mm scale bars). C–D, asci (C – 20 µm, D – 50 µm). E, ascospore (20 µm). F, details of excipular anatomy (50 µm)." Jessica L. Allen and James C. Lendemer, "*Japewiella dollypartoniana*, a New Widespread Lichen in the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern North America," *Castanea* 80, no. 1 (March 2015): 59–65. See <https://doi.org/10.2179/14-036R2>.



weighted sack of kittens over the bridge into the flow or, or, or, is it once a person is lent a vacation home by people called colleagues or is it when one lends a second “home” to a “colleague”? Another sign: when one starts saying that you “can buy a building in that neighborhood for peanuts.” Where can I get *these* peanuts?<sup>6</sup>

*I seek to isolate the moment when a gilded lumpen acknowledges that their sickle and hammer credentials are now powder. Me, a half-gilded lumpen, also seeks the recipe for reconstitution ... to become a useful amalgamate not unlike particleboard.*

My credential, my codpiece: my ma sang on road trips – the radio console was broken – through miles beveled by tunes. Dolly’s *Jolene*. By then she had eliminated the nasal Arkansas vis-à-vis San Joaquin Valley accent, but had not excised or bound her triple-D breasts. Now, in her sixties, she fantasizes about their surgical removal. I suggest their burial in miniature twin pine caskets. She likes that. But until my mother, or DP, has her breasts surgically removed, there is a doubling between these two – mother and crooner – and my mother can claim Dolly, as pretend relative, without shame; that is, if identification, as a twinning based on the physical and broke beginning, holds. For her, it does ... she seeks out kinship in a body that holds the same distortions of class and gender and race. And more specifically, my mother needs a relative that understands how a female body, her own, has become a longstanding cultural joke (a wig, a bosom, a drawl). O alchemy of sound, please transform that joke into a commodity.

I send my mother a pair of earrings. I could have sent dangling resin replicas of *Dickinsonia costata*, crafted as an aside by Australian paleontologists.<sup>7</sup> Instead, each earring I send is a miniature boob with a prominent pink nipple. She emails a photo of the glob hanging from the earlobe. I suggest that she point to her ears, additionally stacked with hearing aids, when old men stare at her old breasts. I return to and extend past Dolly Parton, body and voice – her treacle moan and treacle jingle, her tinny speaking voice. [*What is it, Kinny?*]

One lichenologist’s homage is followed by another: *Hypotrachyan oprah*.<sup>8</sup> These composite organisms are beaded in human names and it makes humans who have temporarily elided their own identity with celebrities *feel* closer to an algae/cyanobacteria and fungus and yeast triad. The face of the superstar is superimposed over the very still life form and this naming is the

cyanobacterias’ chance to be offered some sort of environmental protection. *Hypotrachyan oprah* and *Japewiella dollypartoniana*, surviving biota, require our aid in the Capitolocene. But the online images of Dolly Parton’s house for sale, her toilet installed next to the bed, are hard to hold next to the shrub that holds the lichen in mist.<sup>9</sup> As temperatures soar, there are scientists who carefully remove some lichens, attaching them to rhododendrons, to scrub bushes further north. Instead of direct actions on weekends, we could instead move lichen – maybe *Japewiella dollypartoniana* ... maybe the next working class celebrity lichen, *Hypotrachyan oprah* – toward the Canadian border.

*I have been the problem everyone seeks to eliminate by forced penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/ but let this be unmistakable this poem is not consent I do not consent to my mother to my father to the teachers to the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in cars<sup>13, 14</sup>*

The inheritors could chant of gender violence and how it twines around the FBI and CIA’s agendas; these academies operated (and operate?) as feeder schools to not only the Ivy Leagues but also to the CIA,<sup>15</sup> FBI,<sup>16</sup> and the Supreme Court.<sup>17</sup> I might hope these poets and this chanting change their pupils’ feckless allegiance with their DNA, their capital, and its henchmen. What do henchmen-in-training do with such poems – those who have decided they will be rewarded by the system if they play by the system? I remember that by then prep school rapes or heterosexual sex seemed to be without genetic issue. Unlike my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, no female pupil ever dropped out to have a baby – whether unintended, invited, or forced. They would not produce Government Men before their time. But now I think of microchimerism – that coital bogeyman – where residual genetic material from men passes into female bodies by way of a fetus, realized or not. Some autopsies have revealed Y chromosomes studding the female brain. “Frequently,” they wrote. “Widely distributed,” they wrote.<sup>18</sup> Telegony? buzzes the fly.<sup>19</sup>

Some posit that the current US passion for ancestral DNA analyses is the individual’s desire to “connect to the greater globe,” but I remember my mother’s own exhaustive, mostly analog search for “the good ancestor” operating on very different terms. It was 1984. We lived in my



Emily Dickinson, *Botanical Specimens: [Palestine] Gethsemane. Blossom of the Olive. (seq. 18)*, undated, Harvard University, Houghton Library (Access number: bMSAm1118\_13-METS). The garden of Gethsemane was located on the historic outskirts of Al-Quds aka Jerusalem. Today, a grove of ancient olive trees on the site serves as a spiritual destination for Muslims, Jews, and Christians. It is writ that Jesus Christ took refuge here after his betrayal but prior to his crucifixion. Emily Dickinson references Gethsemane in her writings; she interpolates: this sacred geography and its accordant agonies is situated within her own psyche. Edward Said, educated just north of the Emily Dickinson historic site, also intercalates Jerusalem, honeycombed between Cairo and Massachusetts.

grandparents' house in Salt Lake City, Utah. My mother was waitressing double shifts at two restaurants; there was Johnny Quong's Hawaiian, a themed restaurant that included timed earthquakes, rainstorms, and a falling palm tree; and there was a Lebanese restaurant, The Cedars.<sup>20</sup> Her best friend in town was a fellow waitress called Mary, an Armenian woman who had run a brothel in Monrovia, Liberia. In her spare time, my mother hung out with Mary or sifted through the Salt Lake City geneological archives for related yeoman farmers – slaveless ones, she hoped, because she craved a moral kin.

One afternoon, we looked through an album of photographs of the Liberian club while sitting on her bed in Mary's downtown SRO, one of a series of old brick hotels where drifters could book a single room for months at a time.<sup>21</sup> I noted breasts, legs, shine, glitter, the fancy; I saw gawing johns. In the moment, in the sunlight, I liked how my mother's friend Mary touched me, Mary. Was it like a Madame or a mother ... or both? She lightly grazed my eleven-year-old face, repeatedly, with a soft hand. In her room, there wasn't any sense that any of us – Mary or myself or my mother – had any roots. Nothing digging into any dark wet anywhere. No ancestors. No money. Pre-DNA test. We floated.

One night, after her Cedars shift, a man held a knife to my mother's throat in the underground parking lot and ejaculated on her. She came home and washed her clothes. In my mind's eye, we save her clothes and wait twenty-five years: I get to submit his DNA to DNA123 and trace his ancestors backward – to living cousins in Bethesda.

Will the geneological research for perfect ancestors ultimately result in my mother swapping living child molestors (meaning brothers, uncles, fathers, grandfathers whose parental night shifts included sexual predation) for dead slave owners and viking rapists? Should we also disassociate from Ancestry.com? Literally and literarily, I could enter a state of white disassociation. It's happening: the wind is sougning through the spinney. Do you notice palid gnomes punting in their frogskin coracle? Do you absentmindedly pluck the Y chromosomes from your skull?

## Part 2: After the Hereditary Home Test

My mother submits her DNA to a company. Results reveal that she is 19 percent Scandinavian.

"It wasn't in any of my geneological research." On

the phone, she sounds flummoxed.

"Vikings raped our Irish and Scottish ancestors, Mom."

"Right, right." She concedes.

Revealed by swab, this particular strand of rapist ancestors.

But some rapist ancestors (mine, yours) rape without record.

I don't know who every raped person or rapist in our genome is or who every raping ancestor has raped. I see them surfacing in others' charts – rotting buoys. Ancestor-seekers unwittingly swim towards ... the (genetic) markers of a wreck.

The software deepens its pharmacological profiles over time but the dream of the good ancestor recedes ... or at least her simpler dream of *the un-raped ancestor* dwindles. My mother begins to cleave closer to the Neanderthals. Her tests reveal more Neanderthal DNA than the average user. I begin to break down her features in accordance with web-page claims: straighter hair than most; sneezes after eating chocolate? I am imagining a Neanderthal with flyaway hair eating a Mars bar, sneezing and never ... ever ... forcing anyone ... to do anything. My Neanderthal is looking out over the strait of Gibraltar. He sees an azure opening and the chocolate is making him feel good and he thinks it is beautiful.

My mother's ancestral Neanderthal conjuring differs; 60,000 years separate our genetic reenactments. Whereas my chocolate-eating Gibraltar Neanderthal is the last of the last Neanderthals, hers is the first of the last. A Neanderthal with an insatiable libido, mother's avatar is the first Neanderthal to willfully fuck a *Homo sapiens*. I picture the union in a river valley: genitals drip DNA and immunities are swapped. There are claims that the Neanderthals' demise can be traced to this moment, this "genetic flow" that improved *Homo sapiens*'s resistance to diseases but did little to improve Neanderthal *wellness*. These findings are sourced from the bones located in a mound by a spring in the Marj ibn Amir Valley. Some archeologists and the Israeli Antiquities Authority call this the Levant, but my mother, in this porny middle paleolithic reverie or in street conversation, would call it Palestine. Palestinians, as a group, are the human beings she chose to identify with despite no shared heritage. This slippage begins when she, age nineteen, is a young single mother of a two-year-old. It starts when she travels through Bekaa – Damascus – London – Massachusetts – New



Neanderthal-themed caramel candies are available for purchase in the online shop of the German Neanderthal Museum. See [□](#).



Hampshire, with an origin point of California. Bekaa is several hours north of the Neanderthal gravesite described in the main text. Despite tourist-guide mentions of extraterrestrial landing sites at ancient Bekaa temples, my mother ignores the aliens and astrology. She is relentlessly entangled with the human.<sup>22</sup> While helping a friend deliver her husband's gravestone to Damascus, she gets the closest she's ever going to get to this Neanderthal site in 1974. They aren't far apart if one could drive through war zones, across soils spliced with more recent human remains.

In April 2019, my child asks if one can be a gnome or a Borrower instead of a human. A Borrower is a finger-length humanoid who lives off of human excess. If we sequence my child's genome will The Borrower emerge? I try to be encouraging: "Mee-maw just had her DNA analyzed. You have Neanderthal ancestors ... some say they are the ones the humans killed off because they were not as violent as themselves. *YOU* get to be Neanderthal!" In June, my child casually returns to this notion of an inherited genetic core that organizes bodies, his and others: "I am half Borrower, half praying mantis." There is a pause. He relents, "I am half-human." One week, he is clear that his name is now Ivy and that he must have skin-to-skin time with the nasturtiums' pellas. I say, "I don't think plants like to be touched." He touches them anyway, *like a human, as humans are to do*.

Time-drone (that is a time machine that is also a drone) a Neanderthal. Panning close: Neanderthal hands shake (arthritis is also ascribed to these beings). This one is harvesting pine nuts and moss. Her peach-shaped ass is sunburnt (the propensity to sunburn is also Neanderthal). Like we will be, she is extinct. But we – my grandmother, my brother, my sister – inherit her peach-shaped ass. It – the derriere – buoys in her wake. This family ass is ancient. How many more iterations will there be? Time-drone thirty years forward: the seas are dead and the peach-shaped asses have cleaved from the toxic bone.

Today my child is obsessed with animal scat and rejects a focus on the *Homo neanderthalensis* ass; her near-human droppings are too close to human for his comfort; he understands himself as a minuscule and crafty creature that is only begrudgingly *Homo sapiens*; his survival depends upon a scale where all beings are writ smaller ... something antihuman? Something fettered to the local? An industrial medical intervention – one that tinkers with his hormones – could staunch his growth: he could still weigh in at the

size of a Sylvani, a sort of hulking Italian wood gnome with a know-how in lil' pharma – we call it herbalism.

My child claims that an insect life is also more worth having than a human life.

But he is only staring at their forms and not their behaviors.

So although he has been introduced to worm reproduction – with a dirty fingernail I indicate the clitellum – he does not yet know about the sex lives of praying mantis. If he must be a praying mantisoid, would he imagine himself as decapitating instead of being decapitated? Or does he crave that another bite his head off? Which one, when ... and why?

The praying mantis traits he imagines himself as inheriting are those that will make him green and delicate and dancier; but after this transmutation, won't human traits still bubble up? Will he be decapitated or decapitating when he's *down to seeds and stems* – and which genes will he serve and which will serve him? I know myself there are genes I am subject to, but there are also the ones I seem to have given the slip. Where is my fat? Where is my smoke? Oh, but here is my anxiety, curled like a cat on my throat.

### Part 3: A Final Blubbery Chanty

But in the US, whenever we begin to wax about what is human and near-human and extra-human, it is accompanied by a sort of Christian pop chorus about the fetus. Now I'm in a chorus, too: but we singers deliver a blubbery chanty about dead women; and another chorus goes a third way that I wish I had realized ... they go door-to-door, caroling about the supernatural.

They nearly yodel:

*what about the giant's aborted fetus ...  
the scale of a small whale?!!!!!!  
And how about the gnome's aborted fetus ...  
the size of a currant?*

*Roe Roe Roe*

[Chanty over, carol over.]

A female gnome, braids tucked back, aborts in a bucolic setting, a sylvan clinic where she lies under the alder trees and sky. She isn't interested in raising more yellow-bearded preppers; yellow-merkined preppers. There's

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Poster available for purchase at the Kraneamus Krapina Neanderthal Museum in Croatia, which is part of the Museums of Hrvatsko Zagorje. See <http://www.mkn.mhz.hr/en/about-us/museums-hrvatsko-zagorje/>.

superficial evidence of this sort of gnome problem: an online photograph of a busty female ceramic gnome wielding an AK47. Gnomes are not miscreant. There isn't a punk cell in their bodies and they have become unwitting participants in heteronormative white-supremacist survivalist fantasies. They scurry in the shadow of the settler giant, Paul Bunyan, and his Blue Ox, Babe (despite the Blue Ox's brief reanimation as character-costume for a regional Minnesotan dyke wrestling match).

And so the chanty chanted that a renegade female gnome excised the male gnome spawn, or say deeper into the male gnome's literary form, his partial woody helix.

### The End

But ultimately, it feels errant for me to be so entangled in the reproductive in our hot and flooded gloaming hour; to have been focusing on locating, catching, and collecting a specimen (a sample of the gnome's biological matter), in order to sequence the gnome's genome ... in order to have a gnome baby, a final halfling swim from my giant Bunyan womb – this in our last tilt before extinction. Spy my gnomish spawn riding a reconstituted, prehistoric cyprian dwarf elephant into a starvation sunset! This instinct is too Rabelaisian, my gushing response, literary and bodily, to what is imagined as a neo-medieval deprivation.

Something that slightly helps me imagine a human-like future is a humanoid featured in a British, mid-century children's series penned by Mary Norton. The members of this particular fictional species are called "Borrowers." Female Borrower Arrietty is the size of a finger, but with a rangier form than a human if the race-obsessed anthropologists were to scale us and them and compare. The American and British illustrators draw her white, but she's just as likely to be brown as Cheddar Man – and like him, blue-eyed and lactose intolerant. It is only *logical*<sup>23</sup> that a Borrower would be more genetically entangled with Ancient Brits than Sons of Eve and Daughters of Adam. In *Borrowers Afield*, Arrietty is premenstrual and living outside of personal reproduction. Lest one think that to live outside of reproduction is to be childish, pay close attention to this scene: she cavorts in the digitalis, a lethal plant.<sup>24</sup> She pulls one blossom on her head as a cap and it sinks to her neck. To her consternation, she realizes it resembles an American Klansmen's hood and this is not her aim. This humanoid knows she wants her relationship to inhumane humans to come to an end. She will never swab her inner lip – gagging on the swab – and airmail her cheek cells to

Ancestry.com. There will be no connection.<sup>25</sup> And a white American human cannot be-hood the self without beheading themselves – when they remove the hood, the head comes with it.

Freshly circumcised, I, an adult, surf the web. Blood leaks from the head, but that's ok as every Western Emo knows there is carnage in being and every wannabe revolutionary admits there is human violence when a structure quakes, then breaks for good. Here are my wounded DuckDuckGo searches, before the interwebs cease up:

hot consensual circumcision  
hot circumcision of consenting adults  
hot white adults consenting to circumcision

Unresponsive page:

Caucasoid Homo Sapians Consenting to Circumcising their Power: Hot or Not? Real or Sot?

### Afterwords

I check in with an anthropologist at a local archeological institute. He's spread crania all over the tables. I rub my fingers over the buckling, ridged part of one small skull. I don't really care to touch other skulls that are smooth and familiar. But I touch this one because this thing was never running, breathing, weeping, shitting, singing; it's part of a grouping cast from the real. These ones are made of plaster and other amalgamates. Still, can I violate the fake? Does the violence begin at replication? Think about hack simulations of body parts that process air ... not the whoopee cushion that was never cast from anyone's anus nor the consumer market anal tracts cast from consenting porn stars' bodies ... but say the Vocal Tract Organ, "which enables 3-D printed vocal tracts to be sounded via the provision of an electronic larynx and played via joystick or keyboard?"<sup>26</sup> Its inventor, a white Brit, pops the joystick and a replica of a high priest (at the Temple of Amon in Luxor, circa 1100 BCE): trachea, throat, mouth goes YAWP, or really *ennnnhhhh* ...<sup>27</sup> Humans seem to be adept at violating on a timeline that stretches both backwards and forwards. I drag the mouse across it.

The anthropologist is clear that as data on Neanderthal and Denisovan populations rapidly emerges, it becomes increasingly apparent that the differences between "them" and "us" were perhaps subtle enough that they were not perceptible to these beings themselves. Moreover, these revelations, often bundled in

new DNA analysis, radically alter the visualizations of both early humans and Neanderthals. Natural history museums commission new depictions, swapping out the decommissioned mannequins. Imagine the worker tasked with destroying the prehistoric ones. Could the museum worker be blamed if she resells work trash on Etsy? Maybe: for each intact cave dummy riding shotgun in a lone woman traveler's car, there are scores of buyers who will crack the dummy open, pour their DNA in its craw, and sog the near visual duplicate; the fake bodies of archaic humans provide a site of millennia-old reenactment, an alpha desire to muck affinity – that unexpected and natural liking for the delicate difference in another. In the town of Cheddar (Somerset, UK), the earlier bust of “Cheddar Man” was installed at what was once called the Cheddar Man and the Cannibals Museum, but is presently named the Museum of Prehistory. The earlier display featured a shaggy-dark-haired, pale-skinned head rotating on motorized wheel; the whirling thing resembled a far-out, stoned Doobie Brother sort. (Where is he now?) Recently, analysts drilled into the skull and with the extracted bone powder completed a forensic analysis that rendered a more complete visual profile: Cheddar Man had a dark-brown to black skin tone and blue to green eyes. The twin brothers of Kennis & Kennis, a studio that specializes in historic anatomical reconstructions, generated a Cheddar Man with a hot, queer haircut, saucy twinkle in his eye, and beautiful brown skin.<sup>28</sup> He does not spin and he feels sober. He is not related to other cave inhabitants, white cannibals with drinking vessels made of skulls. “How real is he?” online white supremacists rage.<sup>29</sup>

Tom Booth, an archaeologist at the Natural History Museum who worked on the [Cheddar Man] project, said: “It *really* [my emphasis] shows up that these imaginary racial categories that we have are really very modern constructions, or very recent constructions, that really are not applicable to the past at all.”<sup>30</sup>

Fouke Monster (sometimes described as Big Foot's Midwestern estuarine cousin) is a hairy giantess who is sometimes seen but isn't necessarily here. According to a Fox News report, the Fouke Monster is between six and nine feet with dark or reddish-brown hair. According to an old weblog, she was once spotted by a soldier on night duty at the Fort Leavenworth Military Penitentiary. The nightwatch soldier who spotted the Fouke Monster is purportedly immediately relocated. If a monster report is filed, the filer is also monstrous.

The Fouke circles the prison that held turn-of-the-century labor organizers, and anarchists; the one that jailed twentieth-century Puerto Rican liberation activist Oscar López Rivera, and the one that temporarily penned up its military fuck-ups.<sup>31</sup> In daylight, the night after the sighting, other soldiers find some unusual footprints – has someone/something escaped? – in the sandy shore of the river that flows through the compound. This is the river where, a hundred years prior, a depressed military doctor slinks off to go birding.<sup>32</sup>

Like a human, I think the remaining Fouke plaits that red hair (woodside); but she's something not human. Like some Neanderthals, Fouke suffers from surfer's ear, as she has been regularly scouring an exoplanet's river bottom; but make no mistake, she's not Neanderthal. She's also been hanging out in deep-sea vents and in the surrounding trans-crustal mush, crystal-rich. The universe is flat and she's taking advantage of that. No residual RNA clings to tracks or bedding. The institution cannot account for this ancient hologram in the zone.

Soundtrack\*

- 33
- 34
- 35
- 36
- 37
- x



Mary Walling Blackburn was born in Orange, California. Walling Blackburn's work engages a wide spectrum of materials that probe and intensify the historic, ecological, and class-born brutalities of North American life. Recent publications include *Quaestiones Perversas* (Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, 2017) co-written with Beatriz E. Balanta; "Gina and the Stars" published by Tamawuj, an off-site publishing platform for the Sharjah Biennial 13, and "Slowness," a performance text in the sound-based web publication *Ear | Wave | Event*. Walling Blackburn is the founder of the Anhoek School, a pedagogical experiment, and WMYN, a pirate feminist radio station, whose writing has been featured in publications including *Afterall*, *BOMB*, *Cabinet*, *e-flux journal*, *Grey Room*, *Grafter's Quarterly*, *Pastelegram*, and *Women and Performance*. Group exhibitions and events include Beta-Local, San Juan, Puerto Rico; New Museum, NY; Art in General, NY; Sculpture Center, NY; Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY and Centre Pompidou, Paris and Tate Modern, London.

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1  
Maria Zakrevskaya and Andrey Ivantsov, "Dickinsonia costata – the first evidence of neoteny in Ediacaran organisms," *Invertebrate Zoology* 14 (May 2017): 92–98.

2  
See <http://www.ediacaran.org/whi-te-sea-russia.html>.

3  
Online, a digital version of the archived lock can be found courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum and Amherst College Special Collections. Originally, the lock was enclosed in a letter to Emily Fowler. Perhaps you should skip it? An artifact that is too much a creamy, callow celebration of a rich white girlhood no matter how laced with illuminating depression and literarily generative sexual oppression.

4  
Jessica L. Allen and James C. Lendemer, "Japewiella dollypartoniana, a New Widespread Lichen in the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern North America," *Castanea* 80, no. 1 (March 2015): 59–65 <https://bioone.org/journals/castanea/volume-80/issue-1/14-036R2/iJapewiella-dollypartoniana-i-a-New-Widespread-Lichen-in-the-Appalachian/10.2179/14-036R2.full>.

5  
See [https://archive.org/details/potpourri00unse\\_60/page/28](https://archive.org/details/potpourri00unse_60/page/28). Of note: how Carl Andre's preparatory-school activities organize his public identity amongst peers. As listed in the Phillips-Andover Academy Yearbook, *Potpourri*: Philo 3, 4; Winter Prom Committee 4; Varsity Debating 4; Film Society 4; Mother Liked the Trees; Rifle Club 3; All-Club Soccer 4; All-Club Baseball 3, 4.

6  
But is this shucking off of class really just in adapting the casual phraseology of the well-to-do? ... Nahh. It claims all affect – the many dimensions of breathing as articulated by a laugh, a scream, or say, the speed of speaking. It happens, this transmogrification of our class if and when, you or me, has ceased laughing heartily at our trauma; it is if/when you and me desist in our delivery of long-form stories or shouting a good joke from the rolled-down window of a moving car or ... We stop interrupting and being interrupted by our own, talking over one another. But in a way that was also a pleasure, the pleasure of layering.

7  
See <https://www.halfabillion.com.au/resin-earrings>.

8  
James C. Lendemer and Jessica L. Allen, "*Hypotrachyna opra*

(Parmeliaceae, Lichenized Ascomycota), a new foliose lichen with lichexanthone from southeastern North America," *Castanea* 84, no. 1 (May 28, 2019): 24–32 <https://doi.org/10.2179/0008-7475.84.1.24>.

9  
Scroll down to see photo of DP's bedroom: [https://www.realestate.com.au/news/dolly\\_parton\\_house/](https://www.realestate.com.au/news/dolly_parton_house/).

10  
See Said's 1999 memoir *Out of Place* for an explicit critique of both the landscape (white snowdrifts) and institution.

11  
"In 1906 whilst in Columbia University, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a ... law graduate student from Inanda South Africa, delivered his speech 'The Regeneration of Africa.' In this speech he dreamt of the revival or renaissance of Africa. Richard Rive and Tim Couzens have noted, 'it was largely through his ideas and inspiration that the African National Congress (Africa's oldest liberation movement and South Africa's ruling party) was founded' (Couzens & Rive 1993:1). ... Seme's speech was quoted in its entirety by Kwameh Nkrumah in his speeches when he called for the regeneration of Africa' (Nkrumah 1973:212)." R. Simangaliso Kumalo, "*Ex Africa semper aliquid Novi!*": Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the African Renaissance and the Empire in Contemporary South Africa," *Alternation*, no. 14 (2015): 190–211; 191, 194.

12  
One's confidence in self-annihilation can obscure capitalism's phantasmagoria ... but moreover, my prep school did not see that the inheritance of the certain sort of whiteness they were offering me, if I behaved, had been made spumy, spoiled by all that surges in its wake. I did not understand that either. The subtext of the prize is that if a lumpenish kid like I was worked hard and was lucky, instead of a jailbird, a hooker, a radical, I could be a professor who publishes critical essays about Emily Dickinson.

13  
From June Jordan's "Poem About My Rights," in *Directed By Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005).

14  
A poem as writ, to insider and outsider. Most of the chorus cannot claim they embody the intersectional position in Jordan's "I," and yet Jordan was also a wobbly, young form possibly seated in one of the same wooden seats in Sage Chapel where I, too, sat, without attachment to the genealogies of the wealthy, without a clear sense of the "promise" (of safety, of medical care, of affirmation).

15  
Some examples: Robert Mueller,  
George H. W. Bush

16  
Another example: Christopher A.  
Wry.

17  
And others: Brett Kavanaugh,  
Neil Gorsuch.

18  
See  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3458919/>.

19  
See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/telegony>.

20  
Johnny Quong's Hawaiian was  
later turned into a Veterans of  
Foreign Wars hall.

21  
"SRO" is the acronym for single-  
resident occupancy. SROs are  
semi-temporary, low-income  
housing. In the twentieth  
century, many SROs operated in  
the remains of nineteenth-  
century hotels in downtown  
Seattle (the original skid row),  
Portland, and Salt Lake City. I  
remember stopping by a number  
of SROs in Seattle as a kid,  
searching for my grandfather.

22  
Since her return forty-five years  
ago, my mother has boycotted  
Israeli-made products; in the  
mid-70s, in Brooklyn, she used  
to wear a red-and-white  
checked keffiyeh and whenever  
schools were bombed she wrote  
furious letters (in her old-  
fashioned looping penmanship)  
to the implicated governments.  
Her relationship is different than  
say Jean Genet's (who visited  
Palestinian refugee camps in  
Jordan in 1970) or, of course,  
Edward Said, whose  
contextualizing and seminal text  
*Orientalism* was published in  
1978. Her visit is not only in  
between these critical nodes but  
it without the intellectual  
structures that inform Said and  
Genet's analysis nor the male  
elite privilege that marks say  
Michel Aude's spoiled, sexist,  
orientalist video trolls through  
Northern Africa. I'll hazard that  
Aude thought he was too stoned  
to be considered a colonist or  
that perhaps Genet thought he  
was too gay to be an orientalist  
but I will also admit that my  
mother, as poor and fierce and  
queer and brave as Genet, was  
nevertheless stoned and weird  
and colonizing in her own  
manner. What she perceives as  
love I perceive as fetishism. This  
year, she tattoos a replica of  
Picasso's camel to her shoulder  
and I wince and she shrugs off  
my wince. What she perceives as  
mutual, I perceive as  
inequitable.

23  
But what sort of fictive logics  
emerge when white-supremacist  
investments in racializing comes

to the fore? Data is not being  
visualized; psychological crises  
are being made into form.

24  
Mary Norton, *Borrowers Afield*  
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,  
1955), 147.

25  
In the last volume, *The  
Borrowers Avenged*, Arrietty is  
clearly a pubescent Borrower.  
Following a move to an ancient  
vicarage, she initially  
experiences a fright when  
encountering the buildings'  
ghosts. She comes to realize she  
can simply walk through the  
massive, translucent volumes of  
a human ghost, a dead human  
endlessly re-performing his own  
traumas. She will be unscathed.

26  
Me, I think the contraption looks  
like many sculptures made in  
2013 ... castings and clean,  
ready-made hardware with  
dense conceptual backstories  
<https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/david-howard/057460e7-937c-451b-8055-7fa628cdb402>.html.

27  
See  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/science/mummy-voice.html>.

28  
See  
<https://kenniskennis.com/site/sculptures/Cheddar%20Man/>.  
Dig deep into the Kennis &  
Kennis website. It is hard to  
imagine that SNL has not. The  
images are informed by bones  
and DNA, sure, but also by the  
artists' own subjectivity. What do  
we begin to understand about  
how Kennis & Kennis feel about  
national belonging; sexual  
attraction; familial drama; and  
masculine embodiments. Don't  
these get tangled in a way that a  
comedian and/or an academic  
cannot resist tugging at?

29  
See *The Violence of a Civilization  
Without Secrets* (Dir. Adam and  
Zach Khalil in collaboration with  
Jackson Polys) for a North  
American dimension to how  
white supremacists attempt to  
shape narratives around beings  
exhumed  
<https://vimeo.com/217342747>.

30  
See  
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/first-modern-britons-dark-black-skin-cheddar-man-dna-analysis-reveals>.

31  
The political prisoners included  
over forty IWW organizers,  
including African-American IWW  
organizer Ben Fletcher (central  
to the longshoreman's strike in  
Philadelphia).

32  
1919: An officer of the Medical  
Corps, in charge of the surgical  
clinics for the Hospital of the

United States Disciplinary  
Barracks at Fort Leavenworth,  
makes a casual checklist of  
spring migration. The barracks  
are situated on acres of uplands  
and river bottoms. Birds also  
cling to the buildings  
themselves. Purple martins  
nesting on the outer prison  
walls. The officer's checklist  
includes a note regarding the  
freedom of the purple martins  
against the stillness of the  
prisoners. Officer David C.  
Hilton's bird checklists for the  
Wilson Bulletin produced scores  
of calls and songs (over 150).  
Using Cornell's ornithology  
archives, I looked up each bird  
listed and wrote down the  
specific calls: *chew tuck chip  
chaa whaa phew joree chwirk sip  
pink zweet choo wichety grunt  
hiss yink ...* Full disclosure: in  
2017, I made a sculptural  
installation, based on the  
Leavenworth research, for the  
Ulrich Museum, Wichita, Kansas.

33  
**Embedded Track:** Vocal Tract  
Organ playing a synthesized  
form of grave-looted  
Nesaymun's speech after death,  
after disinterment, after  
surviving a WWII Nazi air raid on  
the Leeds Museum, after 3-D  
scanning, after going viral. A DJ  
makes a loop, mixing it with  
another forced mummy audio  
track, Ötzi the Iceman's vowels.  
Is this an illegal rave?

34  
Circa 1999. Soundtrack lists  
were attached to the print  
columns in *Punk Planet*.  
Simultaneously fascinated,  
alienated, disbelieving, I  
scanned their cool. To be  
influenced? To inherit? To pilfer?  
You scan this, too. We barter?  
Historic disinheritance makes a  
sunny sonic barter impossible.

35  
**Revision Track:** While in the  
process of revising this essay I  
listen to much music but also to  
a June Jordan interview  
conducted by Julius Lester on  
Pacifica radio in 1968. After  
Lester laughingly relays a  
cartoon about a white man  
stealing a heart from a living  
black man's body, he invites  
Jordan to read "Uhuru in the  
O.R." and her voice, low-toned  
yet urgent, delivers: *The only  
successful transplant, from the  
first five attempts, means that a  
black heart kept alive a white  
man who upheld apartheid. At  
that moment, washing dishes, I  
recall that sometimes I imagine  
that the 45th president's body is  
packed with looted organs. Isn't  
that one way to reign forever,  
to make his brand of white power  
endless?*

36  
Jordan's audio rolls on: *I like love  
anonymous / more than murder  
incorporated or / shall we say  
South Africa / I like the Valentine  
the heart the power /  
incorruptible but failing body /  
flowers of the world. Then, a  
second verse: From my death the  
white man / takes new breath he*

*stands as / formerly he stood and  
he commands me / for his good*

37  
These years, boarding schools  
pay radical poets to speak – not  
as poets, but sorcerers, paid to  
purify, to sterilize the  
instrument. Maybe these poets  
utter forked runes ... cursing a  
student replica Kavanaugh and a  
proto Christopher A. Wry and  
blessing the ones who will  
betray their secret societies.  
(Supposedly it is only at death  
that University of Virginia's  
Seven Society reveals a member  
to the public – by leaving a  
wreath of black magnolias,  
typically arranged in the shape  
of the numeral seven. Perhaps  
these poets are anointing with  
words those who might wreck  
the Seven Society after expertly  
sliding in. No black magnolia 7  
for their grave.)

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Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme

# At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade into Each Other

01/03

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme  
At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade into Each Other

And so our need for a new consciousness at those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other.

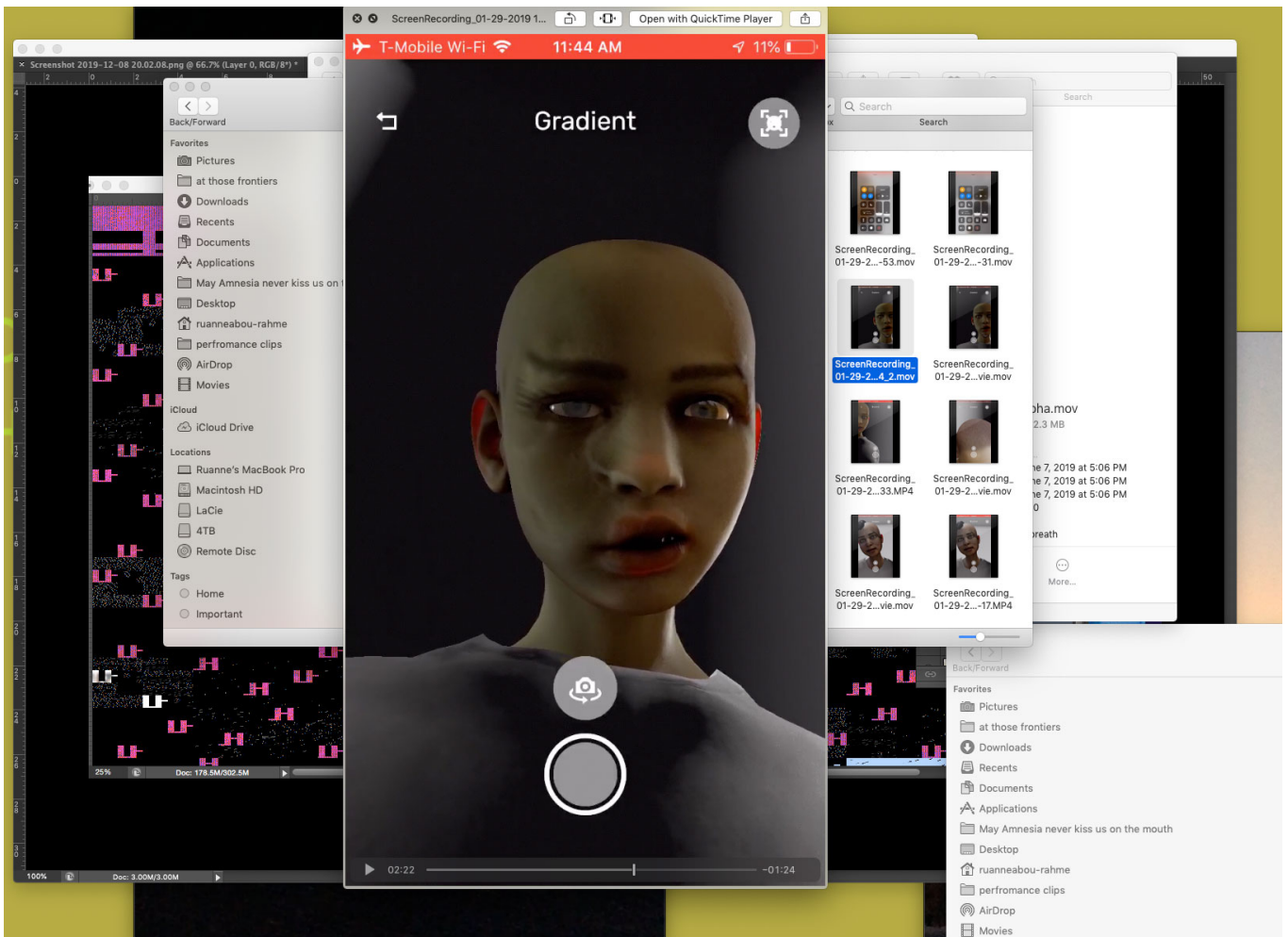
– Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*

Fragments from Edwards Said's most personal and poetic work, *After the Last Sky*, are repurposed to create a new script that reflects on what it means now to be constructed as an "illegal" person, body, or entity. The script is turned into a song that is sung by the artists as multiple avatars. Created via a software program that generates avatars from a single image, the avatars in the video all come from images of people who participated in the "Great March of Return" that continues to take place regularly on the seamline in Gaza, an area that has been under physical siege since 2006. The relationship between fugitivity, fragility, and futurity becomes manifest in this field. The project uses low-resolution images that were circulated online; the avatar software renders the missing data and information in the original images as scars, glitches, and incomplete features on the characters' faces.

x

This project was originally presented as a live performance with accompanying video and sound at e-flux, 2019.

02/03



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Screenshot 2019-12-08 20.17.01*, 2019. Courtesy of the artists.



**Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme** work together across a range of sound, image, text, installation, and performance practices. Their practice is engaged in the intersections between performativity, political imaginaries, the body, and virtuality.

03/03

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 **Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme**  
**At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade into Each Other**



The print edition of *e-flux journal* can be found at:

A  
De Appel, Amsterdam  
Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam  
CCA Andratx  
M HKA, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen  
Aarhus Art Building, Århus  
OMMU, Athens  
split/fountain, Auckland  
Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin  
B  
Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden  
Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre  
Arts Santa Monica, Barcelona  
MACBA, Barcelona  
Kunsthalle Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel  
Vitamin Creative Space, Beijing  
and Guangzhou  
98weeks, Beirut  
Cultural Centre of Belgrade  
Bergen Kunsthall  
b\_books, Berlin  
Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, Berlin  
do you read me? Berlin  
Motto, Berlin and Zurich  
NBK, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein  
Pro qm, Berlin  
Kunsthalle Bern  
Lehrerzimmer, Bern  
Arsenal Gallery, Bialystok  
Bielefelder Kunstverein  
Eastside Projects, Birmingham  
MAMbo - Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna  
Kunsthau Bregenz  
Arnolfini, Bristol  
Wiels, Brussels  
National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest  
Pavilion Unicredit, Bucharest  
C  
Contemporary Image Collective (CIC), Cairo  
Townhouse Gallery, Cairo  
The New Gallery, Calgary  
Wysing Arts Center, Cambridge  
Graham Foundation, Chicago  
The Renaissance Society, Chicago  
Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne  
Overgaden, Copenhagen  
D  
CCA Derry~Londonderry, Derry  
Traffic, Dubai  
Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin  
Project Arts Centre, Dublin  
Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf  
E  
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven  
F  
Konsthall C, Farsta  
Portikus/Städelschule, Frankfurt  
G  
Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, Gdansk  
Centre de la photographie, Genève  
S.M.A.K, Ghent

Beirut, Giza  
Center for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow  
ICA, London  
Grazer Kunstverein  
Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien, Graz  
Kunsthau Graz  
para\_SITE Gallery, Graz  
LABoral Centre for Art and Creative Industries, Grijon  
H  
Kunstverein, Hamburg  
Museum of Contemporary Art KIASMA, Helsinki  
CAST Gallery, Hobart  
INFLIGHT, Hobart  
Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong  
I  
Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck  
theartstudent at University of Arts, Iași  
BAS, Istanbul  
DEPO, Istanbul  
Galeri Zilberman, Istanbul  
SALT, Istanbul  
J  
Center for Historical Reenactments, Johannesburg  
K  
La Cucaracha Press, Kansas City  
Kunstraum Lakeside, Klagenfurt  
Sørlandets Kunstmuseum, Kristiansand  
L  
Pavilion, Leeds  
Mauhaus, Escola de Artes Visuais, Lisbon  
Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon  
OPORTO, Lisbon  
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e-flux journal #106 — 02/2020  
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