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Editors
Editorial

It's yet uncertain what the lasting legacy of 2020 will be. "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us," Walter Benjamin wrote in 1940, "that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." We already know that in the US, the summer of 2020 will be remembered for its sustained state of emergency, when we emerged from stratified isolation and convened, in the millions, in the streets to affirm that black lives matter, that black breath is stolen at an overwhelmingly higher scale by the pandemic and by the largely extralegal military organization known as the police. Benjamin continues: "We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."

The summer of 2020 will be the summer that came anyway, somehow, despite the hundreds of thousands lost during the pandemic. But, there is something about Benjamin's "real" state of emergency that seems to suggest that an underlying pandemic exists below the one we thought we were dealing with. In a time of collective vulnerability, what do we clearly realize? What is being heard around the world from the disproportionate number of black lives taken both by the pandemic and by the police that are tasked with protecting rather than criminalizing life? Many of our institutions – most certainly, art institutions – are now being forced into a painful self-questioning to confront their own inextricable ties to colonial rule, historically and in the present.

Many old white men will now assume different shapes, sizes, and even genders, cultures, and races as they scramble to hide behind the bodies of people their fatherly care has always neglected. But, after so many lives have been sacrificed to expose white supremacy as a much older pandemic inherent to the "healthy" functioning of so many modern societies, we may now find ourselves inside of a rare opportunity to distinguish them clearly. And, if that happens to you while you're looking in the mirror, then rest assured that this is only the beginning. "The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible," Benjamin wrote (again, in 1940), "is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."

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Issue image: Protesters tear down Christopher Columbus statue outside Minnesota state capitol, June 25, 2020. Photo: Stephen Maturen/Getty Images.

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Charles Mudede

White Knee, Black Neck

What Do the Police Do?

Let's begin with the police. What is it exactly that these armed men and women do for a living? They protect the rights of property ownership. All else follows from this primary objective. Even the eighteenth-century moral philosopher Adam Smith was aware of the key police function. In *The Wealth of Nations*, the first systematic defense of ownership (capitalist) society, he wrote:

> For one very rich man there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many. The affluence of the rich excites the indignation of the poor, who are often both driven by want, and prompted by envy, to invade his possessions. It is only under the shelter of the civil magistrate that the owner of that valuable property, which is acquired by the labour of many years, or perhaps of many successive generations, can sleep a single night in security. He is at all times surrounded by unknown enemies, whom, though he never provoked, he can never appease, and from whose injustice he can be protected only by the powerful arm of the civil magistrate continually held up to chastise it. The acquisition of valuable and extensive property, therefore, necessarily requires the establishment of civil government. Where there is no property, or at least none that exceeds the value of two or three days' labour, civil government is not so necessary.[1]

And there you have it. Smith stated, as plainly as possible (and without even a sense of scandal or embarrassment), that the function of law enforcement in a market-based society is to protect the order of property ownership.[2]

The Penal Population

If we begin with this understanding, that police protect property and their owners, we can expect this to be its primary consequence: those who have very little property in a community are bound to experience a frequency of bad encounters with law enforcement that is much higher than those who have a lot of property. And so it is. What we find in the US, the world's top ownership society for the past hundred years, is a vast jail, prison, and parole system filled with men and women who do not own much of anything. From this fact, which links poverty to the business of policing, we also find an explanation for the overrepresentation of black Americans (who make up about 13 percent of the general population) in the US's state prisons (they make up 40 percent of the penal

CHAZ, June 20, 2020. Photo: Charles Mudede.

population).

The Logic of Ownership Society

After the abolition of slavery in the US, blacks received no compensation from ownership society because they did not lose any property. They were indeed the property that was lost. This outcome, no compensation for slaves, can only make sense in a society that has sacralized property rights. Soon after the Haitian Revolution ended in 1804, for example, the former slaves were forced into debt by their former owners. The black nation had to pay France 90 million francs (or $21 billion USD in today's money). This debt was not repaid until 1947. The Haitian slave revolt, the struggle for freedom, violated a property contract. The same is true of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 that freed slaves in the US. This violation of a contract explains, in part, the US's refusal to come anywhere close to adequately compensating black Americans for over 250 years of slavery. What is to be compensated?

To make this manner of reasoning a little more obvious, one only has to consider the reparations to Japanese Americans for internment during much of World War II. The award came late for sure (1988), but it was always politically feasible because many in this group lost property when they were forced to relocate to concentration camps in 1942. Much of this property was never returned after the war. The US government had to finally recognize the racial grievance of the internment because it contained a large number of property grievances. An official apology was offered for the state's brazen racism; and, in recognition of lost property and revenue, $1.6 billion worth of checks were sent to those who had been interned and their heirs.

The Black History of a Bad Check

What we find in the years that followed the Emancipation Proclamation are a series of bad checks sent from the state to black Americans. By 1963, the March on Washington (or the Freedom March) made the then most recent of these bad checks (the postwar Keynesian check that was good for the whites who swelled the middle of the US's social hierarchy) the prime issue of the event. In the words of the march's main speaker, the theologian Martin Luther King, Jr.: "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" It is not an accident that King associated American freedom with American money, which offers the means to own what the police officers are hired to protect: property. "We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt," stated King. "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."[3] This check has yet to not bounce.

The Punitive Turn

Six years after the March on Washington, the US government began channeling surplus black labor into an expanding prison system. The sociologist Bruce Western described this switch point in his 2006 book *Punishment and Inequality in America* as the US's "punitive turn."[4] Mass incarceration had a definite Keynesian function in the sense that it provided the government with an investment opportunity that would not be opposed by the right, whose economic program was, at the time (the late 1960s and early 1970s), making a return after thirty years in the wilderness. It was understood that the government's demand function could not be aborted at this point. This would have resulted in mass unemployment and a return of the political turbulence that nearly toppled ownership society during the Red Decade (the 1930s). The Keynesian demand function was instead repurposed. Western writes: "Prison construction became an instrument for regional development as small towns lobbied for construction facilities and resisted prison closure." Three decades after the punitive turn, "over a million black children – 9 percent of those under 18 – had a father in jail."[5]

Invisible Men and Women

This massive program of incarceration had another Keynesian function: it made many jobless men and women invisible. We can describe this disappearing act as Keynesian because it helped the government maintain its thirty-year commitment to full employment (the solution to the class conflicts of the Red Decade). A grasp of this development is improved by the recognition of black exclusion from the middle class that ballooned during the course of the long boom (1947 to 1970). What happened to them? Black Americans kept pressing for their check – full employment, job security, health insurance, and high wages – to be cleared. But in the end, the only significant Keynesian program the state granted the descendants of slaves was joblessness in the form of mass incarceration, which, as Bruce Western points out, removed a large amount of unemployment from the books and made full employment possible in a period that experienced a decline in the rate of capital accumulation (the 1970s). Western writes: "Prison and jail inmates are invisible in the official labor statistics that describe the

economic well-being of the population."[6] Western estimates that the jobless rate for blacks in the US would go up by as much as 10 percent if the prison population was included in national accounts.

The Pacification of White Labor

What is poorly understood by most Americans is that the Golden Age of Capitalism (or what the French call Les Trente Glorieuses) was at once a period of full employment and intense labor turbulence. Mainstream history, even on the left (Robert Reich, Nick Hanauer, Paul Krugman, and the like), tends to portray it as a period of peace between labor and capital. Wages were high, as was the rate of capital accumulation. It was a win-win situation that was unwisely destroyed in 1980 by the Volcker Shock, which crushed union power, and the subsequent deregulation of financial markets. But the high wages of the Golden Age were tied to labor/capital contracts that put a lid on radical labor activism and diminished the power of unions. This was the consequence of the Taft–Hartley Act in 1947 and the Treaty of Detroit in 1950. The act and treaty were the two blades of a scissor that worked to cut the sinews of labor's greatest strength: grassroots activism. It also pacified much of white labor.

El Nuevo Rodeo

At this point, let's consider the police officer who used his knee to murder George Floyd. Derek Chauvin's income as a servant for the rights of property apparently did not make ends meet. He moonlighted as a bouncer for a popular Minneapolis Mexican-American music venue called El Nuevo Rodeo. He, as with millions of other middle-class white Americans, earned less than the socially necessary income to maintain a middle-class standard of life. If the Keynesian response to black unemployment was mass incarceration, its response to a white middle-class accustomed to high wages in a period of flat-to-declining real wages was what the sociologist Lisa Adkins calls in her 2019 book *The Time of Money* the "financialization of everyday life."[7] As borrowing fueled middle-class consumption, hard cash, which was harder and harder to obtain, became increasingly valuable. If Officer Chauvin's position was similar to that of millions of Americans in the middle class, then he needed not more credit, but more cash. This difficult state of affairs can be explained by the transference of national deficit spending on the maintenance of a socially approved standard of

Capital Hill Autonomous Zone, June 20, 2020. Photo: Jasmyne Keimig.

American life to the realm of domestic deficit spending. This transference had the advantage of maintaining the Keynesian demand function as government budgets contracted.

The Corner of 38th and Chicago Avenue

And yet, a large section of white America was surprised to see, on Memorial Day, in the middle of a pandemic, the knee of a white police officer choking the life out of a black American man, pinned to a Minneapolis street. It seemed not to make any sense to them. Why would a police officer do such a thing? But if we fix the frame of Adam Smith's understanding of the police function on the incident, little about it will seem that out of place. The black man in question has very little property (he's unemployed at the time of his death; and when employed, he was a bouncer at El Nuevo Rodeo[8] – the lockdown closed the venue). In fact, Floyd, who, like 15 percent of all black males alive today, had spent time in prison, and who also tested positive for Covid-19[9] on April 4, 2020, was accused of having used a fake twenty-dollar bill to buy cigarettes from a store, Cup Foods, on the corner of 38th and Chicago Avenue. This was the beginning of the end for him – the possible loss of twenty dollars and the possession of a packet of cigarettes that he may not have had the right to own.

As for the white man whose knee is on Floyd's neck, he has a job to do: to serve and protect the rights of property ownership. And here (as the knee presses on Floyd's neck), we can draw a conclusion from an insight that Karl Marx made in a number of his books, and which, in a sense, extended Hegel's theory of recognition (the slave sees their value in things). In Marx's view, under a property regime, a society that has sacralized possessions, we find that people have been replaced in importance by things. This means that objects (or commodities) mediate our relations with other humans.[10] This is what being in a commodity society comes down to. The police in such a regime, then, do not serve and protect people, but things.

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Charles Mudede is a Zimbabwean-born cultural critic, urbanist, filmmaker, and writer. Mudede, who teaches at Cornish College of the Arts, collaborated with the director Robinson Devor on two films, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, both of which premiered at Sundance. *Zoo* was also screened at Cannes. Mudede is also associate editor for *The Stranger*, a Seattle weekly, and directed the 2020 film *Thin Skin*.

1
Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Thomas Nelson, 1843), 297. Available at Google Books https://www.google.com/books/edition/An_Inquiry_Into_the_Nature_and_Causes_of/8k_K8rf2fnUC?hl=en&gbpv=0.

2
The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 ignited Black Lives Matter protests in Seattle on May, 29, 2020. The center of these protests was the intersection of 11th Avenue and East Pine Street, which is a block from Seattle Police Department's East Precinct. After clashing with protesters for a week, the SPD abandoned the East Precinct building. On June 9, 2020, the protestors declared the station and the superblock west of it an autonomous zone. Art has flourished there ever since.

3
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963.

4
Thomas Piketty writes: "The role of historical research is precisely to demonstrate the existence of alternatives and switch points and to show how choices are conditioned by the political and ideological balance of power among contending groups." Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 516.

5
Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 5.

6
Western, *Punishment and Inequality*, 95.

7
Adkins writes that the "feature of money as a commodity in present-day finance-led capitalism that distinguishes it from previous moments is that it is pervasive. Money as a commodity does not operate as such only in regard to specialist sites or specific kinds of exchanges but is omnipresent in everyday life." Adkins, *The Time of Money* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 63.

8
What to make of this? The live music venue El Nuevo Rodeo, which was destroyed by fire during the second night of demonstrations that followed Floyd's murder on May 25, was located near Minneapolis's Third Police Precinct, which employed Officer Chauvin and which was also destroyed by fire on the second night of the demonstrations. Did Chauvin not know Floyd? How could they have missed each other? Chauvin is said to have spent seventeen years as an off-duty officer for El Nuevo Rodeo. Floyd is said to have also spent a long stretch of time at this business. The owner knew both of them. Did the white officer know he was killing a coworker? Could he not see him as a fellow bouncer at a music venue? Or could he only see a black man, which meant: a man with no property? Indeed, if we were to walk through the mirror of Floyd's murder, we might enter something like that brutal beating scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seizing his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blonde man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, 'Apologize! Apologize!' But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth – when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!" The white man lived and appeared in a newspaper the following day under the caption "mugged." Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Vintage Books, 1995), 4.

9
The Guardian reports that one in two thousand of all black Americans have died from Covid-19. This piece of information reveals the real dangers blacks face in the present sequence of Black Lives Matter protests. On one side: anger, grief, voices must be made public, must be heard; and on the other: this political necessity, which cannot be expressed in a way that meets the safety standards of social distancing, will likely have lethal consequences for the black community. Once again, black America is between the devil and the deep blue sea. See Ed Pilkington, "Black Americans Dying of Covid-19 at Three Times the Rate of White People," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/black-americans-death-rate-covid-19-coronavirus.

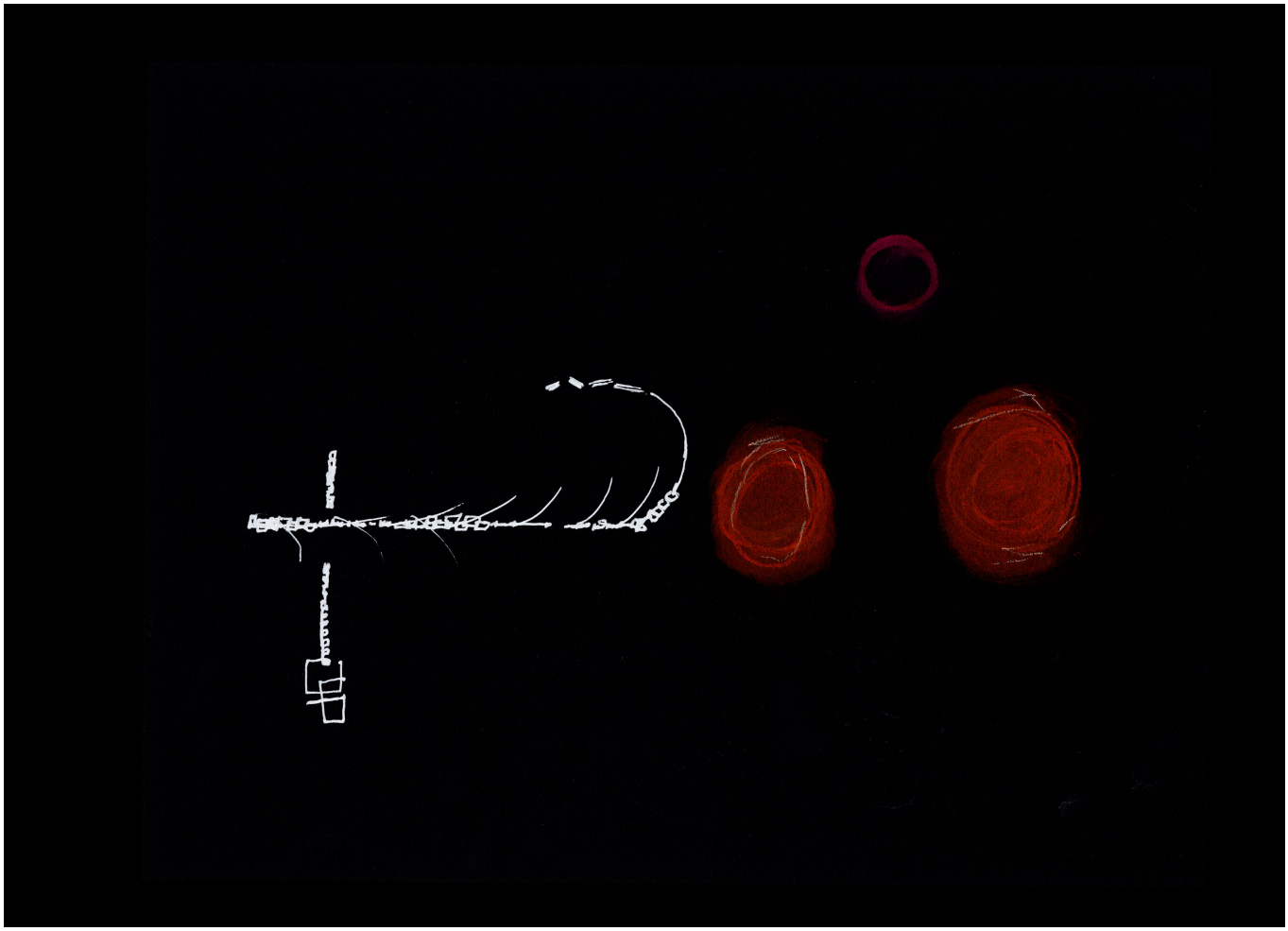
10
When on March 20, Texas's lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, implored old Americans to sacrifice their lives for the economy, it caused a huge scandal. *Newsweek*'s headline was typical: "GOP Lieutenant Governor Faces Backlash for Saying Grandparents Don't Want to Sacrifice the Economy for Coronavirus Isolation" https://www.newsweek.com/gop-lieutenant-governor-faces-backlash-saying-grandparents-dont-want-sacrifice-economy-1493883. But only a month later, Georgia, Florida, and Texas were reopening their economies despite the pandemic. A few weeks after that, almost all of America had come to terms with Dan Patrick's realism, capitalist realism (there is no alternative). My feeling is that a large part of the present Black Lives Matter protest is charged by the horror of this realization: life (white or black) in America is actually less important than the maintenance of the economy, which is structured to preserve and protect property, things. Those in power thought that Americans would just automatically accept necroeconomics (a term I borrow from Achille Mbembe's necropolitics), despite all of the polling data that clearly showed most Americans were deeply concerned about reopening in the middle of a public health crisis. The compounding of this horror (submit to necroeconomics) with the horror of George Floyd's knee-choked face was enough to send a large part of the US over the deep end. See Charles Mudede, "Re-opening Businesses During a Pandemic Shows We Are Entering the Age of Necro-Economics," *The Stranger*, April 23, 2020 https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2020/04/23/43483552/re-opening-businesses-during-a-pandemic-shows-we-are-entering-the-age-of-necro-economics.

Renee Gladman

The Order of Time

I had been looking into the night sky for a long time, wondering how to place certain events of my seeing – shooting stars, stars going nova, etc. – in sequence with other events of my living, so that the time I felt at my feet was the same as that in my eyes. But people were saying what you saw when you looked up in the sky were happenings from thousands or millions of years ago, and the effects of their having happened were just now reaching us; thus when we looked up we mostly only saw the past, a past so distant it was impossible to contain and relate to your own timeline. I would think those thoughts while looking up into the sky and would find it oddly comforting when the conundrum took over parts of my brain, captivated me so entirely that I'd have to bring up the problem in conversations with friends. I made intervals to talk about planets and the delta quadrant, and where time was, where events happened, why space was so vast, how it could be so vast, what the purpose of such infinite space would be. Those would be the things I thought while I also carried on with the ordinary tasks of my living, for example, writing an introduction for a special section of afterwords I'd gathered for a forthcoming issue of the *Black Warrior Review*. I'd asked writers I was currently admiring to write afterwords for books of theirs that had already been published or were soon to be published and it was early February of 2020 that I'd asked this. Something was going wrong in China and beginning to go wrong in Seattle, but that was all I knew at the time. People said yes to writing an afterword and promised to deliver theirs in April.

For a long time, you were looking at the sky: it was full of mystery. "We are on a planet," you said to pull the blanket of confusion over you. "We are in a solar system that is inside of a larger system and somewhere, maybe seventy-five years away (only if you have warp drive) there is the delta quadrant." I was looking up at the sky, waiting for my afterwords, when I brought my eyes down. We were being told to stay inside. This was early March. I'd never been told that before. People said go get enough food for three to four weeks then close the door. We didn't live in a city at the time. We lived in a barn in a small town in a state that shared propinquity to what was going on, but our part of the state was more tucked away. We couldn't experience things firsthand. By the time people sat to write their afterwords we were in a pandemic. We had been inside for months. People were dying everywhere. "Our brains had to have changed," I wrote in my introduction to the section of afterwords. It was May; it seemed perhaps that a century had passed. I was still looking up into the sky because I needed an occupation that would provide an escape. I didn't want to worry



Renee Gladman, *Untitled Moon Score* from the series *One Long Black Sentence* (Image Text Ithaca Press, August 2020).

about the apocalypse; I didn't want to navigate menopause. No one ever mentioned that you would have to do menopause and the apocalypse at the same time. I needed distraction from worrying about what skills I would have when the apocalypse came, what would I have to offer. I decided I wanted to be the one that would lead people through the woods as they foraged for things – things to eat and things to use for healing. I wouldn't be a tracker as much as I would stand and look around while they were bent to the ground or while they stood in a clump of shrubs. I would look at the sky; I would listen to the air. I would say, "Okay, we need to move on." I would help people spot the things they were looking for, then they would dig into the ground for them. It wouldn't be the most important job, but it was what I was up for doing. I was looking at the sky and then looking at the afterwords that began to trickle in. People couldn't help but write about the crisis as they reflected on these books that had been completed long before the crisis began; some of the books had been out in the world for over a year before we found ourselves inside this pandemic. I had to think about time in my introduction and I had to think about the lockdown mind and how it couldn't be the same mind as that which functioned previous to the crisis. I was reading lesbian romances at the time and was waiting for the lockdown romances to emerge, but they had yet to appear. I wanted to know how a lockdown mind would find love. By mid-May, I'd received all of the afterwords and spent a weekend writing the introduction. I wanted to say for whatever time it would be read that we had passed through something, that we were probably still passing through it (because there really didn't seem to be an end to the crisis; we were nearly three months into isolation). I wrote trying to anticipate what our brains would be like six months from now when the journal came out. What would six months of looking up into the sky (mostly by then the sky in my mind) and hardly venturing out *do* to my reading? What would it make of what I needed? It seemed clear we would need afterwords because that was what the days felt like: living in the wake of something.

The day after I submitted my portfolio of afterwords, introduction included, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America. We were in the year two thousand and twenty. Time split and the two timelines we were now living shook violently. We were living a pandemic and a global uprising at the same time. It was hard to say what you were saying because every new day brought an incalculable change to your world and to your language. You didn't know Norway would get involved. You couldn't have imagined the Minneapolis city council would actually vote to dismantle its police department. You went to sleep and when you woke more people had gathered, more change had happened. One day all of Instagram was a flow of vivid black empty tiles, an act that took up more space than it made. White people began pulling from their shelves crusty books written by black authors and saying, "Read this" or "Follow this person." Everyone who was anyone was saying, "Black Lives Matter," but inadvertently were saying, "Some black lives matter," which was all anyone ever said anyway. Any white one. So, we spent a few days finding out which were the black lives that mattered and the rest of us went on with our names unsaid. I wanted to write about this but that was "blackout Tuesday" and by the time Thursday had come along the tiles were gone, the shoutouts had diminished. I was trying to find those days in the night sky. I knew they were gone (or not yet arrived) but maybe there'd be a trace of them somewhere. People started asking me to say what I felt, asking how things looked from where I was, and I was afraid to say anything because of the way time tremored. We couldn't speak of the present reflectively. We could post, but how did we essay?

I am writing; it is nearly the end of the second week of June and everything has changed again. I can't tell what's happening. It's hard to see from the barn. Some things have been achieved and the world seems to have gone a bit silent. I think we are shocked that Minneapolis is willing to disband its police force. We can't believe that this is actually being considered. We also can't believe that there have been more killings of brown and black bodies in the interim. We still can't believe our president. We wish the election was tomorrow. The world is going to change again. Time will be shredded. And the infection rate for the coronavirus continues to surge. I don't know how to write in such a way that when someone reads this, later, weeks or months after I've written it, I will have left enough space for the unknown to tear everything I've said apart but will have left me and you with some semblance of form and experience. That I did live what I lived and read what I read. People did erupt from their shelters, their containers (the pressure of those walls meant to keep us safe yet simultaneously driving us to depression, listlessness, deep anxiety over resource and the future of resource); people did swarm, did put on their masks and braved, said fuck it, said fuck you, changed time, made a moment we could all feel. But the whole time this was happening, you were worried about the virus and worried that after protesting people would just stay outside, forgetting they had breached their confines for a

reason. We no more wanted to live with the virus than we did with violence against black bodies. I didn't want reminding. I never wanted to get used to it.

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Renee Gladman has published eleven works of prose and poetry, most recently a brief detective novel *Morelia*, and two books of drawings, *Prose Architectures* (Wave Books, 2017) and *One Long Black Sentence* (forthcoming 2020, Image Text Ithaca press). Recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, she makes her home in southern New England with poet-ceremonialist and herbalist Danielle Vogel.

Ho Rui An

Technocratic Magic in the Contagion Economy

Something extraordinary happened in Singapore in March this year as the country fought against a new surge of Covid-19 infections. In the middle of a speech addressed to the parliament, Lawrence Wong, the minister cochairing the taskforce responding to the outbreak, began weeping. His emotions had taken over as he paid tribute to essential workers, and he paused to collect himself. After two minutes, the minister continued, his voice still trembling, by acknowledging the growing fear and anxiety that Singaporeans were facing. In speaking about fear and anxiety while showing the very same fear and anxiety, speech in that moment became a mimicry of that which was spoken. In a country where leaders are known for having the emotional range of an instruction manual, such an oral performance was remarkable. Indeed, it can be said that politicians in Singapore do not speak as much as they communicate. The less oratorical flair, the less speechifying, the clearer the message.

In the early days of this second wave of infections, coming mostly from returnees from Europe as that continent became the new epicenter of the pandemic, the calm and unaffected manner with which the taskforce representatives provided their periodic updates comforted residents rattled by the prospect of community spread. Social media gushed over the soothing effect the minister's briefings had on their nerves, with some going as far as to nominate his voice as their desired pandemic soundtrack, something they claimed they could listen to all day. Suddenly, the technocrat's stylistic deficit became desirable, even sexy. It was not uncommon to hear foreigners in Singapore wondering aloud if the government could export its hard-nosed, nonhysterical crisis management to other governments clearly in need of more levelheadedness.

Populist demagogues have most often been held up as the inverse image of technocrats. While the former thrive on immediacy, whether through the fantasy that the virus will, like a miracle, disappear overnight, or through the ability to speak extemporaneously without the filter of propriety or scientific reason, the latter make it their task to emphasize the limits of their representational role. Even as technocrats address the people in real time and present models charting the progress of the spread, they take every opportunity to stress that models can only tell us so much.

While much has been said about how the macho tough talk of populist demagogues from Trump to Bolsonaro to Duterte is built on the rejection of science or even reality itself, it is more specifically this representational logic of contingency-based decision-making that such

Lawrence Wong, the minister cochairing the multi-ministry taskforce on Covid-19 in Singapore, tears up midway through his speech. Source https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wHDTY55_8I.

figures disdain. Rather than persist in the tasks of observation and representation, they short-circuit them by the sheer force of their personality. The populist demagogue does not need to read the figures as *he is the figure*. He can only react by declaring, as Duterte did in February, that he had been looking for the coronavirus, because he wanted "to slap the idiot."[1] Even when they are finally moved to act, such leaders make it a point to ensure that every measure undertaken by the state is experienced as an extension of their presence, as Trump did when he printed his signature on the stimulus checks doled out to Americans. Any handout must be construed by the people as a personal gift from an exceptional figure to be repaid by their votes in a time to come.[2]

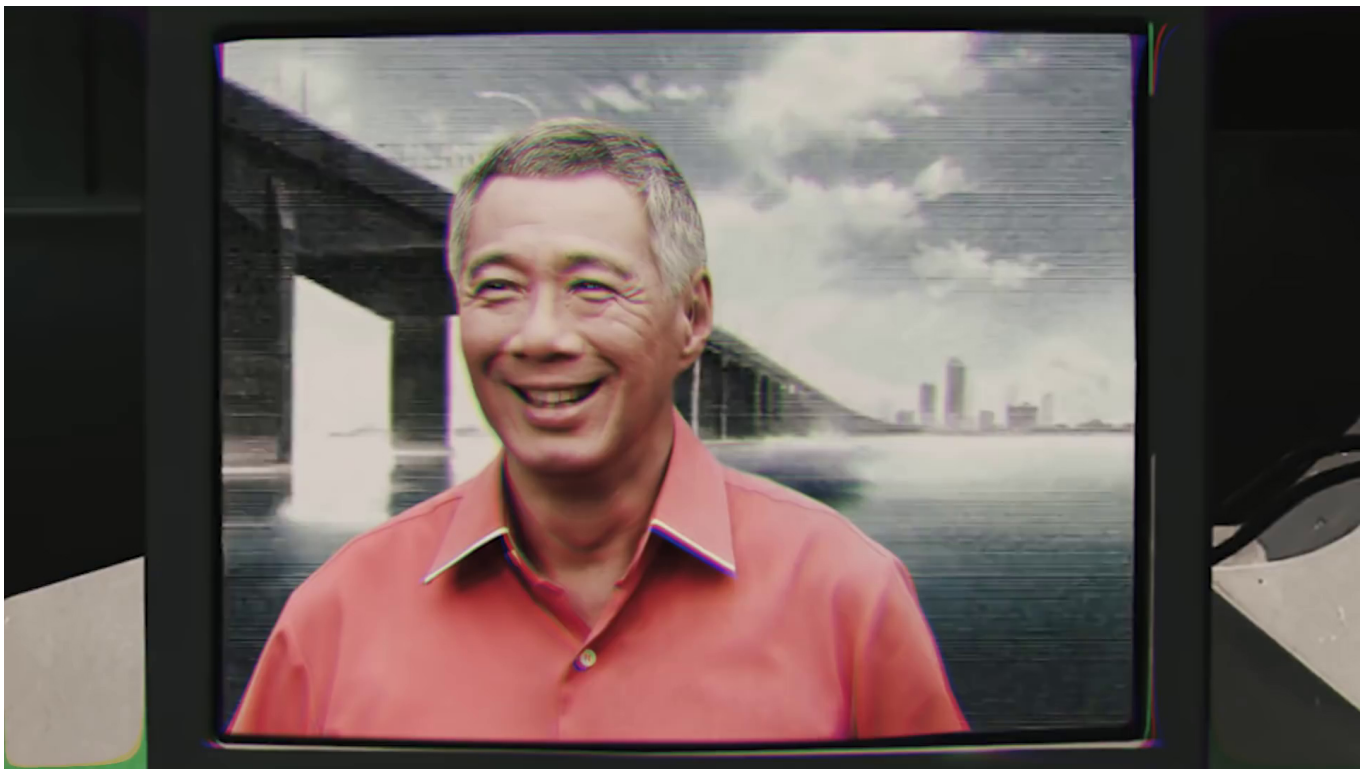
Furthermore, the technocrat exemplifies everything the populist demagogue resents about the state. This is not because the technocrat embodies the state in any figural sense, but quite the opposite: they *literally* perform the state by refusing the body. Often mocked for sounding like they are reading off a script, technocrats model their orality after the written. This is insofar as writing is the precondition of administration: it replaces the singularity of face-to-face encounters with their inscription as files, translating the particular into the general.[3] So even when the technocrat turns to the oral, speech is to be received not as an effect of the live body but as a transmission of the written.

This logic is anathema to the populist demagogue who not only seeks to inflate his live presence, but also perceives the state to be a moribund body constraining the awesome power of his own body.[4] In the case of Trump, his rambling, incendiary, and sometimes inchoate speech in itself expresses a contempt for institutions that extends to the foundational institution that is language itself.[5] If populism of the republican variety is contingent upon the monumentalization of the Rosseauian Great Legislator as the incarnation of the law, on the basis of which the "general will" of the people is enunciated through a singular body, the populist demagogue appropriates the monument as a stage for an always ongoing performance of pure expressivity. His centripetal force does not project the "timeless and statuesque" presence that Rafael Sánchez observes in the Bolivarian monument, but enacts the rambunctious call-and-response of the political rally.[6] He demands not the passive contemplation of the immobilized masses but their horizontal remobilization along new and reactivated tribal lines. He unleashes the technocrat's ultimate nightmare: the unruly crowds.

This specter of the unruly crowds has haunted the technocratic imaginary of Singapore since its successful late-sixties industrialization. Ever so often, images of the strikes and riots that defined the "turbulent fifties and early sixties" are broadcast on television to remind us not to take our current peace and stability for granted.[7] Amidst a pandemic, unruly crowds are not just an index of social disorder, but a public health hazard. Given this, the last thing the technocrat wishes to cause is panic, not least the kind of panic that leads to crowds pouring into the grocery store. In fact, before the outbreak took a severe turn in early April, it's telling that what the technocrat communicated to the people was not immediacy, but constraint. Don't run out to buy your groceries now. Don't hoard toilet paper. Don't wear a mask out unless you are ill. It is as if the technocrat, in speaking, fears the response they might elicit from the people. For all their anti-monumentality, they remain wary of the centripetal tendency of their presence, so much so that they might very well desire the complete recession of their figure into the background, leaving their words in the air to be passively absorbed without any theatricalized moment of disclosure.

Instantiating this impossible desire is a video of a recent speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remixed with lo-fi beats, riffing off the genre of infinitely looped videos set to relaxing, slightly scratchy downtempo music that have gained popularity online in the last two years. Released by a local digital media company just as tensions on the ground began simmering, it expresses the technocratic dream of nonfiguration as a dissolution into ambience. Words are spoken and heard, albeit in a manner that demands little response or even attentiveness from the listener. Everything, as we were told, is under control.

But then came the tears of the technocrat. Appearing in the middle of his speech, they mark a communicative breach. It is a breach that results from the failure to constrain oneself – not as catastrophic as a cough that would cause the nation to collectively skip a heartbeat, but a failure of the technocratic will no less. With the knowledge of what was to come in the following weeks, this irruptive return of the body now appears prophetic. Indeed, if the recognition and performance of constraint are internal to technocracy, these capacities would be tested not just by the worsening of the outbreak but also by its ramifications upon the center of the technocratic imaginary: the economy. Such a predicament demands a turn to immediacy, if only to secure the spatial coherence of the economy as such. One might call it technocratic magic.



Speech by prime minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong remixed with lo-fi beats. Source https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FbCtAhXx6I.

A Group of Men Sitting in Little Rooms

The first case of Covid-19 in Singapore was confirmed on January 23. Over the next few weeks, more cases were reported to the point where, for a brief period, Singapore had the highest number of confirmed infections of any country outside of China. But through strict quarantine enforcement and rigorous testing and contact tracing, the country kept the total number of confirmed infections low. International plaudits poured in, praising the Singapore's response as the "gold standard."[8] By March, as the pandemic became global and countries across the world went into lockdown, the city-state still saw public gatherings of up to 250 people, before the permitted limit was gradually revised downwards as more infections were confirmed. Calls from nervous members of the public for a lockdown were met with indifference from the taskforce, with Wong explaining that there was "no such magic solution."[9] However, as the number of unlinked cases continued to rise, the government eventually announced a set of "circuit breaking" measures that included closing schools and nonessential workplaces for a full month.

The use of the electrical metaphor allowed the government to avoid calling by name what was, for all intents and purposes, a partial lockdown. When asked whether the country was going into lockdown, Wong walked back on his earlier remarks by questioning not the efficacy of a lockdown but that of the term "lockdown" itself. He suggested that the term "means different things to different people" and that the focus should be on the specific measures being introduced.[10] But for all the taskforce's command of the discourse of complexity, they appeared insouciant to an alarming trend that the available data then already made visible: a large proportion of daily confirmed cases were migrant workers on short-term work permits. Over the next few weeks, as numbers spiked to a daily high of 1426 cases, it became clear that massive outbreaks were happening in the cramped and sometimes unsanitary dormitories where over three hundred thousand low-wage migrant workers were housed. Affected dormitories across the island were declared isolation areas, while the circuit breaker was extended for another month.

Across the world, the pandemic has tested not only healthcare systems but also public perception of their governments. Eager commentators have even held up the epidemiological data of each country as a score sheet attesting to the relative effectiveness of political systems hastily clustered along the liberal–authoritarian divide. While apologists for authoritarian regimes have interpreted the data as a vindication of the coercive power of the state, liberals read the same data as underscoring the importance of openness and transparency. This is despite the fact that countries that have successfully contained the virus have adopted measures that do not fall squarely on any one side of this divide.[11] Nonetheless, in Singapore, critics of the government did not hesitate to take up the terms of this debate when challenging its initial gradualist approach by questioning how a state equipped with an arsenal of legislative tools to whip its citizens into compliance proved so meek in the face of a real public emergency.[12] One could almost smell the critics' disappointment that we couldn't even do authoritarianism right.

At the same time, pandemic responses are never politically neutral, even in times when it appears like political partisanship has been suspended for "doing what works." It is unfortunate then that the dominant assessment of Singapore's recent setback is that it had simply "dropped the ball."[13] For all its critical posture, such a view is an indictment less of Singapore's technocratic approach in itself than of the technocrats whose decisions or lapses resulted in the country failing to live up to the promise of its own model. As it turns out, Singapore isn't technocratic *enough*.

But what defines the technocratic approach to governance? Together, narratives of the ascent of the technocratic class broadly describe how in developmental states across the world in the late seventies and eighties, elite cohorts of mostly Western-trained policymakers were catapulted into positions of power on the basis of their purported ability to set aside narrow ideological and political interests in favor of rational calculation and technical expertise in resolving economic deadlocks.[14] Yet, what exactly is set aside and what is construed as "rational" and "technical" in each context is highly variable.

One common tendency conflates technocracy with free-marketization – not inaccurate insofar as many technocrats of that time were indeed advocates of market liberalization. However, this conflation cannot fully account for the technocratic reply to the late-capitalist turn, not least the dramatic Keynesian responses to the pandemic we've been seeing and that will only continue in the years to come. It follows that to understand technocratic governance in Singapore and what it might mean beyond the city-state, we should approach it historically, beginning with this especially vivid picture provided by Lee Kuan Yew himself in praising the accomplishments of his government:

> All these things happen only because there is a hard framework which holds the whole thing together. There is a group of men sitting in little rooms, planning, thinking, analysing, watching figures, watching trends. And, all the time, we are two, three steps ahead of the problem. And the problems are becoming more and more manageable.[15]

Excerpted from a speech in 1966, a year after Singapore became an independent republic upon its unceremonious expulsion from Malaysia, these words recently made the rounds online as netizens criticized the lack of foresight demonstrated by the current leadership in their handling of the outbreak.[16] In his time, Lee estimated this "group of men" (and they were almost exclusively male) to number no more than 150, making up a "very thin crust of leadership" that had to be greatly expanded to avert societal collapse.[17] But just as important as the existence of these men were the "little rooms" they sat in. The significance of this spatial organization becomes clear later in the same speech when the prime minister directly addresses the audience: "When I first came here nearly three-and-a-half years ago, you were unable to articulate yourself. It was amorphous, inchoate, unorganised, disorganised ... The society must organise itself. And to do that, you must understand that this is yours. This microphone is yours."[18]

In speaking of the masses as "amorphous, inchoate, unorganised, disorganised," Lee was recalling the numerous strikes and riots that broke out along political and communal lines in the years leading up to the country's independence. This changed after the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), led by Lee, outmaneuvered their left-wing opponents by imprisoning or forcing them into exile along with communists and their sympathizers, leaving the PAP with a virtual monopoly on power to secure the transition of the spatially unbounded crowds into the "tough, rugged society" of the postindependence years.[19] But despite the prime minister's call for discipline and self-reliance, this society still required a "hard framework" to hold it together. Having the microphone to oneself means not self-articulation but submitting one's voice to the representational apparatus of the state that culminates in the little rooms where a group of men sit isolated from the masses.

This separation of the group of men from the masses is not instrumental but structural. This is because the government understood the danger posed by the masses to be their tendency to succumb to the fantasies of immediacy that were exemplified, in their view, by the strategies of mass action pursued by their left-wing adversaries and former allies. In their estimation, while both parties shared a broadly socialist, anti-imperial agenda, the left-wing penetration of trade unions and other mass organizations to incite direct action (that sometimes spilled into violence) made it more difficult to resolve the main problem of mass unemployment created by the British colonial administration, for the instability that resulted from such actions discouraged investment.

This logic is explicated in the book *Socialism that Works ... the Singapore Way*, published in 1976 to refute the allegations of "totalitarian policies and methods" made by member parties of the Socialist International against the PAP, which eventually led to its resignation from the organization.[20] In an essay, then–deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee explicitly positions his "socialist economy that works" against the "magic" of his "communist" counterparts. The latter's skill in manipulating mass organizations, he recounts, relegated Goh and his moderate colleagues to being mere "apprentices to the magician" whose "virtuosic performances" never failed to draw "thunderous rounds of applause" from the masses.[21] In those days, Goh recognized the infectious power of the crowds but also believed that in order for the government to operate, it was essential that the unsalaried masses first be decisively contained. This was eventually achieved by the government through two related strategies: first, the herding of the masses into high-modernist public housing provided on the condition of one's participation in the wage economy; second, an unflinching crackdown on the labor movement in the name of its "enlightened long-term self-interest."[22]

It might take a leap of imagination to speculate on the continuities between Goh's invocation of communist magic and Wong's dismissal of lockdown magic. For one, a population in lockdown is exactly the opposite of the unruly crowds that so haunt the technocratic imaginary. But a close reading of Wong's comments reveals that underwriting his discourse is a figuration of the economy not dissimilar to that which informed Goh's calculations. This is not the economy that is casually spoken of these days as that which needs to be "traded off" for public health amidst the pandemic, but the economy conceived as a complex whole with moveable and interdependent parts that cannot be shut down with a single lever. That essential services and key supply chains will have to maintain operations even in a lockdown means that parts of the economy will always remain open, and

Composite of the hand gestures of the then–deputy prime minister of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, during an election rally speech in 2015. Source https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrcRB3C72rk.

these parts influence other parts. A lockdown of any magnitude would therefore not be a single gesture but would involve numerous policy decisions across all parts of the whole.[23]

To this end, the fantasy of the magical lockdown shares the same premise as herd immunity in that they both turn the task of resolving the crisis over to the laws of nature within a given set of spatial parameters. Hunkering down or heading out, let the virus solve itself! In reducing the role of the state to deciding whether or not to lock down, these fantasies further mirror an ontology of the free market wherein the apparent recession of the state serves as a premise for assuming that rules actively shaped by a whole array of government interventions occur naturally. Perhaps, then, it's better to trust the men in their little rooms.

Except that Singapore did eventually go into partial lockdown, even if by another name. In a sign that this shift is more substantive than formal, the men are leaving their little rooms to join the masses. Ministers have taken it upon themselves to patrol public spaces. The technocrat's discourse has taken on an actual liveness as Facebook livestreams supplement staid press conferences. Meanwhile, enforcement officers are issuing fines to those defying social-distancing rules. For residents keen on joining the effort, they can report their neighbors using a government-produced app.[24] No longer are the technocrats and the people constrained from directly contacting each other; every demand for immediacy must be met.

The only problem is that technocrats strain when they resort to immediacy. They are seen as plugging holes after having lost the plot. Given this, every extension of immediacy demands an equivalent effort in stepping back from the masses to reexamine the situation as a whole from their little rooms. This pertains not just to the current public health crisis, but also, more crucially, to the economic crisis that is already unfolding. But in the face of the pressure to respond immediately to an uncertainty that no amount of modelling can make calculable, this aspiration to totality can only begin by first redrawing the borders.

In the Short Run We Are All Keynesians

The formidable size of Singapore's reserves has loomed over every discussion of the economy since the country entered an era of slow growth in the second half of the 2010s. The exact figure has never been disclosed, but what is known reveals a staggering sum in excess of US$600 billion. Initially derived from budget surpluses and the private savings of every wage earner through a compulsory savings scheme, the reserves have ballooned in the past two decades through the investment activities of the country's sovereign wealth funds, namely Temasek Holdings and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), which have themselves become major players in global capital markets.[25] Guided by the inviolable principle of fiscal prudence, existing rules stipulate that the current government can use no more than half of the expected investment returns from the country's reserves, and while it can draw on past reserves for emergency budgets, subject to the president's approval, this option was never exercised until 2009.

As the disparity widens between the country's ever-expanding reserves and the stagnant wages of its lower-income groups, discontent has mounted over the government's intransigence over the reserves. Despite this, each election year, propositions made by opposition parties for drawing upon past reserves to expand social spending have only become fodder for the ruling party to rehearse its nightmare scenario of a rogue government depleting the national coffers within a single election cycle. In the 2015 general election, proposals to give direct cash assistance to segments of the population gained so much traction that then–deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam came out to rebuff their shaky economic premises. While defending the current levels of government spending, he explained that monies in the reserves were invested long-term and exposed to significant risk in order to earn higher returns. Every draw on the reserves today thus sacrifices future gains.[26]

Tharman's compelling speeches were widely shared on social media – a sign of the level of popular support for the ruling party, which has never lost an election since the country's independence. But more remarkable than the rare display of technocratic charisma was how the speaker was, throughout his speeches, effectively performing the distributional logic behind the policy decisions he has made. As he spoke about how any government in the world can only give with one hand by taking with other hand, the miming of his speech by the movement of his highly visible hands made for most uncanny viewing, enchanting even as it appeared to confirm a most profane reality: the "invisible hand" of the free market had lost its magic. No longer can we wait for the market to miraculously correct itself and deliver the social optimum. Instead, cue the technocrat who can tell us all about the economy.

But what *is* "the economy" really? The responses given by the technocrats so far evoke something like the sum total of all the monetary exchanges within a defined space carried out in the manner of Tharman's hand movements. But

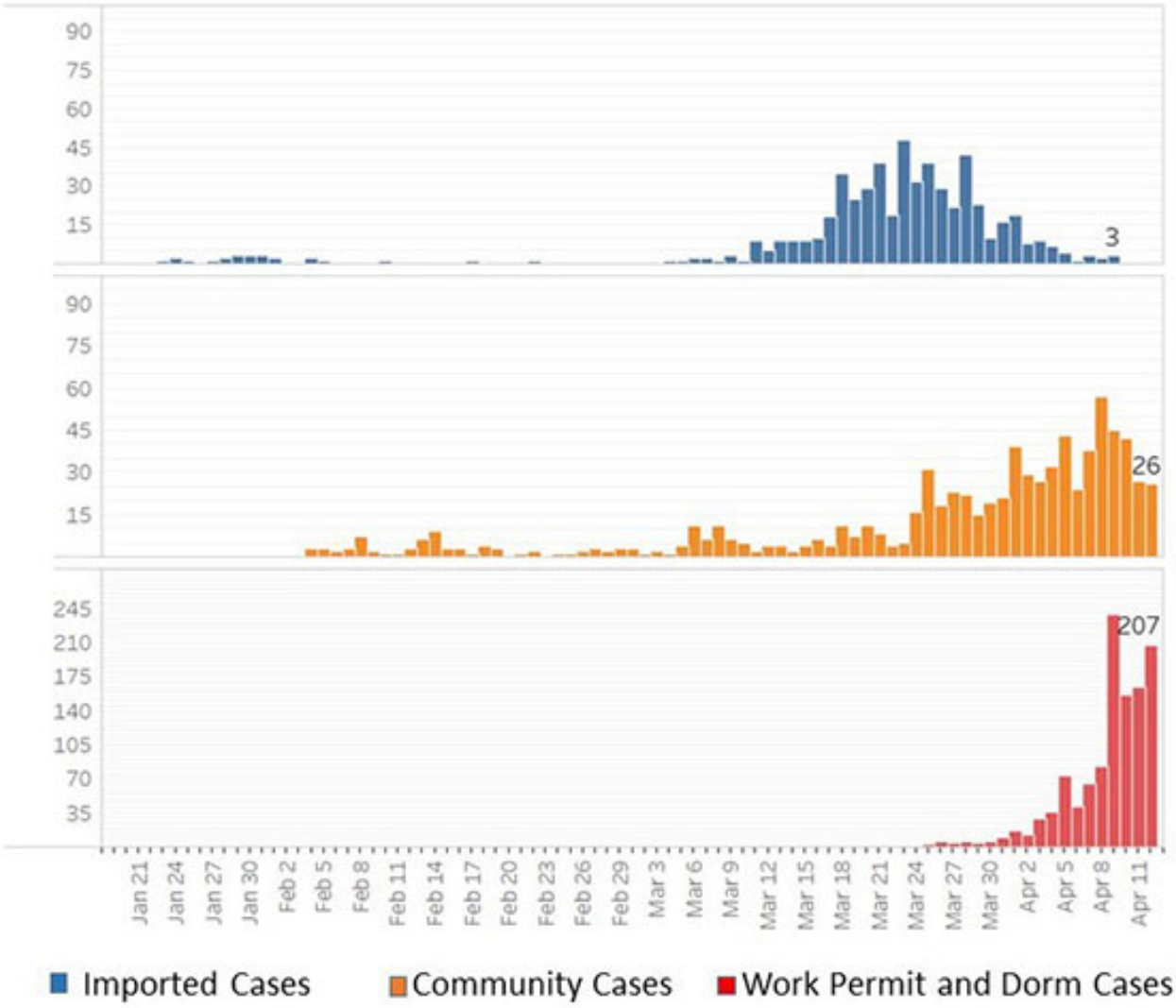
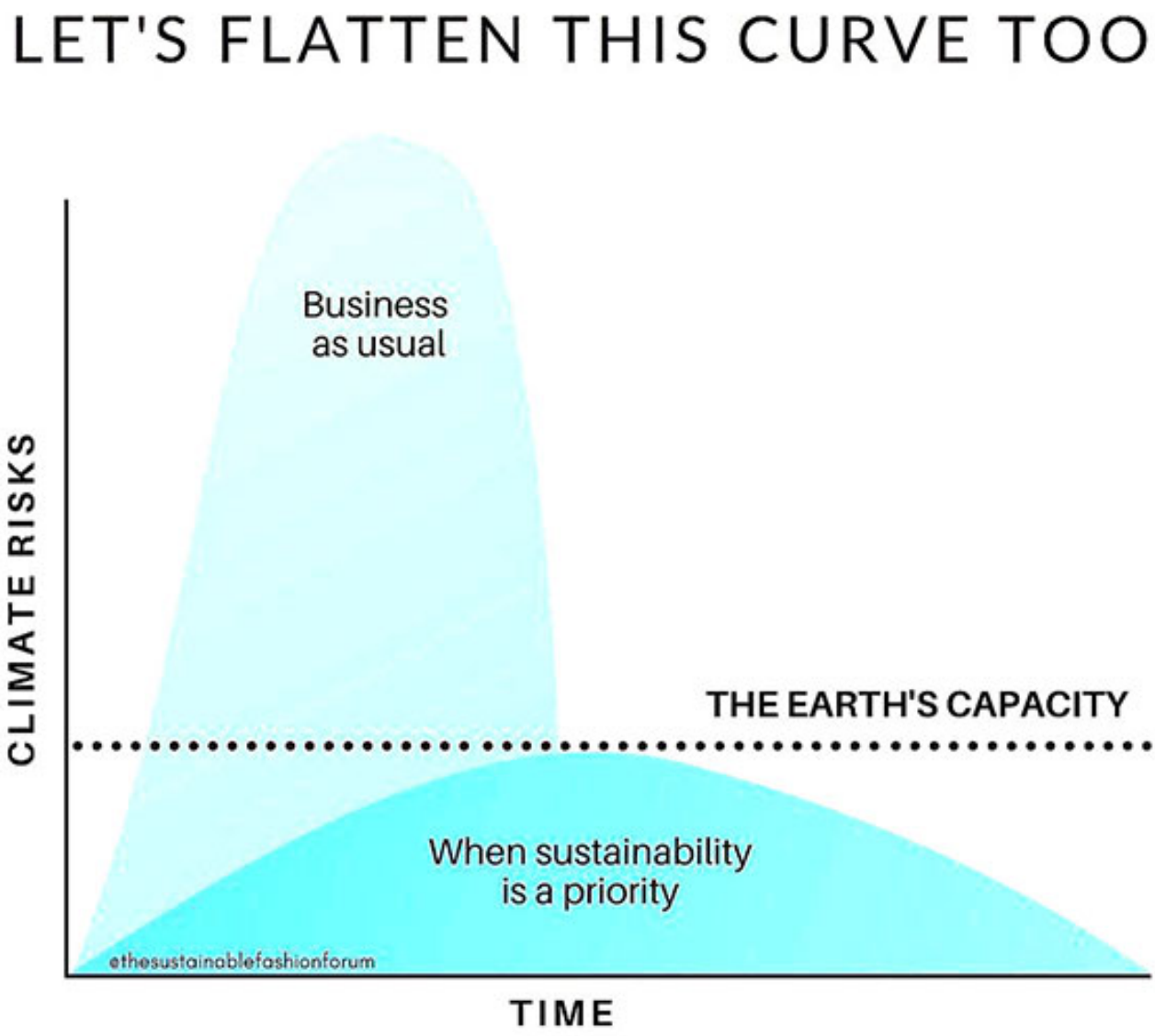


Diagram shared by Wong on Facebook separating infection cases into three epidemiological charts.



A play on the original “flatten the curve” graph calling for mitigation measures to slow down the spread of SARS-CoV-2.

as intuitive as this provisional sketch might seem, the concept of the economy as a distinct, self-contained, and internally dynamic social sphere is a relatively recent invention. In the genealogy drawn by Timothy Mitchell, the emergence of this concept can be situated between the 1930s and '40s amidst the turbulent events of the period that included the Great Depression and the collapse of the international financial system.[27] Pivotal to this moment was John Maynard Keynes, whose writings focusing on economic aggregates at a national level marked a clear departure from the spatially unbounded, laissez-faire imaginary of the neoclassical tradition. In the decades that followed the so-called Keynesian revolution, the prescriptions made by Keynes in response to the economic malaise of his time – most famously, deficit spending in a recession – would wax and wane, yet this concept of the economy that was understood by default as a national space has remained to this present day. Furthermore, crucial to understanding this space is grasping the relationship between geography and demography. This demands setting the boundaries of the space and rendering its constituent elements calculable, from which numbers are produced that allow us to refer to the economy as a "finite and mappable" object.[28]

While Singapore's economy is often understood through its population density – small space, many people – the relatively unrestricted movement of goods, labor, and capital that keeps this wealthy city-state running presents a test to this figuration. Technocrats who conduct the mapping and calculation of the national economy in earnest are acutely aware of the country's vulnerability to external shocks that would undo all efforts at apprehending the economy as an enclosed totality. It is on this basis that the country's vast reserves are construed as a hedge against the failure of the map, allowing the restructuring of uncertainty as risk to be redistributed so as to ensure the long-term survival of the nation-state. By this token, risk sustains the technocrats' aspiration to totality while allowing them to reckon with the gap internal to their representational task. But what exactly is the most equitable way of redistributing risk remains contentious. While the government flatly rejects using past reserves to finance a broader social safety net on the grounds that it exposes future generations to higher risks, critics contend that it is inherently regressive to transfer the surplus generated by poorer earlier generations to future generations expected to be better off.[29]

When the unprecedented step of dipping into the reserves was eventually taken in 2009 amidst the Great Recession, it was not because the government decided that the risks of not doing so would be too much to bear or that it had revised its calculus for risk allocation, but because it was facing an uncertainty that could not be rendered calculable as risk.[30] There's nothing like the dread and gloom of a global recession to confirm the Keynesian witticism that in the long run, we are all dead. These words have never resonated more in a time where the future is so uncertain that the only rational choice is to act now to save the present instead of hedging for a future that might not even arrive.

Indeed, the economic wisdom of the day feels uncannily like a déja vu of the post-2008 Keynesian "return." In the shadow of the global meltdown of financial markets, a phalanx of self-identified New Keynesians across the world had come forth to make their case for a variety of stimulus policies. Many were validated when most countries that pursued expansionary budgets, including Singapore, which drew S$4.9 billion from its reserves, saw relatively quick recoveries. Today, the battering of economies across the world as a result of the pandemic has seen some of the same governments go into a Keynesian overdrive, approving emergency spending of historic proportions that include extensive wage subsidies and direct cash assistance for large segments of the population. Since February, the Singapore government has unveiled four budgets totaling S$92.9 billion that cover virtually every sector of the economy, with S$52 billion drawn from the reserves to finance the deficit. Suddenly, the government pathologically averse to unemployment insurance was disbursing unconditional handouts.

Detractors who see Singapore as governed by a Thatcherite neoliberal state might dismiss this as an exception, yet the reality is that even prior to the pandemic, the last decade has seen a marked expansion in social spending in the country that has funded everything from one-time packages to a compulsory health insurance scheme.[31] Some have read this as a sign of the party shifting left in response to electoral pressures, but it is more accurate to think of it as part of a broader technocratic turn to immediacy set in motion by the crisis of late capitalism that has found its culmination in the government's current response to the looming recession.[32] This turn is also, as blasphemous as it sounds, characteristically Keynesian. But to understand how a political establishment that has long defined itself against the so-called Keynesian welfare state might exemplify some of its key tendencies, we must first situate Keynesianism within a longer historical trajectory that accounts for the conditions specific to capitalist modernity.

In Geoff Mann's magisterial study of Keynesianism, this trajectory runs from Hegel to Piketty. As he argues, contemporary receptions of Keynesianism that run the gamut from progressive cheerleading ("Keynes is back") to conservative disdain ("magical thinking") to leftist cynicism ("save capitalism from itself") simplify what is, "at its core, a reluctantly radical but immanent critique of liberalism."[33] Keynesians recognize the presumption of scarcity that underlines neoclassical economics as a liberal capitalist creation, and that poverty therefore "has no proper place," but are afraid of the society that might come after capitalism.[34] Mann suggests that this is not because Keynesianism has any particular affinity for the distributional mechanisms of capitalism, but because its primary mission has always been the preservation of civilization that Keynesians can only trust bourgeois liberal society (and not the revolutionary masses) to deliver.[35]

To this end, Keynesians share the same fear of the spatially unbounded crowds as Singapore's technocrats. But if Singapore managed to contain the unruly crowds of its pre-independence years through a brutal crackdown on labor, such an "extra-economic" option is not available to Keynesians for it would not differ much from the barbarism that is civilization's other. Instead, Keynesians seek to defer the unruly crowds through the internal mechanisms of the economy itself, but doing so would first require a radical reconfiguration of economics for the "short run" where necessity – that something *must* be done – is the preeminent principle. Unlike Singapore's first-generation leaders who had the luxury of contemplating the long run of the economy, for Keynesians, it is only the short run that matters in the face of a future where civilization as we know it might not even exist anymore.

But to save civilization, as important as a turn to immediacy is the ability to grasp the whole that brackets it. This is where the "general" of Keynes's *General Theory*, along with the focus on national aggregates, comes in. However, even here, there is a divergence between the conventional understanding of the national economy as a wholly mappable space and how Keynes himself conceives of it, for Keynes believed that the human decisions that drive the economy are never made based on strict mathematical expectation to begin with.[36] Instead, the national economy here is a totality that is expressed, in the final analysis, in staunchly qualitative terms, as the "actually existing" capitalism driven by incalculable expectations that inevitably lead to suboptimal markets.[37] Where fascism seeks to overcome this by conflating the economy with a transhistorical national essence, Keynesianism does so by addressing the needs upon which the short-run legitimacy of the system is staked. It is pointless, indeed dangerous, for governments to speculate on what's "natural" for the market or the nation; instead, they should concern themselves only with what Mann calls the "appropriate organization of legitimation": What is the acceptable level of unemployment, poverty, and inequality and how can that level be made acceptable?[38]

This concern is precisely articulated by Tharman in his rally speech when he asked pointedly: "Who pays and who benefits? Is it fair?" Debunking calls for more social spending, the technocrat followed a line of argument that can only be described as classically Keynesian, first naming the crisis (poverty and inequality), then explaining what has already been done (increased expenditure), and finally legitimizing his decisions on the basis of what Keynes describes as "the kind of economy in which we actually live."[39] The adjacency of the two questions posed reveals that fairness here is based not on a principle of universal access to basic services, but on the legitimation of suffering endogenous to the capitalist system. A fair system, in this sense, is not one that seeks to eradicate absolute poverty but one where the poor should be content to give only a fraction in taxes of what they are taking from the state in subsidies. Even if in the years to come the government did inch closer to the Keynesian welfare state it so despises, welfare here has to be understood in the (properly) Keynesian sense: as a means to an end that is the preservation of the totality as it is.[40]

It is against this context that we should understand the Keynesian interventions now being implemented across the world as a response to not simply the "external" shock of SARS-CoV-2 but also the astounding levels of inequality and precarization of labor internal to capitalism that the virus has exposed and exacerbated. If pandemics once served as referents for metaphors of contagion during financial crises, it seems that today referent and metaphor have swapped places. But the pandemic is also more than just an allegory of late capitalism; it is its symptomatology. It reveals that no analysis of inter-temporal risk redistribution can legitimize the continued denial of the social surplus to the poor whose suffering in the coming recession, if left unchecked, would threaten a second contagion – this time of the unruly crowds. This is what pushes the technocratic imaginary from a distanced contemplation of the economy (rendered calculable by supplementing mapping with risk allocation) to immediately acting upon the same

economy now conceived as a qualitatively defined whole whose "welfare" has to be secured at all costs to avert catastrophe. Yet to the extent that this whole remains finite and bounded by the spatial constraint of the nation-state, it cannot account for that which falls outside of it. At this limit, the technocratic imaginary unravels.

Contagion in the House

The first cluster of infections in a migrant worker dormitory in Singapore was identified on March 30. More clusters were announced as Singapore entered its circuit breaker a week later. By the end of the month, the total number of confirmed cases had increased to 16,169. As it stands today, nine out of ten cases are migrant workers living in a dormitory. For years, migrant rights groups have called attention to the overcrowded and unclean conditions of the many dormitories that house the majority of low-wage migrant workers on short-term work permits coming mostly from Bangladesh, India, and China and concentrated in the construction, marine shipyard, and process industries. Government regulations permit as many as twenty men within a room no larger than the size of half a tennis court, while facilities like toilets and kitchens are usually shared. Recognizing the public health hazard this posed amidst a pandemic, activists had urged immediate action to improve standards as early as February, but it was only when infection numbers ballooned at the largest dormitory complexes that the authorities were moved to act. Several dormitories were placed on complete lockdown while healthy workers in essential sectors were quickly relocated.

As the number of confirmed cases continued to escalate two weeks into the circuit breaker, it became clear that there were two separate outbreaks: one happening in the now ring-fenced dormitories where daily increases showed no sign of slowing down, and the other, outside of it, where new cases were heading towards the low double digits. The distinction was so apparent that by mid-April the Ministry of Health was releasing separate epidemiological charts for "Work Permit and Dorm Cases" and "Community Cases."[41] This made for two markedly different lockdown experiences depending on how one is circumscribed by the state. While numbers pertaining to the situation in the dormitories filled the news as the workers underwent mass testing and relocation, citizens were filing applications for the many schemes provided by the four budgets under the names Unity, Resilience, Solidarity, and Fortitude. By May, the government's infectious diseases consultant was already telling Singaporeans that the chance of getting infected outside was literally one in a million – less a numerical expression than an index of how successfully the community has securitized itself.[42] In effect, the two outbreaks created two separate communities: one conceived to be divisible into smaller, moveable units to better manage the redistribution of risk, the other imagined in immunological terms as a precarious but unified whole whose health had to be maintained by the pharmaceutical power of the Keynesian state.

This spatial doubling has always been foundational to the Keynesian project. As Angela Mitropoulos points out, postwar Keynesianism was a domiciliation of the national economy in the image of the normative household, transferring onto the state the domestic (and thus apparently pre-political) organization of the necessities of life.[43] Indeed, public health in the sense of what Hannah Arendt calls "a gigantic, nationwide administration of housekeeping" is literally unimaginable without this Keynesian legacy.[44] But just as the household or *oikos*, to use the classical Greek term that denotes not family but the hierarchical management of the individuals residing within the home, depended on the subjugation of domestic labor, the public debt of the Keynesian welfare state was underwritten by extraction in the colonies, the disenfranchisement of its own racialized minorities, and the precarization of migrant labor.[45] These populations at the periphery of the national body were subjected to a separate spatial imaginary: one that turned them into exchangeable and expendable units onto which all the risks of partaking in "magical" Keynesian economics could be reallocated.

In the case of Singapore, its established preference for drawing upon its reserves over borrowing ostensibly strips the magic from the immediacy of its Keynesian interventions. Yet each time the announcement is made to dip into our reserves, there is no denying the awe that accompanies this self-presencing of that which is literally unfathomable in its totality. While the common perception is that the size of our reserves is owed to the productivity of earlier generations during the eighties and nineties economic boom, there is little scrutiny over how the monies invested as capital parthenogenetically reproduces itself, as Marx would put it.[46] For one, the success of Temasek Holdings is often simply credited to its willingness to take high risks that sometimes pays off in handsome returns.[47] In a sign that technocracy has become its other, such feats of conjuring have bedazzled neighboring countries enough for them to consider setting up their own Temaseks.[48]

Surely, this technocratic magic is in part sustained by the secrecy around the company's investment activities, yet one does not require

corporate disclosure to recognize a profane reality behind the figures. I'm referring to the availability not only of cheap labor both domestically in the migrant workforce and within the wider Asian region where the company has invested heavily, but also of entire "surplussed" populations left at the disposal of a global capital market that thrives on volatility and who are thus most exposed to any fallout resulting from speculative maneuvers. As Neferti X. M. Tadiar suggests, these populations effectively function as "monetized aggregates of disposable life" that not only can be made readily available or redundant in response to the movements of capital, but also offered as "risk-absorbing collateral" through cuts in social spending resulting from corporate bailouts or buy-ups of essential industries to meet the immediate interests of the investment class.[49] When Singaporeans were told that migrant workers kept in lockdown were protecting us, what was thus expressed was really the structural reality of a triple-A economy guaranteed by placing the futures of entire populations on reserve.[50]

If prevailing imaginaries of financial contagion have been predicated on concepts of adaptation, mobility, and diffusion derived from molecular biology, the pandemic exposes how such imaginaries in fact require the naturalization of the nation-state boundary through the idiom of epidemiology.[51] The ability of the state to immobilize its entire population that we see today is the corporeal expression of its ability to "freeze" private assets in the short or long term to combat capital outflows during crises. While in some countries this means imposing capital controls often criticized as draconian, the long-standing "lockdown" of private savings in its reserves for them to "self-multiply" through the "surplussing" of entire populations means that Singapore can at once securitize itself while retaining full capital mobility amidst a contagion.

Perhaps, then, one might say it's fortunate that migrant workers in Singapore are in lockdown insofar as it finally allows them to share in the benefits of this securitization. Most have never had a better social safety net than what they are now experiencing: salaries paid, meals provided, free medical care. In the face of public outrage, the government has further promised a thorough review of the current system and already, alarming statistics show almost half of purpose-built dormitory operators flouting licensing conditions.[52] Such disclosures have allowed the government to couch their response to the situation in a discourse of transparency through which they openly reckon with an actually existing capitalism. Tightened regulation and increased inspection have been suggested to regain the government's oversight of the industry, but this can only be magical thinking in the face of a lucrative, race-to-the-bottom industry where the direct consumers – the workers themselves – have virtually no say over their accommodations, and where operators and the employers who decide where to house their workers consider every amenity denied to the worker an additional cost-saving.[53]

In fact, it only takes noting that the addressee of the technocrats' discourse is the middle-class voter to be wary of this turn to transparency. If disclosure, as Rosalind Morris writes, is a practice of intimacy that reconsolidates a social sphere through the sharing of previously occulted knowledge, the power of secrecy here has been secreted back into the discourse of transparency through the occlusion of class.[54] After all, the purpose-built mega-dormitories located on the urban fringe where the outbreak has been most severe were only constructed to quell the racialized anxieties expressed by the public over the perceived threat that housing migrant workers in their own neighborhoods posed to their personal safety and property values.[55] Put bluntly, the workers were already in quarantine before the lockdown, not just from the citizens of the city-state, but also from the social surplus generated from their labor, a surplus that has now been marginally extended to them as a show of the state's largesse.

The tragic irony is that with the end of the lockdown and the temporary amenities they now enjoy, the workers will find themselves more expendable than they were before. We are already seeing traction gained by proposals to shift the construction industry where most migrant workers are employed from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive model employing a much smaller but skilled and primarily local workforce.[56] Many other countries are on a similar path as the ongoing refetishization of the border has retracted both public health and economic policy into the spatial constraint of the nation-state, leaving surplussed populations stranded at the peripheries of a once teeming global market. In the short run, what is to come looks increasingly like a world split between countries that can sustain their Keynesian stimulations and spend their way out of the crisis and those that can only leave their citizens to fend for themselves and self-mobilize. For the worker, the difference is between retaining one's right to be exploited as labor through capitalist exchange, and being released into the "nonsubjectified" labor of merely persisting in a life held in abeyance as capitalism reinvents itself.[57]

But as we are already learning from the

pandemic, as much as the physical borders of the nation-state might stop the transmission of the virus, they cannot deter the spread of fear, anxiety, and rage in the contagion economy that might, for better or worse, catalyze the formation of crowds so feared by the technocratic imaginary. Signs of this are already present in the viral transmission of images showing how the rich and well-connected are passing their time in lockdown, their repose a luxury denied to those whose horizontal movements enable the continued provision of essential services while putting themselves at risk, and to those forced into vagrancy through their exclusion from the newly securitized nation-state. While such images once shaped the desire for admission into verticality in the hope of elevation, they now index the impossibility of translating a life of relentless horizontality into anything more than a view of the edifice from the ground.

Sadly, this is a view that the group of men in little rooms can never fathom. This is not a question of simply expanding the frame of the technocratic imaginary beyond the nation-state to encompass what we call the "global economy," for what needs to be addressed is the frame itself. Take, for instance, the recent reimaginings of the ongoing climate emergency that adapt the epidemiological logic of "flattening the curve" to the management of "climate risks" so that they are kept beneath the earth's "capacity." The problem here is that even if planetary computation would one day allow us to calculate the totality of the earth's resources and track it in real-time, the implication that we simply have to adjust our consumption patterns in accordance to some predetermined constraint continues to affirm the economy as the near-totalizing ground upon which today's difficult distributional decisions are made.

But to the extent that the virus has contested this totalization through its own powers of contagion, there is an opening for us to begin thinking what I can only call the post-economy. This demands nothing less than relinquishing the aspiration to totality that at once appropriates and disavows the living labor of life underwriting this very aspiration and thus renewing the task of representing capitalist relations so that it begins from the point of view of labor, and not of the thing we call "the economy."[58] The group of men in little rooms can only tell us so much. At best, we can hope for a disclosure of how far exactly we are from the brink of disaster, but not any indication of what might come after it. For now, soaking in the ambience of their words might inoculate us against the contagion in the air, but what it finally shelters us from is the possibility of a more just and livable world after the coming storm.

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I would like to thank Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần, Zian Chen, Kathleen Ditzig, Tan Biyun, Kenneth Tay, Brian Kuan Wood, and Vivian Ziherl for their comments that have helped to clarify my thinking for this essay.

Ho Rui An is an artist and writer working in the intersections of contemporary art, cinema, performance, and theory. Working primarily across the mediums of lecture, essay, and film, he probes into the shifting relations between image and power, focusing on the ways by which images are produced, circulate, and disappear within contexts of globalism and governance. He has presented projects at the Gwangju Biennale (2018), Jakarta Biennale (2017), Sharjah Biennial (2017), Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014), Haus de Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2017), Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, Manila (2017), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (2017), and Para Site, Hong Kong (2015). In 2018, he was a fellow of the DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm.

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This is also what fundamentally distinguishes populist demagoguery from the monumental governmentality of Latin American republicanism or the authoritarian populism some have identified with Thatcherism, both of which partake in the politics of the figure in order to enrich institutional power. That said, if there is an organ of the state that excites the populist demagogue, it is the police – not because the police instantiate the rule of law but because the physical act of policing provides the referent for the populist demagogue's claim to directly fix society's problems through his personal force. On the monumental governmentality of Latin American republicanism, see Rafael Sánchez, *Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism* (Fordham University Press, 2016). On authoritarian populism and Thatcherism, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Macmillan, 1978).

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10
Wong, "Speech at the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19 Press Conference," Singapore, April 3, 2020.

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The measures that proved the most decisive in Taiwan, one of the countries often brought up as an exemplar of the liberal-democratic approach, were early travel bans, strict quarantine policies, and consolidation of production lines for face masks – not exactly what you would find in the liberal playbook. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the relative transparency of public data compared to neighboring China has been crucial in allowing the country governed by a one-party state to emerge from their lockdown without any fatalities. See Hsien-Ming Lin, "Lessons from Taiwan's Coronavirus Response," *East Asia Forum*, April 2, 2020; and Minh Vu and Bich T. Tran, "The Secret to Vietnam's Covid-19 Response Success," *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2020.

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As poet and playwright Alfian Sa'at expressed in a pithy remark made on Facebook: "For things like 'pesky' activists, the government uses sledgehammers, but for things like an actual pandemic where actual lives are at risk, they're trying to use flyswatters."

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Goh Keng Swee, "A Socialist Economy that Works," in *Socialism That Works*, 78.

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Goh, "A Socialist Economy that Works," 83–4. For an account of how the state's public housing inscribed homeowners within the wage economy, see Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS Press, 2013).

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This also explains the government's choice of the circuit breaker metaphor. More recently, health minister Gan Kim Yong, in speaking of the phased reopening of the economy at the end of the circuit breaker, compared the process to how, with actual circuit breakers, we have to turn on the switches "slowly, one by one," in order to locate the source of the electrical fault. Gan Kim Yong, "Speech at the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19 Press Conference," Singapore, May 19, 2020.

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34
Mann, *In the Long Run*, 12.

35
As Mann argues, Keynesians understand the exceptionality of bourgeois liberal society through its historical relationship to revolution. He notes that the specific revolutionary history that produced bourgeois liberalism, namely the French Revolution, is one that allegorizes the potential destruction to civilization posed by revolution, especially when left in the hands of the masses. Insofar as preserving civilization is their primary task, Keynesians thus acknowledge and legitimize this history but seek "to render it unnecessary, to 'revolutionize' without revolution." It follows that only a bourgeois liberal society can sustain what is at once an immanent critique of liberalism *and* of revolution. See Mann, *In the Long Run*, 21–3, 85.

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Keynes, *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume VII: The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Royal Economic Society, 2013), 136.

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One of Temasek's most controversial acquisitions was its purchase in 2006 of Shin Corporation, owned by the family of then–prime minster of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra. Protests and demonstrations erupted after news broke that the sale was tax-exempt. In 2007, Temasek was ruled to have breached Indonesian anti-trust laws after acquiring a substantial share in Indosat, the country's second-largest telecommunications company. During the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States, GIC was heavily rewarded after it sold about half its holdings in Citigroup following a bailout agreement reached with the US government in 2009. On the fraught acquisitions of Shin Corporation and Indosat, see Beng Huat Chua, *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore* (NUS Press, 2017), 101. On GIC's investment in Citigroup, see Rick Carew et al., "Citi Bailout Also Bails Out Singapore Fund," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2009.

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57
Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability," 23.

58
As David Harvey, among others, has argued, the postmodern aversion towards representationalism on the assumption that it reconstitutes

totality is exactly what feeds into capitalism's totalization of social life. The task at hand is to understand capital not as a thing, but as a dynamic process of creative destruction, and one can only do so through a representational project that accounts for its internal relations without reducing them to a fixed totality. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell, 1989), 338–45.

Martha Rosler and Josh Neufeld

Food Riot? Food Riot!

I began writing The Art of Cooking *in the mid-1970s and periodically revisit the manuscript. A mock dialogue between Julia Child, the early television chef schooling Americans in how to produce haute cuisine at home, and then New York Times restaurant critic Craig Claiborne, it uses food and the construction of elevated taste ("art") to explore value and its relation to gender, class, race, and colonization. The present episode centers on access to food. Specifically, it takes on the people's right to affordable high-quality food – and the repeated effort to either get fair prices, with government support, from producers and middlemen or otherwise obtain and distribute food by other means, such as by seizing and allocating it via actions often called food riots, which are a recurring form of people's justice.*

Josh Neufeld and I have worked on this comic off and on for about a year, and its topicality and resonance have varied as we did so. In the run-up to publication, when hoarding and price gouging scarred the coronavirus pandemic response, the comic, as already written, seemed to pitch itself in one direction. But as we are about to go to press, with the comic still unchanged, a different question of justice is at stake: people's right to demand justice and equal treatment as well as equal access to social goods under the law in every aspect of life. No justice, no peace.

– martha rosler

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Photo sources and references:

Julia Child photo: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Craig Claiborne photo: adapted from the cover of Craig Claiborne's *A Memoir with Recipes: A Feast Made with Laughter*.

Page 5, panel 4: Charles S. Whitman, Governor of New York. From the George Grantham Bain collection at the Library of Congress.

Page 7, panel 2: Cover of the *International Socialist Review* (April 1917)

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Food Riot? FOOD RIOT!

A visualized excerpt from **"The Art of Cooking: a (mock) dialogue between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne"**

by **Martha Rosler** and **Josh Neufeld**

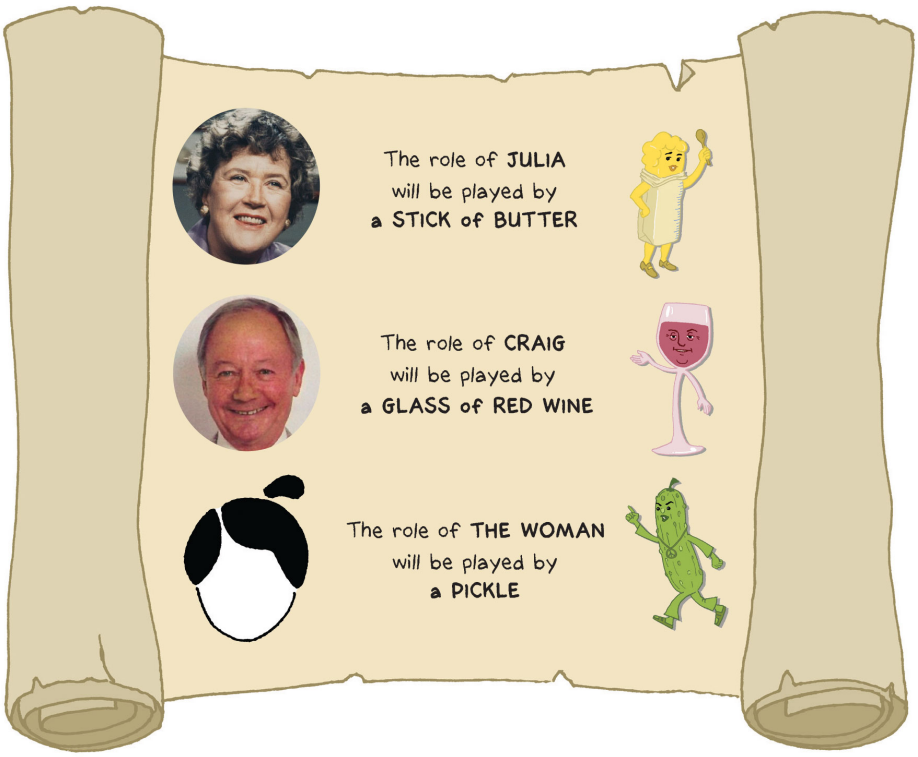
IT'S THE MID 1970S. The U.S. is in the midst of a food craze, with gourmet food, vegetarianism, macrobiotics, foreign foods, regional specialties, and whathaveyou occupying the public's attention. Everyone agrees that there is art in cooking, if only we could locate and learn it. **Julia Child** and **Craig Claiborne** have been meeting regularly to discuss a question that occupies them: If cooking is Art, what *is* the art of cooking?

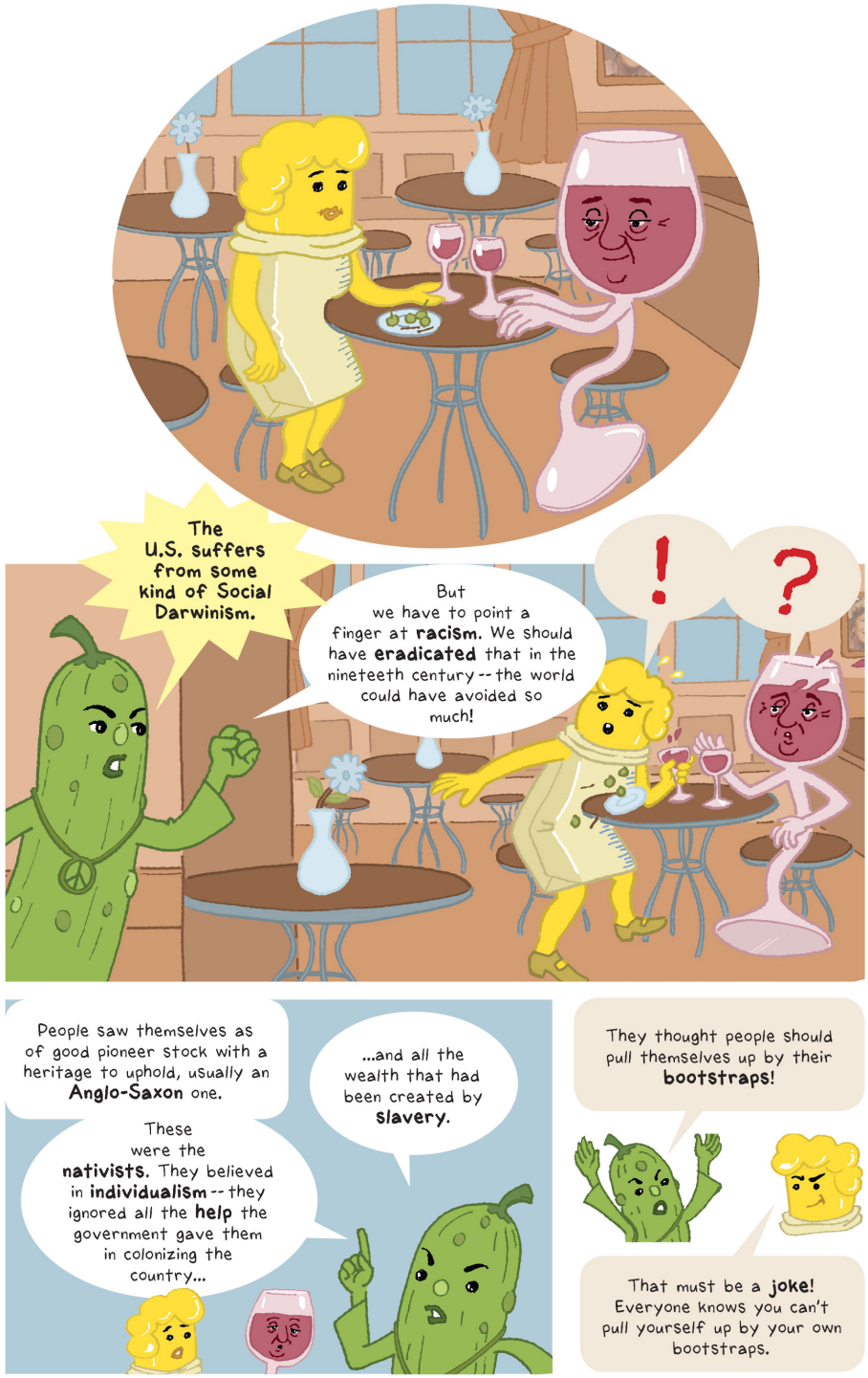
Their conversations occur on bus benches, in train stations, restaurants, diners, bistros, and libraries, as they ponder the question -- citing everyone from Kant to line cooks, from Trimalchio to Brillat-Savarin -- of where in the hierarchy of artistic endeavor cooking finds its place.

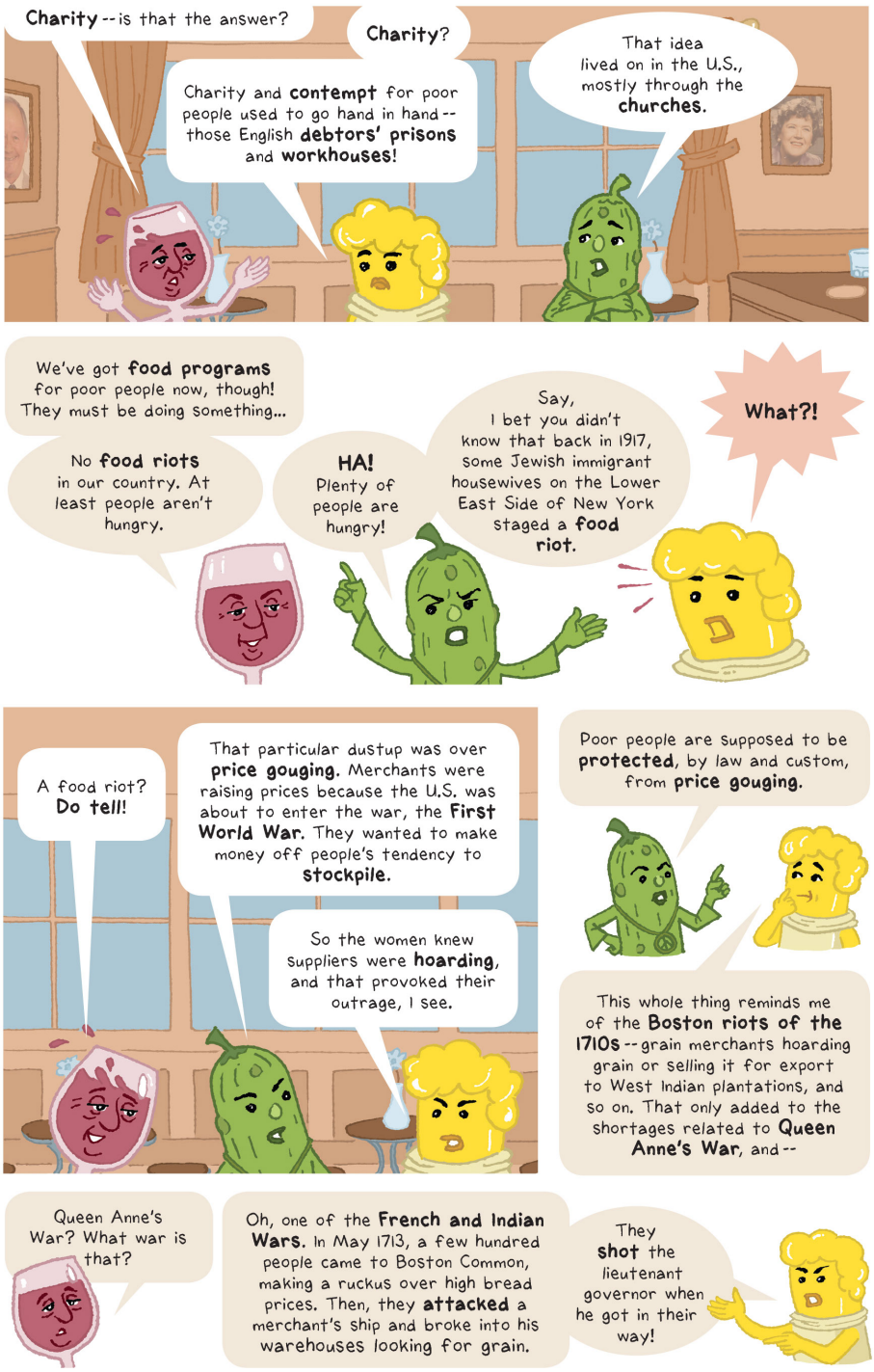
Julia has captured the hearts of millions of women who see her on public television, in her suburban kitchen, showing them, without airs or snobbery, the basics of French cooking, the standard of civilized dining. Craig, from his high perch at the *New York Times*, is the premier arbiter of fine dining, and at the pinnacle of his profession.

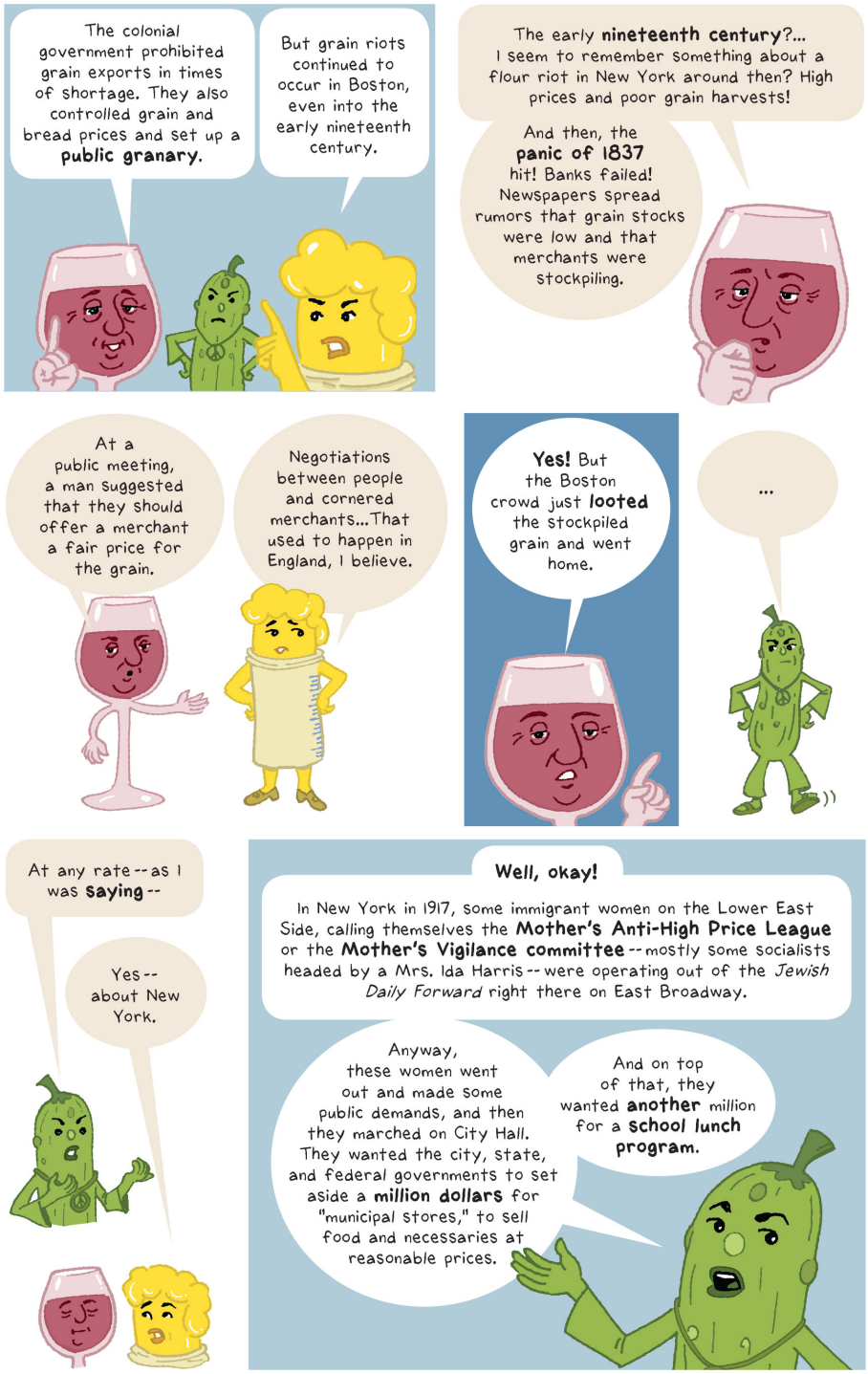
As our scene opens, Julia and Craig are in a small eatery, discussing farming and food distribution, when they are interrupted by a no-nonsense, forward-thinking young feminist who has periodically dropped in on them.

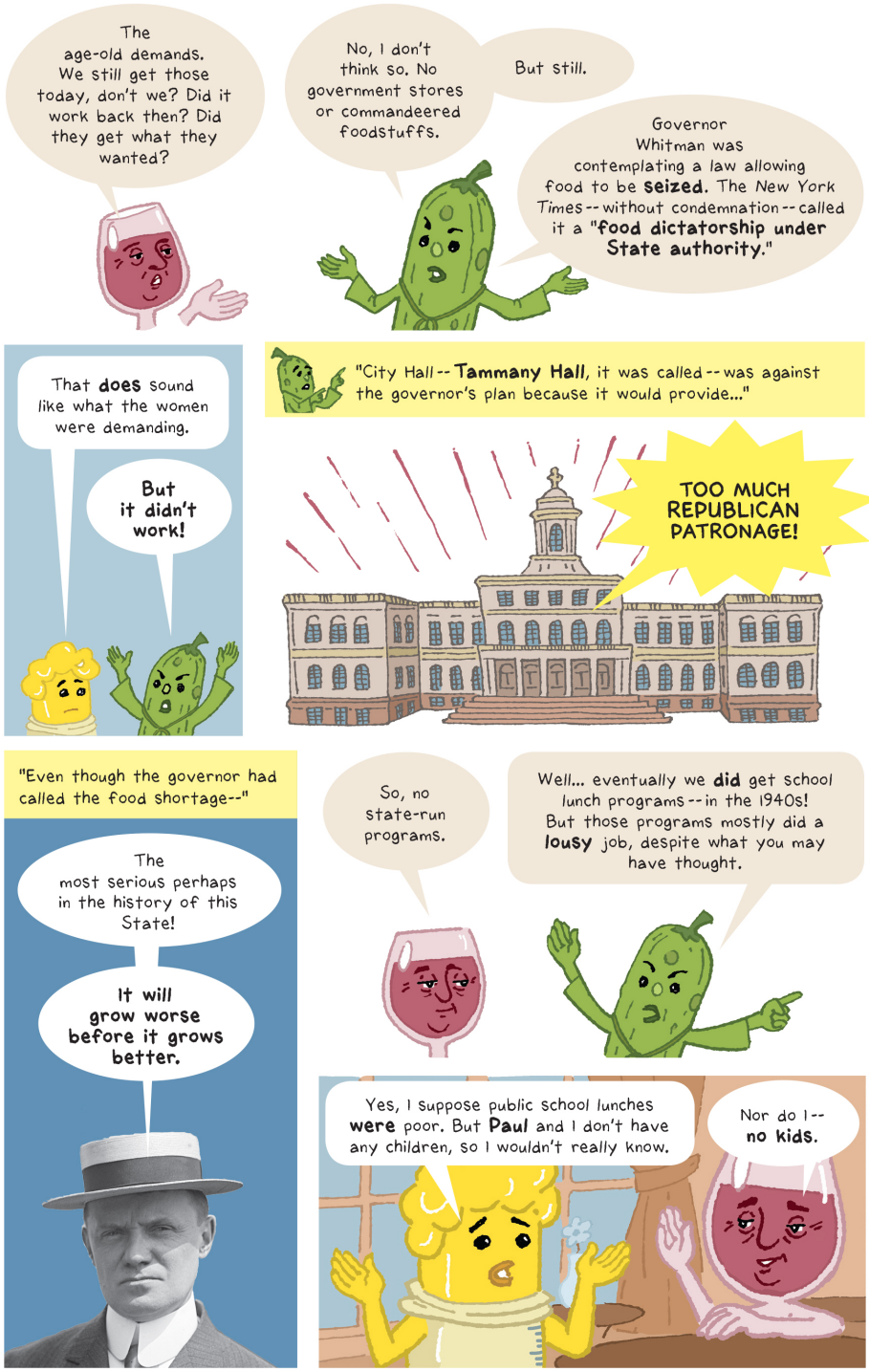
Today she seems a bit more on the *sour* side than usual.

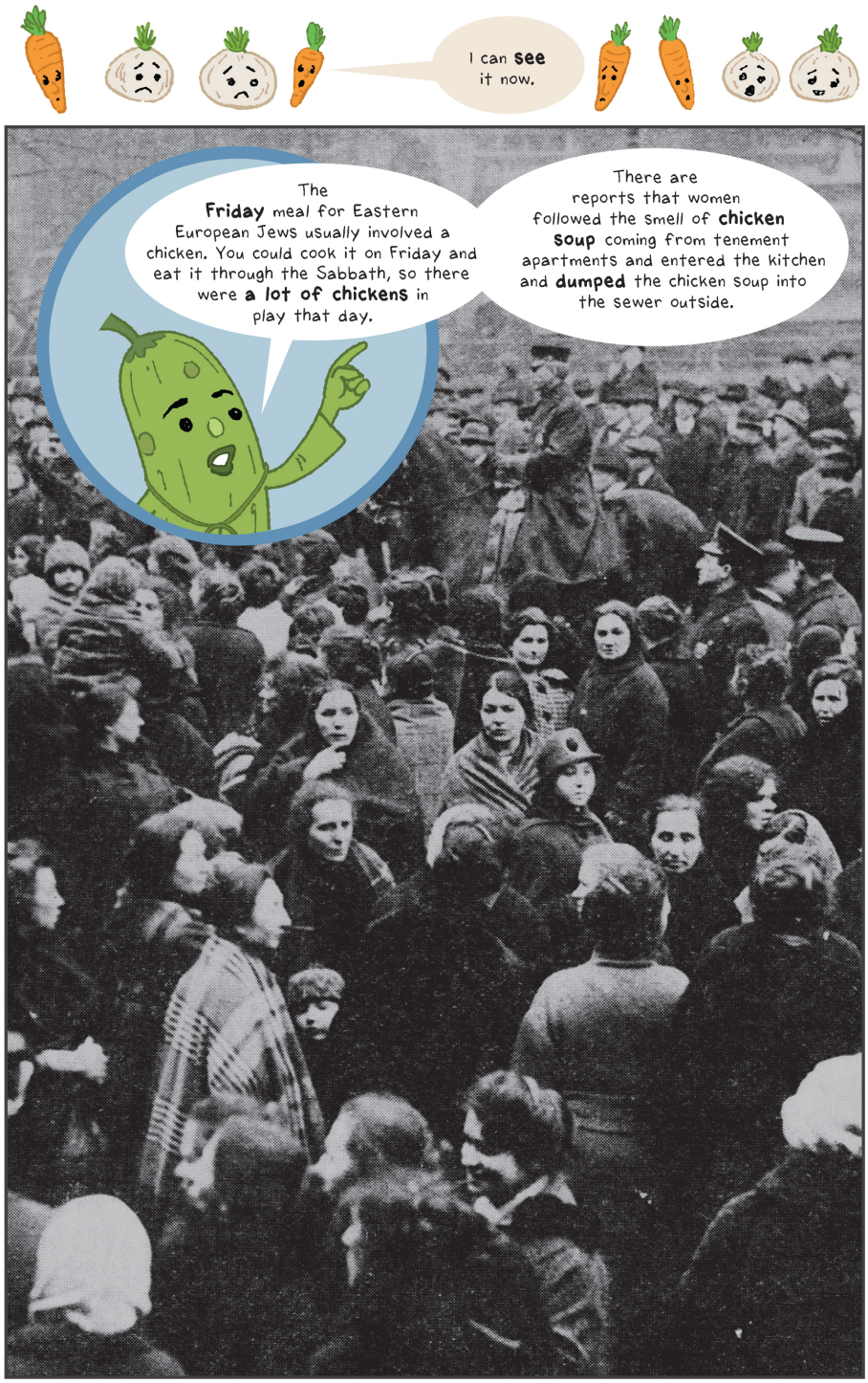


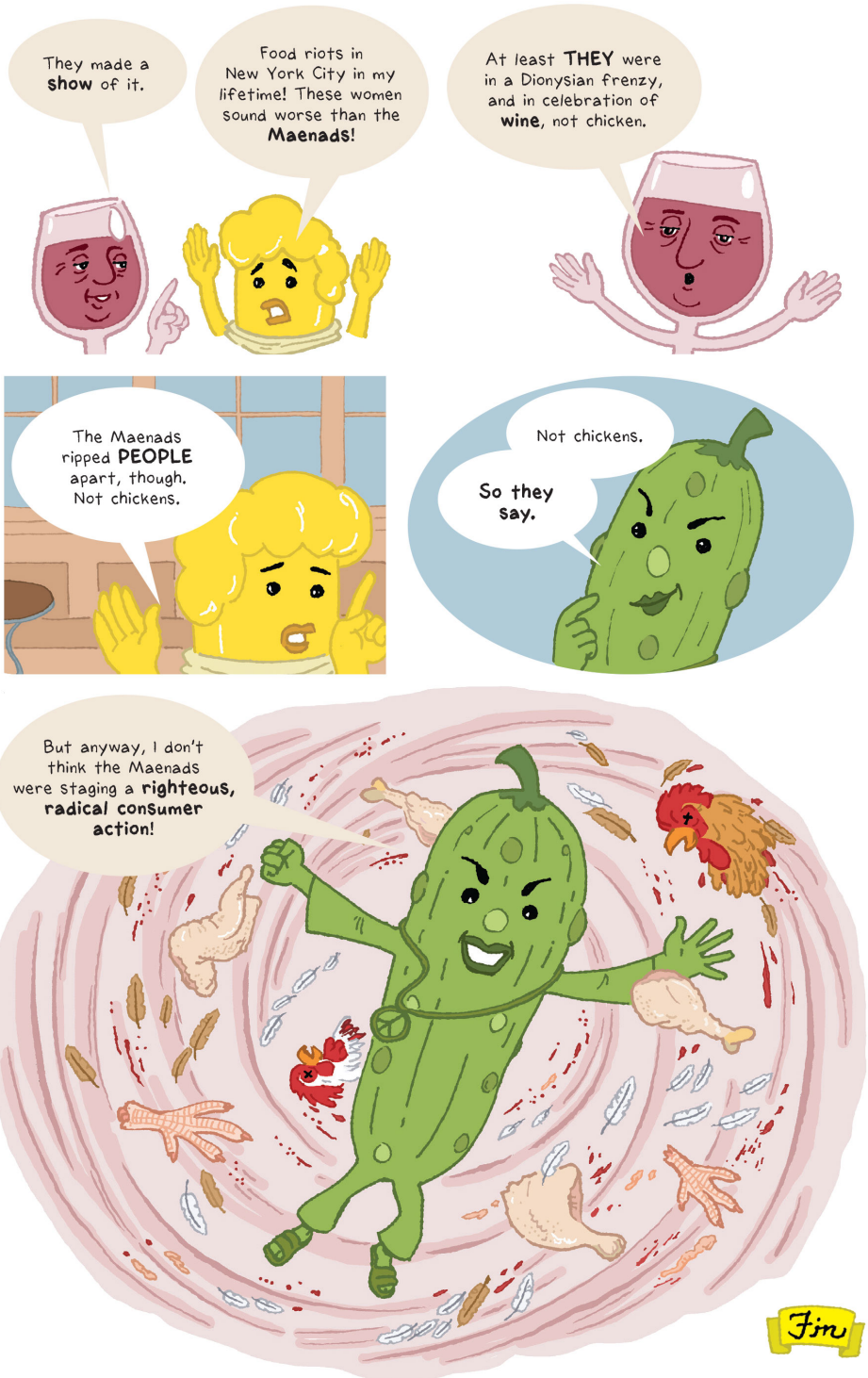











They made a **show** of it.
Food riots in New York City in my lifetime! These women sound worse than the **Maenads**!
At least **THEY** were in a Dionysian frenzy, and in celebration of **wine**, not chicken.
The Maenads ripped **PEOPLE** apart, though. Not chickens.
Not chickens.
So they say.
But anyway, I don't think the Maenads were staging a **righteous, radical consumer action!**
Fin

With her work on food and cuisine; on housing, the built environment, and the right to the city; on sex and gender roles; and on militarism and the national security state – as well as on art, media, and representation – **martha rosler** is intent on tracing the naturalized systems of law, valuation, and belief that structure our world and shape our daily experiences, persistently rewarding members of some groups while constraining others. She hopes that her work, in whatever form and by whatever media, is part of the effort to understand and dismantle these systems of control and cooptation.

Josh Neufeld is a Brooklyn-based cartoonist known for his nonfiction narratives of political and social upheaval, told through the voices of witnesses. Neufeld has been a Knight-Wallace Fellow in journalism, an Atlantic Center for the Arts Master Artist, and a Xeric Award winner. His works include *A.D: New Orleans After the Deluge* and *The Influencing Machine*.

Zdenka Badovinac

Interdependence, or, Secrecy as the Last Universal Right

Unconditional Care and Solidarity

Today, in the midst of a pandemic, "care" has become a keyword, one that also comes up extensively in current discussions and projects in the international art world. Very few of these discussions, however, note that the kind of care we are talking about, which today is largely the province of specific community and civil-society initiatives, was once deeply integrated into certain countries' social systems, or that it would be wise to reinstate a place for care, and to do so more strongly, in larger systems. By larger systems I mean not only individual countries, but also international initiatives that could successfully oppose global homogenization by, among other things, relying on the work of the micropolitical structures that already exist today. We need systems of interdependence, in which larger entities acknowledge their dependence on smaller entities and incorporate it in the way they function. Now, in light of the current pandemic, our interdependence is all the more evident, and it is plainer than ever that it cannot be based solely on human-to-human relationships but must also include nonhuman agencies. The virus that first appeared in a market in Wuhan proves that globalism is dependent even on micro-locations and micro-events. The pandemic, indeed, has made us more aware of the interdependence that exists on our planet, but we can extend this interdependence to the cosmos, whose processes influence our lives and where we, too, are leaving our mark. And if the tiny coronavirus remains a riddle for us, what can we say about the whole of creation, in which humanity is merely an episode in the eternal processes of genesis and decline? Interdependence is not merely what we imagine it to be, nor is it in any way the expression of our symbolic order; rather, it includes secrecy within itself.

The pandemic has not only made us more aware of universal interdependence, but has also sparked a further radicalization of protectionism and nationalism, and it is very possible that we will soon be facing new geopolitical conflicts. A number of Slovenia's progressive business leaders and intellectuals, who recently joined together in the initiative "Ordinary People and Citizens" (*Sleherniki in civilisti*), warn us of a possible end to multilateralism and the curtailment of certain international institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Many of us might say, so what if these institutions are curtailed – they should be serving the cause of international cooperation and solidarity but have instead become subservient to the interests of capital and to

Maja Hawlina, Maša Hawlina, Sara Jassim, *May Day Greeting Card from the Housing for All Network (Mreža Stanovanja za vse)*, 2020. The text, addressed to all Slovene governmental institutions, ministries, mayors and municipalities, urbanists, architectural associations, national, and local media, reads: “Long Live May Day! Rights for Workers and Balconies for All!”

states and corporations competing for global economic dominance. While we will of course still need such international institutions, it is clear they will have to function differently and be rooted in that interdependence which is becoming ever more obvious and ever more critical. New systems of interdependence can only be based on international solidarity and a new approach to public resources and care for the environment. Globalism is built not on the world we all share, but on the privatization of the world; it is not interested in international solidarity, but in the accumulation of power and capital and the distribution of knowledge and information that is subject to this. The idea of a shared world can be built only on a different kind of internationalism, which includes international solidarity, by which I mean it respects the needs of individual groups and localities and their right to survival and to equal participation in the global exchange of ideas and goods – their right to participate in the creation of the commons. The commons means not only shared natural resources, but also shared social conditions for widespread participation in the formation of the world we share.

The imaginary of contemporary art reflects both our dependences and our interdependence, thus tracking two forces that are bigger than us as individuals: a force that dominates us almost completely and turns us into passive objects, and a force that draws us towards active cooperation and collaboration. The central question in Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's book *Cartographies of the Absolute* is how to depict the all-powerful force of capitalism. Here they see "an *aesthetic* problem, in the sense of demanding ways of representing the complex and dynamic relations intervening between the domains of production, consumption and distribution, and their strategic political mediations, ways of making the invisible visible."[1] Of course, this is also a kind of interdependence, but it is one based on mutual interest and profit, whereas what we are envisioning is the interdependence of society not as individuals but as a community based on unconditional solidarity, which is a necessary condition for the survival of all.

Art has always been committed to something larger than the individual artist, whether this is some unknown, ungraspable force or the idea of community in all its possible scope. While dependence on some unknown, ungraspable force has often, in the history of art, been depicted in terms of wild nature, the "sublime" in today's art may be shown in graphs and photographs, videos depicting the distribution and consumption of goods, or sculptures made from modern-day materials.

Left to right: Alban Hajdinaj, *Eye to Eye,* 2003; Gentian Shkurti, *Colorblind*, 2003; Anri Sala, *Dammi I Colori,* 2003. Installation view from the exhibition *Interrupted Histories*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana 2006. Photo: Dejan Habicht / Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

Interdependence, meanwhile, is represented through some sort of active engagement of people, animals, or even inanimate things, striving for universal rights.

The pandemic has thrust to the forefront questions of interdependence and the universal rights associated with it, including, for instance, the right to health care, the right to work, the right to housing, and even the right to the city.

The Right to Housing

One of the key messages during isolation – "Stay home" – although it is full of concern for the health of the general public, does not include the many people who have no home in which to stay. Throughout the refugee crisis of the past few years, the Balkans has been one of the main routes for refugees coming to Europe, but it is a route fraught with obstacles. For a long time now there have been reports from Bosnia about the dire situation of refugees, although, since isolation began, they have been arriving in fewer numbers. Right before the pandemic was officially declared, the artist Jošt Franko created a collage of photographs of refugee homes, which he titled *AFGHANISTAN TUZLA Good, February 8th, 2020*. He accompanied it with the following text:

> The last passenger train deposited the arrivals at the central station in Tuzla two months ago. Now only boxcars with coal from the Banovići mines travel the rails to the Tuzla thermal power plant. The overcrowded temporary reception centers in Bihać and Kladuša are no longer taking in new refugees. The authorities are systematically detaining migrants in other parts of the Federation. Public transport is monitored and refugees are prevented from continuing on their road to the EU. The authorities of the Tuzla Canton have decided not to set up temporary reception centers under the auspices of the International Organization for Migration. Hundreds of people sleep on railroad platforms every night. Local NGOs have organized overnight accommodation for families and vulnerable groups.

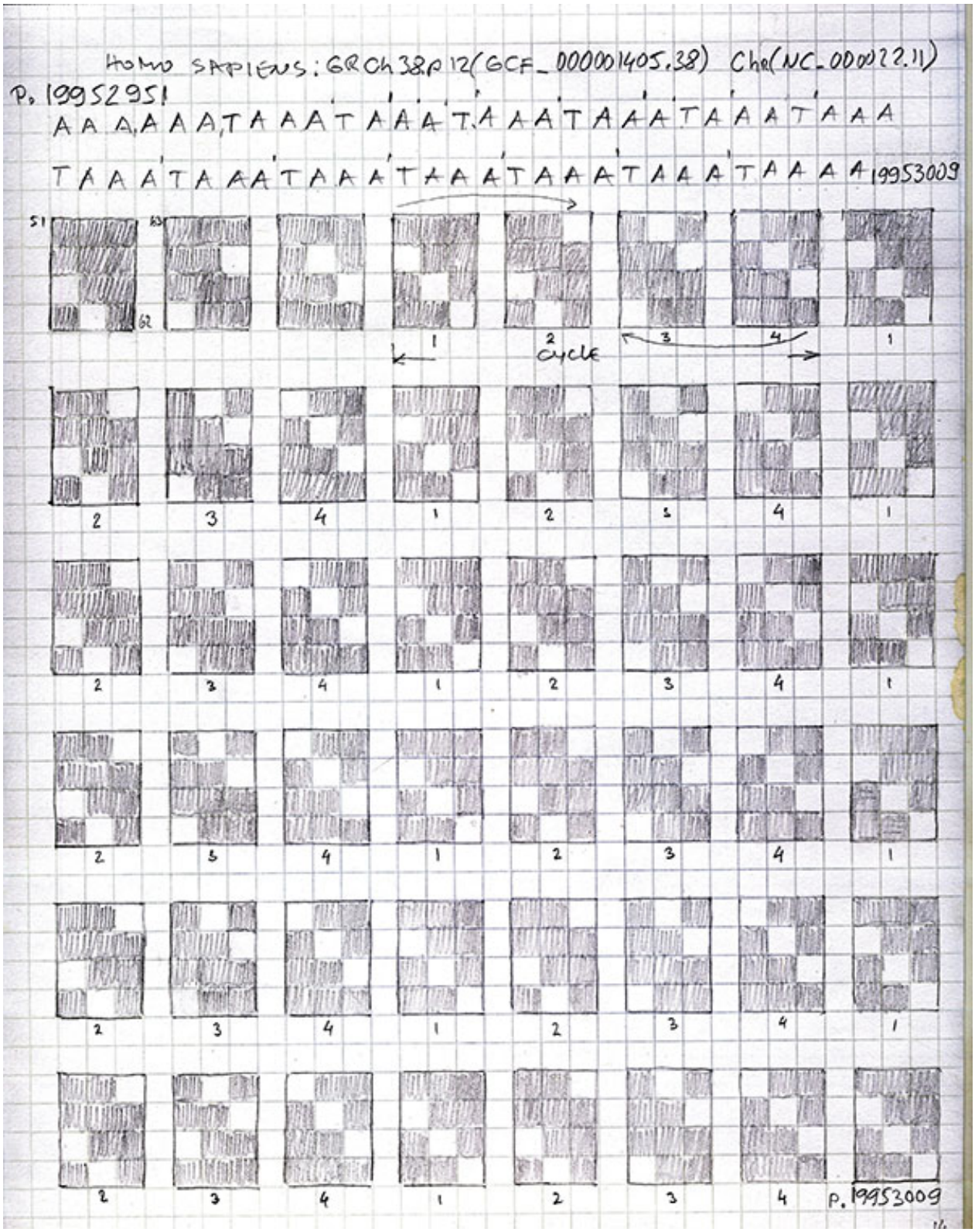
With the onset of the coronavirus crisis, the issue of the refugees receded into the background and priority was given to people with street addresses. In no way do I wish to imply that residents do not deserve whatever care they receive; quite the contrary, the pandemic has shown us yet again that we must do a better job of connecting different issues – the pandemic, the refugee crisis, the economy, and the environment. Civil initiatives have an important role to play in addressing crisis situations, which they attempt to do also through the participation of those who are most affected. The slogan "Stay home" also leaves out many who, even if they have citizenship papers, are still unable to find affordable housing; in their case, civil initiatives that work for changes in local housing policies are all the more welcome.

One such initiative is an action by the Slovene Housing for All Network (*Mreža stanovanje za vse*), which was launched long before the pandemic; it brings together architects, urban planners, sociologists, legal experts, NGOs, and students in an organized effort to influence public opinion and put pressure on policymakers to address the issue in a systemic and sustainable way. The goal is to change Slovenia's housing legislation through various kinds of pressure and persuasion, which are aimed not only at lawmakers but also, by raising consciousness of housing as a basic human right, at all members of society. In our critical discussions of neoliberalism, we too often fail to speak about the crisis in values – the fact that people have lost a sense of what rightfully belongs to them and are, sometimes willfully, unaware of universal rights. This simply means that people have accepted privatization as part of the "natural" order, where the weaker have lost the battle in competition with the stronger.

The Right to the City

Along with the right to housing, it is important also to mention the right to the city, which is threatened, on the one hand, by the pandemic and the understandable safety measures put in place to stop the spread of the virus, and, on the other, by the way certain national leaders are exploiting the situation as an ideal opportunity to realize their strong-arm tendencies. The current economic, social, environmental, and health crises, along with growing nationalism and institutionalized racism, are triggering ever more protests and demonstrations throughout the world, which the authorities try to suppress by barricading streets and squares, limiting movement, and expanding digital surveillance. In some countries, the ruling powers are exploiting this time of mass isolation to do things that, under normal conditions, would provoke even greater resistance within the population.

Recently, the international art world was abuzz with the story about how the authorities in Tirana had used the time of the pandemic to demolish the historic Albanian National Theater in the heart of Tirana. In the early 2000s, then-mayor Edi Rama, who today is the nation's prime minister, became a symbol of contemporary Albania when he ordered that the never-



Gregor Mobius, *Human Chromosome 22*, 2018. Drawing on paper, 30 x 20cm. Representation of *Homo Sapiens*' Chr22 DNA binary sequence of 59 positions (p.19952951-19953009). The sequence consists of 46 bases A/gray and 13 bases T/white organized as 2D images in a series of 48 matrices 3x4. The drawing depicts multiple cyclical repetitions of four distinct states (configurations) marked as 1, 2, 3, and 4. Courtesy of the artist.

replastered buildings of the once grey socialist city be painted in bright colors – blue, green, orange, purple, yellow, and red. Several curators later got involved with this monumental action and invited a number of internationally established artists, such as Olafur Eliasson, Liam Gillick, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, to paint other buildings in the city. Tirana thus became a global attraction. Rama was proclaimed the world's best mayor and, a few years ago, even appeared as an artist in the Venice Biennale. In 2003, the now-established Albanian artist Anri Sala documented the painted façades of Tirana in the film *Dammi i Colori* (Give me the colors), which later that year was included in Hans Ulrich Obrist's exhibition "Utopia Station" at the 50th Venice Biennale. Other Albanian artists also responded to Rama's colorful façades in 2003, engaging in a public dialogue with their city's new image. Alban Hajdinaj created a film in which he underscored his position as a local spectator who sees the fresh-painted façades as something alien. Gentian Shkurti, meanwhile, told the story of a color-blind man who continued to see these buildings as grey – a metaphor for the country's internal problems, which cannot be painted over by some colorful intervention.

As Albania's prime minister, Rama has not stopped making artistic interventions and continues to invite internationally known artists and architects to help modernize Tirana, even if this means construction on the site of historic buildings that have helped shape the city's character. The national theater was the most recent such building to be demolished in the name of modernization. A prime example of Italian modernist architecture in the city center, it was built on Mussolini's orders during Italy's occupation of Albania (1939–43). The modernism of the fascist era was later nicely complemented by the socialist modernism of the dictator Enver Hoxha, which today is succeeded by the new architectural style of the global world. Fascism, socialism, and today's global (post)modernism all share the fact that they elevate their own international language above the local particularities – although not above particular political and ideological interests, which in one way or another always leave their mark. The historic building of the Albanian National Theater will soon be replaced by a new theater, which, however, will be part of a larger complex with a shopping mall and a business center. For the past two years the planned demolition of the old theater has been met with protests from theater performers and other artists, as well as members of the left-wing party Organizata Politike, while the right-wing opposition, led by Monika Kryemadhi, the wife of the Albanian president, has exploited the protests for its own ends. One of the theater's last productions was directed by the Croatian Ivica Buljan, who deliberately chose Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* – about a man who begins his career with big, beautiful ideas but ends up as a corrupt emperor who eventually has to be killed. The play was staged in the swimming pool at the head of the square in front of the theater. It is worth mentioning that this swimming pool accentuated the building's division into two wings. Under socialism, one wing housed the classical national theater (the official theater of the regime), while the other housed an experimental theater, which was one of the rare spaces of freedom in those leaden times.

Jože Barši, *Remembering and Forgetting,* 2020. Installation. Bežigrad Central Stadium (1923-1940). Photo: Jaka Adamič/Večer.

For over twenty years, Tirana's painted façades and Rama's other interventions in the city's architectural and urbanistic heritage have generated public debates that go beyond mere aesthetic issues and delve into questions about spatial politics. The Albanian case speaks to issues about art in relation to people's right to the city and to its collective memory, which is a condition for reproducing any society. The artistic and civil actions in Tirana are not interested in the uninterrupted development of the national culture, or in its allegedly homogeneous unproblematic core, but rather in memory, which relies on various discontinuities. What is "Albanian" must also include the Italian occupation and its fascist architecture, Hoxhaist modernism, and even globalist-style shopping malls.

In the Balkan region we are currently witnessing many examples of irresponsible treatment of cultural heritage, with twentieth-

century modernism especially coming under attack. The most egregious and grotesque example of the destruction of the modernist heritage of socialism is in Skopje, where Macedonian nationalists have covered buildings from the period of socialist Yugoslavia in pseudo-classical façades; among other things, they want to stress the idea that socialism was a deviation in the historical development of a great European culture.

Europa Nostra, a network of cultural heritage protection groups, has compiled a list of Europe's seven most endangered cultural heritage sites for 2020, of which no less than five are in former socialist countries, and no less than three are in the Balkans. Of these, the twentieth-century sites include the Albanian National Theater, which is now gone, and the Central Stadium in Ljubljana, which was designed by the architect Jože Plečnik.

Nature as a Third Element

During the pandemic, discussions in Ljubljana over the fate of Plečnik's stadium became more intense. Built in the 1930s and modeled on the amphitheaters of antiquity, the stadium has the status of a monument of national significance. Nevertheless, today the interests of capital have the upper hand in decisions about its fate, just as they did about the theater in Tirana – and in both cases are opposed to the public interest. With the Plečnik stadium, this is obvious from the far greater amount of surface area being planned for commercial activity compared to what is intended for sustainable communal use by citizens. The realization of the current plans for the stadium was halted by complications over the necessary environmental protection documents as well as an initiative by local residents, who would be deprived of certain green spaces by the planned development. Disputes over the stadium's renovation have dragged on for more than ten years, during which time the stadium has overgrown with grass. The artist Jože Barši, who sees a particular beauty in this overgrown condition, is proposing that the owners be allowed to build whatever they want around the stadium, so long as they leave the interior of the stadium wild and overgrown, with only minimal restoration. Barši's art installation includes a photograph of the overgrown stadium and, beside it, a display case with documents from the stadium's history, one of which is another photograph showing the oath-taking of the Slovene Home Guard, under the command of General Leon Rupnik, on Adolf Hitler's birthday in

Jonas Staal, *Interplanetary Species Society,* 2019. Reaktorhallen, Stockholm, produced by Public Art Agency Sweden. Photo: Jonas Staal.

1944. In the photo, the Home Guard is taking an oath, as an auxiliary unit of the Nazi SS, to fight alongside Germany against the communists and their allies. Not long after the war, Leon Rupnik, a committed anti-communist and anti-Semite, was condemned to death and executed by firing squad. Last year, more than seven decades later, the Supreme Court of Slovenia annulled the Rupnik verdict and sent the case back to the Ljubljana District Court. Rupnik's story is just another chapter that reveals the deep divide between the descendants of the left and the right in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The divisions surrounding the renovation of the Plečnik stadium, meanwhile, reflect a not-so-different antagonism between those who advocate a society of the commons and those who support neoliberal interests. Barši's proposal turns the stadium into a monument that reminds us that everything is transitory. But here we are not dealing with some romantic notion that leaves the resolution of human problems to nature; no, this is more about recognizing as illusion the idea that people have reality under their control. If I had written this before the pandemic, that last statement would have undoubtedly sounded less convincing, but today we are more ready to acknowledge our dependence on nonhuman agencies.

Nonhuman Agencies

When we speak about interdependence with nonhuman agencies, we should not think of efforts to create harmonious relations between humanity and nature based on some sort of essentialist identity. Rather, we should think of an interdependence between constantly changing actors. Under the current conditions, it feels as though we are experiencing ever greater, ever faster transformations of identity, and rapid migrations from one living situation to another due to technology and science as well as an ever more rapacious capitalism. But ceaseless transformations and mutations are also part of the processes of nature. The pandemic has demolished something we never actually had: a stable natural order. When we think of interdependence, we should think of something that is both good and bad at the same time, something that encompasses both nature and our own production.

Even before the pandemic, the question of artificial intelligence and its dominance in our lives was the focus of broad discussions. The visual researcher Gregor Mobius, in his work *Proto-RNA, The First Self-Learning Machine* (2018), talks about that fact that we developed, over the long process of evolution, from the first organic molecules, which, in a sense, were "self-learning machines," to use the contemporary term. People want to see this principle of self-learning in artificial intelligence, too, and to teach machines to teach themselves. Mobius reflects on how children possess an innate ability for self-learning that allows them to quickly absorb information about the world around them, just as the first living organisms learned about the environment in which they found themselves, where they had to discover the path of their own survival. Of all the current hypotheses about the origin of life, the most compelling is the theory that the first living molecules were a primitive version of ribonucleic acid – a "proto-RNA." If this is true, Mobius says, then all of life, culture, and art originated from this molecule four billion years ago. And so did the coronavirus.

Consequently, it makes no sense to understand art simply as a human product, even less as the product of one living person. Of particular interest in this regard are those artists who draw on ideas from the Russian avant-garde, in art, science, and philosophy. Some, such as Anton Vidokle, Arseny Zhilyaev, and Dragan Živadinov, go back to the ideas of Russian cosmism, which says that the only possible equal and just society is one in which, with the important help of science, the dead also participate. Here we might also include Jonas Staal, who is best known for such projects as *New World Summit* (2012–present) and *New Unions* (2016–present), which strive for an open society of cross-solidarities. Recently, Staal and the lawyer Jan Fermon have filed a lawsuit to compel the legal recognition of Facebook as a resource in the public domain that should be owned and controlled by its users. In Staal's work, people who lack full citizenship rights have a way to participate, and the same is also true for nonhuman agencies. Such agencies are part of his project *Neo-Constructivist Ammonites* (2019), which references the heritage of the Russian constructivists and productivists, who viewed revolutionary objects as "comrades." Staal points to the revolutionary tradition of Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Popova, who contrasted their "comradely objects" to the alienation and fetishization of objects. They applied new abstract forms to everyday utilitarian objects, and thus stripped their works of the kind of artistic autonomy that was so integral to twentieth-century Western abstraction. Stepanova and Popova dedicated themselves to designing clothes, fabrics, dishware, and other ordinary objects, while Rodchenko, a master graphic designer of propaganda, also designed the interior of the *Workers' Club* (1925).

In his installation *Neo-Constructivist Ammonites*, Staal combined elements from

Russian avant-garde propaganda design with the fossilized shells of ammonites, sixty-six to three hundred million years old; once prevalent in the world's oceans, these mollusks perished in the fifth mass extinction. Today, at a time some are describing as the sixth mass extinction, humans have assumed the main role in the annihilation of species, which are disappearing at a rate a hundred times faster than they would without us. Staal's ammonites are set on vertical neo-constructivist objects as portraits, if you will, of our nonhuman comrades, as if they were spreading the word from their pedestals about their heroic role in history, about how the ammonites, which are found in various layers of the earth's crust, help us to understand, recognize, and distinguish different geological eras. The ammonites, then, are our teachers, who tell us how important it is to stand in solidarity with, and be responsible towards, everything that might soon become a fossil.

Secrecy as the Last Universal Right

The interests of capital are destroying not only our cultural heritage but also archaeological sites – even if not always directly. In the recent vast wildfires in Australia, many Aboriginal archaeological sites were destroyed, and more than a billion animals died, including many from species that had been endangered even before the fires, and some of these species are found nowhere else in the world. And it is clear that the Australian wildfires are the result of climate change.

Through its aesthetic liberation of things, ideas, and layers of time, art constructs imaginaries of interdependence, which in their own way contribute to a society of solidarity. Today, during this time of pandemic, we like to talk about us all being in the same boat, a metaphor that has replaced the catastrophic image of overcrowded boats of refugees crossing the Mediterranean. But the most powerful metaphor of the present time is the metaphor of the virus, which represents how everything influences everyone. But this is only our view of viruses, our exploitation of its properties. What viruses themselves think about this, nobody knows.

The global circulation of capital, the industrialization of agriculture, the cultivation and breeding of plant and animal species outside their natural ecosystems – all these things facilitate the development of viruses and their transmission to humans. And now, it seems, viruses are exacting revenge for our irresponsible attitude towards nature. Our attitude towards nature is indeed irresponsible, but viruses have other things to do in life besides teaching us to be wiser. Our relationship with nature is truly interdependent, but as I have noted, it is a dynamic relationship in which all the participants are in fact foreign to each other. We humans must do more to respect this foreignness instead of trying to domesticate something that we can never fully know. Sometimes things must be left unlabeled, without names, and thus also without commercial value. Secrecy may be the last universal right we must still preserve.

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Translated from Slovene by Rawley Grau.

Zdenka Badovinac is a curator and writer. Since 1993, she has been the Director of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, which in 2011 was extended to the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova. In her work, Badovinac highlights the difficult processes of redefining history alongside different avant-garde traditions within contemporary art. Her first exhibition to address these issues was *Body and the East – From the 1960s to the Present* (1998). She also initiated the first Eastern European art collection, Arteast 2000+ (2000). One her most important recent projects is NSK from *Kapital* to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst – The Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia, Moderna galerija, 2015. Her most recent book is *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (Independent Curators International (ICI), New York, 2019. Badovinac was Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale from 1993 to 1997 as well as in 2005 and Austrian Commissioner at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 2002. She was also president of CIMAM from 2010 to 2013. Founding member of L'Internationale, a confederation of seven art institutions.

1
Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Zero Books, 2015), 24–25.

Anton Vidokle and Irmgard Emmelhainz

God-Building as a Work of Art: Cosmist Aesthetics

The following text is an edited transcription of a conversation that took place within the context of the Art and Science Aleph Festival hosted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico in May 2020 via Zoom because we were unable to gather publicly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of the festival's program, Anton Vidokle's trilogy of films about Russian cosmism was translated to Spanish and screened for the Mexican audience.

Carlos Prieto: I think it's best to start this conversation by speaking about the role that Russian cosmism could have at this moment of crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Anton Vidokle: Yes, a conversation about immortality acquires a lot more meaning when we are in the middle of a pandemic and so many people are sick and dying. I think this present moment is a bit similar to the original context that triggered cosmism: all the epidemics, droughts, and famines in nineteenth-century Russia. But now there is also the fear of planetary ecological collapse and extinction, and in this context the idea of resurrection becomes much more urgent. There is also a certain hopelessness produced by the decline of reason and social progress, both of which have been encountering countless setbacks in recent decades. All of this makes the delirious optimism of cosmism meaningful and moving, in my opinion.

Irmgard Emmelhainz: Here is another question to start from: What is Russian cosmism?

AV: I am starting to think that there may be no such thing as a unified intellectual movement that can be called "Russian cosmism." What exists is a particular tradition comprising numerous works by a diverse group of people – philosophers, scientists, artists, filmmakers, political activists – whose ideas overlap because all of them were interested in defeating illness and death, as well as exploring possibilities of living and traveling in the cosmos. But many of these people had contradictory views and ideas.

The name "Russian cosmism" is something that was coined very late, in the 1970s. When these ideas were first developed a century earlier, nobody used such a name. These two words first appear together in a Soviet encyclopedia of philosophy. Somebody wrote an entry for "Russian cosmism" and the name stuck. But it's actually a misnomer because it gives cosmism a nationalist reading, while the ideas of cosmism are probably the most universal ideas I have ever come across. Cosmism has bigger ambitions than nationalism: when it speaks of resurrection, it's for everyone who has ever lived on earth. In a sense resurrection is meant not only for humans, but for all living organisms: all life deserves to be

Film still from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 movie *Solaris.*

eternal. You cannot get much broader than that.

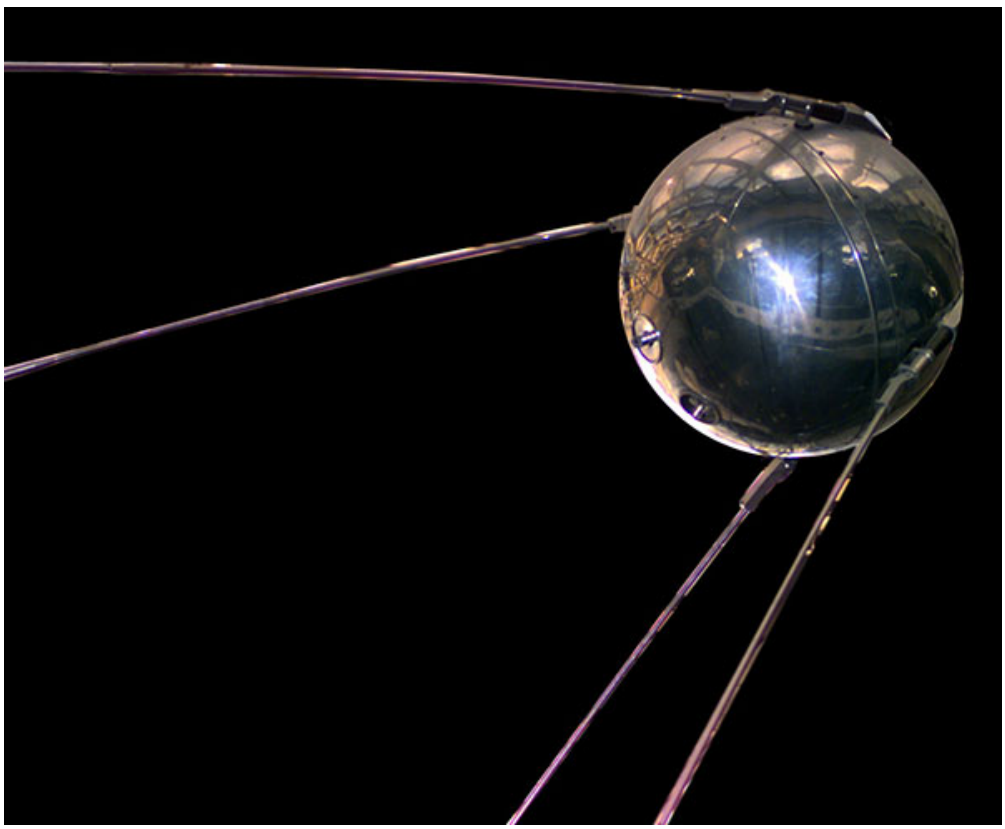
IE: What would be some examples of diverging visions within what is considered to be Russian cosmist thinking?

AV: Nikolai Fedorov, who first developed these ideas, was a deeply religious Orthodox Christian. For him, resurrection and immortality are the most central aspect of cosmism, its "common task."[1] The other main theorist of cosmism is Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the self-taught scientist who first developed the mathematic formulas necessary for a spaceship to leave the orbit of this planet.[2] Tsiolkovsky's view on death was totally opposite to Fedorov's. For him death was an ecstatic, euphoric event: he thought that death/entropy is the moment when the atoms that make up our bodies are liberated from a finite form, and that they are happy in this moment of emancipation. Following Aristotle, Tsiolkovsky believed that atoms can experience happiness and sadness. This is related to panpsychism, a very ancient, animistic worldview which holds that all matter is capable of feeling and thinking.[3] This kind of thinking also appears to contradict Tsiolkovsky's own fervent belief in science and rationalism. In any case, death for Tsiolkovsky is a joyous event for atoms, whereas for Fedorov death is the greatest tragedy and evil in the world, and it needs to be defeated and eradicated by all means possible.

IE: Cosmist ideas and socialism are utopias that overlapped in time, and maybe it can be said that they converged in the Russian avant-garde. If we consider "cosmist aesthetics" to propose a synthesis between art and science, knowledge and creativity, how can we reinterpret the Russian avant-garde? How could art advance the goals of cosmism, be it space travel or immortality?

AV: Sometimes I think that cosmism would not be so interesting if it had not happened against the background of the revolution. The nineteenth century was notorious for numerous utopian movements. Some were based on religion or the occult, and others on socialist utopias. There were many such groups and ideologies in almost every country in the world at the time. Had it not been for the revolution in Russia and the total radicalization of society, cosmism would likely remain a kind of peculiar but insignificant development. But the mixture of cosmism and communism, and the acceleration that occurred in Russia just before and after the revolution, were like pouring fuel on a fire.

Unlike most philosophical, political, or social theories, which tend to give art relatively



A replica of Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite in the world to be put into outer space: the replica is stored in the National Air and Space Museum. Photo: Wikipedia Commons/Public Domain.

little significance other than something decorative or propagandistic (like artists designing T-shirts and posters for the revolution), in cosmism art is equal to science, technology, medicine, and social organization: its transformative capacity is valued on par with all other key fields that shape humanity. In fact, Fedorov writes about immortality and resurrection as a work of art, and space travel becomes a tool to be used towards a spiritualization of the universe, which he also calls an art project. This seems to have resonated with artists, and it generated quite a response – first in poetry and literature, in works of avant-garde, futurist poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchyonykh, Alexander Svyatogor, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Alexander Yaroslavsky, and others.[4]

IE: Malevich's *Black Square* is interpreted in canonical modern art history as an emblem for abstraction via suprematism. How could we reinterpret it through the lens of cosmism?

AV: *Black Square* is a peculiar painting. On the one hand it has become synonymous with a kind of a nonobjective, reductivist, geometric abstraction. However, there is another way to see this painting: simply as a mimetic representation of the black sky at night.[5] In this sense it's not an abstraction at all. In fact there were many black squares that followed Malevich's iconic painting.[6] There is a black square painting by Alexander Rodchenko, which includes small, colorful circles that look like planets and stars.[7] There is also a whole series of black squares by Solomon Nikritin in which a pill-shaped object – perhaps a spaceship or a satellite – gradually enters the black space.[8]

I suspect there can also be a cosmist reading of the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, where Malevich's *Black Square* first appears as part of the stage set.[9] What is implied by this work, if not literally spelled out, is that a victory over the order of nature represented by the sun also heralds a future victory over death.

Tatlin's famous *Monument to the Third International* is angled parallel to the planetary tilt of earth.[10] Various Soviet architects from this period used new proportions for the design of buildings, which were based on distances from the earth to the moon and to other planets in the solar system, as an attempt to bring terrestrial structures into a greater harmony with the cosmos. By the way, the word "cosmos" means "harmony," not "space." It also means "beauty."

There is a passage in Malevich's writing where he speaks of suprematist compositions as

The Caracol Tower, Chichen Itza, Mexico. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

satellites, anticipating the *Sputnik*, which was launched in 1957:

> The suprematist machine, if it can be put that way, will be single-purposed and have no attachments. A bar alloyed with all the elements, like the earthly sphere, will bear the life of perfections, so that each constructed suprematist body will be included in nature's natural organization and will form a new sputnik; it is merely a matter of finding the relationship between the two bodies racing in space. A new sputnik can be built between earth and the moon, a suprematist sputnik equipped with all the elements, that moves in an orbit, forming its own new path.[11]

Malevich's *Architectons*, the sculptural works he was making around 1923, are supposed to be designs or prototypes for space stations that would orbit earth containing bodies of the dead, preserved at zero gravity in the coldness of outer space for eventual resurrection.

IE: How is this history of art linked to your trilogy?

AV: What attracted me to cosmism initially and motivated me to make these films is that while I have always admired and have been influenced by the legacy of the avant-garde, there was always something very oblique about it: a certain limit beyond which I could not make sense of these works. What is the strange energy that animates them? How did they come into being? What do they actually represent? The conventional art historical explanations were never quite satisfying, and to understand these works only in terms of Marxism did not account for much of the strangeness that I was sensitive to. Reading Fedorov and other cosmist authors clarified a lot of things about these works for me.

Because so few people know about cosmism, I felt that I needed to do something to share these ideas. At first I thought about curating a show, publishing a book, or organizing symposia. But I was worried that an academic, historicist approach would flatten all this incredibly imaginative content. So I tried to present some of these ideas in a short play, which was not very good, but the script worked much better for an essay film. Curiously, I didn't focus much on art and the avant-garde in the trilogy – only a little in the third film, which was partly shot at the Tretyakov Gallery. I also did not focus very much on the space program either. I think what really touched me once I got more familiar with cosmism were the ideas themselves, so the films are more about ideas than objects or artifacts.

IE: In cosmist aesthetics, art and science are linked in order to act directly in society. Can you elaborate?

AV: Cosmist aesthetics are really peculiar. For one thing, in Fedorov's writings there are many different definitions of art. He writes about art all the time. It's unusual. As I mentioned above, for Fedorov immortality is art and the labor of resurrection is a work of art. There is an overlap with Marxism: the belief in the transformative, nearly alchemical power of human labor to produce something that is greater than the sum of its parts, in this case a return of life.

At the same time, Fedorov speaks of temples as works of art, because they are inherently interdisciplinary and combine architecture, painted representations, sculpture, music, and words of the liturgy – like a Gesamtkunstwerk. According to his thinking, temples are linked with museums and observatories, because these are all places where memories are preserved. This is because documents, manuscripts, and images – memories – were kept in temples and monasteries, as were the remains of ancestors. Museums also preserve human and animal remains, so temples and museums are also cemeteries. Ancient temples often contained astronomical observatories, for example in Mesopotamia or in Mesoamerica. So for Fedorov all of these are one institution that is also a work of art, which should be radicalized so as to produce art in the form of a returning of life.

Astronomical observatories are also important because the horizon of cosmism does not stop with achieving immortality; it also calls for the totality of the universe to become one, unified, interconnected, immortal, and conscious organism. Like the sapient ocean in Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*, but much bigger: an organism which includes all that exists.[12] This is to be constructed by the labor of immortal humans, who will have all eternity, the resources of the cosmos, and the technology of space travel to teach all the dead matter that comprises the bulk of the universe to become conscious, to feel, and to think. Knowledge of astronomy is essential not only for space travel and navigation, but also in the sense that the act of looking at the stars should not be merely passive gazing, but should produce regulation (harmonization) of the universe, like a manifestation of the "spooky action at a distance" which is a phenomenon by which one particle can effectively "know" something about another particle instantaneously, even if those two particles are separated by a great distance.

"There is no substance which cannot take the form of a living being. The simplest being is the atom. Therefore the whole universe is alive

An Alibaba LED facial mask promoting "skin rejuvenation therapy" and "anti-aging wrinkle removal." See https://www.aliexpress.com/item/32618827583.html.

and there is nothing in it but life," writes Tsiolkovsky in a monograph entitled *The Monism of the Universe* (1931).[13] Despite their profound difference in their relationship to death, both Tsiolkovsky and Fedorov imagine a living, sentient cosmos. While this is largely a scientifically inspired insight for Tsiolkovsky, for Fedorov it is an art project.

IE: If we can thus relate cosmist aesthetics to the task of bringing about immortality (and resurrection for all), can you elaborate on how in the first part of your film trilogy, *Immortality for All*, there is a section in the film that claims to have agency on the viewer's mental and physical health while we see red flashes on the screen?

AV: When I was working on the first film in the trilogy, I came across a discovery made by NASA scientists in the 1990s that a certain type of red light produces a healing effect on living tissue.[14] NASA had a specific problem: in the condition of zero gravity, tissue heals very slowly. So if you're on the space station or a spaceship, even a minor paper cut takes a long time to heal. Red light in a frequency of 680 NM, emitted by LED diodes, expedites the healing of skin. Irradiation by this red light makes wounds heal much faster. Following NASA, the cosmetics industry adapted this technology for skin rejuvenation therapy. The military also adopted red light therapy for special forces soldiers, because there is a similar need to heal wounds quickly in combat.

Film is essentially sound, light, and color, so I thought it might be possible to use these healing properties to suggest a kind of a therapeutic or prophylactic effect. Now, I don't want to claim that my films have healing powers; they are not going to cure Covid-19 or cancer. It's more of a suggestion or a desire that an artwork could also incorporate a healing, therapeutic function, which is in keeping with cosmist aesthetics.

IE: You shot *Immortality And Resurrection For All* in museums in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. And in the context of cosmism, the main enemies are death, decay, and entropy. For Fedorov, death needs to be reversed. Can you talk about how resurrection and conservation, and imagination and memory, relate in this film and in your interpretation of the role of the cosmist museum? Bearing in mind that in the West museums mean precisely death and petrification.

AV: Museum ethics are a really important territory to consider, particularly in light of all the plunder that passed for archeology, the killing of animals, the murder of indigenous people, whose remains ended up in museum displays, and many other unconscionable, unacceptable things done in the name of "science" and "progress." Museums, as we understand them now, came into being during a very violent time: the French Revolution and all the subsequent wars, colonial expeditions, and so forth. Undoubtedly our contemporary museums embody this violence, and this urgently needs to change.

However, Fedorov is not glorifying that side of a museum as an institution. In fact, he clearly says that a museum should not take, but should preserve and return life. I do think that the cosmist museum he writes about is something substantially different than the museums we have now. First, his museum is a museum of everything. The curators of the cosmist museum would not be concerned with the question of selection or what kind of history to write, but would be more like the medical staff in a hospital who, at least theoretically, have to make an effort to save the life of every single patient, everyone in need of help.

IE: Can you explain the role of the dog and the mummy in the film? What are they doing, wandering around the museum in the film? The apparition of the dog running around the museum is very moving because it's like he comes from the afterworld to announce everyone else's resurrection. The mummy, too, is coming back to life.

AV: Both the dog and the mummy are references to Ancient Egypt. The dog is a Pharaoh Hound, one of the oldest breeds that still exists. They are like living artifacts – they have been around for nearly five thousand years. They look exactly like the head of the Egyptian god Anubis, the god of the dead. He invented embalming and mummification. The reason I wanted to have this dog in the film is to have a living animal run through a zoological museum, filled with taxidermy animals. It's also a reference to the dog of an artist whose work I admire: Andrei Monastyrski.[15] He is a conceptual artist who pioneered performance art in Moscow in the 1970s. I used a text passage from one of his key works in one of the films.

The mummy is a reference to Ancient Egypt, where concern with eternal afterlife radically dominated the social and economic organization of their civilization. Everything in life was subordinated to eternal life after death. It is also a reference to Lazarus. In Russian icons, Lazarus is often represented as a mummy. There is a strange detail in these paintings: other people who are present at this resurrection scene are trying to stay away from him or hold their nose because he stinks. His body has been rotting.

IE: Cosmism has been heralded as a sort of alternative modernity in a sense that it's different from Western modernity because it's not grounded in eliminating or overcoming the past in the teleological march toward progress.

A Russian icon from the Novgorod school *The Raising of Lazarus*, 15th century. 72 x 60 cm. The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

But for cosmism, progress means resurrecting the dead and bringing them into the present so they can live literally in the future. And that's true democracy and equality in terms of what it means to preserve the past. In the tradition of Western modern thought, to compensate for the loss of the past we invent ideological or historical grand narratives and memorializing mechanisms. In a critical reading of Western modernism, this destruction of the past means the destruction of humanity's link to the world, that is, the meaning of human life in the world. What is also destroyed is the link to the sacred. Cosmism has in common with Western modernity the elimination of God, the sacred, and any spiritual meaning of humanity's link to the world. But differently than in Western modernity, the meaning of human life is the eternal preservation of human life. That is to say, in cosmism, what gives life meaning is to want to live forever; comfort is not located in past traditions (as in memorializing mechanisms in Western modernism). What truly matters is eradicating disease, increasing human life spans, space exploration, human enhancement, attaining immortality by whatever means is most accessible. In sum, the meaning of cosmist life is to transcend. This leads us to space travel, which materially means transcending our dependence on the earth (our bodily needs) to survive. But this sort of overcoming of life or the material aspects of life corresponds with some dystopian materializations of cosmism, like cryogenics or transhumanism or downloading our brains into machines, which are all phenomena and ideologies linked to the dream of overcoming biological barriers toward immortality and against entropy through technology. Yet, from a feminist point of view, we cannot transcend our reproductive needs (proof of that is that in outer space we need to recreate an earthly environment in order to survive); from an anti-capitalist point of view, transcendence is a war against life which we can link to the neoliberal destruction of healthcare. Is there a twist in cosmism towards rethinking these dystopian outcomes of negating life itself in the search for transcendence? I think it was Fedorov who said we need to self-energize and not depend on our environment to transcend. The modernist human miracle of transcendence via technology and science has been achieved at a heavy cost – not only eugenics and social Darwinism but also climate change, deforestation, soil erosion, water depletion, pollution, mass extinction, slavery, and diet-related diseases, just to name a few of the side effects. We have reached the point where care of the human body has become a geopolitical drama, as public health infrastructure has been decimated and corporate pharmaceutical interests have become class interests. If cosmism's goal is to maintain life, what would be its way out of biopolitics, transhumanism, and genetic engineering?

AV: Healthcare and medicine are a very central preoccupation in cosmism. In fact, many of the people involved were either medical doctors or scientists working on research that has biomedical implications, like Alexander Bogdanov and his experimental blood transfusions, or Alexander Chizhevsky and his research into the ionization of air.[16] Interestingly, the plasma treatment that is the only successful treatment for Covid-19 right now is something very close to what Bogdanov was working on in 1926, and the ionizers that Chizhevsky invented can be very useful in disinfecting public spaces from the virus, while we are still waiting for a vaccine. For all its imagination and grand ideas, cosmism is also deeply concerned with practical interventions in daily life.

I think for me cosmism is first and foremost a project of God-building (богостроительство).[17] In this sense immortality, resurrection, and space travel are not ends in and of themselves, but are means towards a greater goal. God-building was a very important idea in Russia at the turn of the century that some of the key communist leaders also embraced before and after the revolution. For example, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first People's Commissar for education in the Soviet Union, who so empowered the avant-garde after the revolution, supported and wrote extensively on this idea.[18] God-building was inspired by Ludwig Feuerbach's "religion of humanity," which, in turn, is probably inspired by the strange secular religion Robespierre invented to replace Catholicism, following the revolution in France.[19]

"For the sake of the great struggle for life ... it is necessary for humanity to almost organically merge into an integral unity. Not a mechanical or chemical ... but a psychic, consciously emotional linking-together ... is in fact a religious emotion," writes Lunacharsky in *Religion and Socialism* in 1908. By the early 1920s, the anarchist, poet, and founder of biocosmism Alexader Svyatogor organized the Church of Free Labor in Moscow, with the support of the government as an attempt to create a new secular religion that would help build communism and cosmism.

I think what Fedorov proposed a few decades earlier is exactly the same project, albeit on a universal scale: when the entirety of the cosmos will be made sapient, united, and capable of thought and emotion, it will effectively be the same as God. However, this is fundamentally different from any kind of transcendence: cosmists aimed to transform

rather than transcend. For Fedorov, the force that enables this transformation is love, and perhaps this is the twist. He also referred to this as a work of art.

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Thanks to Hallie Ayres for transcribing the conversation and annotating it, and to Carlos Prieto for organizing the Zoom conversation as well as translating Anton Vidokle's films to Spanish.

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

1
Fedorov (1829–1903) worked as a librarian at the Rumiantsev Museum (now the Russian State Library). A collection of his essays was published posthumously by his followers in 1904 under a name *The Philosophy of the Common Task*. This book outlined the basic tenets of cosmism, underscoring the imperative to work toward resurrection and immortality for all.

2
Cited as the grandfather of the Soviet space program, Tsiolkovsky's (1857–1935) plethora of scientific research and philosophical musings laid the groundwork for astronautic theory and modern rocketry. Tsiolkovsky studied under Fedorov for three years at the Rumiantsev Museum.

3
Panpsychism rests between dualism, which distinguishes between the mind and matter but presents a fractured understanding of how the two interact, and physicalism, which offers a unified conception of the world but lacks an explanation for the emergence of consciousness. Panpsychism advocates for a vision of the world in which mentality and consciousness are innate and ubiquitous.

4
A key member of the Russian Futurist movement, Khlebnikov's (1885–1922) poems and plays are characterized by experiments with linguistics and translogical language. Together with Khlebnikov, Kruchyonykh (1886–1968) is credited with inventing zaum, a transnational language rooted in linguistic deconstruction and sound symbolism. The founder of biocosmism, Svyatogor (Alexander Agienko) (1886–1937) championed the belief that death was the source of social injustices and global antagonisms. Zabolotsky (1903–1958) cofounded the avant-garde group Oberiu, a collective dedicated to absurdist, futurist, and modernist art and aesthetics. A proponent of biocosmism, Yaroslavsky's (1896–1930) writings extended the definition to include immortality for all living beings. Highly critical of the Bolsheviks, he was eventually executed in the Solovki prison camp.

5
This argument stems from Boris Groys's writing on the subject, elaborated in the 2017 exhibition "Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism" at HKW in Berlin. See https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/art_without_death_russian_cosmism/start.php.

6
Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) founded the avant-garde art movement suprematism, which made use of basic geometric forms to convey spiritual and artistic feeling.

7
Affiliated with the constructivist movement, Rodchenko (1891–1956) worked in graphic design, photomontage, and photography as a means of social commentary after the Russian Revolution.

8
A painter and exhibition designer, Nikritin (1898–1965) founded and lead multiple research initiatives focused on the biomechanics of movement within the theatrical arts.

9
Written by Kruchyonykh in zaum, *Victory over the Sun* illustrates an endeavor to eradicate reason and time by deposing the sun. The opera was met with violent criticism when it premiered at Saint Petersburg's Luna Park in 1913.

10
Associated with the constructivist movement, Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) worked at the intersection of architecture and sculpture, guided by a utopian belief in the synthesis of art and technology. Conceived as the headquarters for the Communist International, the *Monument* (commonly known as "Tatlin's tower") was envisioned as a spiral iron framework surrounding a glass cube, cone, and cylinder stacked atop each other and rotating at different speeds. Though a model of the tower was exhibited at the Congress of the Soviets in 1920, the Soviet government's disdain for nonfigurative art impeded the structure from ever being realized.

11
Kazimir Malevich, "Suprematism: 34 Drawings," published on December 15, 1920.

12
The Polish science fiction writer and philosopher Stanisław Lem (1921–2006) published *Solaris* in 1961. The novel concerns a group of scientists and their failure to understand the inner machinations of the sentient planet Solaris.

13
Contrary to the theory of dualism, monism posits that reality and all its phenomena are reducible to one unit or principle with no independent parts.

14
See Harry T. Whelan, "The Use of NASA Light-Emitting Diode Near-Infrared Technology for Biostimulation," ntrs.nasa.gov https://ntrs.nasa.gov/search.jsp?R=20030001599.

15
Credited with cofounding Moscow conceptualism, alongside Ilya Kabakov, Monastyrski (born 1949) founded the performance art group Collective Actions to experiment with modes of spatiotemporal practice.

16
A writer, philosopher, and revolutionary, Bogdanov (1873–1928) cofounded (with Lenin) the Bolshevik party. He also founded the Institute for Hematology and Blood Transfusions in 1925–26 to research and experiment the biological potential of blood transfusions to aid in eternal youth and rejuvenation. He died after injecting himself with the blood of a student infected with malaria and tuberculosis. Alexander Chizhevsky (1897–1964) studied the effects of the sun and ionization on biology. Through research with electrically charged chandeliers, Chizhevsky discovered the beneficial effects on living beings of negatively charged ions in the air.

17
Developed by the Bolshevik sector of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, God-building was an enterprise that proposed appropriating the religious mechanisms of symbolism, ritual, and myth and repurposing them as vehicles for pro-communist propaganda that aggrandized science over the supernatural.

18
A Marxist revolutionary, Lunacharsky (1875–1933) occupied the role of People's Commissariat for Education from 1917 to 1929, during which time he oversaw an outpouring of avant-garde artistic production.

19
Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) expanded on theories of historical materialism and atheism by offering a critique of religion as the outward projection of human nature.

Ailton Krenak and Maurício Meirelles

Our Worlds Are at War

The following testimony by Ailton Krenak, a longtime indigenous activist and intellectual in Brazil, was originally published in the December 2019 issue of the Brazilian magazine Olympio: Literatura e Arte. *The testimony was related orally to José Eduardo Gonçalves and Maurício Meirelles, and then transcribed. It is preceded by a Foreword written by Meirelles, editor of* Olympio.

Foreword

Standing at the podium of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies,[1] speaking the white language perfectly, a young indigenous leader addresses the 1987 National Constituent Assembly with an unusual sort of speech. Having already been barred from entering the plenary in his typical dress, he wears casual Western clothes, a white three-piece suit lent to him by a deputy who is his friend, and holds a small container in his hands.

"I do not wish to disrupt the etiquette of this house with my demonstration, but I believe that ..." He pauses, and begins to scoop a dark paste from the container with his fingers, which he then spreads on his face. "I believe that you, honorable members, can no longer stand at a distance from your aggression motivated by economic power, by greed, by ignorance of what it means to be an indigenous people ..."[2]

Barely audible, a female deputy whispers: "But he is painting himself all black." It is genipap paste, used by many Brazilian indigenous ethnic groups for mourning rituals. The young man speaks slowly, but with determination: "I think that none of you could point to aspects or acts of the indigenous people of Brazil that put the life or the patrimony of any person, of any human group from this country at risk ..."

With a flat hand, he paints his cheeks, forehead, nose, and chin. Those in the room hear the sound of many cameras clicking. "A people that has always lived in the absence of riches, a people that lives in houses covered with thatch and sleeps on mats on the floor, cannot be identified, in any way, as a people that is the enemy of national interests, nor that puts any development at risk."

The young Krenak finishes painting himself, and delicately places the empty pot on the podium. His face, all black, is now the same color as his shining head of hair, highlighting his bright white eyes and teeth. "Indigenous people have moistened with their blood every hectare of the eight million square kilometers of Brazil, and you, honorable members, are witnesses to this." Thus, he courageously ends his speech. Before thanking the Constituents who observe him, stupefied, Ailton Krenak takes a long pause.

Denilson Baniwa, *Canoe Snake: Subway,* 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Though his eyes seek something in an uncertain future, his body is rigorously still, as though he had just returned from a shamanic trance.

That speech marked the emergence of one of the most important activists of the many indigenous movements in Brazil; Krenak's action was considered decisive for the inclusion of the guarantees of the rights of indigenous people in the 1988 Federal Constitution. In the same act, an artist was born: using his body as a territory for biopolitical action, Krenak anticipates, in that performance, some of the central preoccupations of contemporary art to come. He is also a writer who, loyal to the ways of his ancestors, weaves his stories at leisure, in the oral tradition – differently from whites, who write their words because their thought is full of forgetting, he says, quoting his friend Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman.[3] And, above all, Ailton Krenak is a thinker.

Passing through disciplines that pertain to the tradition of Western thought – anthropology, ethnography, philosophy – as well as operating in traditions that oppose themselves to the latter – such as indigenous history and culture, and traditional arts and crafts knowledges – Ailton is a cultural shaman. That is, he possesses the ability to cross the borders between indigenous and non-indigenous worlds, administering relations between them. This quality is also present in his speech; he uses the pronouns "we," "ours," and "us" to refer either to collective humanity, in an ample way, or specifically to groups of indigenous people, depending on the context in which Ailton includes himself.

Master of an undomesticated thought that moves agilely in many directions, he is surprised by no question, and reacts with mocking indifference to some of them. In truth, he elaborates a commentary that, often, will only be finished the next day, and takes the shape of a parabola. If we borrow his concept of collective persons – a "cultural body" that perpetuates itself from generation to generation through orally transmitted stories – we could attribute to him characteristics of his ancestors, as reported by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in his 1936 book *Raízes do Brasil* (*Roots of Brazil*): "Extremely versatile, they were incapable of certain ideas of order, constancy, and exactness."[4] Sophisticated and at the same time furtive, Krenak's ideas hide under apparently simple sentences, like when he is asked if culture is an intervention into nature: "No, nature is an *in*vention of culture" – a linguistic cannibalism of the rhetoric of Antônio Vieira (1608–97), in his Jesuit complaints about the inconstancy of the Indian soul: "Other peoples disbelieve until they believe; the Brasis [native Brazilians] do not believe even after believing."[5]

For Ailton, "by always being able to tell one more story, we postpone the end of the world." He did so with joy and patience – between puffs of *rapé* (snuff) from his wooden *tipi* pipe – over the two days of our meeting in Belo Horizonte, which resulted in the testimony below.

As he perhaps belongs to the category of "a people receptive to any shape but impossible to keep in one shape,"[6] to quote Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, a question that we interviewers consider inoffensive could have an unexpected effect, transforming the interviewee's docility into admonition: "Why are you laughing? Our worlds have been at war, from the beginning!" Seeing the astonished look of the interviewers, Ailton Krenak bursts out laughing and looks at us, in turn, with affection.

– Maurício Meirelles

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Nature Is the Creation of Culture

It is only possible to imagine nature if you are outside of it. How could a baby that is inside its mother's uterus imagine the mother? How could a seed imagine the fruit? It is from outside that one imagines the inside.

At a certain moment in history, the "civilized place" of humans conceived the idea of nature; it needed to name that which had no name. Thus, nature is an invention of culture, it is the creation of culture, and not something that comes before culture. And this had a huge utilitarian impact! "I separate myself from nature, and now I can dominate it." This notion must have arrived with the very idea of science. Science as a form of controlling nature, which comes to be treated as an organism that you can manipulate. And this is scandalous. Because once someone thinks this, they damn themselves, don't they? They leave that organism, cease to be nourished by the fantastic cosmic flux that creates life, and come to observe life from outside. And while humanity observes life from outside, they are damned to a sort of erosion.

I find it interesting that one expressive construction of modern thought is around the idea that nature and culture are in conflict with each other – many twentieth-century philosophers debated this idea. There is an enormous amount of writing on this topic, all of which is based on a confusion produced by thought that is logical, rational, Western. The scientific and technological disorientation that the West is now experiencing is the product of this separation between nature and culture.

Firstly, people create nature and separate themselves from it; then, they idealize it. For example, the conception of the Atlantic coastal forest, the Mata Atlântica, is considered part of this idealized nature. In reality, the Atlantic

coastal forest is a garden – a garden constructed and cultivated by Indians.

White People Love to Separate Themselves

I think that the concept of Amerindian perspectivism developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – the potential for different visions, from other places of existence besides the human – can also be applied in other contexts.[7] It is a very powerful concept to help us understand the time in which we are living. If people were not in the situation of being divorced from life with the planet, perhaps this concept would only be a product of knowledge without direct implication for our collective life, or the sustenance of life on earth. But, in the stage of divorce we are in, with humans detaching themselves from here like a caterpillar from a hot roof, disconnecting as if they did not have any empathy ...

It is absurd. It is as if a glass divider separated, on one side, the experience of the fruition of life, and on the other, the place from which we originate. This division reveals another, more profound divorce: the idea that humans are different from everything that exists on earth. And there is a type of person, a type of mentality, that detests the idea that people can live so involved in the daily life of the planet, without detaching ourselves from it. They think this idea weakens them, that it is a rejection of the imagined power of people to distinguish themselves from nature – to become people! – a rejection of this thing that white people love to do: to separate themselves.

Ecology Is to Be Within the Will of Nature

Recently, I met with a group of heirs from some very old, wealthy families. They said to me, "We want to create a fund to take our families' money out of circulation, because this money is financing the destruction of the planet. We have been thinking of buying land in the Amazon and giving it to the Indians." So, I told them: "Don't do it! You will wind up making the indigenous move to places that are not theirs. That are not them, that don't have the necessary ecology and their culture already within. You really want to detach? You cannot buy land, land is not a commodity."

At this meeting, I talked about Chief Seattle's letter.[8] Some time around 1850, the western frontier of the United States was already devouring everything. The American cancer had already metastasized, had left the East Coast and come to the Pacific, where the Seattle tribe lived. I went to learn about the economy of this group of indigenous people prior to the arrival of white Americans. At that time, they lived off salmon fishing. Their beach was divided with rocks. The waves threw fish onto the rocks, and that's how they would catch the fish. It is equivalent to an image described in a Caetano Veloso song: "An Indian raises his arm, opens his hand, and picks a cashew."[9] There was a time of year when the Seattle people fished. This involved the patience of looking for things. This is ecology: it is being inside the earth, within nature. Ecology is not you adapting nature to your will. It is you being inside the will of nature.

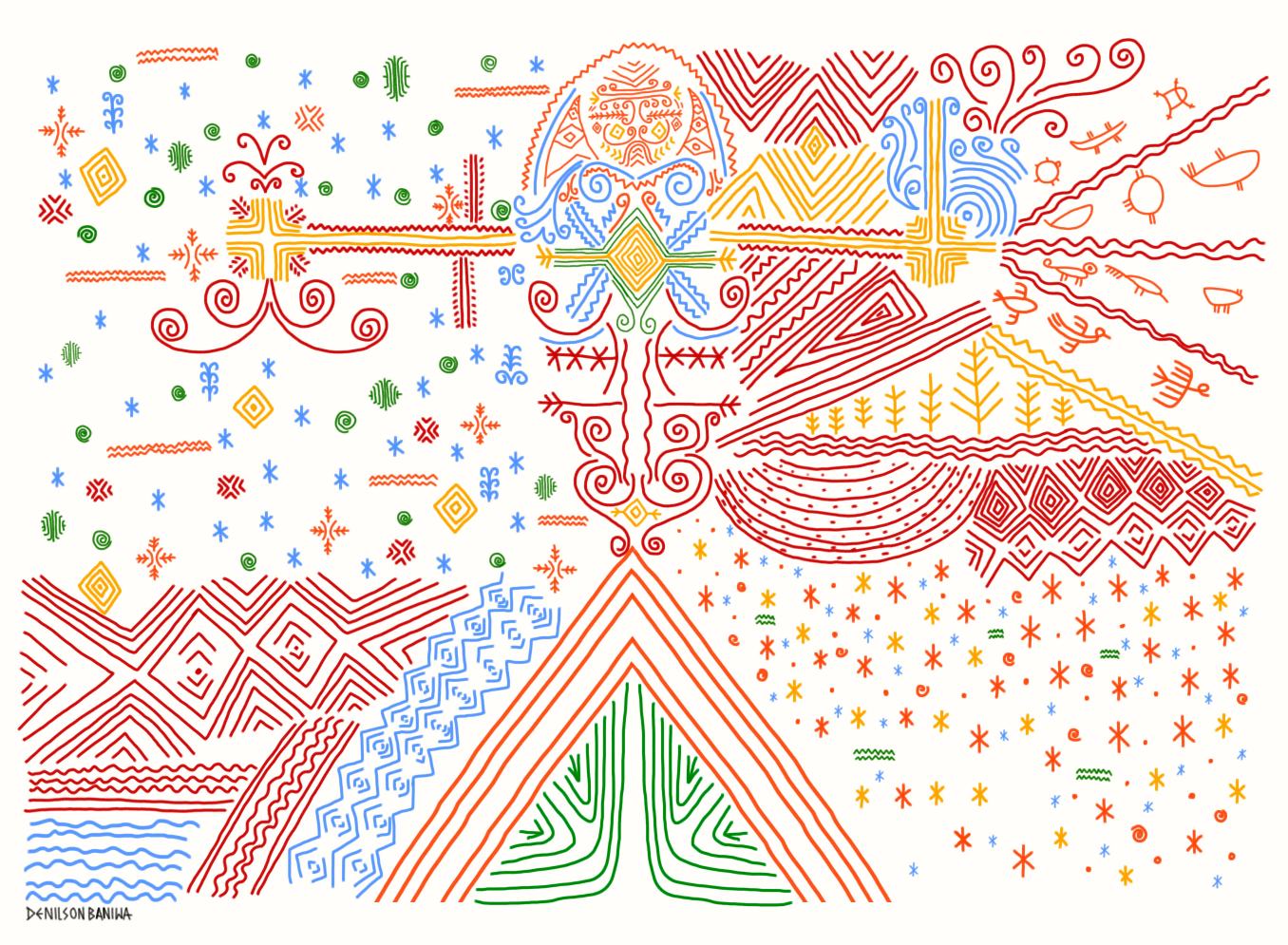
Is This a Body?

When the natives of this land saw the Portuguese for the first time, they had doubts about whether the Portuguese people had real bodies, that breathed, that sweat. A body! So, they took a few of the Europeans and drowned them. And waited to see if they would float, if they would smell. They waited and waited. They then began to suspect that yes, those *krai*, those whites, must have a body. "This could be a body," they thought. After setting a body to dry, they watched and said, "It seems like a body." They began to investigate the material, and the kind of spirit that inhabits those bodies. They asked, if one body was the same as that person's, because that person could be in another body, couldn't they? Or that person could be one of what the Krenaks [an indigenous group in Brazil] call *nandjon* – a ghost that has the nature of a supernatural being, or the ghost of a supernatural being. The natives investigated and discovered that the *krais* were not *nandjon*, but that they had souls of another quality: the master essences of gold, of iron, of weapons, of all the apparatuses associated with the tools whites use to meddle in the world.

Before we appropriated metal to make the tools, we were closer to our other ancestors, to all the other human groups that move the world only with their hands, with their bodies. When people began to string plumb lines into the earth, it produced the spirits that make the tools that impress their mark on the earth. It is they who are fabricating the Anthropocene.

The War to Exterminate the Botocudo Indians

In 1808, when Don João VI arrived in Brazil with the Portuguese court, the Doce River forest was like a wall of the *sertão* (backlands). It was necessary to conduct business over the Espinhaço Mountains so that the royal exchequer could control the flow of gold and diamonds between the mining region and the port of Parati. For this, the Crown created fear in the diamond and gold prospectors who came for land – they are the precursors of the deadly construction and collapse of the Mariana and Brumadinho dams[10] – saying that if they descended the mountains and became lost along the Santo Antonio River, near Piracicaba, and fell



Denilson Baniwa, *Creation of the Universe,* 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

into the Doce River, they would be devoured by the Botocudos.[11] Thus, the Botocudos began to be considered cannibals. But the Botocudos were hunter-gatherers who lived in the forest, bathed on the beaches, and ate cashew fruit. They experienced the cycles of nature profoundly, in a deep ecological relationship with the environment. This idea that we would kill and eat prospectors, miners, was a strategy of the Portuguese Crown so that the contraband trade in gold and precious stones would not take advantage of the natural exit by the coast of Espírito Santo, by the river – how would they monetize the entire Doce River forest? Thus, this image of the Botocudos beasts of prey hidden in the jungle was used strategically to keep that territory isolated.

The "lords of a province," who in that time had already depleted the greater part of the gold and diamond reserves on their own allotments, then went to Rio de Janeiro and said to Don João VI that it was necessary to open the entrance in the Doce River forest – they already knew that there was gold and precious stones there. The settlers were persistent and, promising that they would fill the king's coffers – which were empty – with the riches of the Doce River, succeeded in convincing Don João VI. At that moment, they entered the forest. But, consumed by fear of the Botocudos, they entered with an authorization of war: a letter dispatched by the king, declaring a war of extermination on the Botocudos of the Doce River.[12] After that moment, a large mining concern began to set up barracks on the tributaries of the Doce River, and, from Itabira down, everything became barracks grounds. Each one had to have one military guard, at the least. They brought soldiers from Bahia, from Rio de Janeiro, from São Paulo, from Goiás, and also recruited Indians into troops. They also took the kin of tribes close to the Krenak to be soldiers.[13]

Why did Don João VI accept the settlers' demand and make war against a people he did not know? This question should make sense since a bankrupt European Crown that had finished settling in these tropics authorized a war of extermination on the native peoples. As the settlers had promised the king gold and precious stones, that gesture – the Royal Letter that authorized war on the Botocudos – established a corrupt relationship: the Crown is corrupted by the settlers. And, together in this corruption, they set in motion a war to annihilate the original people, creating a false narrative that they were building a nation. And people believed it.

"Indian Plans"

In the years before the Constituent Assembly,[14] before the means to guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples had been created, we felt the need to show the government and institutions that were still full of the rancidity of the dictatorship, that they were absolutely mistaken in relation to our presence – that we were not the rearguard, but rather the vanguard. "You are completely wrong, your sustainability program is a lie," we told them. If we had not done this, the Constituent Assembly would have declared that the Indians were dead, end of story. At that time, there was discrimination even worse than today's – at that time, they wanted to declare us dead; now, they wish to kill us! There existed, for example, a saying in bad taste that if you were to go out to have a picnic and it rained, that would be "Indian plans"; if you were traveling and your car broke down on the road, that was "Indian plans," etc. So, language can be a vehicle for stereotyping, that secretes venom, can't it?

Today, an imbecile with similar negative potency arrives in a place of power and what does he do? Making a mockery of anthropological and archeological research, he says that "petrified poop of an Indian" gets in the way of the country's development.[15] How can we relate to a world like this, wherein completely insane topics occupy the state apparatus and begin using the system to destroy life?

But if we look at this through another poetics, we will come to understand that the Indians will win. Because, if this state apparatus, since colonialism, never managed to settle down and remains growling and biting all this time, then it is becoming a ghost. This shows that the Brazilian state still has not managed to overcome this question, and that we will win this moral assault. It simply has not yet surrendered – it fidgets, spits, kicks – but we will triumph in time. And there's no use wanting to negate this, because when the head of the nation makes a quip in bad taste about the petrified feces of Indians, he shows that he has not yet grown up, that he remains in the anal phase. The guy is still eating shit.

We Are Vile

I was in Roraima, on the border with Venezuela, with my Yanomami kinsman and with the Macuxi, the people from Raposa Serra do Sol.[16] During my trip home, I took my seat at the window of the plane, and beside me sat a man with a small briefcase in his hand, full of documents.

Right away, his presence infused the air with lack: it was the emptiness, the despair, the pain of a Venezuelan refugee. I sensed his distress as he expressed a wish to make a request of the flight attendant – water, or something else – but did not know how. He, who had not bathed in days, turned to me and said in Spanish: "I am Venezuelan, my name is Jesús

Denilson Baniwa, *World Grandmother,* 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Herrero. I am hungry." I told him that in just a bit they would be serving a snack. He looked anxiously down the aisle.

Jesús is a topographer and technician specializing in hydrology, but he could not find work in Venezuela for the past eight years. He had studied in Moscow, through an international partnership between the National University in Venezuela and a technological institute in Russia. When the snack cart arrived, which required payment, Jesús became completely frustrated: "I don't have cash. For seven days, I was in Pacaraima." In this city on the Brazilian side of the border, refugees are registered and hope to gain entrance to Brazil. He spent seven days there, sleeping in a shelter packed with people, until authorization manifested and he could get on a plane for Santa Catarina. Someone sent the ticket, which he will repay by working.

Beside me, Jesús was sinking into a void. "I can't let this guy get crushed like this," I thought, and I began to talk with him. I struck up a conversation about refreshing topics, mostly so that he would feel accepted, because I perceived that much of the suffering of refugees was that after they gained entry into Brazil, they were greatly mistreated. A national collection campaign had been set up, and when the donations arrived at Pacaraima, they were placed in a shed. The people on this side of the border went there and burned the shed. We set fire to storehouses of donations for suffering people and, eventually, set fire to the people themselves.[17] We are not "cordial," as Sergio Buarque de Holanda's theory goes, we are vile!

To Get Closer in Order to Learn

I don't believe that cities can be sustainable. Cities were born from the inspiration of ancient fortresses that served to protect human communities from bad weather, attacks by wild animals, and war. They are built as structures of contention, they are not fluid. In times of peace they become more permeable, but calling a place that confines millions of people "sustainable" uses a somewhat exaggerated poetic license. Some cities are true traps: if the energy supply there comes to an end, everyone dies – in hospitals, stuck in elevators, in the streets. Whites want to live sheltered in cities and do not perceive that the world around them is ending. They have been doing this for a long time and I don't know if they know how to live any other way. But it is possible to learn other forms of living.

My friend Nurit Bensusan sent me a beautiful letter about these other possibilities of living. She is a biologist and works on public policy in the area of biodiversity. She is Jewish, from one of the branches of the ancient Hebrews, and comes from a culture that already passed through Palestine, through Turkey, through many places. Following these migrations, she went to Western Europe and then arrived in Brazil to work in anthropology, with forests and indigenous peoples. It was as though she had landed on another planet. Little by little, she came closer to this planet. Today she considers herself an ex-human. Nurit imagined a situation in which she moved the same distance that the other moved – this other who is from outside the city, who is from the forest. Like the Indians. She walks toward them just as they walk toward her, until they each reach the limit of their approach. There they stop and observe each other. Her letter is about this, about this other possible place of interaction.

People Who Sprout from the Forest

The Amazon rainforest is a monument. A monument built over thousands of years. The ecology of that place in motion creates shapes, volumes – disperses all that beauty. The Amazon rainforest, the Atlantic coastal forest, the Serra do Mar, the Takrukkrak[18] are monuments that have, for us, the power to open a portal that accesses other visions of the world. The forest provides this. And yet, despite its materiality – its body that can be felled, uprooted as wood – the forest is not seen. In Brazil, there are cities that UNESCO has declared the cultural patrimony of humanity. Meanwhile, we destroy the Atlantic coastal forest, the Amazon rainforest. It's a game of illusion.

The fact that we live in the region of the world where it is still possible to *sprout* people from within the forest is magic. There are people who look at this as a type of delay in relation to the globalized world: "We should already have civilized everyone." But it is not a delay, it is a magic possibility! How wonderful that we can be taken by surprise when, at one of the borders with our neighbors – Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, for example – a collective of human beings springs up that was never registered or inventoried, speaking a strange language and comporting themselves in a totally extravagant manner, shouting and jumping in the middle of the forest. The last time that a previously uncontacted group was encountered was six years ago.

Ancestral Memory

My ancestors always lived in deep ecological relationship with nature. In the spring, a season they loved, the Botocudos ascended along the Doce River to the steep slopes of the Espinhaço Mountains to do the rites of passage for the young men – boys from nine to twelve years old, the age at which they pierce their lips and ears to

install labrets and earrings. The culmination of the period is September 22, when the sky is very high and the seasons pass from winter into spring. The mountains bloom, it's beautiful. The Botocudo families, having come from different hillsides, from the Serra da Piedade, traveled to the Espinhaço to experience this cycle deeply. There is a lot of inscription about this engraved on rocks throughout that entire region. Have you ever noticed, on the slopes of Conceição do Mato Dentro, how wonderful the Tabuleiro waterfall is? The slopes of the Tabuleiro are a tremendous library! Once I stopped there to watch the sunset, until it grew dark. I stayed looking at the different stories on those slopes. It is the history of the passage of our ancestors through those sites some thousands of years ago, as archeological studies have already confirmed. Our ancestors were writing on the slopes and shelters at the same time as other civilizations were also leaving their records and deeds.

Our history is interlaced with the history of the world. But the country throws away this history. People who travel to these places drive pickaxes into the boulders, pull up signs, hang a fossil of a bird, a fish, or a rock painting on the walls of their homes as though it were a souvenir bought on the beach. Each fragment, each piece that they pull up from those rocks is as if they ripped out a page or stole a book from the library. It is in blatant disregard for our ancestral memory. A disregard so large that the possibility of a reconciliation of our idea of peoplehood and nation with the land becomes rejected. It is as if there were a split, a divorce between the land and its people.

A Forest That Floats in Space, *Yvy marã e'ỹ*, and the Wormhole

According to Yanomami cosmology, we are living through a third version of the world. The first was extinguished because a taboo internal to their tradition was broken, and in that primordial world, the sky fell and split the earth. The sky, though it looks light, is very heavy; it can fall and split the earth. Since then, the shamans have dedicated themselves completely to maintaining the supports of the sky. They are like architects in this cosmic engineering of building supports for the sky.

Joseca Yanomami, prompted by Cláudia Andujar, who gave him pencils and colored pens, drew these supports of the sky to show how this idea takes shape.[19] You look, start thinking of the greatest contemporary artists: How is it that this Yanomami, who has never picked up a pen, makes a drawing like this? When Claudia saw the drawings, she felt completely fulfilled, because she discovered that now, among the Yanomami, there was a language that could dialogue with her photographs. She had been photographing the Yanomami and perceived that the language of photography did not make sense to them.

After that, she begins to dialogue with Yanomami thinking about the world, which is a complete transformation in the appearance of things. A tree or a piece of wood, for example: Joseca draws a suspended shape, resembling a spider web, with glowing things and antennas coming out of it, and tells you that this is, in fact, the forest. "But where are the roots, the ground?" There are none, the forest is in space. The Yanomami can perfectly imagine a forest floating in space. Because, for them, the forest is an organism, it does not come from earth, it is not the product of another event. The forest is an event itself. And if it comes to an end on the earth that we people know, it will still exist in another place. In a way, for the Yanomami, everything that exists in this world also exists in another place.

The Guarani also think like this. For them, this planet is a mirror, an imperfect world. Life is a journey heading toward a place called *Yvy marã e'ỹ*, which the Jesuits translated as "land without evils." The idea of "land without evils," of the promised land, is altered from the Christian idea, because in the Guarani worldview there was never a world that had been promised to someone. *Yvy marã e'ỹ* is a place *after*, a place that comes after the other one. A place that is nevertheless the image of this one, is nevertheless the mirror of a place to follow. The Guarani *pajés* (shamans) say that we live in an imperfect world, and because of this, our humanity is also imperfect. Living is the rite of crossing this imperfect earth, moved by a poetics of a place that is the mirror image of this one. And if we were to imagine the *nhandere* – the path that, leaving from that which is imperfect, seeks to come close to that which is not imperfect – a series of events will occur that, as the journey goes on, will bring an end to this image here and create another.

If you were to ask a Guarani, "Does this place you are heading exist?" They would say, "No." "And this place in which you are?" They would respond, "It is imperfect." "Okay, but you are escaping from an imperfect place and running to a place that does not yet exist?" They will say, "Yes, because it will only exist when this one here comes to an end." I find this wonderful! And mainly, I find the exercise of thinking this way to be wonderful.

In Yanomami cosmology, the *xapiri* are auxiliary spirits of the shaman. They can be a hummingbird, a tapir, a jaguar, a monkey, a flower, a plant, a liana vine – all of them are people and they interact with the shaman. These beings make exchanges, alliances, they invent

and cross worlds; and, while they are in movement, they move everything around them.

A shaman once told me this story:

Omama, the demiurge of the Yanomami, has a nephew who is the son-in-law of the sun. In that moment, I thought: "So the Yanomami have kin with the sun? Someone who is married to a person from the sun's family? I need to stay calm to understand if this sun he is talking about is the star up above, if it is the actual sun." Calmly, I went exploring this topic until he confirmed that it was the same sun.

I found this story wonderful because it shows that, for the Yanomami, there are beings that can negotiate with other entities, other existences, other cosmologies.

A shaman left this galaxy and went to another, completely unglued from ours. He tried to come back and could not: he fell into a kind of wormhole. He was sending messages, asking for help from the other shamans and from his *pajé* friends. He said that he had gotten lost and could not find the coordinates home.

It was a tremendous job for the shamans to bring him back. They succeeded, but he arrived defective. He spent the rest of his life sitting in the yard, sitting in the canoe. They had to place him in the sun, take him out of the sun. People would start talking, and he'd be there among them, silent, arranging little sticks on the ground.

It's quite dangerous to enter a swerve like this, isn't it?

×

Translated from the Portuguese by Hilary Kaplan.

Ailton Krenak was born in the Doce River valley in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil. A member of the Krenaki tribe, at seventeen years old he learned how to read and write, became a graphic producer and journalist, and dedicated himself to the indigenous movement in Brazil.

Maurício Meirelles is an architect and fiction writer. His books include *A Cidadela* (2019) and *Birigüi* (2016). He has also published articles in Brazilian newspapers and magazines. He is one of the founders and editor of *Olympio* literary and arts magazine, launched in 2018.

1
Brazil's congress is made up of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. – Trans.

2
A video of this action, an excerpt from the film *Índio Cidadão?*, is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWMHiwdbM_Q. – Trans.

3
Davi Kopenawa, with Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Harvard University Press, 2013). – Ed.

4
Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, *Roots of Brazil*, trans. G. Harvey Summ (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). – Trans.

5
Quoted in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul: The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in 16th-Century Brazil* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). – Ed.

6
Quoted in Pedro Neves Marques, "Introduction: The Forest and the School," in *The Forest and the School: Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?* ed. Pedro Neves Marques (Archive Books and Academy of Arts of the World, 2014–15), 27. – Ed.

7
"It refers to the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, 'according to which the universe is inhabited by different sorts of persons, human and nonhuman, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view.'" Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 229–30. Quotation also found in de Castro, "Perspectivism and Multinaturalism in Indigenous America," in *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul*.

8
The reply of Ts'ial-la-kum – who became known as Chief Seattle – to a proposal made in 1854 by the president of the United States, Franklin Pierce, to acquire the lands of the Suquamish and Duwamish Indians, in the present state of Washington, in the far northwestern US. The first version of the famous document – a transcription of the declaration of Ts'ial-la-kum, made by his friend, Dr. Henry Smith – was published in the newspaper *Seattle Sunday Star*, in 1887.

9
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bca8KmPXro8. – Ed.

10
The Mariana and Brumadinho dams collapsed in 2015 and 2019, respectively. Both dams were made of iron ore rejects, a useless byproduct of mining, and owned by VALE, a Brazilian mining company, one of the biggest companies in the industry. Together, the two accidents killed more than three hundred people and left a trail of environmental destruction that will be around for generations. Here, Ailton refers to the gold prospectors and miners metaphorically, to say that exploiting the land for valuable minerals has always been in conflict with the Amerindian way of life and their rights over the land they have always inhabited, particularly the Krenak people's way of life in the Doce River basin. The collapse of the Mariana dam is particularly central to the culture of the Krenak people and their recent history, because it deeply affected the whole Doce River valley – the river that, historically, provided their means of living. The Krenak people call the Doce River their grandfather – and now, a dying grandfather. – Ed.

11
"Botocudos" was a generic denomination the Portuguese colonizers gave to different indigenous groups belonging to the Macro-Jê language stock (a non-Tupi group), of diverse linguistic affiliations and geographic regions, the majority of whom wore *botoques*, labial and ear piercings. Here, Ailton refers to the indigenous peoples who lived in the region of the Doce River valley, in the present-day states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, considered ancestors of the Krenak people.

12
"You must consider begun an offensive war against these cannibalistic Indians that you will continue in the dry seasons every year and that will have no end, except when you have the joy of taking possession of their homes and persuading them with the superiority of my royal weapons in such a way that, moved by their rightful terror, they ask for peace, and submitting to the sweet yoke of the Laws and promising to live in society, may become useful vassals, as are the numerous varieties of Indians that, in these, my vast states of Brazil, are villagers and enjoy the happiness that is a necessary consequence of the social state … May all Botocudo Indians who present themselves with their weapons in any attack be considered prisoners of war; and may they be handed over to the service of the respective Commander for ten years, and as long as their ferocity lasts, and they can use them in their private service during that time and keep them with due security, even in iron chains, until they prove they have abandoned their cannibalism and atrocity … and you will inform me, via the Secretary of State for War and Foreign Affairs, of everything that will have happened and that concerns this objective, so that the reduction of the civilization of the Botocudo Indians succeeds, if possible, and of the other races of Indians that I highly recommend to you." Excerpt from the Carta Régia (Royal Letter) of May 13, 1808 that "mandates making war against the Botocudo Indians." See https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/carreg_sn/anteriores a1824/cartaregia-40169-13-maio-1808-572129-publicacaooriginal-95256-pe.html.

13
More than a century and a half later, the Brazilian state again takes advantage of native peoples to compose its military-repressive apparatus. The Indigenous Rural Guard (GRIN) was created by governmental regulation 231/69, on September 25, 1969, during the Brazilian military-civil dictatorship. It is made up of youth of various indigenous ethnicities, recruited directly in their villages, "with the mission of executing the ostensive policing of Indian reservations."

14
The National Constituent Assembly of 1988. Formed by deputies and senators of the Republic, and installed in the National Congress in February of the previous year, it was charged with elaborating a new democratic constitution for Brazil, after the end of the military-civil dictatorship of 1964–85.

15
Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil, referring to the environmental reports of FUNAI – the National Indian Foundation, a government body – which are necessary to the licensing of certain construction projects. This declaration was made on August 12, 2019, during the inauguration of a second lane of highway BR-116, in Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul.

16
Indigenous land located in the northeast of the state of Roraima, in the region of the borders with Venezuela and Guyana, destined for permanent possession by the indigenous groups Ingaricó, Macuxi, Patamona, Taurepangue, and Uapixana.

17
In the early hours of April 20, 1997, five youth from the upper class of Brasilia set fire to the indigenous leader Galdino Jesus dos Santos, of the Pataxó-hã-hã-hãe ethnicity. Galdino had come to Brasilia the previous day to discuss questions related to the demarcation of indigenous lands in the south of the state of Bahia, where the Pataxó live. Prevented from entering the boarding house in which he was staying, because of the time, Galdino slept in a bus shelter on South W3 Avenue.

18
Takrukkrak, meaning "Tall Rock" in the Borún language, is a mountain on the right bank of the Doce River, in the present-day town of Conselheiro Pena, in Minas Gerais, a region occupied ancestrally by the Krenak.

19
Joseca Yanomami is a contemporary artist, and Cláudia Andujar is a photographer. – Trans.

Kai Heron and Jodi Dean

Revolution or Ruin

We know how the first paragraph begins. We've read about the changing climate for over twenty years, infrequently at first and then daily until we couldn't deny it any longer. The world is burning. The oceans are heating up and acidifying. Species are dying in the Sixth Great Extinction. Koalas have replaced polar bears as the charismatic species whose dwindling numbers bring us to tears.[1] Millions are displaced and on the move, only to be met with fences, borders, and death.

We've read the news and it keeps getting worse. As pandemics spread, as the climate crisis continues unabated, the imperatives of capital prevent state action on anything but protecting banks and corporations. Since 1988, when human-induced climate change was officially recognized by the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the oil and gas sector has doubled its contribution to global warming. The industry emitted as much greenhouse gas over the twenty-eight years after 1988 as it had in the 237 years since the beginning of the industrial age.[2] Regular reports announce that the atmospheric impact of these emissions is manifesting faster than scientists previously expected.[3] The IPCC clock tells us that we have eleven years to prevent warming from rising more than 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels. Some places on earth already hit that mark in the summer of 2019.[4] "Climate change" – that innocuous moniker preferred by Republican political consultant Frank Lutz and adopted by the George W. Bush administration because "global warming" seemed too apocalyptic[5] – has moved from seeming far away and impossible to being here, now, and undeniable. This has not stopped the United States and Canada from providing economic relief funds in the wake of coronavirus to oil and gas companies.

Those least responsible for climate change, those who have suffered the most from capitalism's colonizing and imperial drive, are on the frontlines of the climate catastrophe. How to find clean water amidst never-ending drought? How to gather needed herbs, food, and firewood amidst rapid deforestation? How to survive the floods and fires? Centuries of colonialism, exploitation, and war undermine people's capacities to survive and thrive, hitting poor people, women, children, people with disabilities, already disadvantaged racialized and national minorities, and the elderly hardest of all. According to a UN report, "We risk a 'climate apartheid' scenario where the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer."[6] Capitalism has always permitted some to flourish by forcing others to fight for survival. The

Tsunami Ruins, Japan, 2011. Photo: CC BY 2.0/Yisris.

climate crisis – and now the coronavirus – intensifies these dynamics into a global class war. In Marx's words, "ruin or revolution is the watchword" for our times.[7]

After Denial

Such a sharpening of the contradictions should prove politically invigorating. It hasn't so far. The old division between climate-change deniers and the reality-based community has broken down, but a new one has yet to take political form. Even as the Trump administration works to dismantle environmental protections, particularly Obama-era regulations aimed at reducing emissions, the establishment recognizes global warming. From the United States Department of Defense to the global energy and banking sectors, there is wide acceptance of the fact that carbon emissions are leading to increased temperatures. The struggle now is around what to do and who should pay.

The old fight against climate denialism benefitted both sides – which may account for why some continue to struggle on this terrain. Denialism bought time for big carbon, enabling the industry's massive expansion across North America. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, the Obama administration constructed 29,604 miles of pipeline (enough to circumvent the earth and then some).[8] Perhaps less obvious was denialism's benefit to the environmental movement: opposing climate denial enabled environmentalists to become mainstream and build a broad coalition inclusive of scientists, indigenous rights activists, and proponents of social justice. Allied with science, environmentalists shed their eco-hippy personae to become representatives of a fact-based critique of mass consumption. Commodity culture wasn't only spiritually deadening; global supply chains' dependence on carbon-based energy means that unfettered consumption directly impacts life on earth. Standing Rock Water Protectors, to use but one example, pushed the leadership of indigenous people to national and international prominence as they forged collective opposition to pipelines and fracking. Attention to sacrifice zones, slow death, and the persistent deprivations of environmental racism helped environmentalists move beyond the elitist image long associated with conservationism. The patient work of building an alliance against climate change denial and the racist, colonialist, capitalist system it sought to preserve produced an inclusive and rhetorically powerful environmental justice movement.

Although the climate change debate has moved beyond the division between deniers and believers, some progressives remain attached to denial. Instead of fighting on the new terrain produced by widespread acknowledgement of the fact of climate change, they displace denial into their own arguments, shielding themselves from the overwhelming burden of action. While no one seriously denies climate change anymore, progressives have found new – and often quite creative – ways to deny climate change's true political consequences, guaranteeing that nothing essential has to change.

Progressive Denial

Some progressives have decided that ruin is inevitable. We just need to accept it. These progressives continue to present the most pressing problem now as climate catastrophe denialism. The task at hand, we are told, is psychological. For example, Jem Bendell's 2018 "Deep Adaptation Agenda" takes the inevitability of societal collapse to be a matter not of physical infrastructure and energy sources but of human values and psychology.[9] Climate change is like getting cancer: it forces a massive reevaluation of what is important in life. The failure to accept the climate catastrophe masks a deeper failure to develop a better relation to the earth.

Five years before Bendell published his deep adaptation agenda, Roy Scranton had already presented the task at hand as learning how to die.[10] In a Stoicism refitted for the Anthropocene, Scranton argued that we have to accept that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. This acceptance will enable us to detach ourselves from false hopes and fruitless plans. It will let us free ourselves from fear.

Scranton and Bendell write in terms of a civilizational us, a "we" of shared values, metaphysics, and investment in the privileges of the carbon economy. There's no class struggle, no inequality of responsibility for or capacity to respond to the fires, droughts, floods, and storms of a rapidly changing planet. Politics disappears, replaced by the individual's psychological capacity to acknowledge the worst and respond ethically, that is, reflectively.

Less metaphysical, although equally resigned to planetary ruin, is Jonathan Franzen. For Franzen, any hope of avoiding civilizational catastrophe is misguided, even harmful, leading to misplaced efforts and broken dreams. To think that we might build new transportation and energy systems, much less replace capitalist competition with communist planning, is a pipe dream – futile and delusional. We need accumulated capital in order to weather the fires, hurricanes, droughts and other emergencies as they increase in frequency and furor. The best we can do is buttress the status quo, "promoting respect for laws and their enforcement," while also advocating for gun control and racial and gender equality.[11] Our best

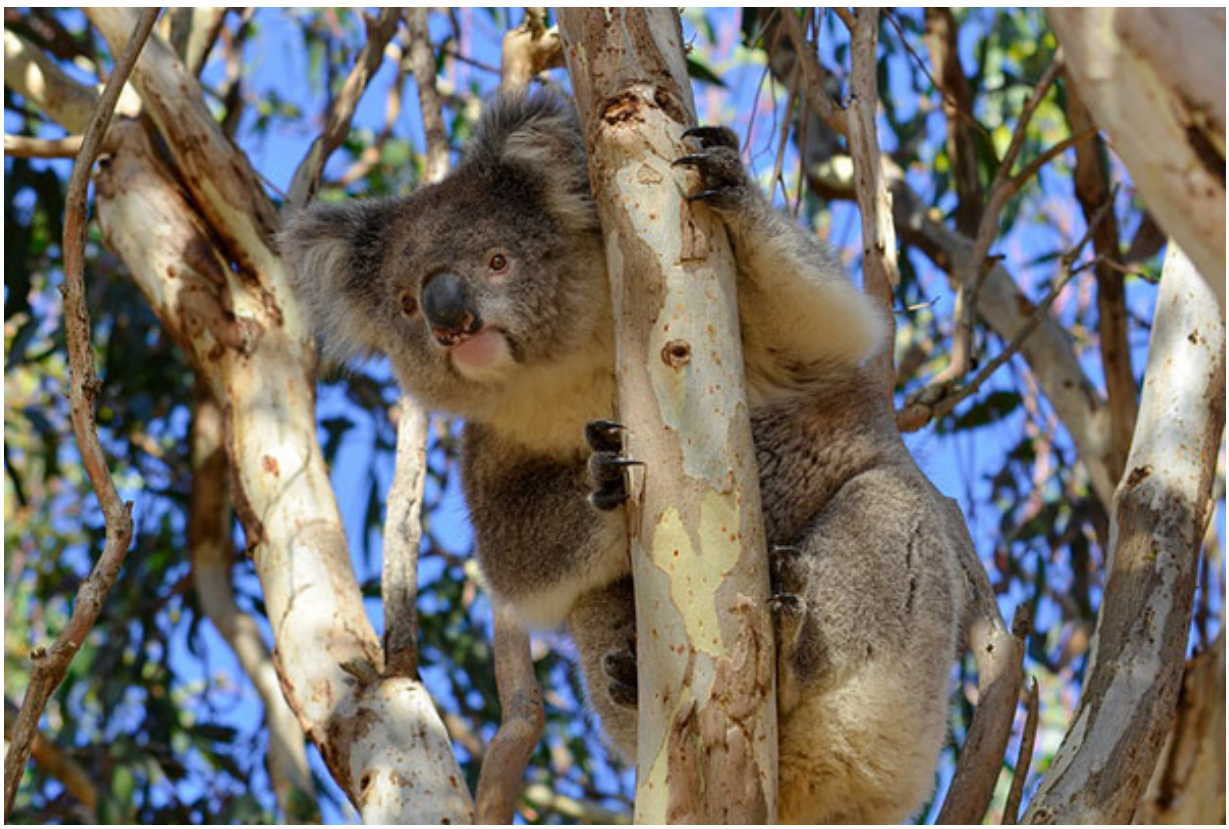
course, in other words, is to follow the liberal line, not make a fuss, and be sure to remain on good terms with the police. If Bendell's and Scranton's embrace of climate catastrophe means that everything changes, Franzen's means that nothing does. Because there is nothing we can do, there is little to be done, apart from what we would be doing anyway. The little to be done, for Franzen as well as Bendell and Scranton, is to combat climate catastrophe denialism, making sure that people comprehend just how catastrophic the situation really is.

Other progressives have rightly refused to join Bendell, Scranton, and Franzen in their embrace of eco-nihilism. David Wallace-Wells and Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, have argued that it is not too late to take action. Yet in their different ways these authors end up as proponents of a new kind of climate denialism. The eco-nihilist denial that there is anything to be done is replaced by a denial of the class character of global warming.

In his 2019 bestseller *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Wallace-Wells explains in great detail how the world's inhabitants will suffer on a warming planet. "It's worse, much worse, than you think," the book begins. Wallace-Wells wants a falsely universalized "us" to feel the panic of

comprehension as the severity of the crisis settles in. This panic, he thinks, will spur "us" into action. But the problem he addresses – awareness that action is needed – is no longer the issue. What is needed is a politics, and here Wallace-Wells comes up lacking. Now is not the time, he argues, to hold anyone in particular responsible for our climate calamity: "The burden of responsibility is too great to be shouldered by a few, however comforting it is to think that all that is needed is for a few villains to fall."[12]

For Wallace-Wells, ecological devastation has not been wrought upon the few by the many. Rather, "each of us imposes some suffering on our future selves every time we flip a switch, buy a plane ticket, or fail to vote."[13] Never mind that 1.2 billion people today have little to no access to electricity. Or that 80 percent of the world's population has never flown. Or, most egregiously, that ExxonMobil executives already knew that their industry was destroying the planet in 1977 but chose to hide their findings and fund climate change–denying research because there was money to be made in killing future generations.[14] To blame everyone equally in the face of such extreme inequality is to take the side of fossil capital. It denies rather than clarifies the



Koala poses for the camera in Vivonne Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia, Australia. Photo: Chris Fithall/CC BY 2.0

Freddie Lane of the Lummi Nation leads a totem pole blessing ceremony at the opening of “Kwel’ Hoy: Many Struggles, One Front,” an exhibition by the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and The Natural History Museum at The Watershed Center, a science education and advocacy center outside of Princeton, New Jersey in 2018. Connecting the science community’s efforts to protect the local watershed from the proposed PennEast Pipeline to the nearby Ramapough Lenape Nation’s struggle to stop the Pilgrim Pipeline, and the Lummi’s struggles to protect the waters of the Pacific Northwest from oil tankers and pipelines, the exhibition was one stop of a cross-country tour, an evolving museum exhibition and series of public programs uplifting efforts to protect water, land, and our collective future. Photo: Emmanuel Abreu, courtesy of Not An Alternative/The Natural History Museum.

obvious: the climate crisis is a space of class struggle.

Because Wallace-Wells does not see the classed character of climate breakdown he is on the wrong side again when it comes to suggestions about mitigating its effects. He admits that he doesn't "have a firm perspective" on whether capitalism can solve the climate crisis and yet he expresses an "intuition" – a kind of liberal environmentalist spidey sense – that "we don't need to abandon the prospect of economic growth to get a handle on climate change."[15]

Like Wallace-Wells, Chakrabarty denies the true political stakes of climate breakdown. He begins by asking the right question: "If the rich could simply buy their way out of this crisis and only the poor suffered, why would the rich nations do anything about global warming unless the poor of the world (including the poor of the rich nations) were powerful enough to force them?" But he comes to the wrong conclusion. Chakrabarty reasons that since "such power on the part of the poor is clearly not in evidence" and since the rich nations are not "known for their altruism," "a better case for rich nations and classes to act on climate change … is couched in terms of their enlightened self-interest." He thinks the rich simply need to be persuaded that it's in their interest to get behind efforts to address climate change. His argument has more in common with bourgeois political economist Adam Smith than it does with the fight for social and climate justice. Like Smith's "invisible hand," it assumes that the self-interest of the capitalist class can be harnessed for the common good, that the "natural laws" of market competition have benevolent consequences.

Such thinking underestimates how much money there is to be made in a warming world. Mining companies buy land in Greenland with the knowledge that melting ice will reveal new mineral and oil reserves.[16] Private security firms prepare to defend wealthy clients from civil unrest caused by droughts, floods, and famines.[17] Dutch engineering companies sell flood-management expertise and plans for floating cities.[18] Wealthy investors buy vast swathes of farmland in the Global South in hope of cashing in when droughts make arable land scarce.[19] Many millions will die from the effects of global warming and capitalists are counting on it.

Capital's self-expanding logic is indifferent to death. This is capitalism's history and present. Investors and conservative opinion leaders prioritizing the capitalist economy over public health is one example. The refusal of Amazon to provide basic cleaning of its warehouses and personal protective equipment to its workers is another. The "enlightened self-interest" of the capitalist class is a fantasy that masks an underlying acceptance of exploitation, dispossession, and imperialism. Fundamental change is achieved through force, through class struggle, and through the agency of the oppressed.

Progressive intellectuals are not the only ones who deny that the climate crisis is political. Extinction Rebellion (XR), one of today's most prominent environmental movements, argues that climate science speaks for itself and that politics gets in the way of action. The movement thus calls for a "move beyond politics."[20] The result is a denial of politics and a denial of responsibility.

XR describes itself as an "international apolitical network using non-violent direct action to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency."[21] As its cofounder, Roger Hallam, explains in his pamphlet *Common Sense for the 21st Century*, the movement adopts an "apolitical" position in the hope of transcending bourgeois parliamentarism and social-movement factionalism.[22] Hallam hopes to shift the climate crisis from a *political* issue to a *moral* one. He describes governmental inaction on climate change not as the conscious and strategic political decision to put profit before people and planet, but as a "moral failure." Similarly, he presents the fight for social and ecological justice not as part of a mass working class movement but in terms of individual moral feeling.[23]

To declare oneself "beyond politics" does not erase the reality of politics. In fact, one of the strange things about politics is that the more you try to go beyond it, the more caught up in it you are. This is a lesson that XR should have learned when critics exposed its blindness to the politics of race, disability, and class, but it didn't.[24] XR's moralism defaults to a white petit-bourgeois liberalism that conforms perfectly to the dominant ideology of our times: politics is bad because it is divisive, because it asks us to choose sides, to name our comrades and our enemies. Most of all, politics is hard because it asks us to take and wield power, to be disciplined, focused, and clear-eyed about what we hope to achieve. It will always be easier – and no doubt more immediately gratifying – to cohere an apolitical movement around an ill-defined set of goals with no real enemies.[25]

The Political Climate

Few are persuaded by the denial of the political nature of climate change. Persistent mobilization by grassroots activists has placed climate clearly on the political agenda. Polls in the UK and the

Climate Lenin atop Hobbes'frontispiece from *Leviathan* (1651) depicting sovereignty represented by a crown figure composed of its subjects.

US indicate that voters recognize climate change as a matter of politics: it's an issue that simultaneously divides and necessitates a political response. Moreover, as is clear to nearly everyone, the scale of the catastrophe requires a state response.

The current most compelling framework for such a response is the Green New Deal (GND). As the leading progressive state-based response from US Democrats, the UK's Labour Party, the Spanish Socialist Party, and others, the GND will play a huge part in the climate struggle over the next few years. In contrast to the failed neoliberal attempt to address rising CO2 levels by creating a market for carbon credits, the GND puts forward a green Keynesianism that places public job creation and enhanced social welfare at the center of its decarbonization strategy.

According to John Bellamy Foster, the term "Green New Deal" was coined in a 2007 meeting "between Colin Hines, former head of Greenpeace's International Economics unit, and *Guardian* economics editor Larry Elliott."[26] Hines's term for an FDR-style state program was also used by *New York Times* columnist and corporate hack Thomas Friedman for an eco-modernist, technocratic green capitalism. Over the next few years, the UN Environment Development Program and the Green European Foundation published similar proposals for a mildly reformed green capitalism. More recently, a radicalized version has been pushed by groups like Commonwealth, which advocates for democratic ownership, and the Climate Justice Alliance, which fights for environmental justice for frontline communities. This new GND, which took shape as a grassroots strategy during Jill Stein's Green Party presidential campaigns in the US, linked the response to the climate crisis to the imperative of responding to the social crisis. The Stein campaign highlighted the role of US imperialism in both: not only is the US military the largest institutional carbon emitter on the planet, and not only does US militarism destabilize and immiserate millions across the planet, but cutting the military budget could pay for new energy infrastructure and decrease emissions in one go. Demilitarization – defunding the military and the police – is essential to climate justice.

Bernie Sanders's version of the GND includes Stein's anti-imperialist proposals. It also, as Alyssa Batisstoni and Thea Riofrancos point out, promotes regenerative agriculture, prioritizes a just transition, treats energy as a public good, and holds the fossil fuel sector accountable for climate change.[27] This last provision is worth considering in some detail. The section of Sanders's GND statement titled "End the Greed of the Fossil Fuel Industry and Hold Them Accountable" has seventeen separate proposals. These include banning fracking and mountaintop-removal coal mining, banning imports and exports of fossil fuels, banning offshore drilling, ending fossil fuel extraction on public lands, ending fossil fuel subsidies, and ending new fossil fuel infrastructure permits. Additional measures raise taxes "on corporate polluters' and investors' fossil fuel income and wealth," and raise and enforce EPA penalties on fossil fuel–generated pollution. They pledge to bring criminal and civil suits against the fossil fuel industry and make it pay for the damages it has caused.[28] Altogether the proposals wage a fierce battle against big carbon, doing everything but nationalizing the industry.

Given the radical nature of the measures proposed to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable, why doesn't Sanders go all the way and propose to nationalize the industry, dismantling or restructuring it in the service of clean energy? After all, the plan invites the combined fury of the entirety of the capitalist class, threatening their profits, stranding their assets, and undermining their stock valuations. The answer must be that Sanders needs the carbon sector to survive, at least for a while. His GND plan is built on a contradiction: it requires the continued existence of the corporations responsible for climate change because it wants to make those corporations pay for the response. If the corporations were nationalized, or if they collapsed too quickly, they wouldn't be able to pay. This contradiction is profound, much more disturbing than the tension between class war and green growth. If the oil and gas sector pays for the collective response to the climate crisis, then it cannot be abolished. In effect, the GND ends up on the same side as disaster capitalism's climate change profiteers. Green social democrats end up having to defend the very industry that is destroying the planet.

The UK Labour Party made its version of the Green New Deal, the "Green Industrial Revolution" (GIR), a central plank of its 2019 election manifesto.[29] The policy is unquestionably the most radical piece of climate legislation the UK has seen from a major political party. It promises more than one million green jobs, nationalized and affordable energy and transport sectors, a major buildout of renewable energy infrastructure, a ban on fracking, and an end to all UK Export Finance support for fossil fuel projects. Corbyn's Labour Party also promised to decarbonize the UK's energy sector – but not the whole economy – by the end of the 2030s, a full decade before the UK Conservative Party has proposed to. Had Labour won the 2019 election these policies would have transformed the UK for the better.

Nevertheless, like its US counterpart, Labour's GIR is an effort to square decarbonization and global climate justice with a nationalist project of growth and development predicated on an exploitative system of wealth and resource extraction from the Third World. Labour's manifesto explains that it plans to fund the GIR through a greenwashed public financial sector and taxes on wealth and capital. This neo-Keynesian approach is less immediately contradictory than Sanders's GND, but Labour also aims to fund decarbonization by becoming a world leader in green technology and the provision of green loan programs to the Third World, while exploiting the Third World for the raw materials – rare earth minerals, copper, lithium, and more – that Labour's industrialized transition demands.[30] As Cooperation Jackson's Kali Akuno argues in a different context, this amounts to a kind of green imperialism.[31] The plan is to profit from the global transition to a post-carbon economy by doing what the ecologically destructive capitalist core has always done: extract raw materials and wealth from the world's periphery. Little has changed, it seems, since Frantz Fanon first wrote that "Europe is the creation of the Third World" six decades ago.

Many involved in the progressive wings of the Democratic and Labour Parties are aware of these contradictions. And yet they deny their political consequences. Like Roosevelt's New Deal before them, the GND and the GIR try to forge a social compromise between the exploiters and the exploited, the polluters and the polluted. Rather than naming the climate crisis as a space of class struggle – and following through with the consequences of this diagnosis – these policies aim to smooth over the cracks that are appearing in capital's edifice as we hurtle headfirst into a warming world. By masking the brutal, exploitative, and unsustainable logic of capital accumulation, both plans serve an ideological function. They promise those of us in the imperialist core that nothing essential has to change as long as we transition from fossil-fueled capitalism and fossil-fueled imperialism to a greener capitalism and a greener imperialism.[32] Climate breakdown demands that relations between the capitalist core and the super-exploited periphery be radically transformed. If we want to avert further compounding disaster we must abolish this distinction entirely. "Green growth" won't cut it.[33] A "steady-state economy" won't cut it. We need to break from capitalism. It really is ruin or revolution.

Seizing the Means, Seizing the State

The green neo-Keynesianism of the GND and GIR is a dead end, but it would be a mistake to conclude that there is nothing to learn from these plans. Thea Riofrancos calls such left conclusions a "politics of pure negation."[34] With this she has in mind views like those expressed by Jasper Bernes and Joshua Clover who have argued that the GND is a materially unrealizable distraction. These authors think the left should critique the GND and move on. But to what? Yes, to revolution – no disagreement from us. But to build what? And how? Here we agree with Riofrancos that fully dismissing the GND and GIR is "neither empirically sound nor politically strategic" even as we reject her proposed alternative of "critical support."

For Riofrancos, a politics of pure negation is unhelpful because it mistakes the GND for a "prepackaged solution" to the climate crisis that one either accepts or rejects wholesale. She proposes that the plan is better thought of as an ever-changing "terrain of struggle" with "the potential to unleash desires and transform identities" and reasons that if the final shape of the GND is still to be decided, then to reject it is to cede important territory to fossil capital. As an alternative, she suggests that we "take our cue from social movements that adopt a stance of critical support, embracing the political opening afforded by the Green New Deal while at the same time contesting some of its specific elements, thus pushing up against and expanding the horizon of possibility."[35]

"Critical support" for the GND is as unsatisfactory as a politics of "pure negation." Like all democratic socialist strategy, it subordinates working class struggle to the task of electing progressive candidates. It gives up on the left's revolutionary tradition to focus instead on the more "realistic" task of agitating for gradual leftward shifts in the Overton window. As with all political strategies, the efficacy of democratic socialism rests on the achievability of its aims. While Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour's leader in 2015 and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's success in 2018 gave democratic socialism a boost, the Democratic National Committee's opposition to Bernie Sanders and the 2019 UK election have shown the limits of mainstream parties' tolerance for socialism. To think it possible to implement a progressive GND with the DNC that we have, the Supreme Court that we have, the House of Lords that we have, or the patterns of property and land ownership that we have – that is to say, with the capitalist state that we have – is to assume that the institutions of ruling class power can be used for mass benefit without removing the ruling class. Riofrancos proposes that "extra-parliamentary, disruptive action from below" should be combined with "creative experimentation with

Climate Lenin intervenes in Mann and Wainright's *Climate Leviathan* diagram, from the eponymous 2018 book.

institutions and policies," but surely by now – in the midst of compounding crises – we should be beyond experimenting with bourgeois institutions on bourgeois terms.

Riofrancos's "critical support" excludes the option of building towards revolution. As her argument unfolds, it moves from defending the GND as *an* important site of struggle to arguing that it is *the* site of struggle. To question the GND's electoralism is to make a choice for "resignation cloaked in realism," to acquiesce to an endless "waiting for [the] ever-deferred moment of rupture." The obvious but unspoken third option here, though, is to build toward the moment of "rupture," or more concretely the seizure of power, *outside* of the Democratic or Labour Parties. No doubt this option remains unspoken because it is too "unrealistic," too undemocratic, and too "authoritarian" for democratic socialists to countenance.[36]

Let's look at this third option more closely. To build towards an eco-communist revolution, we need to avoid both a politics of pure negation and a politics of "critical affirmation." As Marx argued, revolutions need dialectics. They need us to find what Fredric Jameson calls the "dialectical ambivalence" in capitalism. This means training ourselves to locate aspects of the present that point beyond themselves and towards the communist horizon. Lenin did precisely this after the outbreak of the First World War. Rather than joining with the majority of the socialist parties of the Second International in capitulating to imperialist war, and rather than wallowing in melancholia following the betrayal of so many of his German comrades as they voted for war credits, Lenin saw in the war an opportunity for revolutionary advance. Those interested in the emancipation of the working class needed to fight not for peace but for the dialectical conversion of nationalist war to civil war.[37] The war, and the collapse of the Second International, was the opportunity for something new.

What would it mean to think dialectically about the GND? We think it would mean stripping the policy's reformist *content* away from its revolutionary *form*. For decades environmental movements in the capitalist core have busied themselves fighting for local solutions to global problems: cooperatives, local currencies, urban agriculture, and ethical consumerism. As these experiments blossomed, the climate crisis continued unabated. More pipelines were built, more indigenous land was stolen, more fires raged, and more species flickered out of existence.

In their *form* the GND and GIR put localism aside. Both recognize that the climate crisis demands a state-led, centrally planned, and global response. They take for granted that we need a state to intervene on behalf of nature and workers against capital. The fact that the GND and GIR promise to do this is what makes capitalists fear them.[38] Those who are excited about the promise of the GND – such as Riofrancos – have similarly turned towards the state as a terrain of struggle and a locus of power. Consciously or not, these movements have learned from the failures of Climate Camp, Occupy, and the Movement of Squares. It is not enough to suspend the normal running of things. Taking responsibility means taking power and organizing society in what Marx called the interests of "freely associated workers," or more controversially, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." The struggles to implement the GND and GIR tell us that environmentalists are increasingly aware of the need to seize the state – and the need to develop a fighting organization with the capacity to do so.

Against State Denialism

Ironically, at almost the precise moment that progressive movements have become conscious of the necessity of a climate response operating at the necessary scale, the Marxist left has taken a state-phobic turn. Consider "disaster communism."[39] Confronted with the choice between ruin or revolution, disaster communism opts for ruin as the path to revolution – without considering the form of association necessary to ensure that the revolution ushers in a more equal, just, and sustainable world rather than insulated groups struggling with each other over resources. In lieu of the revolutionary subject emphasized in the Marxist tradition, disaster communism turns to climate breakdown as the agent of history.

Drawing on Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, a study of how practices of mutual aid and collectivity arise in the aftermath of crises, disaster communists argue that we do not need to seize the state because the state will be washed away, along with the capitalist system itself, as the full force of the climate crisis crashes down around us. While Solnit emphasizes the ephemerality of "disaster communities," disaster communists ask how these communities might be sustained and even flourish well beyond the punctual point of a climatic disaster wrought by capitalism. Theirs is a vision of communism arising, triumphantly, from capital's ashes. Vision may be too strong a term here: for the most part, disaster communism is a hope, a screen covering over the need for organization and planning at a scale that can produce a form of life suitable for billions of people and nonhuman species.

Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic

illustrate the point. Even as mobilized volunteers and mutual aid can meet real needs by distributing meals, assisting neighbors, and coordinating webinars, they are inadequate to the most demanding tasks of developing and administering tests for the virus, securing hospital beds in intensive care units, producing and distributing respirators, and providing adequate protective equipment at the necessary scale. Mutual aid is inspiring, but it's not enough – it can't stop the hoarders and profiteers, pay hospital bills and unemployment insurance, release prisoners and detainees. It doesn't scale, particularly when the prevailing logic comes from the market. That capital accumulation takes place through dispossession as well as exploitation brings home the real limit of mutual aid: poor and working people do not own the means of production and therefore production does not meet social needs.

Furthermore, in extreme capitalist countries like the US and the UK, social and political diversity means that many do not voluntarily comply with public health recommendations. Employers insist that employees come to work. Students spend spring break at the beach. Individuals approach their own situations in terms of exceptions, reasons why they don't need to comply with directives. Orders from the state don't eliminate all these exceptions. But they reduce them substantially, most significantly by preventing employers from requiring workers to put themselves at risk. Were the state used as an instrument of working class power, it would, at a minimum, guarantee that workers would continue to be paid, that the health and well-being of people would be the focus of government attention. The pandemic demonstrates a truth that the left's responses to climate change have been slow to acknowledge: global problems require a centrally planned response with all the tools that are at the disposal of the state. Failing to seize hospitals, industry, banks, and logistical networks from the capitalist class results in needless death – and gives a green light to disaster capitalism.

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright's 2018 book *Climate Leviathan* provides another state-phobic response to the climate crisis. Mann and Wainwright predict four possible resolutions to the climate crisis. The first is "Climate Leviathan." This is a global sovereign power that would act in the interests of capitalist states and global capital to limit the effects of climate breakdown. This is effectively the scenario hoped for by Chakrabarty. The second is "Climate Behemoth." Here, states cannot agree to constitute a global sovereign power and so the crisis is tackled by international capital in the interests of international capital. The third is "Climate Mao." In this scenario a single authoritarian sovereign power, most likely China, leads global mitigation and adaptation efforts. Finally, their fourth and preferred scenario is "Climate X." This would be a so-far-nonexistent social movement that struggles to resolve the crisis in a way that is simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-sovereign.

Alyssa Battistoni and Patrick Bigger have already written compelling Marxist critiques of *Climate Leviathan*.[40] We don't need to rehearse them here. We note, however, that responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have resembled Climate Behemoth and Climate Mao. While the US, UK, and EU have been slow to use state power to coordinate either within or among the themselves, instead following the dictates and interests of capital in their structuring of economic responses to the pandemic, China has modeled both rigorous state action with respect to quarantines and international leadership with respect to provision of medical aid. What's important for our argument here is that Mann and Wainwright's state denialism prevents them from conceiving the state as a form for the collective power of working people, an instrument through which we remake the economy in the service of human and nonhuman life.

Jasper Bernes offers a third state-phobic Marxist response to the climate crisis. A proponent of communization theory, Bernes argues that communism means "the immediate abolition of money and wages, of state power, and of administrative centralization."[41] Absent something like a state, how is a just response to the climate crisis even possible? Should we assume that it will spontaneously emerge as a result of disparate local disaster communisms? Should we assume that access to food, water, living space, and capacities for self-defense will be equally distributed, that by some miracle the immediate abolition of money and wages will leave everyone in the same position? The pandemic gives us insight into the inability of the communization approach to respond to catastrophe: when millions who have been dependent on the wage are without it, they require centralized state power to seize the means of production and distribution and administer both on the scale necessary to meet social needs. The issue isn't the power of the state. It's the class wielding state power.

Climate Lenin

Lenin recognized the difference between confiscation and socialization, or, more in keeping with the terms here, between abolition and communism. The latter requires creative, collective cooperation, which has to be

organized. Through the reorganization of the modes and relations of production and reproduction, the many come to exercise control over their lives and work. Neither revolution nor communism occurs in a single moment. For communists, revolution is the process of building communism. The negation of prior practices, assumptions, and institutions doesn't happen overnight. Acknowledging the "long haul" is not to capitulate to capitalism or social democracy. It is how we *refuse* to capitulate to capitalism and democracy and accept the complexity of the task of building free societies and the revolutionary organizations adequate to that task.

One of the lessons Lenin took from the experience of the Paris Commune was the revolutionary role of the state. He applied this lesson to the setting in which the Bolsheviks found themselves:

> This apparatus must not, and should not, be smashed. It must be wrested from the control of the capitalists; the capitalists and the wires they pull must be *cut off*, *lopped off*, *chopped away from* this apparatus; it must be *subordinated* to the proletarian Soviets; it must be expanded, made more comprehensive, and nation-wide. And this *can* be done by utilising the achievements already made by large-scale capitalism (in the same way as the proletarian revolution can, in general, reach its goal only by utilising these achievements).[42]

The state is a ready-made apparatus for responding to the climate crisis. It can operate at the scales necessary to develop and implement plans for reorganizing agriculture, transportation, housing, and production. It has the capacity to transform the energy sector. It is backed by a standing army. What if all that power were channeled by the many against the few on behalf of a just response to the climate crisis?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, multiple voices have called on the state to take control of hospitals and industries, to build field units, supply necessary equipment, and provide economic relief. State response has been uneven, typically coupling enormous benefits to corporations with minimal benefits to working people. Even worse, repressive regimes such as those in Hungary and the US have seized the opportunity to enact anti-trans, anti-abortion, and anti-environmental measures. Again, our situation is one of revolution or ruin.

As Ted Nordhaus argues in a pro-capitalist takedown of the contemporary left, the progressive response to climate change has failed because of the incoherence between its diagnosis and its solution.[43] The left sees that capitalism is responsible for climate change. It recognizes the urgency of the situation. But instead of building its capacity to seize the state, it advocates small-scale, local, decentralized solutions and more protests and democracy. If we really are on the verge of catastrophe, shouldn't we building a revolutionary party able to respond to the disaster and push forward an egalitarian alternative?

The left has offered moralism when it needs to offer organization. Consider the contrast between the widely popular Fridays for the Future protests and the mass strikes in France and India. The former attempt moral persuasion. The latter assert proletarian power as they interrupt capital's circulation and stand up against capital's state. What if electrical workers all over the world followed the lead of their French comrades and turned off the lights? What if all transport workers refused to drive or fly all vehicles that weren't zero-emission? What if the global working class emulated the 250 million Indians who brought their country to a halt with their January 8, 2020 general strike? Such mass working class action creates the space for further radicalization, further organization, further conviction that we have the capacity to bring about a radical transformation of the global economy. Organization, not moralism, gives us the power.

Nordhaus pinpoints the cause of the left's incoherence: its rejection of centralized, top-down power. Climate Leninism, however, doesn't fall for this tired spatial metaphor. When the state is seized by a revolutionary party, it is turned bottom-up. Grappling with the challenge of working this out in practice occupied Lenin until the end of his life. Getting local soviets or worker's councils functioning is a challenge. In a complex federated system like the US, there are already elaborate local, county-wide, state, and national governmental offices. Lenin himself was particularly enamored of the post office and libraries, seeing both as models for socialist accounting and distribution. Our problem today is not excessive centralization. After forty years of neoliberalism, it is disorganization, unaccountability, ongoing exploitation, and widespread accumulation by dispossession. We need a politics adequate to this context, a militant, disciplined, communist politics that doesn't flinch from the enormity of the challenge, nor the coordination at scale required to address it.

We know that this is a tall order. We know that the forces of fossil capital and social democracy stand in our way. But to do anything less than build towards an international revolution today would be ruinous. As dire as

both the coronavirus and climate crises are – and we really have seen nothing yet – we need to exercise some dialectical ambivalence. Global capital sees these crises as an opportunity to entrench its power, to break into new markets, to extract more wealth. Social democracy sees the crises as a chance to strike an impossible social compromise between capital and workers. We need to see these crises as both social and ecological catastrophes of unprecedented proportions and as an opportunity to end exploitation, oppression, imperialism, and inequality. We need to see this moment from the perspective of the revolutionary party that we must build as climate Leninists.

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Keti Chukhrov

Evil, Surplus, Power: The Three Media of Art

In avant-garde rhetoric, as appropriated by contemporary art, the ideas of social engagement and artistic achievement have been almost identical: after art's self-sublation, its principal goal has supposedly been social engagement. Yet despite the internalization of the avant-garde's socially oriented legacy, the true episteme and achievement of art since the 1960s has been conceptual surplus rather than social involvement. The negative antisocial character and vicious genealogy inherent to art since early modernist practices fostered various manipulations of this conceptual surplus, which eventually turned into the surplus value – the "metaphysical index" – of art's economics, as Diedrich Diederichsen puts it. Regardless of whether this surplus is a cognitive gimmick, symbolic capital enhancing the cultural impact of an artwork, or a financialized abstraction simply increasing the cost of art, it has functioned as a hidden *power* of art in contemporaneity, and has been effectively disguised by art's stated good will and emancipatory intentions. But what happens to art as an institution of contemporaneity if its codex of self-sublation and the logic of conceptual surplus are demolished by post-secular, post-conceptual cyber-fantasies?

1. Descending into Evil to Gain the Good: Truth Instead of Power

The main difference between Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics is quite evident. The former embeds its goal in disinterested universal pleasure, and hence grounds art in the perception and contemplation of transcendental aesthetic phenomena by a community (*sensus communis*). The Hegelian model insists that the primary goal of art is revealing truth ("a truth procedure," as Badiou puts it[1]). This truth is gained via sensuous means, which only art is able to handle. In this case, art is not simply something sensuous as opposed to being cognitive or philosophical, but it is a specific, sensuously designed tool – the medium for attaining truth. Yet, as we remember from Hegel's aesthetics, when these sensuous means wither away, or art no longer applies them with the aim of obtaining truth, then art itself ends.[2] In his introduction to *Aesthetics*, Hegel defines the classical art of Greek antiquity (and of the Renaissance) as art in which the idea and its sensuous configuration are shaped in accordance with one another. In art from these periods, the idea does not hover over materiality as in Romanticism, or as in modernist art and conceptualism. As Hegel argues, in the art of the classical period spirit appears sensuously and in its body, simply because it is by means of sensuous embodiment that the spiritual can be

François Godefroy, *The Rustic Orpheus*, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Etching, 18.8 × 23.3 cm. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953. Image: Public domain.

manifested as "the truly inner self," and not as an abstraction.[3]

Indeed, Hegel does not try to preserve art or aesthetics at any cost. This is because his goal is truth. And if art's sensuousness means no longer functioning toward that goal, philosophy can deal better with obtaining truth. Long before Hegel, Plato similarly demonstrated that art is not at all what's at stake, but rather the common good; and if it can be gained via philosophy, or the rule of the polis, then art, poetry, and music don't matter much.

This is to say that the function of art and aesthetics is not autonomous for either Hegel or Plato; art has an applied function and subsists simply in surpassing evil and viciousness in favor of truth and the common good. (In fact, even catharsis was nothing more than one of the first attempts at purification and release from the malicious and evil components of human affects and social vices.)

It is interesting to recall the ancient methods by which the acquisition and conquest of the good and the true were exerted in myths about the origin of art. In the Orpheus myth, or in Parmenides's verse about acquiring wisdom, in order to properly engage in poetry or art, both poets – Orpheus and Parmenides – have to descend into hell, the repository of evil, and jeopardize their lives even at the cost of undergoing a tremendous loss, like Orpheus's loss of Euridice. Contact with the dark forces of evil is mortifying. The task nonetheless is not simply acquiring the experience of evil and then documenting it; it is not simply obtaining some knowledge about death and the uncanny in exchange for a risky journey. It also implies that after the descent one has to ascend and reveal the knowledge gained on that risky quest by means of *composing* a "weird" product – *a work of art*. In other words, this weird product (a work of art) – a piece of gained truth produced *as the result of passing through evil* – could not have been realized in the form of a straightforward statement in a bargain with the gods. Truth and the good can only be acquired by means of a new body in the form of a strange product in which the producer has to generate a disguised, oblique, and fictitious mode of accessing the truthful.

Hence the paradoxical dialectics: art was needed as a force of purification from evil and grief, but it could only be produced by some insane creature like the artist, or the poet, who would risk descending into the depths of evil, who would experience and study it and then de-alienate its uncanniness by means of a sensuous transformation of that horror (grief), in order to extract light from the dark, to transform dense inhuman incomprehensibility into human clarity – into the truthful, into beauty (when beauty implies ethics rather than aesthetics).

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno repeats that behind any image or phenomenon in art stands the uncanny. Let's remember Nietzsche's statement that "we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth,*"[4] which in fact is a paraphrase of the following: *art brings the true fictitiously, since the direct transmission of the true could kill*. This is because acquisition of the true passes inevitably through evil.

We see a similar act of descending into the dark depths of evil and then uplifting it to the good in Dante's descent into the Inferno. What happens to Oedipus before he is blinded and becomes a poet demonstrates a similar topology: only after the ultimate confrontation with horror is Oedipus able to face the true and transmit it by means of poetry – by becoming blinded by uncanny evil, but having acquired the true at this cost.

Christ, too, first descends to earth and suffers in order to subsequently protect humanity from evil. According to Hegel, in his descent and ascent Christ epitomizes the dialectical topology reminiscent of the artist's passage to the realms of evil with the aim of transcribing it into the good.[5]

Such a topology is in fact a description of the dialectics of the idea, of the spirit. As Hegel argues, it is true that sensuousness is acquired through a descent of the spirit and of the idea into reality and it is then a contradiction to the idea; but the descent of the spiritual and the conceptual into sensuous objecthood is the inevitable cycle an idea follows (Mikhail Lifshitz).[6] The *highest* has to inevitably descend to the *lowest*, and the *lowest* is able to evolve into the highest – into the ideal, the true. This process is formed as one dialectical body. For Hegel, such "masochistic" dialectics represents the aesthetics of classical art, where the convergence of the conceptual and the material – the *incarnation* of the conceptual – takes place. Hegel mentions Christ as an example of spirit's *concrete* incarnation. In Christ, the abstract (spirit, logos) and the concrete (body, matter) converge. Yet this convergence takes place not as a mechanical combination, but as a result of the voluntary sacrifice of God (of the highest) by means of a fatal descent to the most painful, malign, and vicious – to the lowest.

What is crucial here, along with the argument about art as a medium against evil that is dedicated to the true, is of course the aspect of *power* and its economy. Traditionally, in the critique of ideology, the quest for truth is identified with power and ideology. Yet the topology of truth that we have just discussed – its genesis and gnoseological trajectory –

conversely opts *against* power. In art, only one of the two – truth or power – can be chosen. Why is this so? Because power delimits the potentialities of *sensuousness* (*Sinnlichkeit*) – which in fact forms the syndrome of the artist's voluntary, "masochist" vulnerability. Power forecloses the motives that would enable our protagonist – the artist – to dare to confront evil for the sake of truth.

Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing,* 1997. 9:54 min. Mexico City.

2. Choosing Power Instead of the Impossible Truth

A very important Copernican turn takes place in modernism's treatment of evil and the true. What is important for modernism is the stoic acceptance of evil rather than the "masochist" surpassing of it: it is important to dare to fall, to become sinister, or even to sarcastically intensify maliciousness, skeptically defying truth as an impossibility. This turn was crucial starting with Nietzsche and Baudelaire and was reversed only in the expanded sociality of the Soviet avant-garde. We should therefore keep in mind that all artistic programs taking place since then are embedded in this negativist genesis of art production. Modernism's maliciousness is not about a conscious and programmatic choice for evil, but departs from a certain onto-gnoseological facticity in which evil is the status quo and the struggle against it no longer presupposes any procedures of "masochist" self-resignation. (The Western avant-garde in capitalist conditions, as opposed to the Soviet one, does not find the way out of this predetermination for evil). Therefore sensuousness, which Hegel considers the principal means by which to pursue the truth in art, is not simply an aesthetic method; sensuousness is the technique for the *voluntary choice of self-resignation* for the sake of reaching the true and the common good.

Yet if the very idea of gaining truth and saving others from evil is discredited as a forgery, as a conceited pretension, then sensuousness as the tool that can achieve truth is redundant.

Genuine truth, then, is the impossibility of truth, hence sensuousness as the aesthetic medium through which evil is confronted must be dismissed and profaned. When truth has to be dismissed from art, then power inevitably becomes the principal ethical medium within it.

Adorno theorized this Copernican shift as the tragic condition of art. He showed that discarding aesthetics as the regime of sensuousness was the stoic choice of the courageous who had to inevitably stand up to evil. For Adorno, any attempt to use sensuousness to talk about "the true" and claim any utopias against evil would be ridiculous after the Holocaust. This was why the stake of negative counter-aesthetics was in the ultimate nullification of artistic sensuousness, in reaching art's zero degree. This was not because such a condition was desired, but because it was inevitable under the conditions of the alienated capitalist economy and society. So, what remains after the impossibility of sensuousness in art is art's end, i.e., the apophatic articulation of the ineffable, the incarnation of emptiness and of the absence of truth, which is superseded by the reification of this emptiness.

Of course, Adorno is quite far from the paradoxical conceptual tautologies of contemporary art; yet it is with Adorno that modernism's negativity was first envisaged as an obligation for a work of art to be a total alterity to culture and sociality, in order to further alienate an already alienated society. Consequently, it is with Adorno that we can first mark the moment when abstraction and the zero degree of composition become not merely a method or a demonstration of a medium in an artwork, but in this self-destructive move, art gradually turns into a gnoseological institution of art's nullification and sublation until ultimately, in conceptualism, art articulates the goal of such negative genealogy in establishing the bureaucratic systematics of its own nullification. What is crucial in such an ethical strategy is that art self-sublates and starts functioning merely as the administrative machine that operates not via "the truth," "the good," or "the sensuousness," but via the bureaucratic legitimization of its acts of conceptualization.

In his well-known text from 1990, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," Benjamin Buchloh confirms that in a conceptual artwork, a ready-made, along with superseding the image with a linguistic proposition, theoretical speculation, or speech act, the principal tool of institutional validation

is legal power, a tacit juridical contract, an administrative act that augments the value of the semantic trick which is at work in a conceptual piece.[7] Buchloh cites passages from programmatic artistic manifestos on negativity and annihilation by such artists as John Cage (whose motto was "no subject, no image, no taste, no object, no beauty, no talent, no technique [no why], no idea, no intention, no art, no feeling"); Ad Reinhardt (who calls, in his "Art as Art" manifesto, for "no lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses … no pleasures or pains, no accidents or ready-mades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities – nothing that is not of essence"); and Joseph Kosuth (who claims that "the absence of reality in art is exactly art's reality").[8]

From Duchamp to Warhol, the speculative gimmick added to the ready-made object was always openly claimed as part and parcel of the tacit Dadaist codex; it implied the sober acceptance of "evil," since such an act allowed art to openly expose the inflated significance of the bureaucratized metaphysical surplus – the act of instituting authority and its potential capitalization. In this case, the act of power and its vicious acquisition is honestly and arrogantly revealed and even subject to sarcastic irony.

3. The Bureaucracy of the Conceptualized Surplus

There's an anecdote that provides an eloquent example of such bureaucratically instituted art power. While living in the Russian North, the Russian actionist artist Anatoly Osmolovsky was sailing with other artists along a riverbank when one of his friends suggested they get out and have a picnic at a meadow they were sailing by. Osmolovsky fiercely objected to stopping because, as he argued, it was not the proper meadow to stop at. When his friend asked why, he answered: "Because this meadow is not fashionable" (*Potomu chto eto ne modnaya poljanka*). The artists sailed on until they encountered a meadow slightly further away; although the new meadow was completely identical to the previous one, Osmolovsky agreed that the new meadow was fashionable enough for a picnic.

This story demonstrates the conceptualist logic of the ready-made. Nominally similar and identical objects are conceptually different. One meadow is simply a piece of beautiful nature, while another is not a piece of nature anymore; it acquires a cognitive surplus that cannot be sensuously traced or confirmed, nor can it be comprehended in a conventional way. When the second meadow is labeled as fashionable, we are dealing with a tautology, a surplus conceptual abstraction that hovers above the materiality.

On the one hand, this presents a classic case of what I once defined as a "simple machine of conceptualism."[9] We have two elements (two meadows) that construct a machine of reciprocal indexical relation, a nonsensical reference between two meadows that becomes a cognitive trick. As Rosalind Krauss emphasizes, what is important in the indexicality of a conceptual work is this disjunctive gap between the two elements, despite the act of their correlation.[10] Meanwhile, in our anecdote about two tautological meadows, there is one more component beyond the nonsensical semiological trick that institutes the surplus impact of "the fashionable" meadow. This supplementary component is added to the indexical semiological junction between the two meadows to bureaucratically assert one of the meadows as "fashionable." This assertion of a nonexistent quality as a symbolic surplus exceeds a simply conceptual paradox between two objects (meadows). It surmounts the mere representation of the conceptual "trick" to become *the bureaucratic act of instituting*, with all its legalistic force. We can witness such an act (codex) of instituting the nonsensical as early as Malevich's *Black Square*, Duchamp's *Fountain*, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, or Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. Thus, what is endorsed in the act of conceptualization and what acquires *surplus validity* is not merely an indexical tautology – a paradox of semiological difference between two similar meadows, the real meadow and the fashionable "art meadow." Even more important than the act (or gimmick) of conceptualizing the semantic gap is the act of forcefully establishing the legitimacy of this quasi-theoretical game, which must ultimately acquire historical, institutional, and artistic validity.

This administrative gesture asserts the absence of the meadow's fashionable condition as if it were its existent status; in this case something absent is instituted as if it were present. Meanwhile, what is physically present – i.e., that very natural meadow – is treated as absent and is subsumed by the supremacy of another meadow that acquires a conceptual surplus. This Dadaist, nihilist gesture is the principal episteme of contemporary art and its cynical genesis departing from the inevitability of evil and the necessary application of power. Such a gesture is art's heuristic and gnoseological achievement too.

Among the most notorious cases that reveal the juridical and administrative power of an artwork is Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003). In this work, Fraser meets a collector to pass him her artwork, which in accordance with the juridical

contract between them is nothing but her sexual intercourse with that very collector, videotaped and subsequently exhibited as the document validating the collector's purchase of that piece. In this case the empty contents, the ready-made of sexual intercourse, is not merely displayed as an exhibit in order to bureaucratically confirm the artness of no art; a proper juridical contract officially endorses this act of intercourse as being art, and helps to symbolically validate (and monetize) the absence of the artistic validity of the sexual intercourse. (Interestingly, the juridical validity of the contract is precisely what simultaneously mocks its own validity and functions as an "artistic" object.)

Now, if the same "paradox of the two meadows" appeared in a philosophical or a theoretical context, it would never generate such symbolic surplus; neither would it get monetized to the extent of becoming a precious object with added value. In theory, the immateriality of a concept or an abstract idea could never be traded as a materially evaluated and monetized object. Only when the quasi-philosophic conceptualist paradox is instituted as an artwork can it function as a precious material object with boosted surplus value. It does not matter whether this surplus can be nominally monetized or not, as it is first and foremost a fact of symbolic valorization. Moreover, such an artwork's impact is not valid merely as a paradoxical pun – quoted, transmitted, researched – which would be the case if it were merely a theoretical research text. In a conceptual artwork, any immaterial, cognitive game or paradox undergoes the reification of the symbolic surplus, which is then instituted as valorized objecthood despite its immateriality and absence. This is why Diedrich Diederichsen calls this kind of surplus in art a "metaphysical index"; as he argues, in contemporary art value is constructed by mere spirit, by metaphysical speculation, which exceeds the use value of an item even more than is the case with luxury commodities.[11]

We would add that if in a commodity or in non-contemporary art, surplus value is a combination of living labor, unique aura, artifice, and recognition of an artwork as a piece of cultural heritage – in other words, if it implies certain morphological components for validation, and surplus value is therefore added to a *certain substance* – in the case of conceptual art, surplus value is added to *almost nothing*. Conceptual art's use value has to be almost *zero*. (For instance, Cage's *4′ 33″*.) Unlike the hidden surplus in a regular commodity, in conceptual art such metaphysical surplus value is maliciously exposed and ironically and bureaucratically asserted as an achievement of artistic activity and authority. This is why the artist himself has to be an institution, and a *malign*, *omnipotent* bureaucrat.

Therefore, Steven Wright's initiative in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* to restore the ready-made's and contemporary art's use value and thus deprive art of its "expert-based" bureaucratic surplus component seems quite puzzling.[12] The question is not about devalorizing art's valorized topology, thus depriving it of

Comedian Apparel line based on Maurizio Cattelan's eponymous work *Comedian,* 2019. On sale at Perrotin's store. See https://store.perrotin.com/en/maurizio-cattelan/10002649-maurizio-cattelan-comedian-apparel-m-size-2900100043304.html.

"false" competences. Wright's attempt to extract the art object from the hyper-institution that endows it with symbolic value and insert it back into life, sharing a valorized conceptual art object with users, does not end up democratizing art. Rather, Duchamp's pissoir, for example, if it again acquired 1:1 use value and returned to the realm of consumption (the profane space of the everyday), would simply cease to be a Dadaist artwork based on a nonsensical logical proposition. In that case, nobody would even notice the return of the artistic ready-made to the realm of daily life, as the only thing one needs a pissoir for is to piss in it. Why would anyone need a ready-made *as an artwork* to be reinserted into everyday life? The *artness* of a ready-made art object – if it returned to a "profane" everyday reality – could only be sustained if such a return to the everyday were posited and documented as a conceptualized profanation of the formerly valorized conceptual object. In that case, its relocation away from the museum back into mundane reality would have to become a further and stronger act of conceptualization. This is not to deny in any way the use value of an artwork as such; but it is to say that the works that did their best to mock and undermine their use value cannot retrieve what never formed them. An artwork that is determined by use value is one that claims use value consciously, voluntarily, and within its poetics and formation. A conceptual work of art denies the use value of the objects that it engages.

4. Three Post-conceptual Essentialisms of Contemporary Art: Techno-Cybernetic (Post-human), De-colonial, Pop-Performative

Among the artistic edifices that most drastically bid farewell to the conceptualist codex was socially engaged art, the impact of which nowadays – with the rise of conservative movements and the election of right-wing authoritarian governments – can be considered a failure.

I cannot dwell here at length on the aberrations within socially engaged art, but will mention its primary controversy: its strange mutation and unconscious hypocrisy. On the level of the rhetoric of resistance and critical discourse, it claimed expanded public engagement and affirmative democratic sociality. But when it came to the rules of validation of artistic achievement and regimes of recognition, the counter-aesthetic aspects of socially engaged art were evaluated *not* by their sociopolitical merits, but by the extent of art's self-sublatedness in these works of art – the tacit bureaucratic conceptualist codex which does not need any public to valorize and legitimize the institutional power and artistic merits of an artwork. The 2012 Berlin Biennial, curated by Artur Żmijewski, along with his art in general, provide a good example of how to preserve the nihilist logic within the external form of a socially engaged, affirmative art practice. In his work one witnesses the narratives and stylistics of political critique, which pretend to be the contents but turn out to be merely the work's formal package. Social engagement here functions as the annihilator of aesthetics, bringing an exhibition closer to the zero degree of art. Thus the only role of the social artwork's contents is in the annihilation of art's aesthetic remainders, quite like in a conceptualist artwork. This is why numerous institutional initiatives since the 2000s[13] that intended to create alternative, emancipation-based alliances to support the commons within artistic and civic social spheres, or to expand public programs aiming to democratize art, led to almost no social results. Quite similarly to conceptualist practice, their episteme remained self-referential because of an inability to exceed the frame of art as a hyper-institution. To repeat, these initiatives and practices were socially engaged only formally: they valorized their anti-aesthetic merits not as political achievements, but as the coefficient of art's self-sublatedness, which art's bureaucratic power eventually validated, uplifting nonart *to the degree of* art.

Meanwhile, after social engagement, the post-conceptual exodus from art's nihilist path has continued in more recent practices, which are sometimes labeled as "new materialist," "research-based," or "meta-modernist" (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker).[14] In such practices, one can trace an exhaustion with art's negativist rigidity and conceptualization of the void, yet art's applied social role does not seem to be a matter of interest.

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After the financial crisis of 2008, the failed Occupy movements, the new flows of financial capitalism, and the collapse of socially engaged practices, it seemed that art would return to its conceptualist path, shifting to the expanded social and political-economic spheres and rechanneling defeated social activism into a neo-conceptualist questioning of alternative businesses and economic strategies. For example, it would turn concrete segments of social and economic practice into artistic ready-mades offering alternative economic paradigms. In this case both the conceptual genesis and social formatting of contemporary art would find its continuation.

e-flux *as an art platform* (including

education and circulation strategies), and the Time/Bank activities initiated by Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle,[15] which functioned as the ready-mades of an alternative business economy, embodied such projects to a certain extent. If this tendency had developed further, it would have meant a continuation of art's ironic path in its social conceptualization of various modes of the capitalist economy. Yet the hegemony of tendencies in art were channeled elsewhere. After the collapse of conceptualist poetics, and the further collapse of socially engaged quasi-avant-garde projects, the terrain of art has played host to three main theoretic fashions that fit its post-conceptual paradigm. These three essentialist tendencies are: (1) a techno-cybernetic (post-human) tendency; (2) a de-colonial tendency; and (3) a pop-performative tendency.

Before I dwell on these three essentialisms dominating the post-conceptual terrain of art, I want to reiterate the following: modernist, avant-garde, and conceptualist poetics presupposed, as an indispensable trait, the "castration" of pleasure and enjoyment – which is so abundant in mass culture. They implied a prohibition of any forms of emphatic engagement with an artwork and its sensuous evolution, characteristic of premodernist art, to say nothing of any affective immersion in ritualistic spiritualities. Hence the primacy of theory and speculative logic – the condition that established contemporary art as an institution that has no need of any audience or its feedback for evaluation and historization. By this logic, classical sensuous empathy is forbidden, pleasure and entertainment is castrated, and ritualistic sublimity is annulled. Meanwhile, in the abovementioned three paradigms we can trace drastically different onto-gnoseologies and epistemes.

In techno-cybernetic, de-colonial, and pop-performative paradigms we witness a demand to change the rules of historicizing within the art institution, an effort to cancel art's self-referentiality and self-sufficiency and open up paths for pleasure, erotization, mystical divination, sincerity, and sensuality. Such poetics fail to understand that modernism and conceptualist poetics – even in their announcement of the end of art, even in their nihilist defiance of enlightenment – preserved an umbilical cord to art by means of instituting themselves as art's self-reflection. The three abovementioned post-conceptual essentialist paradigms surpass this drama. Consequently, they deal not even with the defiance of enlightenment, or the sublation of art, i.e., with the awareness of their loss, but with the loss of the understanding of what was lost. As a result, the end of art, which was hitherto so essential to constructing contemporary art's negativist territory, is no longer at stake – but rather the end of art's end.

This is why, with the invasion of these three post-conceptual paradigms into art, the art institution is in danger of decomposition, as a result of merging with mass media, pop culture, and show businesses. Certainly, the processes that triggered the emergence of these paradigms are not confined to the realm of contemporary art. They encompass drastic onto-gnoseological changes in the humanities, sciences, philosophy, and politics, which amount to a shift from the politics of secularity to one of explicit de-secularization, and to a drastic turn from the symbolic and ideated dimensions of culture and thought towards literal and nominalistic materialities, which is so evident in the philosophy of new materialism, in new media theory, and in the digital sciences.

5. From Human Neoteny (Fragile Deficiency) to Techno-Pagan Omnipotence

To repeat, the principal paradigmatic civilizational shift that automatically gave rise to the abovementioned three post-conceptual essentialisms in art is the global de-secularization and re-spiritualization of theory. The algorithmic vocabularies and sensorics of the machine, instead of serving as expanded technical tools of cognition, became new mystifying myths about machinic and cybernetic autonomies that often bring us back to magic and the mechanics of sorcery. For example, a recent exhibition about the history of artificial intelligence at the Barbican Center began its narrative about the origin of cybernetics with alchemy and pagan pantheist belief in animism and the spiritual nature of objects.[16] The history of Japanese robotics was traced to Shintoism, according to which all inanimate natural and nonorganic forms – even tools and technologies – are inhabited by divine spirits (called *kami*) that surpass human intelligence.

Similarly, de-colonial theory often reminds us that the abolition of religion, the erasure of pagan rituals, the supersession of astrology by astronomy, and the dismissal of other modes of spiritism are in fact the result of Western secular culture's hegemonic domination over indigenous regions. Today it is easy to imagine religious rituals of all sorts being presented as art performances, or as emancipating agencies – something that would have been impossible a decade ago.

Secularity is, in fact, quite a recent phenomenon. Even the Renaissance that followed the clerical Middle Ages was not yet fully secular, given its pagan mysticism and fusions of poetry and sorcery, alchemy and

science, theology and philosophy. In fact, secularity was attained speculatively, logically, and ethically no earlier than in Descartes's *cogito*. The most interesting paradox in the present de-secularization, with its focus on techno-mysticism, is its choice of certain notions and practices of emancipation that explicitly presuppose de-socialization and de-humanization. For example, one very popular term nowadays in social and urban studies is "navigation." This term comes from digital studies, as well as from research into the environmental aspects of ecology and biology. Another widespread term, automatically considered emancipatory, is Donna Haraway's "interspecies." It epitomizes radical equality and the intersection of all species, against the hegemonic anthropocentrism of human sociality. Both of these terms are useful tools in their respective fields. But they are applied far too often to dispute the concepts that formerly shaped a universalist view of the world, such as "*Weltanchauung*," "history," and "human society."

One of the central premises of anthropology and phylogenetics is the theory of human "neoteny." Paolo Virno dedicates a whole chapter to this notion in his *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*.[17] "Neoteny" here refers to the human species' insufficient protective capacities to survive in its natural environment. As Virno points out, a human being, unlike an animal, is born into neoteny, which motivates it to produce a *second* nature – culture, language, thought, a social horizon, a world – as a consequence and extension of the initial deficiency and vulnerability of the human species. Yet, the view of the world that the human subject needs as a deficient anti-species cannot be constructed in a sovereign way by a singular self; such a view can only be borrowed from another deficient anti-species. This is because the only way to see the world is necessarily through the eyes of another being. The perception of a singular self would not construct a view of the world; nor would it be able to navigate as animals do, without technical extensions. Constructing *Weltanschauung* then is a result of human vulnerability (neoteny): for survival, humans need the sensory and mental capacities of other human beings. Thus, the acquisition of culture, language, and world is not "my" affair and "my" capacity, but a capacity borrowed from other humans and other anti-species, who similarly failed due to their neoteny. The need for a universal horizon of the world is thus a necessity departing from this phylogenetic vulnerability. And the dimension of the generic and the symbolic is the consequence of such a condition. Animals, conversely, *do* have the capacity to be morphologically inscribed in their habitat, or even in their own selfhood, within which they navigate perfectly.

On the other hand, while an animal's capacities to navigate and survive in its habitat are far more developed than those of humans, this very navigational sovereign power paradoxically keeps the animal captive within its environment (habitat) and forecloses the world for it, as famously argued by Agamben[18] (and before by Heidegger). Many thinkers since then have argued that this foreclosure is relevant only for human beings and not for animals, hence such a view is extremely anthropocentric. But this is exactly the point: confinement to nothing but an environment is an unbearable limitation precisely for humans. An environment presupposes navigational tracks and thus it gives a species the option of interlacing or intersecting with, or tailing, other species (Elizabeth Povinelli), but it does not lead to the kind of general overview that could surpass the self and posit the self as a nonself.

In his *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari shows that with bio-technical amelioration, human beings will gradually become immortal xeno-deities.[19] Yet he adds that this might not imply the enhancement of reason or even the evolutionary improvement of the neural construction of the brain. Humans will simply become cyber-animalized divinities, perfectly handling their own bodies, intelligence, information, and environment. Now, if, as Harari writes, the drawback of neoteny – the human incapacity to survive in its environment – can be surmounted bio-physically and technologically, then, hypothetically, history, the idea of the world, and the social interdependence of humans in thinking and language will simply become obsolete and redundant. Which means that the post-cyber human will aspire to nothing but the capacities of an intelligent animal with sovereign rule over and operation of its environment.

The next important question, which departs from the previous one, concerns two drastically different epistemic attitudes toward ontology and gnoseology:

1. According to the first approach, quantities do not grow into qualities. This entails the politics and poetics of an overall reversibility of quantities, i.e., radical literalist nominalism (the first law of thermodynamics).

2. According to the second approach, quantity irreversibly turns into quality, becoming second nature, labor, and culture (the second law of thermodynamics).

It's no surprise that crucial to contemporary techno-pagan mysticisms is a complete pre-Socratic pantheist reversibility – and consequently, a compliance with the first law of thermodynamics, according to which energy never expires, it simply recirculates. According to

such logic, there is no death, no history, no revolution – no motivation to move forward into irreversible stages, after which a return to the previous condition would be impossible. On this level there are symmetries between the past and the future, the premodern and postmodern states, the same forms of consciousness before the origin of human labor and after it, etc. Conversely, according to the second law of thermodynamics, the increase of entropy accounts for the potential irreversibility of natural processes, and hence for the asymmetry between the future and the past.

***

The concluding question is how the art institution as a bureaucratic machine molded by modernism and the conceptualist codex responds to the paradigmatic shift towards counter-secularity. How is the art institution positioned between evil, surplus, and power amidst the conditions of such a shift?

At the beginning of this essay, I depicted the artist as a "masochist" martyr who self-resigns from power and searches for evil in order to struggle with it. Subsequently, the modernist artist succumbs to cynicism to provoke the audience by means of power; then the conceptualist contemporary artist performs the bureaucratic legitimization of her power. Finally, the post-conceptual contemporary artist, indulging in a new counter-secular shift, becomes a sort of cyber-wizard, a techno-astrologist, a bio-alchemist enchanted by digital divination and mystical navigations, embodying some extraterrestrial "divine" omnipotence. What remains of art's institutional tools of social critique and self-reflection in this situation, when it ignores its genealogy of self-sublation and indulges in these post-secular phantasies, which are so attractively wrapped in technological invention, performative agencies, and de-colonial enchantments?

Why is it that the narratives of artificial intelligence, instead of expanding access to digital and cybernetic means of production, instead of enhancing emancipation and equality, instead of facilitating the further clarifications of reason, merely generate new fantasies of mystical power, reveries about dark ontologies and geographies, reducing both reason and the senses to the mechanics of algorithmic witchcraft?

Does it all mean that, if these fantasies persist, the museum and art practice will transform themselves into a kind of techno-temple that assembles the specimens of elite magic and power? This power is neither altruistically rejected, as in premodern art, nor critically appropriated, as in modernist and avant-garde conceptualizations.

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The text is based on a lecture given at "The Big Shift: The 1990s Avant-Gardes in Eastern Europe and Their Legacy," a "summer school" curated by Zdenka Badovinac and Boris Groys, held at the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, August 25, 2019.

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1
Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford University Press, 2005).

2
G. W. F. Hegel, "Introduction," in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–91.

3
Hegel, "Introduction."

4
The full quotation reads as follows: "For a philosopher to say, 'the good and the beautiful are one' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true,' one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly. We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*." Friedrich Nietzsche, Book 3, §822, in *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, 1968), 435. Emphasis in original.

5
Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 73–77.

6
Mikhail Lifshitz, "Estetika Gegelja I Sovremennost" (Aesthetics of Hegel and contemporaneity), in *O Gegele* (On Hegel) (Moscow: Grundrisse, 2012), 153–85; 172.

7
Benjamin Buchloh, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," *October*, no. 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.

8
Buchloh, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," 112, 113, 128.

9
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10
Rosalind E. Krauss, "Towards Post-Modernism: Notes on Index," chap. 2 in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1985).

11
Diedrich Diederichsen, *On Surplus Value in Art* (Sternberg Press, 2008).

12
Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

13
For example, see issue 21 of *On Curating* (January 2014), dedicated to New Institutionalism https://www.on-curating.org/ issue-21.html#.Xrgs1BMzZp8.

14
Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010) https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/jac.v2i0.56 77.

15
"Time/Bank: A Conversation with Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda," *Manifesta Journal*, no. 14 (2012).

16
"AI: More than Human," curated by Suzanne Livingston and Maholo Uchida, Barbican Center, May 16–August 26, 2019.

17
Paolo Virno, *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Semiotext(e), 2008), 17–22.

18
Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford University Press, 2004).

19
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Andreas Petrossiants

Inside and Out: The Edges to Critique

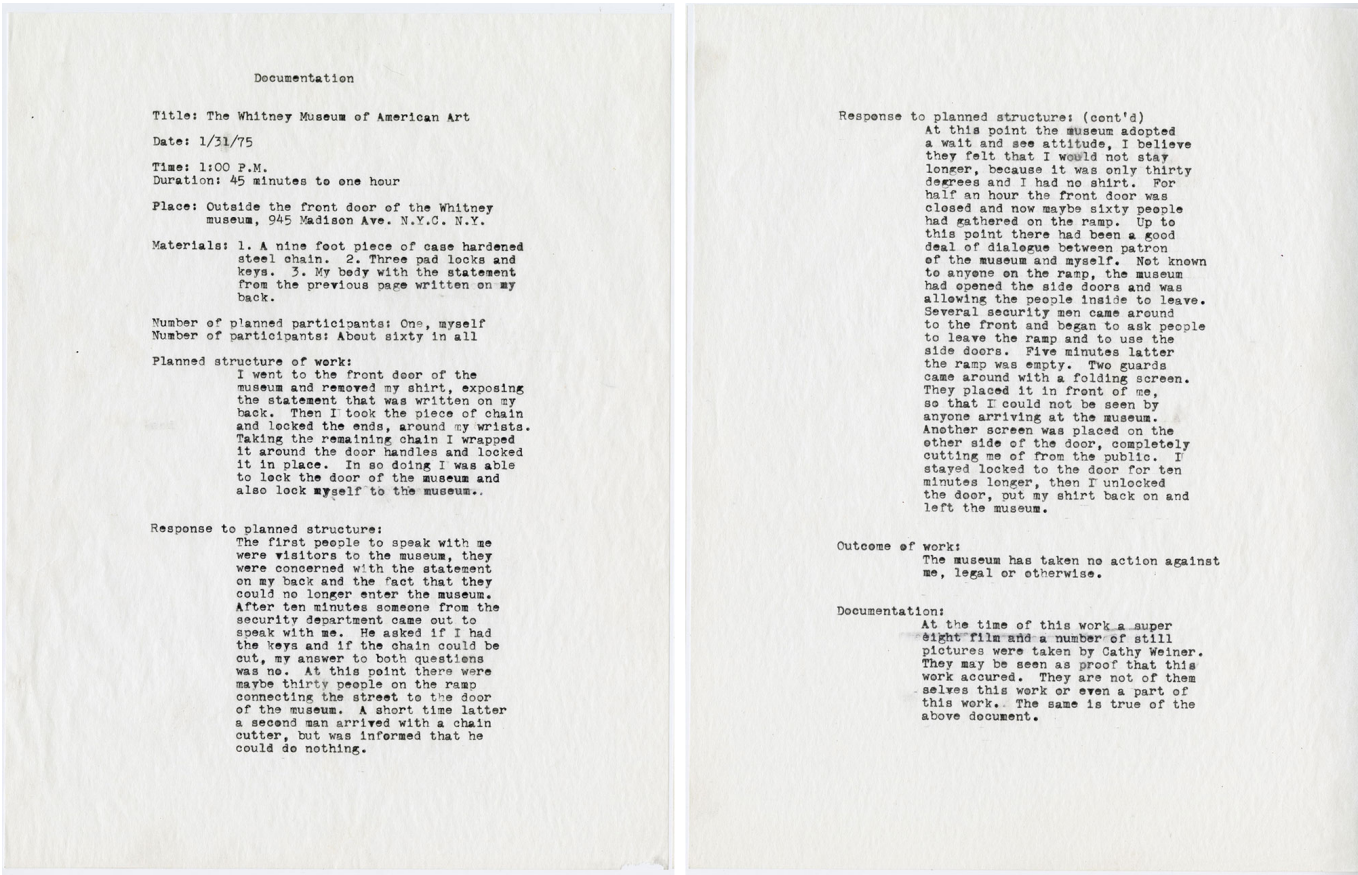
> [Institutional critique] has aimed to clarify the legitimate bounds of critique, but in this case, the bounds have been drawn around the type of critique artists could, in good faith, level at the institution of art, while also embodying it professionally, socially, psychically, and economically. This soldered artists and institutions together in an increasingly half-hearted tableau vivant of autonomy, a reconciled realpolitik not all that different from the kind that anointed liberal democracy as the least-worst form of government still standing after everything else has ostensibly been tried.
> – Marina Vishmidt, 2017[1]

1.

On a cold afternoon in 1975, a young artist took off his shirt and chained himself to the doors of the museum, blocking spectators from entering the Whitney Biennial. After some time (long enough for the museum staff to try and cut the chains), a second entrance was set up, but visitors waiting in line crowded around what they perhaps imagined was a sanctioned performance. On the artist's bare back his "anti-manifesto" was stenciled, declaring: "WHEN I STATE THAT I AM AN ANARCHIST, I MUST ALSO STATE THAT I AM NOT AN ANARCHIST, TO BE IN KEEPING WTH THE (_ _ _ _) IDEA OF ANARCHISM. LONG LIVE ANARCHISM."[2] Museumgoers ogled and asked questions, which the artist, Christopher D'Arcangelo, was poised to answer. In fact, a central part of this "action" was to engage with museum visitors, to tell them why he was there: a combination of community outreach and political education – something like an explanatory wall label made flesh. He titled the work *The Whitney Museum of American Art*, and listed his body as one of the materials for the piece.

After opening the other entrance, museum staff brought out folding screens to hide D'Arcangelo, demonstrating the instinct to "remove from view" all that they cannot fit into their curatorial matrix. *There is nothing to see here*. The screens intended to sap the action of any remaining material power it might have had, especially the conversations with visitors. It was only after they blocked him from view, after an hour of remaining chained in the January cold, that he unlocked himself and left. Jeffrey Deitch remarks that the staff's decision to cover him up was a "curatorial solution."[3] This solution is just one type of policing that serves to remind us of the museum's other forms of control that act in concert with other more obvious enforcers of the capitalist social order. Some may read this

Film documentation of Christopher D'Arcangelo's action at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, May 3, 1975. Copyright: Cathy Weiner.



Documentation

Title: The Whitney Museum of American Art

Date: 1/31/75

Time: 1:00 P.M.
Duration: 45 minutes to one hour

Place: Outside the front door of the Whitney museum, 945 Madison Ave. N.Y.C. N.Y.

Materials: 1. A nine foot piece of case hardened steel chain. 2. Three pad locks and keys. 3. My body with the statement from the previous page written on my back.

Number of planned participants: One, myself
Number of participants: About sixty in all

Planned structure of work:
I went to the front door of the museum and removed my shirt, exposing the statement that was written on my back. Then I took the piece of chain and locked the ends, around my wrists. Taking the remaining chain I wrapped it around the door handles and locked it in place. In so doing I was able to lock the door of the museum and also lock myself to the museum..

Response to planned structure:
The first people to speak with me were visitors to the museum, they were concerned with the statement on my back and the fact that they could no longer enter the museum. After ten minutes someone from the security department came out to speak with me. He asked if I had the keys and if the chain could be cut, my answer to both questions was no. At this point there were maybe thirty people on the ramp connecting the street to the door of the museum. A short time latter a second man arrived with a chain cutter, but was informed that he could do nothing.

Response to planned structure: (cont'd)
At this point the museum adopted a wait and see attitude, I believe they felt that I would not stay longer, because it was only thirty degrees and I had no shirt. For half an hour the front door was closed and now maybe sixty people had gathered on the ramp. Up to this point there had been a good deal of dialogue between patron of the museum and myself. Not known to anyone on the ramp, the museum had opened the side doors and was allowing the people inside to leave. Several security men came around to the front and began to ask people to leave the ramp and to use the side doors. Five minutes latter the ramp was empty. Two guards came around with a folding screen. They placed it in front of me, so that I could not be seen by anyone arriving at the museum. Another screen was placed on the other side of the door, completely cutting me of from the public. I stayed locked to the door for ten minutes longer, then I unlocked the door, put my shirt back on and left the museum.

Outcome of work:
The museum has taken no action against me, legal or otherwise.

Documentation:
At the time of this work a super eight film and a number of still pictures were taken by Cathy Weiner. They may be seen as proof that this work accured. They are not of them selves this work or even a part of this work. The same is true of the above document.

Christopher D'Arcangelo, Documentation of *The Whitney Museum of American Art*, 1975. Christopher D'Arcangelo Papers, MSS.264. Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerilla Art Action Group protest in front of Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City with the AWC's "And babies?" poster, January 8, 1970. Photo/Copyright: Jan van Raay.

plainly as a rejection of his gesture of performance, but it's a more complicated indication of a key function of the culture industry, and creative capitalism generally. To recuperate, to make theirs, the museum must first nominalize the action as a performance and spatialize it. The curators had to bring the folding screens outside and thus expand the museum's walls to incorporate him. With this, they brought him "inside" – of an extended white cube, and of their preferred mode of presentation. It is only after this neutralization that they could cover him up. His disruption must first be deemed a performance so that it can become a *rejected* performance.

In the epigraph to this essay, Marina Vishmidt describes the symbiosis between many critical artistic gestures and the institutions that exhibit and historicize them by comparing institutional critique to the illusions of neoliberal democracy. For decades, artists and arts writers have negotiated this mutually beneficial interaction with a theorization of "inside" or "outside" positions with respect to sites of exhibition, display, and presentation. This speculation on the spatial, linguistic, and most importantly political borders of the institution is embedded in many questions that cultural workers have been asking themselves since at least the 1970s: How complicit am I? Can I still critique while inside? How to subvert while maintaining my autonomy? How much autonomy should I relinquish? What is the border between the museum and the statist, racialized, capitalist, neocolonial, gendered violence that produces its material wealth? It's only more recently that grassroots groups (some including artists) have reframed the last question by acknowledging the border as nonexistent, while incorporating into their tactics the belief in that border exhibited by systems of power.

Though modern art has long speculated – explicitly or not – on the borders of institutions (most obviously with Duchamp and later with happenings, Fluxus, and performance), it becomes particularly pronounced with the advent of institutional critique, and with conceptualism in the late sixties, when this concern was folded into the linguistic conception or documentation of artworks themselves.[4] However, some semantic and political inconsistencies have long riddled the discourse. In particular, writing in art from the last decade has worked to untangle two terms and what they are meant to signify: the "dematerialization" of the art object and the becoming "immaterial" of work. Given that the development of post-Fordism and conceptual art occurred around the same time, the two were read as reflections across spheres of art and labor, rather than as contiguous processes in the development of new regimes of work (in visual culture as well). Though many Euro-US artists started to inscribe their art working into labor's historical development during the Vietnam War era, if only rhetorically, thus breaking with modern aesthetics' view of art as an activity distinct from labor, art nonetheless continued to be considered exceptional – as commodity, as "unproductive" work, autonomous to capital's imperative to produce value, even if entangled inside its other structural violence. (Much art theory discourse until recently also failed to differentiate between material wealth and value.[5])

Dematerialization, as a conceptual strategy, was and remains rhetorical or semiotic, or realized through performative gestures that correspond to some material act that need not be performed by the artist themselves: Lawrence Weiner scoring the chipping away of a square meter of drywall to be completed by himself or someone else (*A 36" X 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL*, 1968), Lee Lozano declaring in a notebook that she would no longer make art for a certain period of time (*General Strike Piece*, 1969), Stanley Brouwn making works by soliciting directions and walking (*This Way Brouwn*, 1963), an exhibition taking place in a mass-printed book (Seth Siegelaub's *July/August Exhibition*, 1970), and so on. Dematerialization was proposed as the negation of material "sellable" objects in favor of the cognitive production of non-objects or other-than-objects. Few were naive enough to assume that non-object-based artistic production wouldn't leave behind photo documents which could be archived, sold, exhibited; nor did they believe, for example, that Weiner's cutouts of rugs wouldn't make it into onto the registrar's desk. In fact, the possibility of slyly entering commodity and attention markets, or entering a canon for that matter, were often part of the critical strategy itself. Just five years after writing her landmark essay on dematerialization with John Chandler, Lucy Lippard admitted as much in the intro to her anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.[6]

Immaterial labor, on the other hand, is not the negation of material labor, nor its undoing, but rather the obscuring of the material conditions guaranteeing production – it is a *process* of obfuscating work, rather than a stable category of labor.[7] Though the use of this term has been heavily, and rightly, critiqued from anarchist and radical feminist viewpoints, especially by feminists of color, it nonetheless continues to be used to essentialize wide types of work into a single category, from unpaid care

work to data analysis. Regardless of the term's validity, the ubiquity of immaterial labor in arts discourse does signal an acceptance of the shift to post-Fordism, as well as to labor's continual subsumption to capitalism. Furthermore, discourse on both terms has also tended to evacuate labor of key historical traits: immaterial work assumes wide individualization and forecloses labor's collective potential through invisibilization rather than acknowledging capital and historical production (choosing to rather ontologize labor, as Vishmidt has described), while much discussion of dematerialization seems to omit the aesthetic, material conditions of art itself.

In the mid-sixties, with the emergence of minimal and conceptual art, Euro-US art criticism was preoccupied with a "rat" haunting the gallery.[8] For modernist critics like Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, the rat doing the haunting was the re-reception of Duchamp and his ready-made, implying the evacuation of the artist's hand, and perhaps, as scholars have since pointed out, the influence of John Cage's implementations of chance and indeterminacy: in short, an assault on the modernist, formalist functions of art.[9] But importantly, there was another vermin: the managerialism guaranteeing that post-Fordist work became flexible, under-waged or unpaid, outsourced, invisibilized. The rat as manager was present in minimal art and conceptualism, just as much as in the office. If Sol LeWitt's stipulation in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" reads, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," remember Helen Molesworth's 2003 retort in the catalog of her exhibition *Work Ethic*: "But machines do not make LeWitt's wall drawings; assistants do."[10]

A more recent ubiquitous question concerns the possibility of withdrawal as a means to critique. Martin Herbert's 2016 book *Tell Them I Said No* deals with this in part, tracing some Euro-US artists along what he calls an "axis of absenting."[11] It's unclear, however, how this vector can accommodate artists who were dropped by the institution, those never allowed "inside" in the first place, or how the slippery term "artist" is adjudicated when the question of legitimacy is destabilized. Graffiti writing was first criminalized, then recuperated, then re-criminalized again along lines of race and class; "folk art" was invalidated as other than art; art by indigenous artists has been reified as anthropological relics, and so on. These outsider classifications are maintained at least until the institution can include such categories in its models of value production, typically under the aegis of liberal representation.

In such a matrix, there are two broad categories applied to artists working in a critical register. The first is "going inside," with the intention to subvert or usurp the operating protocols of the institution, or to "show the public," through forms of pedagogy, what is otherwise obfuscated or invisibilized in other domains. Different "waves" of institutional critique have either taken this strategy at face value (Hans Haacke, let's say), or, following the influence of the social sciences, imagined this posture of mitigating complicity as the only position from which critique is possible – what Andrea Fraser termed "critically-reflexive site-specificity." The second category, "going outside," sometimes referred to as "dropping out," is applied when artists build other institutions, collectively organized/owned or not, or refuse the circuits of art's commodification. Keti Chukhrov's description of anti-capitalist critique that operates within capitalist ideology applies to critical art as well. In a forthcoming book she remarks:

> The capitalist undercurrent of ... emancipatory and critical theories functions not as a program to exit from capitalism, but rather as the radicalization of the impossibility of this exit ... The planning and ideological framework is counter-capitalist, but the contents remain either nihilist, or reproduce the status quo of capitalist political economy and sociality in the form of its critique.[12]

The entrance into the walls, apparatuses, protocols, and functions of the institution depends on defining where a border between inside and out can be constituted: a closed door now opened, a computer server now unlocked, a managerial role now usurped, a philanthropy revenue stream now rerouted. And, most often, the fact that these gestures reify or legitimize the very structure being engaged is taken as inevitable.[13]

That said, "dropping out," unlike going inside, continues to be considered a *political* strategy in itself. Tactics such as boycotts, general strikes, and sabotage, all carrying with them an element of refusal, are consistently welded to the belief that dropping out is possible. But, it's different in cultural production. As Vishmidt reminds us, the "key significance" of the many generations of institutional critique "was in laying a track between the critique of institutions and critique of infrastructures; that is, not simply the formal but the material conditions that located the institution in an expanded field of structural violence."[14] How does one escape from the field if it determines from where, and how, one begins that very movement? Not just the "social field,"

per Bourdieu, but rather the entire cultural landscape that is imaged as other to work?

When we think through this assumed differentiation between calculated subversion and performative refusal, it can be seen to mirror other binary sets of possibilities from Marxian aesthetic theory, social historiography, and postcolonial theory: reform vs. revolution, stadial progress vs. historical rupture, organized labor vs. autonomist self-organization, and so on. How then to avoid the mistaken belief that such vectors of action (going in and going out) take place in wholly different sites of contention, when they operate along one border sketched by the institution itself?

2.

> First I wanted to be inside, then I understood that inside the system I would always have to pay. For whatever kind of life, there was always a price to pay.
> – Protagonist in Nanni Balestrini's *We Want Everything*, 1971

A good place to begin sketching a genealogy of exiting and entering as critique in art is the establishment of the Art Worker's Coalition (AWC) in 1969 – an artist group comprised of cultural workers including Haacke, Lippard, Jon Hendricks, Jean Toche, Lozano, and many others. Most important in hindsight was their popularization of the moniker "art worker" to bridge the spheres of art and labor.[15] The catalyst for the organization of the AWC was artist Vassilakis Takis *entering* Pontus Hulten's exhibition "The Machine at the End of the Technological Age" (1969) at the Museum of Modern Art and physically removing his exhibited work, which he had asked not to be shown because he felt that it no longer represented his practice. Takis's attempt to reclaim agency over his production by entering the site of display allowed him to literally disrupt MoMA's framing mechanisms. Later, AWC and Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) members similarly *entered* in front of Picasso's *Guernica* to protest the Vietnam War, distributing copies of the now iconic anti-war poster *And Babies* (1969). Five years later, Tony Shafrazi spray-painted "KILL LIES ALL" on the painting. Such activated entrances, in the way of Takis, GAAG, and Shafrazi, contrast with the predominant exiting of the institution that many conceptual artists in the late sixties attempted by either abandoning their practices, or by literally exhibiting/performing outside of the physical art space as in early post-studio, environment, performance, and video art: Daniel Buren's *Affiches* and *sandwich men*, Robert Smithson's "non-sites," Lygia Clark burning her paintings (as many did), the work of BMPT – the list is long.

Historian Alan W. Moore brings attention to a key form of institutional administration that became much clearer in this moment: the hierarchical relationship between the museum that exhibits "critical" art, and the gesture of critiquing itself – in others words, recuperation. He writes: "The AWC undertook a comprehensive interrogation of the role of the museum, which paralleled *significant self-examination carried out within the museums themselves*."[16] Acknowledging this process at the first meeting of the AWC on April 14, 1969, Jean Toche, cofounder of GAAG, stated that rather than changing museums, the goal of the group should be to "get effective participation in the running of these institutions" – proposing a dictatorship of the cultural precariat, perhaps.[17] The cohesion between this sentiment and today's liberal (or even democratic-socialist) politics is not coincidental, but rather underlines the historical amnesia that guarantees the cyclical calls for appropriating ownership of unjust institutions, rather than abolition. A corollary is the ossification of traditional left formations such as the union as ends in themselves rather than means for waging struggle over the last five decades. In Nanni Balestrini's account of Italy's Hot Autumn, for example, we follow a worker who comes to political consciousness, building collective power away from fallible structures in one of the great examples of twentieth century literature that proffers radical theory. Alienated by the class collaboration he sees firsthand in the union (asking workers not to strike), the protagonist has an epiphany: "And who has the pimp's job of negotiating with the bosses for a few more lire for the worker in exchange for new tools of political control? It's the union. And it then becomes itself a tool of political control over the working class."[18] The parallel structure in the art world is not the museum worker's union which agitates, but rather the cultural institution itself which carefully curates performances of critique in its own halls in the spirit of dialogue.

Two later actions by D'Arcangelo demonstrate a form of artistic critique that sidesteps the museum's liberal protocol just as protesting workers sidestepped the unions during the large wildcat strikes in Northern Italy in 1969–70. In 1975, D'Arcangelo entered the Met. After handcuffing himself to a bench, he proposed that the museum take down all the art and instead allow anybody to enter the museum for seven days and put up their own. He handed out copies of his text "The Open Museum Proposal" in which he also asked the museum to run TV and radio ads to invite people to take part.

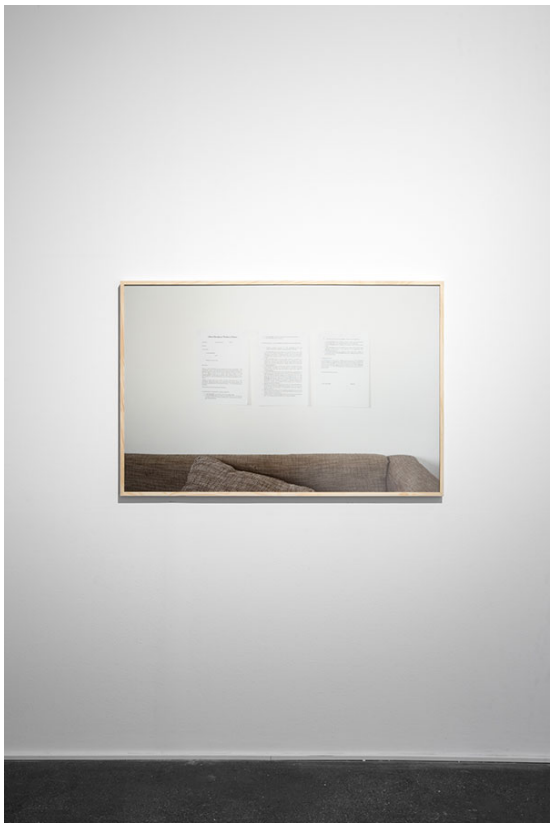
Installation of *Enough. Projects: Louise Lawler*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 19–November 10, 1987. Work shown: *Untitled, 1950-51*. 1987. Three silver dye bleach prints and transfer type on painted wall, each print: 29 3/8 x 39 1/4 in. (74.6 x 99.7 cm): wall text: 1950-1951, 1987. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

His proposal – one that would democratize the canon and the space itself – wasn't accepted. Instead, he was quickly escorted out of the Met's Great Hall by security guards, taken out of view, and pushed down the steps leading to their offices inside their museum. There, he was arrested and taken away by police.

In another action on March 8, 1978, D'Arcangelo paid to enter the Louvre, removed Thomas Gainsborough's *Conversations in a Park* (1745) from the wall and placed it on the floor, leaning against the wall, as if in a collector's home or in the artist's studio. In its place, he taped up a manifesto. Here, he undertook operations that are tangential to art's production (e.g., de-installing a painting and installing a text work) but nonetheless integral to the protocols of art's sale, presentation, and historicization. Incredibly, he left the museum completely unnoticed. Disturbed by this lack of attention, he published an open letter in *Libération* where he began to refer to his actions as "demonstrations." Evidenced by notes in his sketchbooks, he became more aware of how his actions could be recuperated as performances, but "demonstration," especially in France just a few years after May 1968, imparted his political intention.

Given the radical nature of his actions, D'Arcangelo showed that unsettling museological procedures of value production may be a key element of genuine institutional subversion. Interestingly, many of the museums he struggled against responded with a seemingly peculiar punishment: blacklisting him from entering them in the future. In keeping with the Balestrini reference, perhaps this can be compared with the retribution that bosses in the modern factory took against workers organizing wildcat strikes, when they weren't paying thugs and mafiosos to physically assault them; as described above, a sanctioned protest operates quite similarly to commissioned critique. The museums' reactions signaled the dangers they felt in allowing their functions to be destabilized when the gesture of destabilization wasn't comfortably within the aesthetic registers of the conceptualist artwork. In other words, museums like when artists drop out, but not when they go outside and chain themselves to the building. They like when art critiques its methods of value production from the inside, but not when that value is targeted or put at risk.

3.



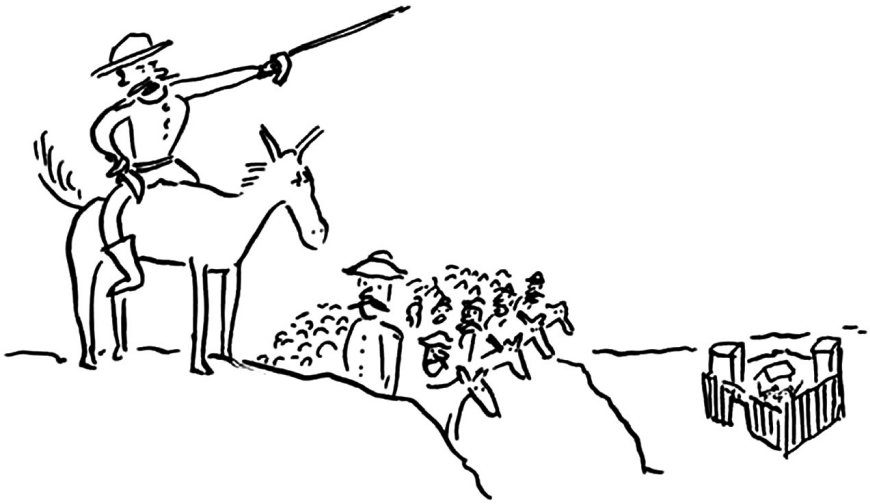
Yazan Khalili, *I, The Artwork,* 2016. Framed photographic print 120 x 79.2cm. Installation shot at Lawrie Shabibi gallery, Dubai, 2017. Yazan Khalili in collaboration with Martin Heller. Commissioned by Riwaq Biennial with support of Mophradat.

> You can ask them to imagine [Kafka's] art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door opens … and it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along.
> – David Foster Wallace, 1998[19]

Following the popularization of practices in line with what Andrea Fraser famously termed the "institution of critique" in the nineties, another term that seems to retroactively apply to much critical art is "subversivity," which philosopher Lieven de Cauter describes as "a disruptive attitude that tries to create openings, possibilities in the closedness of a system."[20] Much of Louise Lawler's work from the eighties can be said to anticipate this posture. In a 1987 exhibition at MoMA, "Enough. Project 9: Louise Lawler," she installed three copies of *Untitled 1950–51*, a photograph that shows the lower half of a Miró painting hanging in the museum. However, the framing focuses on an ultra-polished bench in front of the work bearing a reflection of the painting. In the museum, benches are positioned to quasi-subliminally alert spectators to which works are worth focused contemplation, stimulating value-production via reception. Lawler then placed the same bench in front of her photographs, mimicking the mechanisms of the museum, and in the process, informing the viewer of the technique. One is reminded of Michael Asher's 1974 installation at Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, which eliminated the wall separating office and exhibition space, exposing the gallery's operations and similarly re-spatializing the white cube. Even more similar in strategy perhaps are Asher's contribution to the "73rd American Exhibition" and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*,[21] wherein the act of conforming to the museum's historical periodization works to destabilize the embedded violence, and in the case of the latter reveals the violence against people of color integral to museum taxonomy and property.

In a 1979 group exhibition with D'Arcangelo, Adrian Piper, and Cindy Sherman at Artists Space, Lawler installed a painting of a racehorse (1863) borrowed from the Aqueduct Race Track. She also installed two very bright stage lights, one directed at the painting and the other toward the viewer. The lights were bright enough to illuminate the street outside as well, including the façade of a Citibank. One key feature often left out of discussions of this show is that Lawler and D'Arcangelo had initially proposed to present all four artists' work as a single piece.[22] When this proposal was rejected by the other artists, D'Arcangelo decided to make himself institutionally invisible. He struck his name from all instances of the show's title (in the catalogue, in publicity material for the show, and so on), inserting a blank space instead.[23] He also wrote a four-page essay that was pasted on the walls – corresponding to four blank pages in the catalogue. Lawler later remarked that the pages of his essay appeared in the room with her installation, confusing spectators: whose work is whose, what is the work, who did the lighting, who is missing, and so on. In her 1982 exhibition at Metro Pictures, Lawler activated the goal of unifying various artists' objects when she began her "arrangements," exhibiting work by the gallery's artists as one piece, pricing it at the total of all the individual pieces, with a 10 percent commission fee for herself. The art system necessities clear forms of attribution and authorship for the sake of producing value, and simultaneously for crafting its own insides and outs: who belongs to the canon and who doesn't. Though Lawler's intervention in this instance was a conceptual gesture and not an attack on that value production, it pedagogically sketches the regimes of authorship and lampoons them.

To consider how a relatively benign disruption of protocol can develop further, take Lawler's production and subsequent reuse of what is perhaps her most famous picture: *Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Connecticut* (1984). It depicts what is likely Jackson Pollock's last drip painting hanging in the home of storied collectors in the age when hyper-speculation truly exploded the art market. Only a small portion of the Pollock canvas is included in the image, which captures how the painting is "framed" in the space, hanging just above a Limoges soup tureen.[24] This disruptive re-performance of images is most evident when one considers the "medium" designated for another re-performance of *Pollock and Tureen* in the collection of the MoMA. Here Lawler disturbs the very pinnacle of museological taxonomy: the cataloguing of the art object. MoMA's website stipulates that *Pollock and Tureen (traced)* (1984/2013) is comprised of "signed certificate, installation instructions, and PDF formatted file."[25] The objects that the title refers to are rather the iterations that *can* be printed and installed following the parameters of Lawler's instructions and a proposed site. However, the individual iterations are *contingent* upon specific constraints stipulated by the artist's "hand" (the installation instructions) – an internalization of something akin to the artist's contract or the



"Send in the art activists!"

Artoon courtesy of Pablo Helguera.

score into the work's medium itself.

4.

The modes and gestures of conceptualism (refusal of authorship, counter-institutional formations, non-object-based and process-based work) have become the dominant forms of artistic production – or at least of art that is shown in museums. As Ed Halter remarks: "Perhaps we should stop thinking about the failure of conceptualism to transcend the art world, just long enough to notice that it has, in fact, overtaken the world as such."[26] (This allusion to transcending the art world into the world itself carries yet more import when considering political work through or with art, as discussed below.)

The work of artists such as Jill Magid is certainly in this register, but brings up a different problematic implied in entrance/collaboration: Who can enter, and why? For her *System Azure Security Ornamentation* (2002), for example, Magid approached the Amsterdam police proposing to decorate CCTV cameras with rhinestones. They refused. However, after founding a company and becoming "professionalized," at least performatively, thus operating in a creative capitalist managerial role, Magid was not only invited but paid by the police to do the same work. The work intends to bring visual attention to the cameras and the pervasive surveillance state they foster. The process of gaining access, however, attests to a privilege that Magid's whiteness carries within an inherently racist and violent institution such as the police. In this sense, Magid's work identifies who is "permitted" to critique and who isn't. While the museum is surely less violent than the police (though the two collaborate), similar privileges determine who can protest and who cannot, or who will be penalized and who won't.[27]

Magid's *The Spy Project* (2005–10) takes institutional disruption further by engaging with the site of display and a state intelligence agency. After securing a commission by the Dutch Secret Service (AIVD) to produce a work for its headquarters, for three years she met with different employees of the agency and recorded their conversations in handwritten notes, given that sound recordings were not permitted. Her project proposed that she become a member of the organization as a "Head of Service," "responsible for maintaining the secrecy of sensitive information."[28] Throughout the duration of the project, Magid exhibited sculptures, neons, and works on paper based on the conversations, some of which were censored and confiscated by the police. She also wrote a spy novel. She collected her notes in a manuscript, but was told it would be greatly censored. After arguing, the AIVD conceded that she could exhibit her manuscript "as a visual work of art in a one-time-only exhibition."[29] Afterwards, the book would be confiscated and become property of the Dutch government. Magid recounts this conversation in a novel she later produced from the manuscript, 40 percent of which was redacted:

> My advisor interrupts him. *What are you proposing?*
>
> He directs his answer back to me. *We want you to think of the book as an object of art. We will redact it and put it inside the vitrine with your notebooks where it will remain, permanently.*
>
> You want me to put it under glass so that it will no longer function as a book but as sculpture? *Yes*. He blinks his eyes rapidly. *It becomes an object of art*.[30]

The AIVD therefore completed the work of art on Magid's behalf, creating a conceptual text object.[31] Climactically, Magid presented the agency's censorship as a physical performance in her exhibition "Authority to Remove" (2009–10) at the Tate. There, she installed the to-be-confiscated manuscript securely under glass. At the opening of the show, agents entered the Tate and permanently removed the object. In stark contrast to D'Arcangelo, who stealthily entered the Louvre in order to sabotage a work, Magid essentially directed the police to sabotage the work on her behalf, thus demonstrating the diverse levels of accessibility, surveillance, and control guaranteed by institutionality.

If Lawler and Magid's disruptive propositions rely on the institution to play its part – either in stretching Lawler's picture beyond recognition ("to scale"), or in literally removing and confiscating a piece of Magid's show – then Yazan Khalili's *I, The Artwork* (2016) instead relies on the museum to disobey his instructions, a different choreography entirely. In this work, the viewer encounters a contract written and signed from the position of the artwork itself, meaning that for all intents and purposes it is null and void. It stipulates, among other things, that the piece – a photograph of the contract hanging on a wall above a sofa – cannot be shown in an institution in a country which is occupying another land or people. Clearly, this work cannot be shown in Israel. The point therefore is to wait for an Israeli institution with liberal views to install it on its walls.[32] At that point spectators will come into conflict with their position regarding Israel's violent occupation of the Palestinian people and land. The disturbance

of museum protocol that Khalili activates is predicated on the failure of the contract underpinning it. It disturbs by entering and "failing."

Courtesy Decolonize This Place.

5.

I finish with another formulation by Vishmidt:

> If the project of critique always ends up affirming its subject – the institution of art – in its valorization of both the affective subject and its critical capacity, this can inflate the artist as critical subject beyond all reason, much like how philosopher Theodor W. Adorno deems art a grotesque, inflated "absolute commodity" with no use value in place to stop it from expanding to whatever the market will bear. Only labor can check the infinite expansion of the "automatic subject" of capitalist value in art as elsewhere.[33]

Given the historical narrative of institutional critique, where has political sloganeering via cultural practice, genuine or not, brought us? This question is especially urgent in today's context where critique has become enshrined in the highest orders of institutionality, from Google artist residencies to United Nations in-house consultants. How do we critique without relinquishing the self-determination and curating of the work and its public, whether it be art or grassroots organizing? Under a visual culture beholden to capitalist philanthropy for funding and legitimacy, and more expansively, under neoliberal forms of representation (i.e., mainstream identity politics), how can agitation by way of cultural production avoid being defanged and made the spectacle of absorption itself?

The successful ouster of ex–vice-chair of the Whitney Museum Warren Kanders in 2019 provides one possible answer. After sustained action by dozens of grassroots community groups, cultural workers, and museum staff members calling for Kanders's removal because of his role in producing and profiting from weapons use in settler-colonial occupation and state violence all over the world, he resigned. Much discussed in art magazines the world over, many missed the point. One article, for example, discussed the crucial pressure by Decolonize This Place (DTP) in coalition with anti-displacement groups, anti-jail activists, and many other grassroots groups, but chose to ask this: "As calls intensify for Whitney Museum vice chair Warren B. Kanders to step down, what more can museums do to avoid appointing board members with unethical business ties?"[34] Though the campaign was incredibly clear-eyed in its goals – to unseat a violent warmonger so as to destabilize the entire system of private ownership and its incumbent colonial forms of exploitation – why were so many in the art world stuck asking how to *reform* boards rather than abolish boards? A statement released by DTP in September 2019 is clarifying:

> For those who may think that the work we do is to be measured and valued by whether a Warren B. Kanders is removed or a certain curator is hired, or a problematic show is cancelled, etc., fundamentally misunderstands the political project Decolonize This Place is engaged in. We, and all our collaborators, seek collective liberation and are unafraid to unsettle everything. We are accountable to, first and foremost, communities we belong to and not simply the art world, its gatekeepers or funders. We blur the lines between art, activism, academia and organizing to build movements rooted in peoples sovereignty, as we recognize the debts we owe one another, seeking to resist and build together in order to be free. There are always people that are / feel left behind, because they are attached to the status quo, cannot imagine anything else, or

> simply benefiting from the misery of others as they intellectualize the problem, whether intentionally or otherwise (doesn't matter). We can understand that and it won't stop us. Here, we also take the opportunity to make it abundantly clear to all those who wonder (or not): We are for abolition and decolonization, and are anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist without being statist. We also state unequivocally that we are anti-Zionism and Israel as a settler colonial project not dissimilar to the United States, as well as against all other forms of oppression.[35]

Amidst the campaign to oust Kanders, DTP organized "Nine Weeks of Art + Action," leading up to the 2019 Whitney Biennial. During the sixth week, a woman artist of color spoke in Spanish and in English in the occupied lobby of the Whitney. She described the connections between Kanders's war machine and the continued colonization of the Puerto Rican people and land by the US. At one point, she directed our attention up towards the stairs where an employee of the museum filmed the action; she asked us why her work isn't shown in this "museum of American art" and then reminded us that some years from now, the video of her speech would likely be projected onto the Whitney's walls, historicizing her protest as another wave of artists' critique.

As demonstrated by this campaign, *entering* the institution is still a viable tactic for creating popular power and leveraging it, depending on how it is done, in coalition with whom, and to what ends. As a comrade recently mentioned to me, *what* is to be done is clearer than *how* to do it. Most recently, MTL+, along with other groups and collectives, has proposed an "arts of escalation" as one *how*, which uses the museum as a semi-safe space (with less police presence than the street) to build a struggle.[36] This must happen across and through the boundaries sketched by the museum, and especially across the boundaries erected between cultural production and other work. The victory against Kanders was not accomplished alone by the museum staff who penned a letter, nor by the eight artists who boycotted the show by removing their work halfway through the exhibition. The broad coalition was instead a show of how autonomous, abolitionist community groups across New York City "showed up." Wherever a gesture of critique begins or terminates, it must reject methods of value production and legitimized forms of critique, do away with the separation of art-working and labor, and embrace struggles that aim to erode the need to exit or enter, with the goal of making these spaces ours.

×

My gratitude goes to the many exceptional friends and comrades who read this piece at various stages of completion, too numerous to list. Among them: Christian Xatrec, with whom I am conceptualizing an event to emerge from the text; Louise Lawler and Cathy Weiner for reading a late draft and confirming the historical facts. Thanks as well to Julia Robinson for inviting me to read a very early draft of this text for her class at NYU. Nicholas Martin graciously searched through the Fales Library collection while the archive remains closed. I'm grateful to my colleagues at *e-flux journal* for their support and for all they've taught me. I thank Elvia Wilk for editing this piece and thinking through critique with me; without her thoughts and work, the formation of a coherent essay would have been impossible.

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1
Marina Vishmidt, "Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural," in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practices)*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Tom Holert (BAK, 2017), 219.

2
For more on his manifesto and actions, see the exhibition pamphlet for "Anarchism Without Adjectives: On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo," organized by Sebastien Pluot at Artists Space, New York, September 10–October 16, 2011, available here: https://texts.artistsspace.org/h5zj56in. The statement was written with a marker by Cathy Weiner.

3
Jeffrey Deitch, "Christopher D'Arcangelo," in *Anarchism Without Adjectives: On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1975–1979)*, exh. cat. (Artists Space, 2011), 17.

4
I use "speculate" here in the way Marina Vishmidt theorizes it in her book *Speculation as a Mode of Production* (Brill, 2018). In the book, she draws parallels between the processes of speculation in financialization and in art, arguing that neither financialized capitalism nor artistic production can be thought of as unproductive labor.

5
On this, see the introduction to Dave Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production* (Pluto Press, 2019). Marina Vishmidt's excellent way of countering art's ostensible unproductiveness is to consider it socially reproductive, as argued in *Speculation as a Mode of Production*.

6
Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (University of California Press, 1973).

7
In a recent discussion on these two terms, Vishmidt remarked succinctly: "all labor is material." Marina Vishmidt in conversation with Andreas Petrossiants, "Marina Vishmidt: Speculation as a Mode of Production," *e-flux podcast*, June 18, 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/podca sts/.

8
The "rat" reference is to Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* (MIT Press, 1996), 56, where he writes that critics like Michael Fried were worried about minimal art presenting "a self-conscious position *on* art ... but also to intervene in this discourse *as* art. Again, this is an avant-gardist recognition (Fried smelled the same rat as Greenberg: Duchamp and disciples) ... only with minimalism does this understanding become self-conscious. That is, only in the early 1960s is the institutionality not only of art but also of the avant-garde first appreciated and then exploited." For other discourses happening at the time in minimal dance and music that are also relevant, see the essays by Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Diederich Diederichsen in *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968*, exh. cat. (Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with MIT Press, 2004).

9
See Julia Robinson, "John Cage and Investiture: Unmanning the System," in *John Cage*, ed. Julia Robinson (MIT Press, 2011), and the catalog for the exhibition that Robinson organized: *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art*, exh. cat. (MACBA, 2009). See also Branden Joseph *Experimentations: John Cage in Music, Art, and Architecture* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

10
Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, exh. cat. (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), 42.

11
Martin Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No* (Sternberg, 2016).

12
Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (e-flux and University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2020).

13
One outlier, of a few, is the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, central, in fact, for considering much of what is discussed in this text; specifically her residency at the Department of Sanitation of New York since 1977. See my "Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance and/as (Art) Work," *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 21 (2018) https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2018/21-invisible-labor/mierle-laderman-ukeles - maintenance-andas-art-work. Even the scope of her project, which brought attention to the underfunding and horrendous working conditions of sanitation workers, specifically from a materialist perspective, has been recuperated by the austerity government of New York City, which launched a residency program in 2018 to artwash over consistent cuts to social spending while invoking Ukeles' name.

14
Vishmidt, "Beneath the Atelier," 220–21.

15
See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the*

Vietnam War Era (University of California Press, 2009).

16
Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (Autonomedia, 2011), 26. Emphasis mine.

17
See Jean Toche's statement at first AWC hearing printed in: AWC, *Open Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers Coalition* (AWC, 1969), statement 1. Primary Information has made this available as a PDF on their website: https://primaryinformation.org/files/FOH.pdf.

18
Nanni Balestrini, *We Want Everything*, trans. Matt Holden (Verso Books, 2016), 105.

19
David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 65.

20
Lieven de Cauter, "Notes on Subversion/Theses on Activism," in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, ed. de Cauter, Ruben de Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouk (NAi, 2011), 9, referenced in relation to Lawler's work by Roxana Marcoci in "An Exhibition Produces," in *Louise Lawler Receptions* exh. cat. (MoMA, 2017), 28.

21
See Anne Rorimer, "Michael Asher: Kontext als Inhalt," available in English here: http://www.mit.edu/~allanmc/asher1.pdf; and Martha Buskirk, "Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louis Lawler, and Fred Wilson," *October*, no. 70 (Autumn, 1994): 98–112.

22
Louise Lawler, in *5000 Artists Return to Artists Space: 25 Years*, ed. Claudia Gould and Valerie Smith (Artists Space, 1998), 100–101.

23
This was another way of "dropping out," perhaps, though this time he participated in a sanctioned exhibition. In a twisted turn of events, when a retrospective of his work was mounted at Artists Space four decades later, rather than including the title *Anarchism Without Adjectives* on the banners outside their Tribeca space, the gallery opted for D'Arcangelo's name, stating that the neighborhood would not take kindly to anarchist sentiments. I thank Sébastien Pluot for bringing this to my attention.

24
The image has been represented in multiple ways: as a gelatin silver print, along with "Pollock and Tureen" printed in red on the image's mat; as a traced image drawn by the illustrator Jon Buller, printed on paper or on a wall, produced at any size "to scale." Lawler first exhibited the "traced" works in her 2013 survey at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. See *Louise Lawler: Adjusted*, ed. Phillip Kaiser, exh. cat. (Museum Ludwig in cooperation with Prestel Verlag, 2013). Most recently, Lawler has developed another "adjusting" mechanism: "distorted" versions of her images, titled *(adjusted to fit, distorted for the times)*. See Louise Lawler, "Distorted for the Times," *October*, no. 160 (Spring, 2017), 152.

25
"Louise Lawler: *Pollock and Tureen (traced)*," MoMA.org https://www.moma.org/collection/works/205063.

26
Ed Halter, "The Centaur and the Hummingbird," in *Free*, exh. cat. (New Museum, 2011), 43. Accessed online: http://archive.rhizome.org/free/index.html#edhalter.

27
One clear and distressing example among many: the New Museum hiring a union-busting firm to intimidate organizing workers, and then firing most of those successful unionists with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, soon after exhibiting the work of Hans Haacke, who has long championed the rights of workers.

28
Jill Magid, "Becoming Tarden – Prologue," *e-flux journal*, no. 9 (October, 2009) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/09/61368/becoming-tarden-prologue/.

29
Jill Magid, "The Spy Project," Jillmagid.com http://www.jillmagid.com/projects/article-12-the-spy-series-2.

30
Jill Magid, *Becoming Tarden* (New Museum, 2010); excerpts quoted in Halter, "The Centaur and the Hummingbird."

31
I would be remiss not to bring up Marcel Broodthaers's *Pense-bête* (1964), in which he exhibited the remaining unsold copies of his book of poetry of the same name affixed in plaster, making the book unreadable. *Pense-bête* set an early precedence for this type of conceptualist work, which strikingly resembles Magid's work, if only formally. In Broodthaers's work, he performatively "quit" his prior work as a poet, and declared himself an artist. If his books wouldn't be read, he sarcastically asked, perhaps they would be looked at. In Magid's piece, the book is also unreadable because of its censure by state intelligence.

32
Yazan Khalili, in interview with David Kim, "*I, The Artwork*: A Conversation with Yazan Khalili," *e-flux journal*, no. 90 (April 2018) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/90/191401/i-the-artwork-a-conversation-with-yazan-khalili/.

33
Vishmidt, "Beneath the Atelier," 235.

34
Cody Delistraty, "The Whitney's Choice: Can a Museum for 'Progressive Artists' Have an Arms-Manufacturer Vice-Chairman?" *Frieze*, April 12, 2019 https://frieze.com/article/whitneys-choice-can-museum-progressive-artists-have-arms-manufacturer-vice-chairman. This is not to single out *Frieze*, but is just one example of the approach many art magazines took to covering the events.

35
Statement shared with author via email on September 24, 2019 and released on social media the previous day.

36
MTL+, "The Art of Escalation: Becoming Ungovernable on a Day of City-Wide Transit Action," *Hyperallergic*, January 31, 2020 https://hyperallergic.com/540324/j31/.

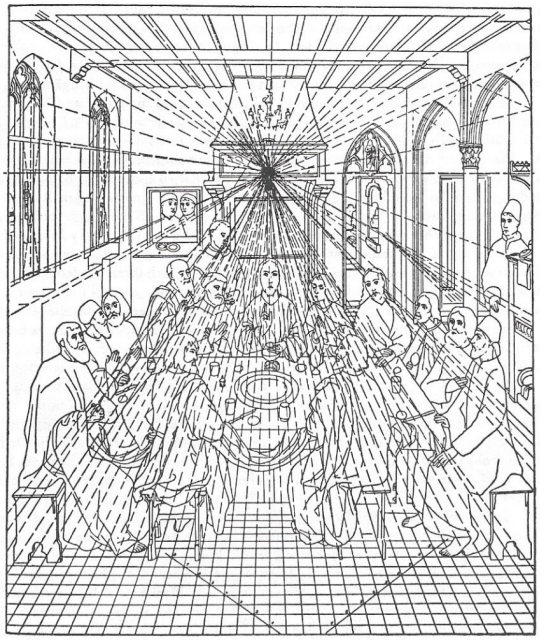
Sven Lütticken

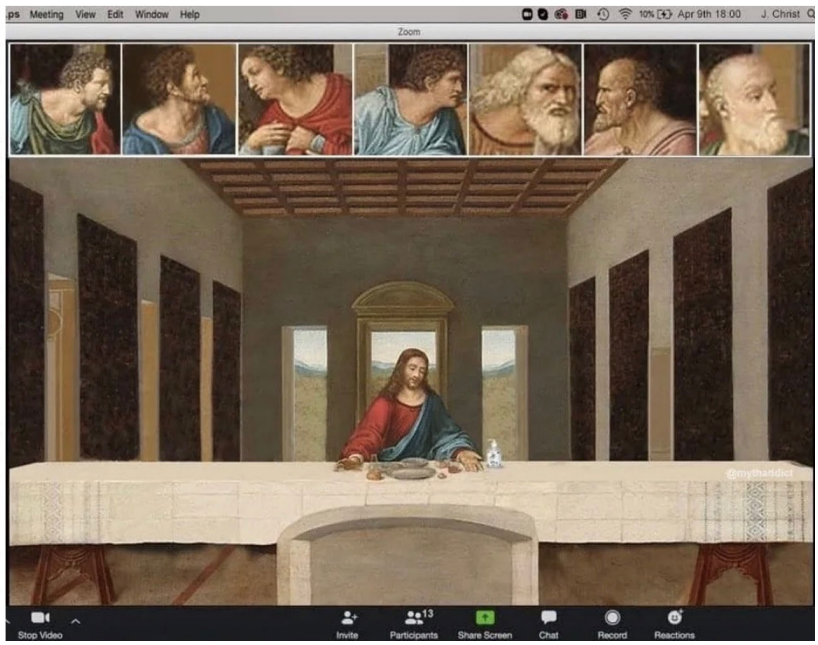
Performing Preformations: Elements for a Historical Formalism

It may seem like the pinnacle of frivolity to discuss formal concerns in the present state of exception, yet I would like to insist that form matters, vitally, more than ever. "Formalism," of course, has long had a bad reputation. The term was weaponized both by Stalinists and by reactionaries in early- and mid-twentieth century debates about modernism, with the frequent implication that modern art was devoid of meaningful content and social use value. The 1960s witnessed the greatest triumph and ultimate downfall of formalism in art criticism – although, in keeping with the term's bad reputation, critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried did not necessarily self-identify as formalists, but rather as modernists. Today, after decades of Greenberg-bashing, a set of contemporary neoformalisms – in theory as in aesthetic practice – often conceives of form in social terms.

One such neoformalist is literary scholar Caroline Levine, who defines form as "*an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*."[1] This broad definition includes "social arrangements," meaning that forms are "the stuff of politics," and thus formal devices in a novel such as *Jane Eyre* can be read in conjunction with the structures of institutions in the fictional world of the novel; Lowood School, with its disciplinary regime and its "semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement" is a matter of form, too.[2] In contrast to such an articulation of a social structure within the text of a novel, certain contemporary artists work *directly* with social gatherings as their material, such as creating forms for alternative parliaments and various types of assemblies. For instance, Judith Butler's theorization of the *assembly form* has been being taken up by artist Jonas Staal in his proposal for "assemblism" as a morphological practice.[3] Here, social form is self-constitution, self-organization, and ultimately self-institutionalization: the preemption of forms imposed by others.

If form is "the stuff of politics," it would be a fallacy to assume that it is a politics of pure presence and concretion – or that political forms can be equated fully with conventional methods of representation. It is worth recalling Theodor W. Adorno's modernist insistence that in art, formal articulation will always remain partial and fractured: "The articulation, by which the artwork achieves its form, also always coincides in a certain sense with the defeat of form. If a gapless and unforced unity of form and the formed succeeded, as is intended by the idea of form, this would amount to the achievement of the identity of the identical and nonidentical."[4] If today's neoformalisms rightly broaden the





Left: Illustration from Erwin Panofsky's book *Perspective as Symbolic Form;* Right: a COVID-19/Zoom meme by an unknown author.

understanding of form beyond late-modernist reductivisms, Levine's suggestion that the formal turn amounts to a shift from a (Marxist) privileging of "deep structures" to an emphasis on the patterns of lived experience strikes me as problematic in its one-sidedness.[5] Form should instead be thought of as the mediation- – and, at times, the conflict – between deep structure and concrete articulation. Form enacts a dialectic of the concrete and the abstract – an oscillation that makes it central to modern thought.

Today's progressive political formalisms continue to operate under conditions shaped by what Alfred Sohn-Rethel termed "real abstraction," an actual and operational abstraction rather than a mere matter of thought. The capitalist value-form molds the social, and does so in conjunction with the formal schematas of the law and technoscience. The elaboration of (new or renewed) organizational forms needs to instead be complemented by an engagement with the dominant schemata that continue to structure subjects and objects, collaboration and collectivity. Whereas modern aesthetic theory at times posited a quasi-autonomous *life of forms*, the question now needs to be how *forms of life*, with a degree of autonomy, can be created from and against the structural conditions that both necessitate and sabotage them.

The Return of Formalism (But Which One?)

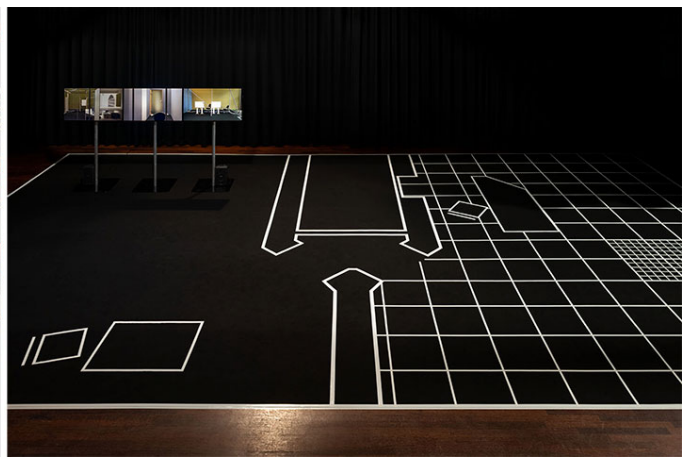
Never a neutral descriptor for a clearly defined phenomenon, the notion of form has always been an unstable signifier that has been paired off with concepts such as *content*, *matter*, or *structure*, creating dichotomies that haunted modernist and anti-modernist criticism and theory alike. As the storm of history erodes cultural conventions, modernism often revolved around the problematic relation between form and content, exemplified by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and his insistence that form is a "sedimentation of content" – in a far from effortless and remainder-less dialectical process.[6]

If forms shape experiences and the horizon of expectations, moulding what can be perceived, thought and done, then it obscures just as much as it makes visible. Drawing a line creates a formless outside where monsters live. As Adorno states:

> Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. This is confirmed by the artistic labor of forming, which is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form, and this prolongs guilty domination in artworks, of which they would like to be free; form is their amorality. They do injustice to what they form by following it. At least something of this was sensed by vitalism's endlessly rehearsed assurance, ever since Nietzsche, of the antithesis between form and life.[7]

Adorno, offering here yet another "form and…" pairing, thus suggests that a political and social formalism in aesthetic practice – attempting to shape the social and create structures for living and working together – must also remain cognizant of what remains disavowed and formless in the process of formation.

In Greenbergian modernism and its exclusive focus on abstract art, medium-specific "flatness" and forms and colors, the awareness of "sedimented content" was limited to a few vague comments on "feeling" or "mood." By the



Left: People's Tribunal *Dissolve the NSU Complex*, Cologne, 19 May 2017. Photo: Jasper Kettner; Right: Forensic Architecture, *77sqm 9m26sec,* 2017. Installed at BAK, Utrecht, 2018-19.

end of the 60s, and into the following decades, art production and theory, marked by a widespread rejection of this entire approach, took on such guises as post-minimalism, conceptual art, institutional critique and appropriation art. But was this really the last word on formalism? In the 1980s and 1990s, Yve-Alain Bois argued that what had (rightly) been rejected was merely a "restricted formalism"; Roger Fry and Clive Bell's concern had been "merely good design." The same might be said of Greenberg, who – with his notes on the "deductive structure" in paintings by Newman and others notwithstanding – ultimately reduced form to "morphology."[8] Seeking forebears who instead conceived of form as "generative structure," Bois looked among the Russian formalists (Jakobson and his contemporaries), Saussure, and Barthes.[9]

Bois charged morphological formalism with an idealist conception of form that is ultimately "an Aristotelian one, where form is an a priori UFO that lands on raw matter."[10] Aristotelian hylomorphism ties together the terms of the second major opposition within which form functions: *morphe* (form) and *hyle* (matter). In the 1930s, Henri Focillon had already protested against such a hylomorphic UFO approach, stating that "form does not behave as some superior principle modeling a passive mass, for it is plainly observable how matter imposes its own form upon form."[11] Bois, however, does not critique the UFO approach in order to claim that matter informs form, but so as to argue in favor of a structuralist emphasis on the conventional and differential value of the sign, which has "slipped away from the fixity of what semiologists would call an iconic condition."[12]

In structuralism, both the form/matter and the form/content pair were replaced by a dialectic of *langue* and *parole* – in other words, of a deep structure and its performative enactment. In analyzing Mondrian's work in terms of the "semantic function played by various combinations of pictorial elements" in order to "understand how a seemingly rigid formal system engendered diverse significations," Bois continued to treat it as an autonomous – albeit surprisingly rich – system.[13] However, the fact that this approach lacks any sense of in-formation as semiotic labor raises questions. How, under what social circumstances, and through which media and materials, does *langue* come to be performed as *parole?* How does the deep structure become enacted and to what effect might the resultant forms be socially transformative?

While Bois discussed the impact of Brecht

The White West, symposium at La Colonie, Paris, May 9, 2018.

on the early Barthes of *Mythologies,* his neoformalism largely negated the avant-garde impetus of artists and theorists such as Brecht, or the communist critic Lu Märten.[14] In her work of the 1910s and 1920s, Märten effectively replaced the *art(s)* with that of *form(s)* to counteract the reductive formal questions of art from the narrow, institutionalized/high art perspective. What mattered to her was "the materials and means that could generate the forms – arts, if you prefer – of the revolutionized life" in a communist society.[15] Märten's forms of a revolutionized life can be seen as a radicalization of early twentieth-century German theories about *Lebensformen*: life-forms, or forms-of-life.[16] Many of the authors who wrote on forms-of-life were conservative; it wasn't only the leftists who were interested in developing a formalism of social life.

Even Focillon, who was intently focused on "the life of forms *in art"* (as per the title of his 1934 book), quoted Balzac to the effect that "[everything] is form, and life itself is form."[17] For Focillon, form does not exist in autonomous isolation but is a way of trans-forming the world – Greece without Greek architecture would merely be a "luminous desert."[18] Focillon thus posits form as the medium through which art takes on life, and life becomes aesthetic. He likely would have found much to agree in Rudolf Arnheim's perception psychology, which considers that "the work of art is a Gestalt of the highest degree," and can be thought to present a kind of morphological clarity that transcends unfocused, everyday perception.[19] At times, Arnheim uses an all-encompassing sense of *Gestalt*; in a 1951 essay, for example he discusses football teams and electrical circuits, as well as paintings, as "wholes, which determine their parts."[20] He argues that organizational and artistic form come together in the string quartet:

> Four musicians who form a string quartet will create a unified style of performance. This style is a delicate crystallization of affinities and conflicts of temper. It is the balance of convergent and divergent social forces and, in turn, modifies the behavior of each player. Change the arm of the left boy in the Laocoon group, and the entire piece of sculpture assumes a different composition. Such internal play of influences obeys rules that are largely independent of the particular medium in which they are observed. In a sense, they refer to "formal" properties.[21]

Here, Arnheim does not refer to the string quartet primarily as a musical form, but instead as a group of people. However, this social arrangement clearly informs the composition and its performance in ways that belie any claim of aesthetic independence from this particular (human) medium. It is in passages such as these that the seemingly most apolitical or conservative of formalists – such as Arnheim or Focillon – can prove productive, suggesting the need to problematize blanket condemnations of the "wrong" kind of formalism.

The art of recent decades encourages a critical rereading of the formalist corpus. For all its limitations, the relational aesthetics of the 1990s was instrumental in the widespread shift from a modernist-formalist understanding of form as superior Gestalt – created by an artist for individual aesthetic apperception-- – to what Nicolas Bourriaud called a focus on "social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations)."[22] For all the strengths of certain works by Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija, or Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, relational aesthetics helped inaugurate an era of bland biennale art and project-based ubiquity, yet a question posed by Bourriaud continues to be valid: "One day, somebody ought to write the history of art using the peoples who pass through it, and the symbolic/practical structures which make it possible to accommodate them. What human *flow*, governed by what forms, thus passes into art forms?"[23]

While the use of "symbolic/practical" is intriguing, it is unclear what kind of relationship is signified by the slash between the two terms. Structuralism had frequently accorded a questionable autonomy to sign systems. By contrast, in the 1990s Judith Butler began using and developing J. L. Austin's notion of speech acts (as well as its critique by Derrida and others) to focus on the enactment of langue in the subject's interpellation as a gendered being.[24] Here, the performance of the linguistic deep structure, its social conditions, effects and affects, become the center of attention. Even back then, Butler insisted that "bodies matter," but her recent (post-Occupy, post-Arab Spring) work places greater emphasis on the physical enactment, in addition to the linguistic performance; the intersubjective speech act becomes a collective assembly. In contemporary artistic practice, when Staal organizes a parliament in Rojava whose formal arrangement and mode of operating differs from a standard representative democracy, this is a practico-symbolic structure where speech acts have agency within the precarious and embattled enclave of the Kurdish autonomous cantons.[25]

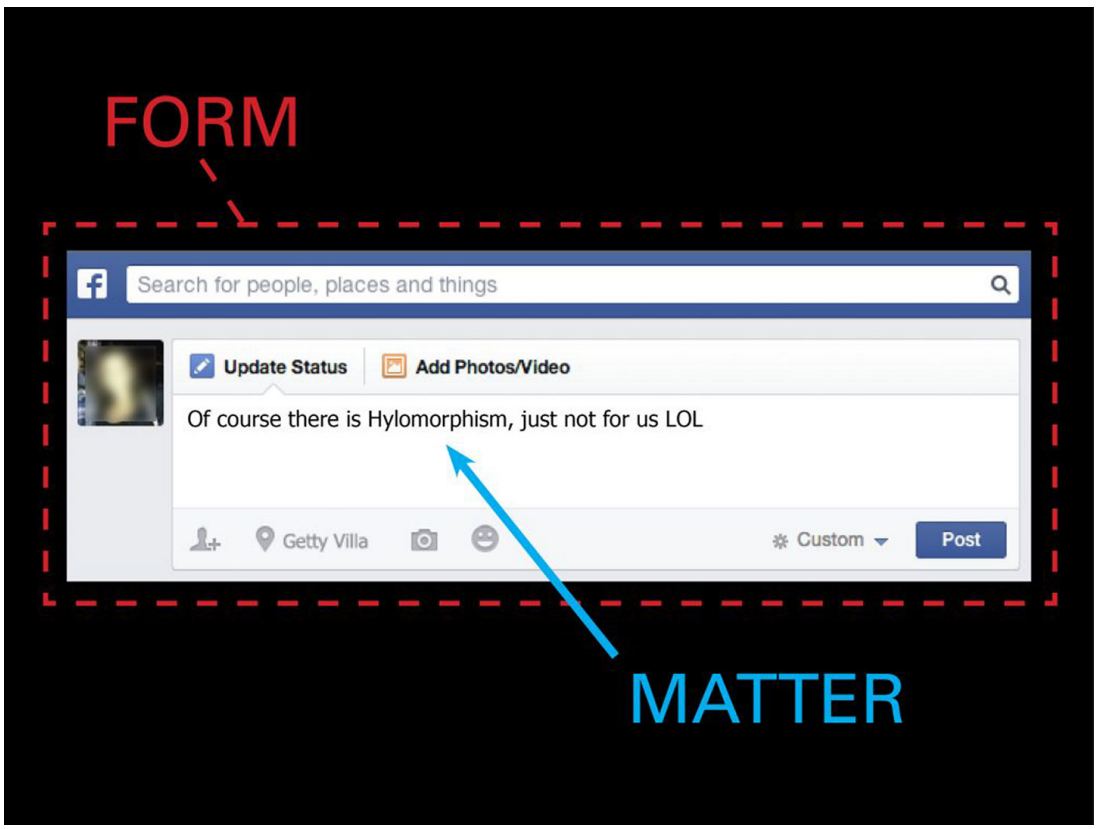
Projects such as Staal's entail a critique of 1990s relational aesthetics' bubble-bound staging of conviviality and easy sociability, and

its refusal to acknowledge contradictions and antagonism. These works amount to a form of *organizational aesthetics*.[26] Examples of such practices could be multiplied. They range from branded "artist organizations" à la Staal's own New World Summit or Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International to cooperatives such as Inland (founded by Fernando García-Dory, among others) or the decolonial space *La Colonie* in Paris (initiated by Kader Attia, and run by a dedicated team); one can also think of artistic-curatorial practices such as Don't Follow the Wind or *Ruangrupa*, and of a networked antiracist alliance such as Dissolve the NSU Complex and its artistic offshoot: the artistic alliance The Society of Friends of Halit, in which Natascha Sadr Haghighian was a key participant. Many such forms crucially revolve around physical assemblies – which recently became painfully obvious when such gatherings were no longer possible in the COVID-19 state of exception, and the dependence of critical practices on the platforms of surveillance capitalism was exacerbated.

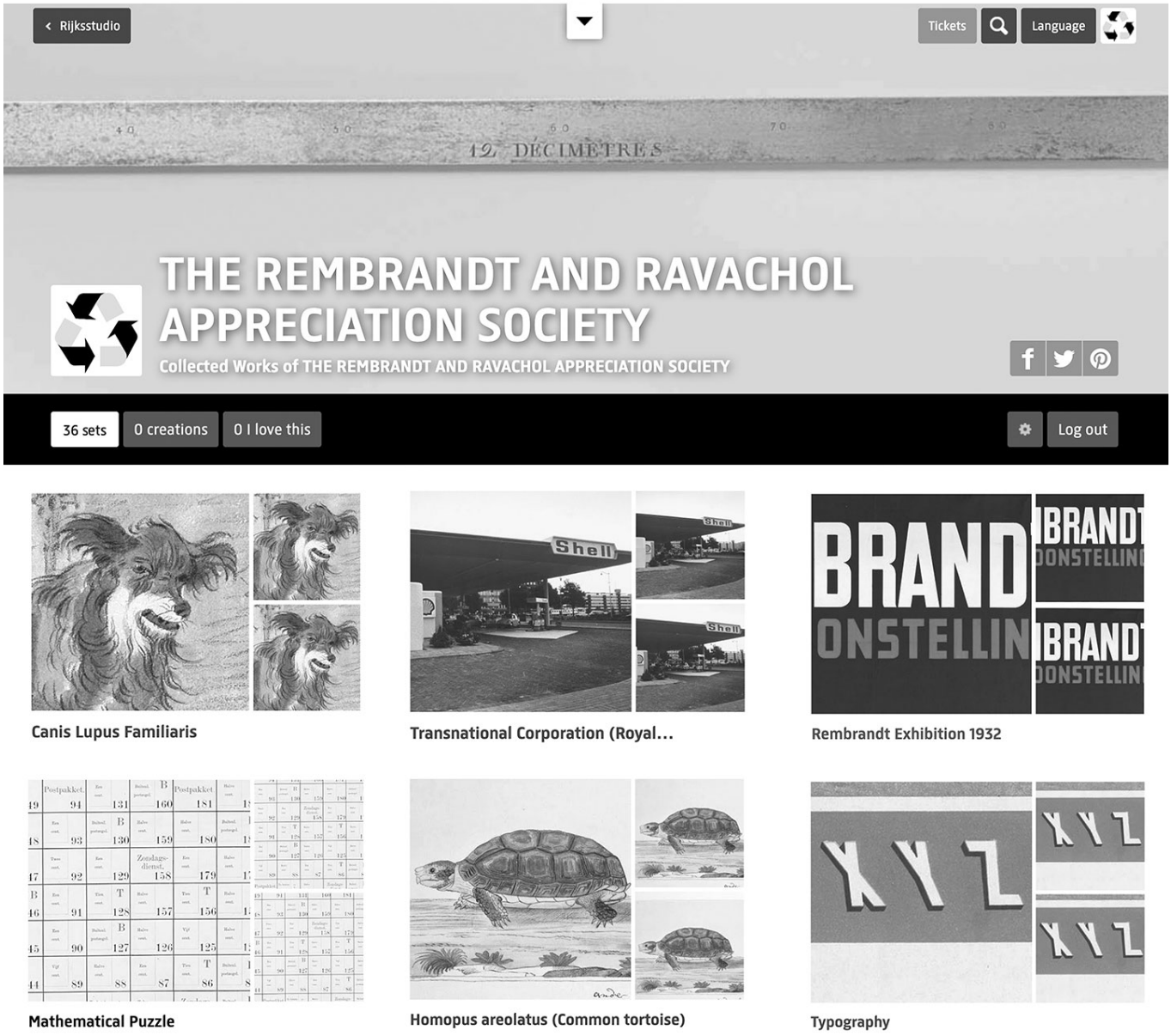
Paul Chan has analyzed these platforms in hylomorphistic terms. Illustrating the templates of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Chan notes that "a form is something we fill out with what matters in our lives. And the principal substance that motivates and underwrites this operation is every bit as valuable, vital, and immaterial as what was once called the soul. Today, we call this substance data."[27] For Aristotle, the real form of a human person is the soul that animates the body; hence the *morphe* is not always the visible form. A sculpture modeled after a human being, or a dead body, lacks the living person's soul, and hence their form.[28] Does then the *morphe* of an entity posting propaganda on Facebook matter? In the logic of the network, does it matter terribly if there is a human mind behind an avatar, or if it is a bot? What kind of relations and assemblages between human and technical entities are possible, and indeed desirable? How are subjectivities and collectivities being *pre*formed, and how can such preformations be *per*formed otherwise?

Perspectives

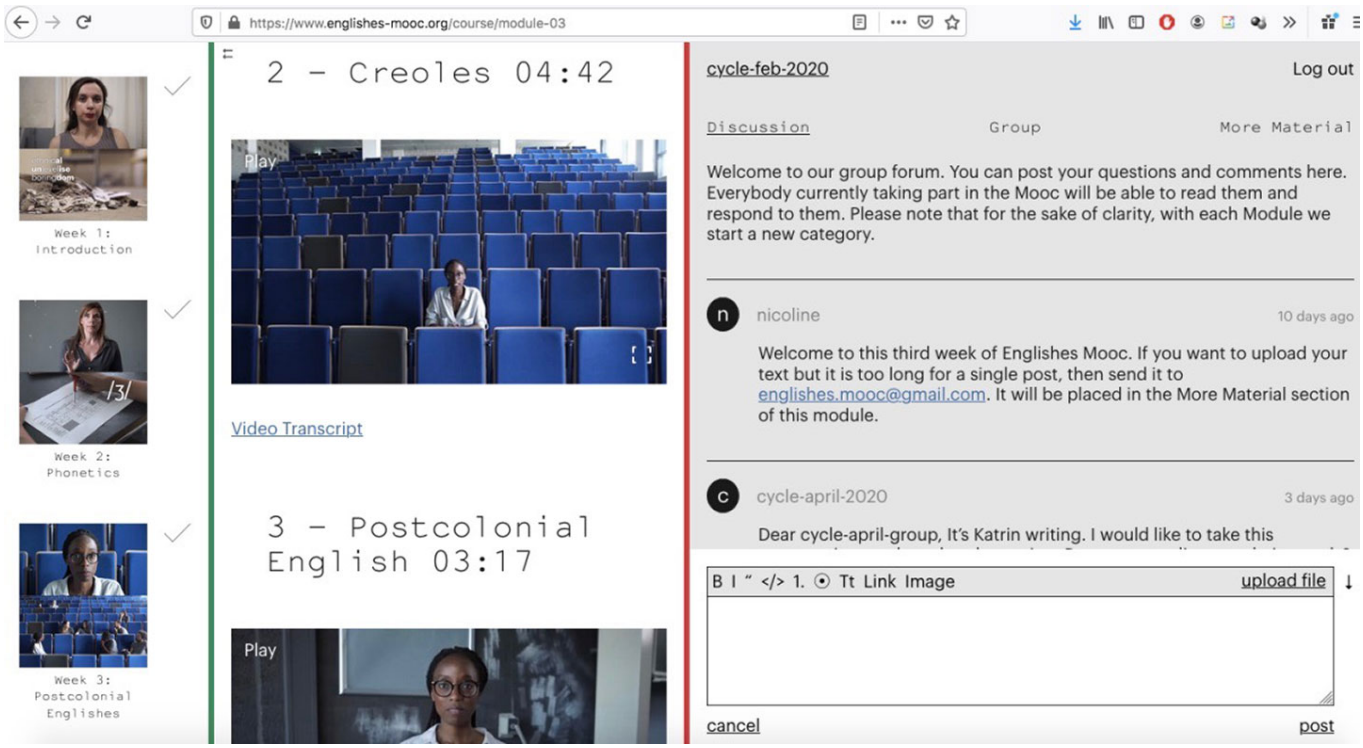
When Paul Chan illustrates the aforementioned article with screenshots of social media "boxes" and profile windows with the deadpan caption "This is a form," such structures – with their objectification of precarious and nervous



Paul Chan, *This is a Form,* image from the essay "Our Data, Our Selves" (2019). See https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/our-data-our-selves/.



Sean Snyder, homepage of the *Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society* (desaturated).



Nicoline van Harskamp, *Englishes MOOC,* ongoing project. Screenshot.

subjects – become the contemporary equivalent of Renaissance perspective and its latticework. In his famous 1924-25 essay "Perspective as Symbolic Form," Erwin Panofsky interpreted Renaissance perspective as a symbolic form that functioned as an "objectification of the subjective."[29] He extended this analysis by suggesting that it also does the reverse: linear perspective first creates a distance between people and things, but then "abolishes this distance by [...] drawing this world of things, an autonomous world con-fronting the individual, into the eye."[30] The *objectum* is appropriated by the subject. Illustrating the text with diagrams that abstract perspective grids from the physical paintings, the iconologist sought to reveal the deep structure that both separates and connects the viewing subject and the depicted world.

In analyzing the geometric latticework as a *symbolic form* that places the depicted objects in a definite relation to the viewer, Panofsky used a key notion from Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantian philosophy. Cassirer *pluralized* and *culturalized* Kant's epistemological framework. Kant's mental categories and transcendental schematism constituted an apparatus that structures our reality (and relegates the *Ding an sich* to an epistemological netherworld). In this manner, Kant had given an idealist turn to old Aristotelian debates about substance and attributes. Cassirer noted that Kant's thinking "keeps circling around the dualism of matter and form set forth in its beginnings, and [...] gradually changes and deepens the meaning of this opposition.[31] Following cues put forth by Yuk Hui, one could indeed discern a displacement of hylomorphism in Kant's categories of understanding and transcendental schemata, through which the subject imprints the sense data with form: the mind in-forms perception.[32] Cassirer, however, posited not a single schematic apparatus but rather a plurality of symbolic forms that each have their own innate logic that structures the world in different ways: myth, for instance, or language, or science, or art. Late in his life, in a 1942 lecture at Yale, he acknowledged Saussure's semiology as a kindred and compatible project, even if Saussure's privileged sign system – language – was, for Cassirer, only one particular symbolic form among others.[33]

If art *as such* is a symbolic form, it seems rather curious that Panofsky would choose to specifically interpret Renaissance linear perspective – a device from a particular type of art – as a symbolic form. This could be seen as a symptomatic lack of rigor, or also a further purposeful specificity: as a step in the labor of concretization. In fact, Cassirer's own listing of "myth and art, language and science" as the four fundamental symbolic forms is curiously like a Borgesian encyclopedia, since the terms clearly overlap and are not comparable in every respect. The interrelations between the "linguistic sign" and the "mythical or artistic 'image,'" which can be articulated in linguistic signs, remain undialectical and approximate.[34]

Kant's ethics and aesthetics are frequently characterized as formalist. The same can be said of his epistemology in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Kant's categories of understanding constitute a quintessential "thought-abstraction" (*Denkabstraktion*) or "thought-form" (*Denkform*). Having studied with Cassirer in the 1920s, Sohn-Rethel became close to the Institut für Sozialforschung and developed a Marxian reading of Kant – culminating in his 1970 opus *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, in which he desublimates the thought abstractions by generically linking them to the "real abstractions" of money.[35] Marx, of course, had himself analyzed value in formal terms, with the commodity having a natural form (*Naturalform*) and value-form. The latter takes on a false autonomy, a reified appearance that occludes the basis of any commodity's value in labor-power.[36] For Sohn-Rethel, money functions as the ultimate medium for the "pure formal abstractions" of the value-form, of "formal properties abstracted from all use value."[37] As the deep structure that supposedly preforms our perception and cognition, the Kantian mental apparatus works along similar lines.

Sohn-Rethel notes that this preforming Kantian mind appears to arrive on the scene fully formed; it is *itself* preformed. Kant interpreted this preformation in purely mental terms without any temporal or spatial specificity. However, this preformation of the Kantian thought-form should in fact be regarded as being *social* in nature, and as the outcome of a long historical process.[38] While tracing this process back to Antiquity and considering the emergence of a money-based economy in the Mediterranean, Sohn-Rethel acknowledges that whereas ancient economies were largely based on *appropriation*, modern capitalism revolves around the *production* of surplus value.[39] Nonetheless, his account of real abstraction remains exchange-centric: production is hardly featured.[40] In this respect, it constitutes a step back in relation to Marx's analysis of the historical emergence of capitalism's systemic features. Surprisingly, Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of technical objects – elaborated during the 1950s and 1960s – is much closer to Marx in this respect.

In a critical reconsideration of Aristotelian hylomorphism, Simondon argues against the "UFO conception" of form. Rather than somehow

magically manifesting itself in matter, form is the result of complex operations and modulations. Even in the case of something as seemingly simple as molding clay into bricks, we are always dealing with *prepared matter* and with already *materialized forms* (such as a mold). In addition to *matter* and *form*, an important third term, which classic Aristotelian hylomorphism leaves out, is social human labor. Simondon suggests that this blind spot reveals that the *hyle/morphe* distinction reflects the divide between the craftsman/slave and free man/designer.[41] This recalls Marx's observation in *Capital* that Aristotle made some headway with the analysis of value, but that Greek society's foundation on slavery had prevented him from unveiling its innermost workings: "The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labor are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labor in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice."[42]

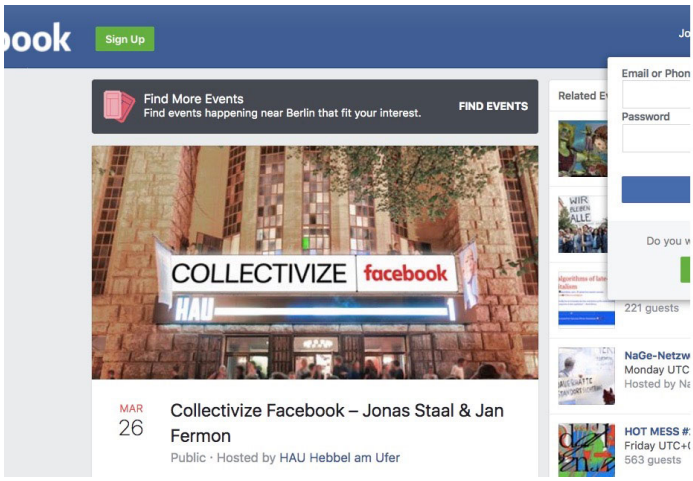
The constellation of authors brought together here offers pointers for the elaboration of a historical formalism – as a component or complement of historical materialism. Their very limitations can be generative. For instance, Sohn-Rethel, who is perhaps more indebted to classical bourgeois philosophy than he would care to admit, has a tendency to characterize sensory experience as irredeemably private and solipsistic. This leads him to speculate – in a negative mode – that "although the perception [of a commodity] is as multiple as the people perceiving it, its existence is singular. If the existence of one object were divisible, the object could indeed be owned simultaneously by separate owners. Each owner could then not only experience the world as his 'private datum' but own it as his exclusive property."[43] In the age of digital commodities and social media this needs to be rethought; what happens when we produce value for Facebook by sharing what was once private data, ultimately becoming trapped in a tableau watched over by machines of loving grace?

Or, more specifically: What happens when the Rijksmuseum asks people to create their own albums with items from its collection on the Rijksstudio online platform, and to submit product designs based on downloaded images from this same platform for a "Rijksstudio Award"? The Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society, initiated by artist Sean Snyder, filled out the online submission form with a self-destructive meta-proposal about a photograph of a Shell gas station that cannot be downloaded from the site due to copyright restrictions, claiming to regard "the slippery image of a Shell gas station as the very embodiment of the immutable visual vocabulary deeply imprinted in the fossilized mental landscape of capitalist exhaust."[44] In its quixotic manner, such a performance by the mysterious "Society" highlights the ways in which the real abstractions of exchange *preform* the experience of the perceptions and actions of our social life.

Creative Deformations

Sohn-Rethel's key criterion for exchange being a "real abstraction" is that "in the exchange process, doing and thinking diverge on the part of the participants."[45] While he obviously needs to maintain that this abstraction is not *just* conceptual but takes on an actual social form, it is odd to suggest that it is a *lack of awareness* that makes abstraction real rather than conceptual or intellectual. Real abstraction is certainly an operational force, preforming and remaking the world. But does an awareness of the inner workings of capitalism – for instance one fostered by reading Marx, or Sohn-Rethel – make capitalist market relations any less "real"? Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano have argued that "greater attention to the *legal* forms of property" problematizes "the unconscious character ascribed to commodity-exchange as a form of practical abstraction," since legal forms are, of course, consciously elaborated as real abstractions that are operative in the social world.[46] The value-form under capitalism is deeply dependent on the supposedly universal rights accorded to the abstract person – particularly the right to hold property.[47]

If economic real abstraction is identified with the *value-form*, juridical real abstraction can be designed with the *rights-form*. The value-form and the rights-form both abstract from the material and sensory world; Sohn-Rethel quotes Marx to the effect that "not an atom of matter [*Naturstoff*]" enters into the composition of value, and the legal person, in theory, is also abstracted from all particulars.[48] In practice, of course, a variety of sciences have been at the ready to determine which persons were more equal than others, from nineteenth-century racist phrenology, psychology and criminology, to today's digital profiling. In Sohn-Rethel's opposition between real abstraction and thought abstraction, the latter covers not only idealist philosophy but also science – or at least the ruling epistemology of modern science.[49] But have the "thought abstractions" of technoscience not also demonstrated their operational potential? Sohn-Rethel acknowledges this in remarks on science and technology in the service of capitalist enterprise; while he interprets this as the first step towards a socialist reappropriation of the production



Jonas Staal and Jan Fermon, *Collectivize Facebook,* announcement for pre-trial announcement planned for March 26, 2020; Transformella Malor at *Deserting from the Culture Wars*, BAK, November 15, 2019.

process, the accelerating operationalization of (techno)science has in fact boosted capitalism.[50]

As a third form of real abstraction, technoscience can be identified with the *information-form* – to coin a pleonasm. Taking cues from Vilém Flusser, Alexander Galloway has stressed that *data* are "things given," while *information* means giving form or being out into form.[51] Technoscience parses and processes data to turn them into actionable information. Protocols and metadata schemata function as quasi-Kantian schemata that are used to arrange, navigate and mine data, creating value in the process.[52] In-formed data can be rematerialized in any number of production processes. 3D printing is today's phantasmagorico-real hylomorphism. In genetic engineering, life itself having been reconfigured in informatic terms of coded DNA sequences and cellular protocols that regulate the replication. However, it is not only cellular depths that are mined for information; the same goes on the surface. Facial and voice recognition software, for instance, can be used for racial profiling or to reject asylum claims, while fitness trackers influence health insurance rates. Technoscience has culminated in an informatic and networked paradigm in which life itself and its contingency are subject to constant (re)design and management.[53] Algorithms trawl vast quantities of data to predict potential movements or occurrences that break the known patterns – whether they are fatal or profitable deviations from the norm.[54]

The economic, juridical, and technoscientific vectors of real abstraction are key preformations of capitalist modernity. The value-form, rights-form, and information-form are together an operational structure that creates *inequality through equivalence.* Monetary, informational and juridical equivalence create new hierarchies by destroying old ones; this is the core business of real abstraction. The juridical fiction of all persons being equal before the law, for instance, produces safeguards for some, but it also produces a system of violent exclusions. Some have always been more equal than others – artificial juridical persons increasingly outstrip and outperform natural persons, who sign away rights by agreeing with any and all "Terms and Conditions." Modern reason is productivist, and its real abstractions become all the more operative as various vectors of real abstraction enter into a productive exchange.

Nicoline van Harskamp's digital art project/online school, *Englishes MOOC*, concretizes and politicizes Cassirer's symbolic form of language by examining English as a global lingua franca and the proliferation of creolized or specialized "Englishes."[55] The project engages with the transmutation of linguistic form into value-form (English as currency and capital, for instance, in the art world), even while critiquing imperial standards and valorizing difference. As a MOOC (massive open online course), the project is also dependent on programming languages that use instructions in English to mediate between natural language and machinic code. From a Cassirerean symbolic form, English has become information-form. While *Englishes-mooc.org* uses open-source software and has free registration, the MOOC format that is pushed by American juggernauts such as Harvard and MIT further strengthen strong global edu-brands based in the Anglosphere, allowing users from all over the world to sign up for an online course even if they can't have access to the full experience. Even if you are unable to legally enter the United States, you could still pay for a MOOC. As the project fosters reflection on such entanglements, it hardly dispels the reality of real abstraction; if anything, that reality becomes all the more concrete.

The ever-tighter integration of the vectors of real abstraction has resulted in the *regime of concrete abstraction* of global hypercapitalism. Its fundamental principle is a networked enmeshing of platforms, products, and lifestyles that is as dependent on neoliberal "deregulation" as it is on high-frequency trading algorithms. Under the onslaught of "creative disruptions" that might as well be called *creative deformations* of the old order, everything that is solid melts into Airbnb. The likes of Airbnb and Uber synthesize the technological, legal, and financial dimensions of the network form into disruptive innovations. The proliferation of designed solutions based on relentless extraction and on the dissolution of old juridical obstacles – or, in short, the total mobilization of equivalence – generates forms of entropy that are opportunities for disaster-capitalist accumulations. Crises give rise to tailor-made solutions waiting to be marketed. During the COVID-19 outbreak, information-forms proper to Big Pharma and Big Tech merge in virus tracking apps. The operational hylomorphism of networked design solutions – which had long promised (some of) us an ever-smoother life – turned out to be perfectly compatible with a state of emergency. Being stuck in an Airbnb at the other end of the world as one's cheap airline tickets have been canceled and everything goes into lockdown – this situation, too, is a product of operational abstraction, and a boon for social media giants. The state of exception is a state of product development.

The rise of the network economy in the

1990s spawned debates about the nature of sovereignty under neoliberal globalization. In a post-9/11 dialogue with Geert Lovink, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker insisted that "*in recent decades the processes of globalization have mutated from a system of control houses in a relatively small number of power hubs to a system of control infused into the material fabric of distributed networks)*."[56] Breaking with 1990s net utopianism and its "tired of trees" rhetoric, Galloway and Thacker maintain that networks, even distributed networks, are not intrinsically liberating, but impose new forms of control.[57] Seeking to problematize the entrenched opposition between centralized state hierarchies and liberating distributed networking, they point out ways in which multiple topologies can coexist within a network, with examples that include the state-based and centralized Domain Name System and the distributed Internet Protocol.[58]

Galloway and Thacker ultimately analyze this aggregate in Foucauldian/Deleuzian terms of a society of control in which the old "sovereign power" over life and death gives way to a new "regulative power" based on constant biopolitical monitoring and data-gathering: "Express yourself! Output some data! It is how distributed control functions best."[59] In the *"Society Must Be Defended"* lectures, Foucault effectively relegated sovereignty to the past; the sovereign power to take life and let live had been replaced by modern biopower to instead become the power to make live and let die. In contrast to Foucault, Giorgio Agamben tends to do for power what Sohn-Rethel does for value: in an *argumentum ad antiquitatem,* he privileges Ancient Rome and its institution of the homo sacer to explain (and at times "explain away") the recent distinctly capitalist and neoliberal forms sovereignty.[60] Here one should heed Joshua Clover's insistence "that capitalism, with its industrial body and crown of finance, is sovereign; that carbon emissions are the sovereign breathing; that *make work and let buy* must be annihilated; that there is no survival while the sovereign lives."[61]

All this notwithstanding, and in spite of the fact that his public interventions in the COVID-19 crisis might as well have been tweeted from the bathroom at 6 AM, Agamben's serious work remains a crucial theoretical account of sovereignty, the state of exception, and the forms-of-life that this state makes (im)possible.[62] A key passage from *Homo Sacer* comments on the formalism of Kant's ethics and its focus on "the simple form of law."[63] As one of the Italian authors (along with Paolo Virno) to have brought back the *Lebensform* concept from its post-war eclipse, Agamben argues that if Kant "left the form of law in place as an empty principle," then it raises the question of which "*form of life*" corresponds to the "*form of law*."[64] Glossing Kafka's parable of the law, Agamben notes that "the empty potentiality of the law is so much in force that it becomes indistinguishable from life." Given such indistinguishability of the law and life, "life under a law that is in force without signifying resembles life in the state of exception."[65] Such is the a-signifying semiotics of the rights-form. Operational abstraction remakes relations by producing forms of life that offer no other alternatives and impose themselves, insofar as being, for some, unlivable.

Some lives are more literally unlivable than others, of course. As dehumanized Black subjects continue to be robbed of even the right to *breathe,* the unidentified and unaccountable violence targeting recent protests against police killings demonstrate that the sovereign revocability of "universal" rights, long experienced viscerally by people of color and migrants, is increasingly experienced more widely. Neofascist politics today (let us dispense with euphemisms) makes sovereign exceptions in the name of a capitalist elite that weaponizes the white working and middle-class fear of ending up among the (post-)human surplus.

Surviving Forms of Unlivable Life

In his 1930s manuscript *Fabrikation der Fiktionen,* Carl Einstein compared the "archaic" use of metaphors in modern poetry and philosophy to the liquefaction of the material world by capitalist exchange:

> The metaphorical strings contain another archaism. The different conditions and things slip into one another and are evaluated evenly. One sign can replace the other randomly. And so the mana wanders serenely from humans into things, from animals into stones. A similar neutralization of concrete things or persona is administered by the capitalist. He defigures humans and objects by the means of abstract money, which is his mana. Poets and capitalists are dynamists and are seeking out a maximum of mobility."[66]

Quoting this passage, Kerstin Stakemeier notes that the metaphor-laden aesthetic mode comes to function as a "figure of capital" and "its boundless ability to homologize all things living and dead under the value form."[67] Art's sensate forms can deny and occlude – and perhaps, at times, negate – their preformation by real abstraction, yet art can also foreground those

very preformations and use them as aesthetic material. Stakemeier focuses on avant-garde and queer "debordered formalisms" that attempt to get rid of the self and entrenched modes of subjectivity and identity. Since the "subject of capitalism inhabits an unliveable form," an "impossible form," Stakemeier pursues an investigation of modern and contemporary aesthetic "[destabilizations] of the boundaries safeguarding the continuation of our (aesthetic) subjectivities," which she regards as "enabling self-inflictions."[68] To be sure, avant-garde attempts to break or transmutate dominant forms of subjectivity (or personhood) and objecthood (or property) have long been complicit with the capitalist *Umwertung aller Werte* (transvaluation of values) through equivalence. Such complicitness is not so much their dismal outcome as their starting point, their *conditio sine qua non.*

In recent times, any number of art-based anticapitalist, antiracist, feminist, or queer practices have privileged physical assemblies- – workshops, reading groups, training sessions, cookouts, and so on – in conjunction with social media platforms. From the great assemblies of organizational aesthetics to the queering of such aesthetics in informal and half-underground spaces such as Bei Cosy, Philipp Gufler's re-imagining of a legendary 1960s gay bar in the basement of Rongwrong in Amsterdam for one example: these meetings are networks physically manifested, and transformed in the process. As Werker Collective has put it, social media has a great potential to "mobilize the collective body [...] especially when online and offline collectivities invigorate each other to demand equal rights, equal pay, and respect."[69] But what if the dialectic between online and offline is brutally interrupted? In the early days of the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown, Kader Attia wrote a great rant (on Facebook) about the dire consequences of events being cancelled, not just at La Colonie, but across the board of emancipatory practice; as much as the cancellation of gatherings was necessary, it was hard not to sympathize with Attia's outcry. Recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations underline the necessity – with precautions being taken and a degree of risk being accepted – of physical protests that take the outrage found on Twitter to the streets, channeling it into transformative social form.

Both online networks and physical gatherings are "natural forms" taken by the networked value-, rights-, and information-forms. Or rather: they will be natural(ized) forms as long as we resist engaging with the sometimes conflicting and contradictory ways in which they have been preformed, and the ways in which these preformations are performed. For March 26 of this year, Jonas Staal and lawyer Jan Fermon had planned the "pre-trial" launch event for their *Collectivize Facebook* lawsuit – also announced on Facebook, of course – at HAU in Berlin. In the end, under the state of exception, this had to take the form of a website launch and an online video, in which Staal and Fermon explain the key points of the indictment (available on the site), which takes aim at Facebook (and Google, and the other tech giants) as "new feudal overlords" appropriating people's (informational) labor.[70] If capitalist technoscience is an operational hylomorphism that remakes matter and humans and social relations, then to work against such preformations and toward different technosocial formalizations may involve the seemingly impossible dream of a collectivization of Facebook, as well as the development and use of open-source alternatives to the dominant platforms.[71]

More often than not, productive reason does indeed produce impossible forms. How to live and act repeatedly within those formal constraints? In the 1960s, the German post-Situationist group Subversive Aktion strove to realize "the ambivalence of constructed (and not practically necessary) situations, in which social conflicts can be concentrated and carried out in an exemplary manner."[72] In current aesthetic practice, artists and others aspire to create more livable and workable forms on the basis of the materials at hand. They themselves, and the constraints they are operating under, *are* those materials. Johannes Paul Raether's avatars, including the various Protektoramae and Transformellae, engage with "smartphone fetishes," while demonstrating alternative recording devices such as the Transformellae's "data body," a dynamic record of the various personas, activities, mutations and "forkings" in the artist's overall "identitecture."

Falling short of transforming ourselves (our selves) into potential forms of life with such aesthetic deliberation, most of us struggle with the productive constraints of operational abstraction in more haphazard ways. As deformed subjects attempting to attain a degree of self-organization by intensifying self-exploitation, we cultivate an art of breakdown in precarious affinity groups, coalitions, and alliances. As always, some are more exposed and vulnerable than others; this is precisely what makes such organizational labor imperative, as well as fiendishly difficult. In the accelerating storm of history, today's historical formalists try to construct the necessary out of the impossible.[73]

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This text outlines my two-part book project Forms of Abstraction*. It draws on the manuscript for the first volume,* Objections*, the production of which has been delayed due to COVID-19. Lectures at Ashkal Alwan (Beirut), the University of Queensland Art Museum, and the Power Institute at the University of Sydney allowed me to sketch out some of this material.*

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1
Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 3. Emphasis in the original. Levine's work is also discussed by Tom Holert in a book chapter hat has a number of (very welcome) resonances with my own work, though I've come across it too late to discuss it here: Tom Holert, "Matters of Form," in *Knowledge Beside Itself* (Berlin: Sternber Press, 2020), 86-119.

2
Levine, *Forms*, 2.

3
Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Jonas Staal, "Assemblism," *e-flux journal*, no. 80 (March 2017) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/.

4
Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1970; Bloomsbury, 2013), 200.

5
Levine, *Forms,* 14, 17.

6
Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 192. Foucault traced the rise of the form/content dichotomy back to his "classical episteme" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while acknowledging that it only became consolidated in the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; Routledge, 2002), 88.

7
Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 198.

8
Yve-Alain Bois (unsigned), "Formalism and Structuralism," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames and Hudson, 2004), 33.

9
Yve-Alain Bois, "Whose Formalism?," in *The Art Bulletin* LXXVIII (March, 1996), 11.

10
Bois, "Whose Formalism?," 11.

11
Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (1934; Zone Books, 1989), 96.

12
This exact phrasing is from Bois' close colleague Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 28.

13
Bois, "Formalism and Structuralism," 38.

14
Bois, "Formalism and Structuralism," 32.

15
Lu Märten, "Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste," (1924), in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften. Aufsätze, Vorträge* (VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 107.

16
As Stefan Helmreich and Sofia Roosth have argued, the biological discourse on *Lebensform* in the early nineteenth century was indebted to a Kantian and Goethean understanding of form as "aesthetic, self-determining, and teleological, as well as (generously assuming sufficient knowledge of the mechanism of its formation) deductively predictable." *Lebensform* was thus used in a "broad biological sense," even while there was increasing emphasis (following Alexander von Humboldt) on *Lebensform* as custom or habit, as adaptation by organisms to their environment. *Lebensformen* can thus only ever be deviations from Goethe's *Urform*, from an ideal prototype. By the early twentieth century, this "social turn" of the concept led to a veritable glut of books about *Lebensformen* in the German-speaking world. See Stefan Helmreich and Sofia Roosth, "Life Forms: A Keyword Entry," in Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 19–34.

17
Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 33.

18
Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 61.

19
Rudolf Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," in Lancelot Law Whyte, *Aspects of Form* (Lund Humphries, 1951), 197. However, whereas Focillon insisted that form is never a modelling of a passive mass, in a 1951 essay, Arnheim indulged in a masculinist fantasy of submission: "Dancers and actors, who use their own bodies, and to some extent photography, which uses the direct registration of physical objects," are "suspected of being hybrids of art and nature. The artists prefer the submissiveness of amorphous matter." Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 197.

20
Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 196.

21
Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 196.

22
Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Les Presses du réel, 1998), 18.

23
Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* 74.

24
Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997).

25
See Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* and Staal, "Assemblism."

26
Staal refers to his own and related practices as organizational art. I use the broader term to indicate a potential opening toward practices that are not primarily based in the art world – and in an ironic nod both to relational aesthetics and to a network and a journal that define organizational aesthetics in terms of consultancy aiming to improved organizations through "arts-based methods."

27
Paul Chan, "Our Data, Our Selves," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* September 19, 2019 https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/our-data-our-selves/ .

28
Christopher Shields, "A Fundamental Problem about Hylomorphism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/suppl1.html.

29
Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (1924-25/27; Zone Books, 1991), 66.

30
Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 67.

31
Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, 1957), 7.

32
Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6–8.

33
S.G. Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer: A "Repetition" of Modernity* (State University of New York press, 2000), 227 (note 5).

34
Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, 1955), 106.

35
Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und Körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis* (Suhrkamp, revised second edition, 1972). The English version of Sohn-Rethel's book is an anglicizing reworking rather than a pure translation; it sometimes adds clarifications, but is in many ways an inferior digest of the original. I refer to the English version only when it contains a particularly apt expression of one of Sohn-Rethel's crucial points. I use the second (1972) German edition, which was revised and expanded in response to the book's critical reception. The "versioning" of *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* doesn't stop there: Sohn-Rethel published a revised German edition in 1989, which is remarkable for its acknowledgment that his "thought-forms" are closer to those of mechanistic natural science than Kant's categories, and for his dialogue with Cassirer, which is missing from previous editions.

36
"The value-form denies and veils the quantitative relation of value to labor through the 'reified appearance' (*gegenständlichen Schein*) of commodity value." Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867), chapter 1.3 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S3. Referenced in Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 77.

37
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 20–21.

38
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 22.

39
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 139, and more generally, 123–146.

40
Anselm Jappe, "Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction': A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?," in *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 1 (2013), 3–14.

41
Gilbert Simondon, *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1958; Millon, 2013), 40–51.

42
Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One* (1867), Chapter 1.1.4 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm.

43
Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (MacMillan, 1978), 43; for the (more or less) equivalent passage in the German edition, see page 70.

44
From the Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society's submission for the Rijksstudio Award, February 27, 2020. The submission was rejected https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudioaward.

45
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und*

körperliche Arbeit, 57. My translation.

46
Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction," in *Radical Philosophy*, no. 174 (November/December, 2015), 9. Meanwhile, Christoph Menke has proposed an ambitious critique of the modern conception of rights as a *form* that needs to be understood historically. See Christoph Menke, *Kritik der Rechte* (Suhrkamp, 2015), especially part II.

47
See my "The Juridical Economy: Notes on Legal Form and Aesthetic Form," *New Left Review*, no. 106 (July–August 2017), 105–123.

48
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 48. English translation in *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 27.

49
The more general German "*Begriffe der Naturerkenntnis*" becomes "the concepts of natural science" in the English edition; see *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 42; *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 20.

50
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 167–172, 179–182.

51
Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Polity, 2012), 81–83.

52
Hui, *Existence of Digital Objects,* 52.

53
Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 47–57.

54
Krystian Woznicki, *Undeclared Movements* (b_books, 2020), 25–37.

55
Week 5, on "Professional Englishes" includes a discussion of International Art English https://www.englishes-mooc.org/.

56
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 3. Emphasis in the original.

57
Lovink, for his part, has long been skeptical of Silicon Valley-style technolibertarian net utopianism, insisting on the importance of building "organized networks" with strong links, à la the Jesuits, against a situation of platforms on which we are connected through weak ties, and "we pass around status updates." See Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media* (Minor Compositions, 2018), 34, 130.

58
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 44–45.

59
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 41.

60
For Foucault's historicization of sovereignty, see lectures 1–5 and 11 of *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76,* trans. David Macey (Picador, 2003). In contrast to what Joshua Clover suggests, Foucault here tends to oppose sovereignty to biopolitics, rather than defining biopolitics as a new form of sovereignty. What Clover calls "the famous formula of biopolitics: *the sovereign power to make live and let die"* is Clover's own rewrite of a passage on page 241 in which Foucault pointedly refrains from calling this biopolitical power *sovereign*. Joshua Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour," *Critical inquiry* blog, March 29, 2020 https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response -to-bruno-latour/.

61
Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics."

62
Agamben drew simplistic conclusions from his own work on the basis of a "COVID-19 is not much worse than the flu" assessment – but he is hardly the only philosophical Methuselah to have made a fool of himself in these days. For a good analysis, see Tim Christaens, "Must Society Be Protected from Agamben?," *Critical Legal Thinking* blog, March 26, 2020 https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/26/must-society-be-defended-from-agamben/. For Agamben's latest missive, "Requiem for the Students" https://medium.com/@ddean3000/requiem-for-the-students-giorgio-agamben-866670c11642.

63
Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), 51.

64
Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 52. Both Virno and Agamben will have encountered the term in Wittgenstein, who in turn was likely informed by W. Fred's *Lebensformen* (1911). In addition, the concept was used by Weimar-era reactionary thinkers with whom Agamben must have at least a passing familiarity. Carl Schmitt, a crucial reference for Agamben, quoted or discussed Eduard Spranger's *Lebensformen* (1921) as well as the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén's *Der Staat als Lebensform* (1917).

65
Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 52.

66
Carl Einstein, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen* (late 1930s), ed. Sibylle Penkert (Rowohlt, 1973), 311. English translation from Kerstin Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," in Eric de Bruyn and Sven Lütticken (eds.), *Futurity Report* (Sternberg Press, 2020), 54–55.

67
Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," 55.

68
Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," 50–51, 53. See also Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus. Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik* (b_books, 2017).

69
Werker Collective, "Imaging Dissent: Towards Becoming a Collective Subject," Art & Education, January 15, 2020 https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/310806/imaging-dissent-towards-becoming-a-common-subject.

70
The indictment can be downloaded from https://collectivize.org/.

71
Magdalena Taube und Krystian Woznicki, „Zusammenarbeiten trotz ‚Corona-Krise'? Warum der aktuelle Netz-Hype unsere Gesellschaft gefährdet," *Berliner Gazette*, April 8, 2020 https://www.englishes-mooc.org/ https://berlinergazette.de/zusammenarbeit-corona-krise-netz-hype/.

72
Editorial comment by Frank Böckelmann and Herbert Nagel in their anthology *Subversive Aktion. Der Sinn der Organisation ist ihr Scheitern* (Verlag Neue Kritik, 2002), 168.

73
After the publication of this article, I came across a text by Heidi de Mare I edited more than twenty years ago, when I was a grad student: "Gedisciplineerd kijken. Van kunstgeschiedenis naar historisch formalisme," in *Kunstlicht* 20, no. 3/4 (1999): 14–20. I cannot exclude the possibility that De Mare's use of "historical formalism" had lodged itself somewhere in the recesses of my mind, though my derivation and usage of the term are markedly different. Through a discussion of developments in Dutch art history, De Mare proposes a renewal of art history through "historical formalism," or the combination of synchronic and diachronic methods; the latter do not include dialectical materialism, which was anathema in the highly depoliticized field of Dutch art history in the period in question.

Andris Brinkmanis

Constellation Asja

01/20

> "Can truth be mortal, falsehood live for ever?" – "I think that's clear."
> "Where have you seen long-overlooked injustice?" – "Here."
> "Who knows a man whose violence made his fortune?" – "All of us do."
> "Who then in such a world could rout the oppressor?" – "You."
> – Bertolt Brecht, "Questions and Answers"

> I considered it a necessity to work with people who, just like me, saw the revolutionary movement as the driving force, the engine of their creation. To me, the whole idea behind the proletarian theater revolved around the building of a community that would be human and artistic, but also political.
> – Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theater*

Prologue: The Porous Generation of the Avant-Garde

The "turmoiled" beginning of the twentieth century in Europe and Russia – with Western modernity and capitalism irrevocably heading towards their "*cul-de-sac*" of subsequent economic crises, attempts to overthrow regimes and governments, recessions and repressions, as well as the First World War and the October Revolution – became a "cradle" of a whole new transnational generation of artists and intellectuals. This generation reached their maturity and became aware of their aspirations and working methodologies through disillusionment, crises, and frustration, gaining a voice that they made heard during the Golden Twenties and early 1930s in geographically different contexts, maintaining certain inter-contamination between their distinct traits. Notwithstanding the obvious cultural and political disparities, members of this new generation, as Susan Buck-Morss put it,

> experienced "the fashions of the most recent past as the most thorough anti-aphrodisiac that can be imagined." But precisely this was what made them "politically vital," so that "the confrontation with the fashions of the past generation is an affair of much greater meaning than has been supposed."[1]

These sometimes irreconcilable avant-garde groupings became radicalized through a shared traumatic experience which taught them "that the phantasmagoria of progress had been a staged spectacle and not reality."[2] Politically

A cover of Walter Benjamin's book *One Way Street* featuring a photomontage by Sasha Stone.

225. Колонна демонстрантов с масками в Ленинграде 1 мая 1924 года. ЛГАКФД, № Вр 22527

Две головы: одна с зеленым истощенным лицом, другая — с веселым, полным и розовым. „Я покупаю у частного торговца". „Я покупаю в кооперации" („Красная газета", 1925, 2 мая; см. док. 73).

Demonstrators with Stem Masks, Leningrad, May 1, 1924. On the left side of the mask, the slogan: "I'm buying from a private seller," on the right: "I consume cooperative goods," Krasnaya Gazeta, May 2, 1925. Collection of the author.

disillusioned and misrepresented, these orphans of failed modernist aspirations were thirsty to fuse art, life, and politics in order to shatter the old bourgeois ways and forms of life once and for all in favor of something yet to come, a new world they strove to erect on the ruins of the preceding one. As Jean-Michel Palmier states in his "Weimar in Exile,"

> Communists, Socialists, pacifists, republicans, liberals and non-partisan writers, these intellectuals embodied throughout the 1920s an aspiration to-wards liberty, a critical and moral conscience that was almost unique ... They were also perhaps the last generation of intellectuals to believe in the power of the word over history.[3]

The time-space coordinates of the territory of their interventions spanned from Weimar Germany to the newfound Soviet state in Russia, covering the entirety of Europe along the way. As Leon Trotsky wrote in his *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (recalling the year 1908),

> For us Russians, the German Social Democracy was mother, teacher and living example. We idealized it from a distance ... in spite of my disturbing theoretical premonitions about the German Social Democracy, already mentioned, at that period I was undeniably under its spell.[4]

The same can be said about the new generations of German and European intellectuals, who, from the 1920s onwards, fell completely under the spell of the October Revolution in Russia and its cultural protagonists and advocates.

The so-called "Russian Berlin" was a vivid reality until the mid-twenties, similar to how Moscow was home to German, Latvian, and other émigré diasporas with their magazines, theaters, and publishing houses until the late 1930s. Cultural exchange was booming. The great impact that the October Revolution, as the first model of a socialist revolution, had on intellectuals in Europe (and in particular those in Germany) was a fact which Stalinist politics speculated on extensively. The Revolution's universal prestige started to bend only towards the end of the 1930s, coinciding with the Moscow trials and the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact (1939):

> Kameny Theater, Vakhtangov Theater, Blue Blouse, and the Meyerhold troupe exemplify the relatively free passage of dramatic art from Russia to the West. Among the willing emissaries were Anna Lācis, Bernhard Reich, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Sergei Tretyakov, and Sergei Eisenstein. German artists and intellectuals (such as Brecht, Piscator, Toller, Becher, Huppert, and Benjamin) in their turn travelled to the Soviet Union in order to experience for themselves the tenor of art and life in what was heralded as a new and more humane society.[5]

If initially the lines of advocates of "left-wing culture" and "cultural Bolshevism," for whom art "was the most powerful weapon for Organizing collective forces,"[6] were fit, only a few of them followed this *One-Way Street* till the end, without taking side turns.

The traces of this generation remain disturbing to any dominant order, sometimes even to their former peers and friends. Their true agendas, aspirations, and dreams, however silenced or put on hold, continue resurfacing amidst historical readjustments. Their most intimate convictions were never fully bent, not even by the most sadistic of repressions inflicted on them. A unique invisible thread links the disparate trajectories of intervention of these last protagonists on the shared stage of the short century.

So, how can we navigate through such a complex historical archipelago without breaking on its network of underwater rocks? In his *Berlin Chronicle*, Walter Benjamin proposes drawing a diagram or a "psychogeographic" map:

> I was struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of my life ... I have never since been able to restore it as it arose before me then, resembling a series of family trees. Now, however, reconstructing its outline in thought without directly reproducing it, I would instead speak of a labyrinth ... It was on this very afternoon that my biographical relationships to people, my friendships and comradeships, my passions and love affairs, were revealed to me in their most vivid and hidden intertwinings.[7]

Let us apply a similar method to outline the contours of a constellation of one such radical avant-garde grouping, by following the traces of its central female emissary, Asja Lācis. Her pedagogical, theater, and theoretical work, however misrecognized and subjugated, together with an account of her life and the vivid intellectual cross-pollination she was able to set in motion, remains one of the most fascinating forgotten pages of cultural history of the twentieth century. By no surprise, it echoed strongly with the anti-authoritarian aspirations of the post-1968 generation, and to the present

day its emancipating potential has not dispersed its charge.

Given her centrality to this history, why do we know so little about Asja Lācis? Why has her name emerged mainly through the already fully assimilated histories of her male colleagues? How and when did such a deliberate marginalization, trivialization, and patriarchal disqualification of Lācis occur? And what could be the routes or methodologies for redistributing the respect, authority, and representability she deserves and for reassessing her role on the stage of early twentieth-century history from a new perspective? Benjamin's notion of a dialectical image and the Brechtian method of epic theater are both of great importance and will be used here as methodological references.

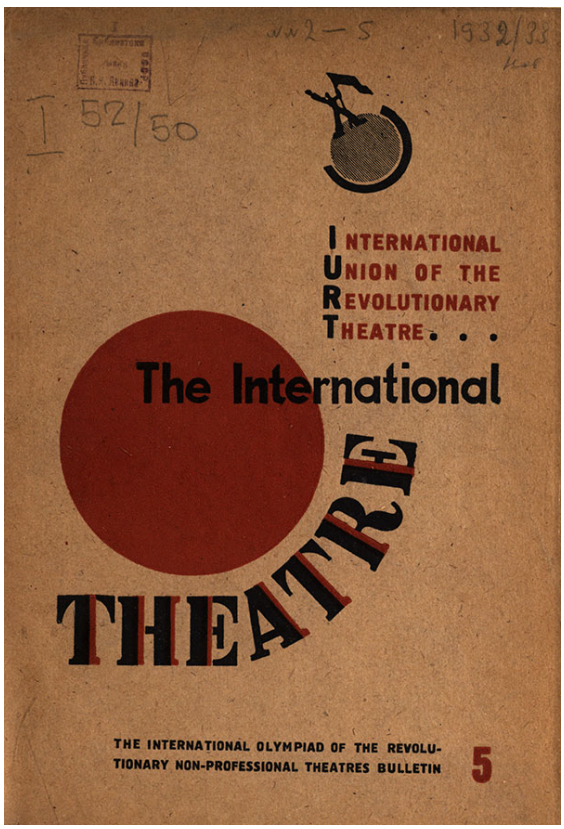
The following fractured and semi-theatrical montage will attempt to restage the complex story of Asja Lācis and a group of figures linked to her. The staging will be narrated in eleven interconnected acts, without any pretense of arriving at an exhaustive synthesis. On the contrary, through its freeze-frames, gaps, and asynchronies, a new type of interpretation that is strongly intertwined with the present situation may come to the fore. Hopefully it will equally shed light on the potentialities that still dwell dormant in her work and deserve to be rediscovered.

Scene 1: Asja, Engineer of the Avant-Garde

One-Way Street (*Einbahnstraße*), a collection of essays by Walter Benjamin (his literary montage in line with constructivist ideas), reached bookshops in Berlin in 1928. Its title was a radical declaration of intent and its opening page contained a cryptic dedication: "This street is named Asja Lācis Street, after her who as an engineer cut it through the author."[8]

The "engineer" in question was Anna Lāce (born Liepiņa, 1891–1979) – internationally known as Asja Lācis – a Latvian theater director, actress, and revolutionary theorist. Not only this – she was also a playwright, pedagogue, and a feminist *ante litteram* who went on to become the protagonist, the intermediary, and the *trait d'union* between the German, Latvian, and Russian avant-garde cultures.

Following the labyrinthine topography of her life, a map emerges that leads to virtually all the early twentieth-century focal points of cultural innovation in Europe: from Riga to Berlin, Munich, Naples, Rome, Vienna, Paris, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and returning back to Riga. Departing from her early Soviet theater



The International Olympiad of the Revolutionary Non-Professional Theatres Bulletin, No. 5, 1933, Moscow published by MORT. International Union of the Revolutionary Theater. Collection of the author.

experience and the highly influential proletarian children's theater experiment, at each of these topographical locations Asja Lācis set forth collaborations with leading intellectual figures, frequently creating a fertile ground for the emergence of unique "constellations." It was through her that "the meeting of the greatest living German poet" with the "most important critic of the time," as Hannah Arendt later described the encounter between Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, became possible.[9] She later contributed to the promotion of films by Sergey Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, among others in Germany (via Siegfried Kracauer); introduced the Soviet and Latvian public to the traditions of the German epic and the proletarian theater; and collaborated with Erwin Piscator and John Heartfield on the set of the film *Revolt of the Fishermen* (Восстание рыбаков). Last but not least, she created an original personal synthesis of political theater exercised in Russia and Latvia. Her affiliations with RABIS (Trade Union of Art Workers – *РАБИС, Союз работников искусств*), early RAPP (Russian Proletarian Writers' Association – (*РАПП, Российская Ассоциация Пролетарских Писателей*) circles, and the newfound and more important Proletarian Theater group (*Пролетарский театр*) that emerged due to disagreements with RAPP leaders; involvement in the organization of the First International Olympiad of Non-Professional Revolutionary Theatres in Moscow in 1933 with the participation of agit-prop and workers' theatre groups from more than sixteen countries, participation in the foundation of MORT (International Union of the Revolutionary Theater – *МОРТ, Международное объединение революционных театров*), collaboration with VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries – *Всесоюзное общество культурной связи с заграницей*), and other groupings with international members and aspirations may help to further reveal the actual scope of a whole parallel underground network of the avant-garde that involved major left-leaning cultural figures on all latitudes (from Europe to the US and Japan), in which Asja played an important and yet completely underestimated role. These aspects of her activity still require their adequate historical evaluation. The same applies to her theater work, her anti-authoritarian and antifascist educational work, and her writing, all of which will hopefully attract more international attention.

View from the outdoor mass theater performance "Faces of the Centuries" (directed by Leon Paegle) and the dramatic collective of the Riga People's High School at the Culture Festival in Saules dārzs (directed by Anna Lācis) Photo: unknown author Riga, June 5, 1921. Collection of Literature and Music Museum, Riga.

Scene 2: Theatrical October

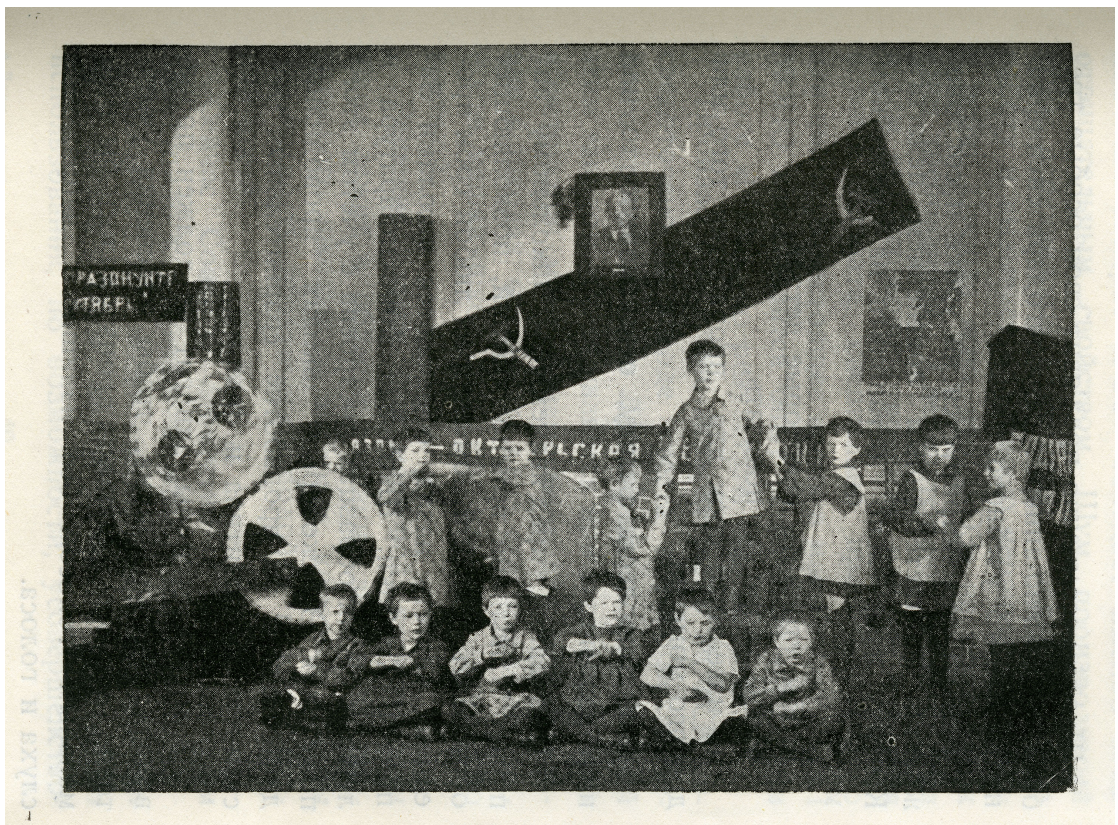
Lācis completed her early education in Riga, where her working-class provenance begat many unpleasant confrontations with the bourgeois realities of the period. Her true loves since childhood were literature and theater. She absorbed works by Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Russian decadents, and French and Latvian symbolists.

Her real ideological and artistic formation occurred in St. Petersburg and Moscow. From 1912 til 1914 she took courses at the Bekhterev Psychoneurological Research Institute, in 1915 she enrolled as a student at the Moscow Shanavsky's Cultural University, and then pursued studies at the Fyodor Komissarzhevsky Studio from 1916–1918. Bekhterev's new institute in Petersburg was one of the most innovative and unorthodox educational institutions of its time, open to women and students from various diasporas (most institutes had limited quotas of admission in the best case). Courses spanned from psychology to philosophy (especially Nietzsche) and law, and professors always encouraged students to form, express, and argue their opinion through experimental formats including literary trials and philosophical disputes. Asja absorbed the cultural richness of Petersburg and later Moscow by actively participating in its academic and cultural life, visiting opera, theater, exhibitions, witnessing plays by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Nikolai Evreinov (his theatrical mass reenactments like *Storming of the Winter Palace*), Alexander Tairov, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and poetry readings by the young Vladimir Mayakovsky.[10]

Komissarzhevsky Studio in Moscow provided an equally nonclassical approach to theater education. As Asja recalls: "Fyodor Komissarzhevsky was convinced that there is no art without philosophy. The actor must first study philosophy and form a scientific worldview ... I agreed with him that art must be taken seriously, that it can only be created by people with a certain worldview."[11]

This intellectual training, along with being witness to the revolutionary events of 1917 and affiliated with a core group of avant-garde artists, poets, theoreticians, and film and theater directors – among them Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovsky, Evreinov, Eisenstein, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Tairov, Sergei Tretyakov, and Vertov, among others – became the cornerstones of her future engaged practice. Asja writes:

When I read the first proclamations



A Still from the film *Четвёртая смена* (The fourth unit), Sovkino, 1928.

addressed "To the People, To the People!" signed by Lenin and posted on the walls, I was completely for the Communists. I wanted to be a good soldier of the revolution and to change my life in line with it. And all around me, I saw life changing: the theater moved out onto the street, and the street moved into the theater. The "Theatrical October" burst forth.[12]

Scene 3: The Orel Experiment: Theater as a Site of Proletarian Education

In 1918, the Russian village of Orel became a stage for Lācis's important experience with *besprisorniki*, as Russian war orphans were then called. Her experimental children's theater helped local children overcome the trauma and violence of the postwar period through improvisation, performance, and play. It was a children's theater made by and for children. The theater emphasized process rather than result, a praxis where participative and collective dimensions became more important than the final spectacle. This empowering venture laid the basis for Lācis's methodology, which she would later apply to her proletarian and political theater work:

> In 1918, I went to Orel. I was supposed to work as a director in the municipal theater – in other words, to follow the traditional theatrical path and make my career. However, things turned out differently. On the streets of Orel, at the market places and cemeteries, in cellars and destroyed buildings, I saw gangs of abandoned children: the Besprisorniki ... They looked at you like old people, with sad, tired eyes. Nothing interested them. Children without a childhood ... You couldn't remain indifferent when confronted with all of this. I felt I had to do something, and I knew that children's songs and nursery rhymes would not be enough here. In order to get them to break out of their lethargy, a task was needed which would completely take hold of them and set their traumatized abilities free. I knew how great the power of making theater was and what it might do for these children.[13]

The theoretical synthesis of her experiment with children's theater in Orel was later provided by Benjamin, who in 1928 came up with the well-known "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," based on her experience – a fact later forgotten (or deliberately omitted):

> Proletarian education needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space within which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea toward which education leads ... The education of a child requires that its entire life be engaged. Proletarian education requires that the child be educated within a clearly defined space. This is the positive dialectic of the problem. It is only in the theater that the whole of life can appear as a defined space, framed in all its plenitude; and this is why proletarian children's theater is the dialectical site of education.[14]

With this early experience mediated via the program written by Benjamin, Asja actually laid the groundwork for those experimental drama practices that later emerged under the labels of political children's theater, amateur dramatics, theater-in-education, community theater, and *animazione teatrale*, i.e., drama/theater as a process of an anti-authoritarian aesthetic education with a strong bent towards social empowerment. This was a practice that emphasized theater as a tool for the acquisition of critical consciousness, with an emphasis on reactivating and liberating creative and bodily expression, energy, blocked gestures, and vital impulses via collective work within a circumscribed setting: "community."

Scene 4: Persecuted Theater

From the moment of her unconditional adhesion to the Soviet revolution, the stages of her existence – as the theater critic Eugenia Casini-Ropa underlines – are identified with those of the proletarian theater, reflecting the tensions and the conquests, the aesthetic-theatrical and the social and political implications, of the revolution.

Upon her return to Riga in 1921, a young and energetic Lācis published her programmatic text "New Tendencies in Theater" in the magazine of the second Leftist Trade Union Culutural Festival (Kreiso Arodbiedrību Kultūras Svētku biļetens):

> As a revolutionary politician protests against the old economical and social regime, which slays the free spirit of humankind, a revolutionary artist protests against old academic and frozen forms, which have grown out of capitalism, and rather moves toward the new, fresh forms of art.[15]

She was active in Riga twice. The first period was during 1920 and '21, when she collaborated with the amateur and workers' theater collectives affiliated with Riga People's High School. This

Postcard. A. Lācis to E. Bramberga from Capri, 6th of June 1924, where A. Lācis got acquainted with Walter Benjamin. Collection of Literature and Music Museum, Riga.

A. Lācis, L. Keilina. “Children & Cinema” (Дети и кино). Graphic Design: Varvara Stepanova. Moscow, Leningrad, publishing house Тea-кино-печать, 1928. Collection of the author.

work culminated in the mass open air theater play *Faces of the Century*, written by Leons Paegle, in line with the theories of Platon Kerzhentsev and Evreinov's large-scale reenactments. In 1925 and '26, she worked with the drama section of the Riga Unions' Central Bureau and major left-wing Latvian literary figures such as Linards Lacēns, Leons Paegle, and Andrejs Kurcijs, who were prolifically experimenting with original forms of agitprop and proletarian and political theater, including "disputes" and "charades." Articles by Lācis in local leftist magazines, together with Lacēns's classic collection of Latvian political love poetry, *Ho-Tai*, bear a particular testimony to that moment. This period of Lācis's career has been subsequently coined the years of "the Persecuted Theater."

Scene 5: Intellectual Nomadism

Her first visit to Germany, in 1922, saw her as a theoretically mature flag bearer of a successful revolution, which led to her meeting with major German intellectuals, including Fritz Lang. It is there that the transnational constellation around her started to take shape.

Through a young theater director of Austrian descent, Bernhard Reich, who was engaged with the Max Reinhard theater, Asja discovered Berlin, its cultural circles, its theaters (*Volksbühne*), and its more politicized literary, proletkult, and agitprop theater groupings. In 1923, Asja and Reich went to Munich, where he was supposed to work on a new play. Twenty-four-year-old Bertolt Brecht was impressed by her extensive knowledge of Soviet dramaturgy and invited her to become his assistant for staging the mass scenes of *The Life of Edward II of England*, as well as to perform the role of the young Edward, the son of the king.[16]

Remembering her days in Munich, Asja wrote:

> Also this city of wide alleys and luxurious white buildings had its narrow and untidy side streets. In one of such streets, in a tiny dark and damp apartment lived Brecht. Here, heated up discussions were taking place, new projects were coming to the fore, new tempting and original ideas about art originated. Among the regulars of this "Brecht's Club" you would find his collaborator and painter Casper Neher, directors Erich Engel and Reich, the outstanding writer Lion Feuchtwanger and by the way also me.[17]

Their collaboration and friendship continued throughout their lives. Later, Brecht would go on to elaborate on some of Lācis's pedagogical inputs into his *Lehrstücke* form. In 1929 he wrote: "Only a new purpose can lead to a new art. The new purpose is called pedagogics."[18] It was also through her, Reich, and later Tretyakov that he kept himself constantly updated on Soviet developments. Asja also maintained longterm relationships with other members of Brecht's circle, such as composers Paul Dessau, Hans Eisler, Kurt Weill, writer Elisabeth Hauptmann, and actress Helene Weigel, among others.

Her meeting with Piscator, meanwhile, provided ideas that Lācis later incorporated into her own theater practice. She was a witness and learned from Piscator's technologically complex set designs and particular stage management.

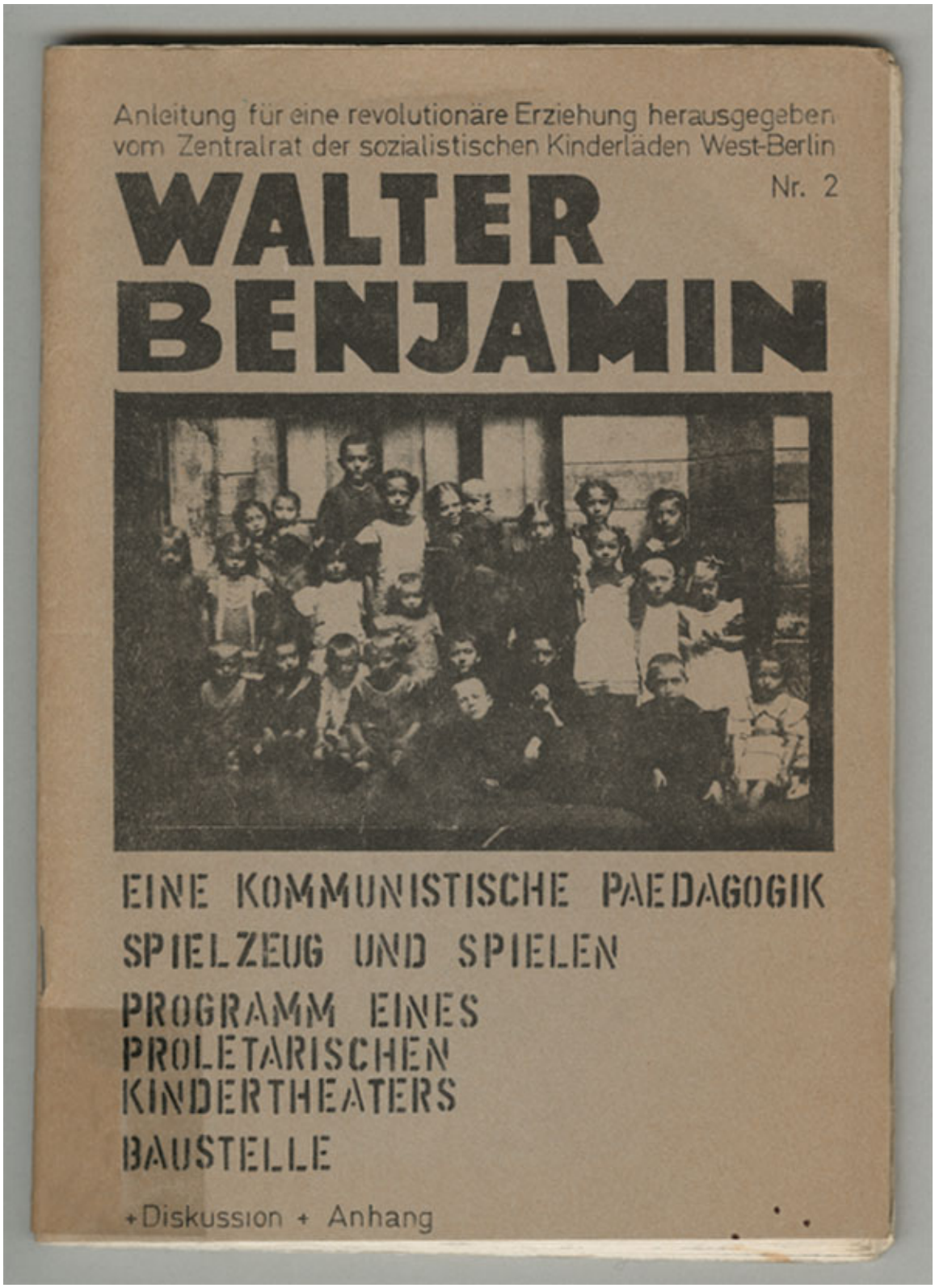
Scene 6: Capri and Naples: Almonds, Revolution, and the Birth of a Critical Theory

A postcard from Capri in 1924 informed Asja's friend, actress Elvīra Bramberga, that she had settled on the island due to the illness of her daughter, Dagmāra (Daga). Bernhard Reich, who accompanied them, soon had to leave to Paris for work. On Capri she experienced futurist poetry readings by Marinetti, rubbed shoulders with Maxim Gorky and the Russian intellectual diaspora, paid visits to Brecht on Positano, explored Naples, Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, and Sorrento, and also ran into an unexpectedly significant friendship:

> I often went shopping with Daga around the Piazza. One day I wanted to buy some almonds in a store; I didn't know the word for almonds in Italian, and the salesman didn't understand what I wanted from him. Next to me stood a gentleman, who said, "May I help you, Madam?" "Please," I said. I got the almonds and turned back to the Piazza with my packages. The gentleman followed me and asked, "May I accompany you and carry your packages?" I looked at him and he went on: "Allow me to introduce myself – Doctor Walter Benjamin" ... My first impression: glasses that threw out light like little headlights, thick dark hair, a slender nose, clumsy hands – he had dropped the packages. On the whole, a solid intellectual – one of the well-to-do. He accompanied me to the house and asked if he might visit me.[19]

It is enough to read further chapters of her book *Profession: Revolutionary* to immediately grasp both Lācis's intellectual weight and her impact on Benjamin:

> I told about my Children's Theater in Orel. About my work in Riga and Moscow.



Samizdat Edition Walter Benjamin. Berlin, publishing house "Anleitung fur eine revolutionare Erziehung herausgegeben vom Zentralrat der sozialistischen Kinderladen, West Berlin", Nr. 2, 1968. Collection of the author.

> Benjamin immediately supported the idea of a proletarian children's theater and became inflamed for Moscow. I had to tell him in detail not only about the Muscovite theater, but also about the new socialist customs, the new writers and poets: I named Yuri Libedinsky, Isaac Babel, Leonid Leonov, Valentin Kataev, Alexander Serafimovich, Mayakovsky, Aleksei Gastev, Vladimir Kirillov, Mikhail Gerasimov – I talked about Alexandra Kollontai and about Larissa Reissner.[20]

Their copublished article "Naples," which appeared in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on August 19, 1925, condenses this productive exchange. Written as a set of literary *Denkbilder* (thought images), this reflection on the "theatricality" of everyday life brings forward the metaphors of "constellation" and "porosity" that later became crucial philosophical concepts applied by Adorno, Benjamin himself, Kracauer, and others. Lācis offered Benjamin what he himself defined as "an intensive insight into the actuality of radical communism."[21] This fusion of politics and life remained an essential element of Benjamin's relationship with communism.

Posthumously, the curators of the Benjamin estate, and editors of the first edition of *Complete Writings*, Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, decided to remove Asja's name as a coauthor of "Naples," doubting her contribution. Apart from Lācis's claim of having made the observation about porosity, the theatrical references in the article speak for themselves:

> Porosity results not only from the indolence of the southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be preserved at any price. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters ... What is enacted on the staircases is an advanced school of stage management. The stairs, never entirely exposed, but still less enclosed in the gloomy box of the Nordic house, erupt fragmentarily from the buildings, make an angular turn, and disappear, only to burst out again.[22]

The recently published book *Adorno in Naples: The Origins of Critical Theory* by Martin Mittelmeier provides an exhaustive account of other members of what Benjamin called an "itinerant intellectual proletariat" *(GS, 3:133)* dispersed throughout the gulf of Naples. To name just a few figures from this group: young Adorno, who arrived in Naples in the company of aspiring political journalist Siegfried Kracauer; theoreticians Alfred Sohn-Retel and Ernst Bloch; Bertolt and Marianne Brecht; the set designer Caspar Neher; director Bernhard Reich; the designer and illustrator of Stefan George's books, Melchior Lechter; and Benjamin's nemesis from afar, Friedrich Gundolf.

According to Mittelmeier, it is in the middle of the exotic "theater of everyday life" of Capri and Naples (not Berlin), amidst philosophical and theoretical confrontations and quarrels between Benjamin, Sohn-Retel, Bloch, Kracauer, Adorno, and Lācis, that the birth of a new critical theory took place. It is also, perhaps, the same latitude from which the later malice of Adorno, Bloch, Kracauer, and Scholem towards Asja originated.

Scene 7: Stereoscope and Tears on Tverskaya

Benjamin followed Asja to Riga in 1925 and to Moscow in 1926, capturing his passionate nomadism in numerous fragments of his *One-Way Street* and "Moscow Diaries."

> I had arrived in Riga to visit a Woman friend. Her house, the town, the language were unfamiliar to me. Nobody was expecting me, no one knew me. For two hours I walked the streets in solitude. Never again have I seen them so. From every gate a flame darted, each cornerstone sprayed sparks, and every street-car came toward me like a fire engine. For she might have stepped out of the gateway, around the corner, been sitting in the streetcar. But of the two of us I had to be, at any price, the first to see the other. For had she touched me with the match of her eyes, I should have gone up like a magazine.[23]

Benjamin's surprise arrival in Riga was at odds with Lācis's busy schedule and engagement with political theater in Riga. Yet, his letters testify that he worked on his translation of Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* there and that during his more than month-long stay he observed and started to love the city, as he mentions in his "Unpacking My Library."

In 1926, after receiving news about Asja's neurological illness, Benjamin headed towards Moscow. For two months (December 6–February 1), he observed Soviet cultural life and met its most important cultural representatives. These observations are summarized in his articles "Moscow," "Russian Toys," and "Moscow Diaries." The latter, perhaps not intended for the public eye, was published only after Lācis's death (a decision made by Adorno and the

Sovetsky Teatr magazine issues 13-36 (1930) and 7 (1932), Moscow. Design by G. Klucis, including articles by A. Lācis, Collection of the author.

Frankfurt Institute for Social Research), thus depriving her of any possibility to answer. A great deal of her stereotypically negative depiction by Benjamin scholars derives not so much from the diary itself, but from the tendentious remarks by Gershom Scholem and quotation of its various fragments frequently taken out of context.

Benjamin had come to Russia with the thought of commitment, both to Asja Lācis and the Communist Party. Why he hesitated to make more concrete decisions is yet another story. His description of Moscow and the communist realm, though, remains amongst the most lucid analyses of the century. He describes an emotional farewell to Lācis and the city:

> I asked her to hail a sleigh. As I was about to get in, having said good-bye to her one more time, I invited her to ride to the corner of Tverskaia with me. I dropped her off there, and as the sleigh was already pulling away, I once again drew her hand to my lips, right in the middle of the street. She stood there a long time, waving. I waved back from the sleigh. At first she seemed to turn around as she walked away, then I lost sight of her. Holding my large suitcase on my knees, I rode through the twilit streets to the station in tears.[24]

Scene 8: Children and Cinema

Between 1925 and '26 Asja got involved in yet another educational project, this time the experimental community playgrounds for children in Moscow. In between, she had accompanied Ernst Toller during his stay in Moscow as a translator and his guide. In 1928, her interest shifted toward children's cinema, and she worked on the subject in close collaboration with Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya. One of the first cinema theaters for children in Moscow was opened in the facilities of the old cinema Balkan. She involved nearby *besprisorniki* and created a community of children who managed the functioning of the cinema, chose repertoire, and promoted and reviewed films.

Her research on media influence on younger generations preceded and overlapped with Benjamin's research on media for his essay on "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Her book *Deti i kino* (Children and cinema), cowritten with Ludmilla Keilina and published in Moscow in 1928 with a cover and graphic design by Varvara Stepanova, remains a singular contribution on the subject.

During these same years she became part of RAPP (Russian Proletarian Writers' Association – *РАПП, Российская Ассоциация Пролетарских Писателей*). Due to internal discord, this group split into another group called Proletarian Theater (*Пролетарский театр*). Eugenia, the wife of Bill-Belotserkovsky, recalls their heated meetings:

> People started to gather late in the evening and dispersed only with the morning light. They were reading plays, discussing, and always quarrelling. Asja, as we were calling her, was keeping in line with men and I noticed that everyone was respecting her and took her opinions very seriously ... She was speaking not just passionately, but was always able to sustain what she thought was right with a solid argumentation.[25]

Scene 9: Cultural Bolshevism in Weimar and the Birth of the Frankfurt School

Asja returned to Berlin in 1928 as the official representative of the Soviet trade mission in Germany for children's and documentary cinema, organizing presentations of Soviet culture and film, including Kino-Eye works. She passed most of her time in the company of three Bs: Brecht, Johannes R. Becher, and Benjamin, with whom she lived at the time. During the latter half of 1929, Benjamin began doing frequent broadcasts for children at stations in both Frankfurt and Berlin. Asja brought Benjamin to meetings of revolutionary proletarian writers in workers' halls and to a series of performances by proletarian theater groups, and he introduced her to his childhood Berlin. Asja joined rehearsals of Brecht's *Happy End*, and both her and Benjamin remained close to his circle. Her conference on Soviet theater at the German Union of Proletarian Writers was published in *Die Scene – Blätter für die Bühnenkunst* (no. 5, 1929) and her lectures spread interest about the theater work of Bill-Belotserkovsky, who later got invited to Frankfurt. At the request of Johannes R. Becher and Gerhard Eisler from the Karl Liebknecht Haus, Benjamin would complete a "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," for Lācis. His attempt to divorce Dora Benjamin and marry Lācis in order to extend her permit of stay failed. In their history of Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings describe Lācis's health difficulties and the birth of the Frankfurt School as follows:

> As she was preparing for her return to Moscow, Asja Lācis suffered a breakdown similar to the one that had incapacitated her in Moscow in 1926. Benjamin put her on a train to Frankfurt to be treated by a neurologist who ran a clinic there. On trips to Frankfurt in September and October,

Anna Lācis during the visit of Brecht to Moscow together with filmmaker Slatan Dudow, poet Semjon Kirsanov, writer Sergey Tretyakov, theatre directors Bertolt Brecht, Bernhard Reich, Erwin Piscator, actor Erwin Deutsch, and Maria Kerzhentseva. In the center stands Anna Lācis with her daughter Dagmāra Ķimele (Daga) to her right. Photo: unknown author. Moscow, 1930s. Collection of Māra Ķimele, Riga.

during which he not only saw Lācis but gave several radio talks, Benjamin began to intensify his intellectual exchanges with Adorno … A small group soon formed around Benjamin and Adorno in Königstein, a resort town in the Taunus Mountains. Sitting around a table at the "Schweizerhäuschen," Benjamin, Lācis, Adorno, Gretel Karplus, and Max Horkheimer engaged in discussions concerning key concepts of Benjamin's work, such as the "dialectical image." These "Königstein conversations" left an imprint on the thinking of all the participants and helped shape what became known as the Frankfurt School of cultural theory.[26]

Scene 10: Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears

Upon her return to Moscow, Lācis continued her pedagogical work and was appointed as a director of the professional Latvian theater Skatuve in Moscow. Among the plays she directed, her version of *Peasant Baez* by Friedrich Wolf was premiered with the author and Piscator in the audience. An article in which Piscator praises Lācis's dramaturgical approach was published in *Pravda* on May 7, 1934. Asja lived with Bernhard Reich, frequently greeting Brecht and other foreign friends who visited the USSR. She enrolled at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VgiK) and started postdoctoral studies at the Lunacharsky Institute for Theater in 1933. Throughout the thirties she continued her pedagogical work and was engaged with Latvian theater groups in Smolensk and Kislovodsk. Piscator involved her as an assistant for his large-scale cinema production of *Revolt of the Fishermen*, written by Anna Seghers. She contributed extensively to magazines such as *Soviet Theater*, *MORT*, *Molodaja Gvardija*, *International Theater*, *Domas*, and *Celtne*. Due to historical events in Germany, the anti-fascist spirit was another unifying and strong motivating factor for her to remain active.

Scene 11: The Avant-Garde Comes to a Standstill

A photograph shot in Moscow around 1932, on the occasion of Bertolt Brecht's first visit to the USSR to present his film *Kuhle Wampe*, depicts: filmmaker Slatan Dudow, poet Semjon Kirsanov, writer Sergey Tretyakov, theater directors Bertolt Brecht, Bernhard Reich, and Erwin Piscator, actor Erwin Deutch (probably), and Maria, the wife of Platon Kerzhentsev. In the center is Anna Lācis with her daughter, Dagmāra Ķimele (Daga), to her right.

In 1935, a similar but extended group, including Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Tretyakov, and Gordon Craig, united for the last time when Chinese actor Mei Lanfang visited Moscow and St. Petersburg. The traditional Chinese theater thus became the last utopian stimulus for the avant-garde generation that was at odds with the new doctrine of socialist realism. Chinese theater resonated strongly with Brecht and his *V-effekt* (alienation effect), with Meyerhold, and with others.

The Moscow constellation including Margarete Steffin, Carola Neher, Reich, and Lācis were hearing Brecht performing his "Ballad of the Dead Soldier" on the guitar for the last time. He made his next unwilling brief stopover only in May of 1941 on his way towards Los Angeles, offering to intervene on behalf of Lācis when he learned of her arrest and detention.[27] Other friends such as Tretyakov had already disappeared by that time. With the beginning of the Moscow Trials and Nazi atrocities, those times in 1935 were the last happy moments of the *Heftige Jahre* (violent years).

Like numerous other intellectuals of her time, and most members of the above-mentioned constellation, Lācis would be accused and arrested on false charges by the Russian secret police in 1938. Names of her German peers resurfaced in her acts of accusation as well as later in those of Bernhard Reich. She served her sentence first in Butyrka prison and then at forced labor camps in Kazakhstan. Her biography simply states: "I had to spend some time in Kazakhstan." Little is known of that period in her life, apart from the fact that she was able to organize a women's theater collective in the prison camp, notwithstanding its extremely harsh and physically exhausting conditions.

Upon her release from prison in 1948, Lācis moved to Valmiera, Latvia, where she worked as the director of the Valmiera Drama Theater until her retirement in 1958. Only after her rehabilitation did she manage to reestablish contact with Brecht and find out Benjamin's fate. Late in her life she reunited with and married Bernhard Reich, and finally officially joined the Communist Party. During her retirement she worked on her memoirs and theoretical articles in Russian, Latvian, and German. Lācis passed away in 1979.

Epilogue

The book *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator* (Revolutionary at work: Reports on proletarian theater, Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator; published in Munich in 1971) would become Lācis's only "Western" publication, translated as it was into

Italian, French, and Spanish. The work came into being through a series of interviews and letters published in Hildegard Brenner's magazine. Brenner belonged to the Brecht's circle. This material was later edited by Lācis and included a partial reprint of her previously published Russian book on German revolutionary theater (*Revolucionnyj teatr germanii* [German revolutionary theater], published in Moscow in 1935). If it were not for this rediscovery through Brenner, Lācis's work might have remained largely unknown to Western scholars. The relative isolation of Cold War Latvia kept these two worlds distinctly separate, too.

The 1960s saw a renewal of interest in her work, coinciding with polemics about the management of Benjamin's estate by Adorno and Scholem. Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas both publicly expressed their disapproval. Mismanagement of the Institute for Social Research did not just concern Lācis, but also Brecht and everything Benjamin had to do with both.

Tragicomically, Lācis and Reich would meet Brecht again in Moscow on the occasion of the assignment of Stalin (Later Lenin) Peace Award to him in 1954. The surviving members of our constellation met once again in Moscow. Brecht provided information that Piscator was involved in important pedagogical work, and together they mourned the fate of their friend Walter Benjamin, grief over which Brecht had expressed in two poems. Having experienced so many tragedies, they still kept faithful to their common cause.

After Brecht's death, Lācis and Reich were later invited to visit the DDR for a series of commemorative events at the Berliner Ensemble. There they became acquainted with a younger generation, in particular Heiner Müller. The Berliner produced a commemorative kerchief for the occasion, with a drawing by Picasso in its center, and the phrase "Peace to all nations" written around its four sides in German, Russian, English, and other languages, but also Latvian.

It is through the writings and practices of Brecht and Benjamin, the teaching of Piscator, and the rediscovery of Lācis's work that their interrupted practices were revived and passed on to younger generations. It is perhaps not fully an accident that Judith Malina and Julian Beck from the Living Theater met at the Piscators' Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York (Malina's *The Piscator Diaries* is a beautiful account of that time). The Brecht/Piscator/Lācis tradition also expanded towards Latin America through Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal, among others.

In 1973, Jack Zipes, polyhedric author of books dealing with childhood education and theater, made Lācis's *Memoir*, which recounts her Orel experience, available for English readers in *Performance* magazine. It was published together with the first translation of Benjamin's "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," in collaboration with Susan Buck-Morss. No further materials were made available in English after that.

A serious reevaluation of Lācis's work therefore is only in its initial phase. Those who have contributed notably in recent years include Beata Paškevica, Susan Ingram, Martin Mittelmeier, Lígia Cortez, and Latvian theater director Māra Ķimele (the granddaughter of Asja Lācis), among others. Hopefully this process will develop and continue. The author of this text has personally contributed by curating three exhibition projects in recent years: "Archives of Anna 'Asja' Lācis," Documenta 14, Kassel, 2017; "Asja Lācis: Engineer of the Avant-Garde" at the National Library of Latvia in Riga, 2019; and "Signals from Another World: Asja Lācis and Children's Theater" in AVTO Istanbul, 2019. He is also working on a book about Lācis in Italian.

I will conclude with an imaginary conversation between Adorno, Brecht, and Benjamin. It begins with Adorno commenting on Brecht's concept of the interventionist politics of art: "What drew Benjamin to dialectical materialism … was no doubt less its theoretical content than the hope of an empowered collectively legitimized form of discourse."[28]

A legitimate answer to this could be the following affirmation from Brecht: "With the learning-play … The theater becomes a place for philosophers, and for such philosophers that not only wish to explain the world but wish to change it."[29]

Benjamin's clarification in a letter to Gretel Karplus, where he talks about his friendship to Brecht, could conclude the conversation:

> What you say about his influence on me reminds me of a significant and continually repeated constellation in my life … In my existential economy, a few specific relationships do play a part, which enable me to maintain one, which is the polar opposite of my fundamental being. These relationships have always provoked more or less violent protests on the part of those closest to me … In such cases I can do little more than ask my friends to have a confidence that the rewards of these connections, whose dangers are obvious, will become clear.[30]

Lācis's theatrical and pedagogical approach, which emerges clearly through her texts, her work, and the constellation that formed around her, perhaps help to make this clear. All members

of this "dangerous" grouping were trying to grasp a synthesis of life, aesthetics, and politics in their own way. By looking at their intertwinings, the rewards of their connection are self-evident. As Lācis herself noted: "In times of struggle, art has to be both an ally and friend of those in conflict."[31]

Our present global circumstances of crisis, shock, and a permanent state of emergency – all lucidly foreseen by Benjamin – with entire generations deprived of the right to self-determination and forced to face extreme violence, oddly resemble the identical historical moment that Lācis and her friends faced a century ago. What this genealogy can teach us, then, is perhaps the fact that today, more than ever before, it is exactly in the "ruins of yesterday where today's riddles are solved."[32]

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Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (Dover Publications, 2007), 212, 213.

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Katherine Eaton, "Brecht's Contacts with the Theater of Meyerhold," *Comparative Drama* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 3–21.

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9
Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harvest Books, 1968), 167. Original sentence: "And there is indeed no question but that his friendship with Brecht – unique as here the greatest living German poet met the most important critic of the time, a fact both were fully aware of – was the second and incomparably more important stroke of good fortune in Benjamin's life."

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Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, 68–69.

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Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October*, no. 35 (Winter 1985), 121.

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Miglāne, Freinberga, Adamova, and Lācis, *Anna Lācis*, 45–46.

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Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 332–33.

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Helen Fehervary, "Art Instead of Romance: Brecht's Collaborations with Women," in *The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch 41*, Urlaub Per, Imbrigotta Kristopher, and Rippey Theodore F., eds (Boydell & Brewer, 2017) 185–197

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Yuk Hui

In Memory of Bernard

How can I believe that Bernard has already left us? It is true that he has left, but I don't believe it and I will not believe it. Since I woke up on August 7 and read about the death of Bernard Stiegler, I have listened to his voice on the radio and felt Bernard's presence, his generosity, his warm greetings and smiles. I haven't been able to stop my tears. I was on the phone with Bernard just a week ago, talking about an event in Arles at the end of August and our future projects. Bernard's voice was weaker than usual, but he was positive. He complained that his mobile didn't work and his printer was broken, and he wasn't able to buy new ones online because he needed a verification code sent to his mobile. Yet he continued to write. On August 6, I felt unusually weak myself. My belly was aching. This happened to me two years ago when my friend and copyeditor committed suicide. I dragged my body to the post office to send Bernard some Korean ginseng I had promised him a while ago, but the post office was closed due to COVID-19. When I got home, I thought to send him a message telling him that two special journal issues I edited, and that he took part in, were about to come out. I now regret that I didn't manage to tell him, since I no longer have the chance to talk to him anymore.

I met Bernard in November 2008 in London, though I had already seen him lecture several times. I went to St. Pancras Station with a colleague to pick him up. I was young, excited, and very nervous. I had read *Technics and Time, volume 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, his *Echographies of Television* with Jacques Derrida, and watched with admiration *The Ister*, a film made by David Barison and Bernard's long time translator and friend Dan Ross, and which I screened many times for my students. Like everyone, I was intrigued by Bernard's past as a bank robber who took up philosophy again during his five years of incarceration. I had already intensively studied Heidegger's *Being and Time* and his later work after the *Kehre*, and thought I had penetrated into some important aspects of Heidegger's thought on technology. But reading *Technics and Time 1* was mind-blowing and revealing. I read it several times, sentence by sentence, and each reading was an extraordinary experience. Bernard deconstructed Heidegger's *Being* using the concept of technics (tertiary retention), and opened a breach to enter Heidegger's thinking and reconstruct it from within. Even more impressive was Bernard's ambition to deconstruct the history of Western philosophy. For him, the question of technology, which was indeed the first philosophy, is repressed – in Freud's sense – by the history of philosophy. The first two volumes of *Technics and*

Épineuil-le-Fleuriel, Summer 2015, Photo: Michaël Crevoisier.

Time were dedicated to the deconstruction of phenomenology in Heidegger and Husserl. The third volume on cinema is the deconstruction of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and a critique of the Frankfurt School.

This third volume of *Technics and Time* was also the beginning of Bernard's political writings against the technological industry and capitalism. Bernard published almost one book a year, spanning various subjects including aesthetics, democracy, political economy, automation, and so on. Bernard is not against industry as such, but rather the short-term thinking of industrial production and the cynicism of all forms of denial. The current industrial program is based on profit-making, notably consumerism, and no longer takes care of the population, especially the younger generation – the generation of Greta Thunberg. This is also the condition under which technology becomes toxic. From the third volume of *Technics and Time* onward, Bernard systematically attempted to find new weapons in his reading of Marx, Freud, Simondon, biology, and economy. The task of Ars Industrialis, an association Bernard created with his friends in 2006, was dedicated to the transformation of industry. His project at Sant-Denis, in the north of Paris, is a collaboration with various industrial partners and banks to develop a new political economy, which he called an economy of contribution.

I still remember that it was a rainy day. He was wearing his black coat and hat, like a typical French intellectual, but still I offered him my umbrella. He refused at first, but then accepted. Bernard was very friendly. He asked me what I was reading. I replied that I was reading his *Acting Out* and another book by the historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot. He was surprised. I had just recovered from a near-fatal disease and was fascinated by the resonance between his philosophy and ancient spiritual practice. Bernard gave a keynote speech in a conference, and I also gave a talk; he was very interested in my work on relation and David Hume and asked me to keep in touch. A few months later, during a debate with David Graeber and Yann Moulier Boutang that Scott Lash organized at Goldsmiths (when a Russian artist, a self-proclaimed fan of Giorgio Agamben, took a shit in front of the speakers to demonstrate his understanding of resistance), he asked me to give a talk in his seminars in Paris. Later, he agreed to supervise my PhD thesis. I looked up to Bernard, and every time I met him to discuss my thesis I felt I was wasting his time. But Bernard was warm and generous – he never treated me as a student. He respected me as a friend and was always interested in knowing my ideas. I don't remember all of these scenes, but so many details are still vivid today. During one of the meetings, Bernard advised me not to read too much Heidegger, since, according to him, great thinkers only have one or two major works, and for Heidegger it is *Being and Time*. Once, when we were waiting to cross the street, he said there is someone you should take seriously later in your life, and that is Jacques Derrida. I published my thesis *On the Existence of Digital Objects* in 2016, and Bernard kindly contributed a preface.

I only came to know Bernard more personally after I moved to Paris from London and started working in his Institute of Research and Innovation, an institute he created with Vincent Puig in 2006 after leaving his post as director of the Department of Cultural Development at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Before his directorship there, under at the invitation of the musician and composer Pierre Boulez, he was director of IRCAM (Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music), an institute of the Centre Pompidou. Bernard's life was legendary, much more than anyone else I've met in my life. A farm worker, an owner of a jazz bar, a former bank robber who studied philosophy in the prison of Toulouse with the help of the phenomenologist Gérard Granel, a masters student of Jean-François Lyotard, then a PhD student of Jacques Derrida, then a person responsible for several projects including one in the 1980s with the National Library of France on digitalization in the 1980s, before becoming acting director of INA (National Audiovisual Institute), then IRCAM, finally retiring from IRI in 2018.

I eventually left France to take a job in Germany, but my relationship with Bernard became even closer. He was a visiting professor for a semester at the Leuphana University in Lüneburg where I worked, and later he was a visiting professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin where I lived, so we were able to meet almost every week during the semesters. I went to his summer school every year in Épineuil-le-Fleuriel, in the countryside of central France, where Bernard and his family organized weeklong seminars with invitees and students. It was a festival of thinking and friendship, which unfortunately ended in 2017. With the passing of Bernard, those French summers I had almost every year since 2010 seem so far away.

I went to China for the first time with Bernard and his family in 2015. Bernard always told everyone that I brought him to China, but I think it was the other way around. I had already lived in

Europe for a decade, and would only go to Hong Kong once a year for a few days at a time to see my parents, without passing through mainland China. The trip to Hangzhou with Bernard was an important event in my life, since I rediscovered China and was able to do so thanks to the generosity of Gao Shiming, who recently became the dean of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. From 2015 on, Bernard and I taught a master class together in Hangzhou, where I also had the chance to have lunch and dinner with him almost every day. During some warm spring nights, we went for a glass of wine on the terrace of an Italian restaurant next to the academy. We had many great conversations. I remember in 2018 Bernard was smoking, with his glass of wine, and all of a sudden said to me, "Do you remember I once asked you not to read Heidegger?" I replied, "Yes, I remember, it was 10 years ago, but I didn't follow your advice." He smiled and said, "I know that you didn't listen to me, and I now think I was wrong."

In 2016, I published my second monograph, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, a response to and a critique of Heidegger's 1953 essay "The Question Concerning Technology." In this book, I presented a reading of Heidegger different from Bernard's, but the second part of the book still relies on his critique of Heidegger's concept of world history to deconstruct the Kyoto school and New Confucianism. I dedicated this book to Bernard, for without our numerous discussions, and without the spirit of rebellion he affirmed in me, I wouldn't have been able to make this step. This book, however, posed a problem for Bernard. He disagreed with me, not in my reading of Heidegger, but in my reading of the French palaeontologist André Leroi-Gourhan. We discussed it during a trip to Chengdu in 2018 while on our way to see the pandas with his son, Augustin. We were supposed to have a debate on it in our seminars in Taipei in 2019, but we didn't manage. Finally we thought to stage it in a special issue of *Angelaki* dedicated to the concept of cosmotechnics, which came out on the day of his death. It was very generous of Bernard to complete his article in April from the hospital, while suffering from a lot of pain. However, he changed the direction in the essay and we never staged our confrontation.

Bernard left us a wealth of original and groundbreaking work on philosophy and technology. He never limits himself to a single discipline, nor is he satisfied with any superficial interdisciplinary studies. He has been trying to invent new thinking and practice to break down boundaries and offer vision and hope. He is a thinker of catastrophe, or, more precisely, a tragic thinker who never missed the chance to turn the contingent event into a philosophical necessity. Still, Bernard owes us the multiple additional volumes of *Technics and Time* that he promised. Bernard told me several times about his psychedelic experience in prison. He wrote a text during that time that he couldn't understand. When he showed it to Gérard Granel, Granel told him, "this is going to be your philosophy." The text was included in his PhD thesis, and Jean-Luc Marion, who was on the committee of his thesis defense, wanted to publish it independently, but Bernard refused. This part was supposed to become the seventh volume of *Technics and Time*, but we are still waiting for the fourth, fifth, and sixth. According to Bernard, this mysterious text is about a spiral. I have never read it, but I started to wonder whether it was close to what I wrote in *Recursivity and Contingency*, whose introduction was titled "A Psychedelic Becoming." Bernard read the book, and thought that it was important that I engaged with German idealism and cybernetics, and recommended it to French publishers. However, we never discussed the relation between recursivity and his concept of the spiral since we missed the chance last year.

Last year, when we were walking around West Lake in Hangzhou, I told him that I once got quite drunk with his old friends Ishida Hidetaka and Hiroki Azuma. Bernard was very happy. He said that after his time in prison he never really got drunk, since he stopped enjoying the feeling of intoxication, but he would like to make an exception. In the restaurant, he ordered a bottle of wine, but I couldn't drink more than a glass since I was still suffering from the exhaustion of completing *Recursivity and Contingency*. Bernard took half the bottle back to his hotel room, and I missed the chance to get him drunk. But, after all, Bernard is the tragist who doesn't need intoxication.

This year I had hoped to find him again in Hangzhou, but the pandemic killed any possibility of such a meeting. The last time I saw Bernard was in November 2019, when we went to Taiwan together to give master classes at the invitation of the Taipei National University of the Arts. I was supposed to go to Paris that December to give a talk at his annual conference, but I was too exhausted to go. This year, the conference will still take place in December, though Bernard will no longer be there with us.

Bernard chose to leave us during a destitute time, when stupidity has become the norm, when politics is no more than lies. All this is

accelerated by the pandemic, and it is all that he fought against in his life. Since 2016, Bernard spoke often about dreams and the necessity of dreaming. Industrial capitalism destroys dreams. It only produces consumerism through the manipulation of attention. The faculty of dreaming, for him, is the faculty that Kant ignored. Bernard was a dreamer who dreamed the impossible, a fighter who fought against stupidity. As he often said: *il faut combattre*. Bernard spoke highly of Hayao Miyazaki's film *The Wind Rises*, which he saw as a good example of the faculty of dreaming. All technologies are primarily dreams, but dreams can also become nightmares, and this makes them pharmacological. After Plato and Derrida, it was Bernard who became the pharmacologist of technology. Today, however, most universities of science and technology work for the industry. Even if they talk about ethics, they no longer need philosophy, because they have already lost the capacity to dream. "The wind rises" is also a phrase from his favorite poem by Paul Valéry, "Le cimetière marin." The poem ends with the following verse, words that could have been left by Bernard, the greatest tragist after Nietzsche:

> The wind is rising! ... We must try to live!
> The huge air opens and shuts my book: the wave
> Dares to explode out of the rocks in reeking
> Spray. Fly away, my sun-bewildered pages!
> Break, waves! Break up with your rejoicing surges
> This quiet roof where sails like doves were pecking.
> – August 8, 2020

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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 fur 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
Kunsthaus 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, Dusseldorf

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
Kunsthaus 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
Maumaus, Escola de Artes Visuais, Lisbon
Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon
OPORTO, Lisbon
Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana
Mostyn, Llandudno
Architectural Association / Bedford Press, London
Calvert 22, London
Chisenhale Gallery, London
Gasworks, London
ICA, London
Serpentine Gallery, London
The Showroom, London
Visiting Arts, London
REDCAT, Los Angeles
LACMA, Los Angeles
Casino Luxembourg

M
Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht
Brumaria, Madrid
CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid
Pensart, Madrid
Ballroom, Marfa
Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
World Food Books, Melbourne
Librería Casa Bosques, Mexico City
Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City
Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan
Hangar Bicocca, Milan
Milton Keynes Gallery
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal
Garage, Moscow
Haus der Kunst Munich, Walther Koenig Bookshop
Museum Villa Stuck, Munich

N
Sarai-CSDS, New Delhi
e-flux, New York
ICI, New York
Printed Matter, Inc, New York
Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham
Good Weather, North Little Rock

O
Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha
Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo
Modern Art Oxford

P
Fondazione March, Padona
castillo/corrales - Section 7 Books, Paris
Centre Pompidou, Paris
Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Paris
BODEGA, Philadelphia
Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, (PICA)
Publication Studio, Portland
Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto
Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague
Stacion–Center for Contemporary Art Prishtina
AS220, Providence

R
Reykjavik Art Museum
Kim?, Riga
A Gentil Carioca, Rio de Janeiro
Capacete, Rio de Janeiro
MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma
Opera Rebis, Rome
Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam
Witte de With, Rotterdam

S
Le Grand Cafe, Centre D'art Contemporain, Saint-Nazaire
Salzburger Kunstverein
Artpace, San Antonio
Master in Visual Arts, Faculdade Santa Marcelina, São Paulo
Kunsthalle São Paulo
Sarajevo Center for Contempoarary Art
The Book Society, Seoul
Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University, Sherbrooke
Press to Exit Project Space, Skopje
ICA Sofia
Performing Arts Forum, PAF, St Erme Outre et Ramecourt
White Flag Projects, St. Louis
Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm
IASPIS, Stockholm
Index, Stockholm
Konstfack, University College of Art, Craft and Design, Stockholm
Tensta konsthall, Stockholm
Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart

T
Kumu Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn
Sazmanab Platform for Contemporary Arts, Tehran
Stroom Den Haag, The Hague
Mercer Union, Toronto
The Power Plant, Toronto
Centre of Contemporary Art Znaki Czasu in Torun
Raygun Contemporary Art Projects, Toowoomba
Trieste Contemporanea, Trieste

U
Bildmuseet, Umeå University
BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht
Casco-Office for Art, Design and Theory, Utrecht

V
Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz
Malta Contemporary Art Foundation, Valletta
ARTSPEAK, Vancouver
Fillip, Vancouver
Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
Motto, Vancouver
READ Books, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver
Kunsthalle Vienna
Salon für Kunstbuch 21er-Haus, Vienna
MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporanea de Vigo
Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius
Montehermoso Kulturunea, Vitoria-Gasteiz
BAC, Baltic Art Center, Visby

W
Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Warsaw
Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki / Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
Nassauischer Kunstverein (NKV), Wiesbaden

Y
Armenian Center For Contemporary Experimental Art, NPAK, Yerevan

Z
Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic, Zagreb
Gallery Nova, Zagreb
Institute for Duration, Location and Variables, DeLVe, Zagreb
Postgraduate Program in Curating, Zürich University of the Arts
Shedhalle, Zurich
White Space, Zurich