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It is April now, which T. S. Eliot once called the cruelest month. In Eliot's April, lilacs rose from the ground as if to mock the dead of World War 1. Today, as the pandemic rages on, many lives are on pause, while many others end. And yet, the flowers bloom.

We might say that this issue of *e-flux journal* asks how Covid-19 preys on existential vulnerabilities – through essays written well before the current crisis, and others in response to it. If Covid-19 has merged the biological and the political, how then do we reconcile the strengthening of national borders to protect populations with the stoking of fear and racism through self–other or friend–enemy paradigms, imagined or real? Even if nation-states and intergovernmental organizations are often the problem as well as the solution – both sickness and cure – how might our global interdependencies and vulnerabilities go beyond the ecological and techno-industrial waste that fuels the exhausting openness of globalization?

Or, as one author who experienced the pandemic in both Shanghai and New York asks: “How to harvest the energy from such permanent existential untranslatability and transform it into something productive?”

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Editorial

Yuk Hui
**One Hundred
Years of Crisis**

01/09

If philosophy ever manifested itself as helpful, redeeming, or prophylactic, it was in a healthy culture. The sick, it made ever sicker.

– Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*

§1. Centenary of “Crisis of the Spirit”

In 1919, after the First World War, the French poet Paul Valéry in “Crisis of the Spirit” wrote: “We later civilizations ... we too know that we are mortal.”¹ It is only in such a catastrophe, and as an *après coup*, that we know we are nothing but fragile beings. One hundred years later, a bat from China – if indeed the coronavirus comes from bats – has driven the whole planet into another crisis. Were Valéry still alive, he wouldn’t be allowed to walk out of his house in France.

The crisis of the spirit in 1919 was preceded by a nihilism, a nothingness, that haunted Europe before 1914. As Valéry wrote of the intellectual scene before the war: “I see ... nothing! Nothing ... and yet an infinitely potential nothing.” In Valéry’s 1920 poem “Le Cimetière Marin” (“Graveyard by the Sea”) we read a Nietzschean affirmative call: “The wind is rising! ... We must try to live!” This verse was later adopted by Hayao Miyazaki as the title of his animation film about Jiro Horikoshi, the engineer who designed fighter aircraft for the Japanese Empire that were later used in the Second World War. This nihilism recursively returns in the form of a Nietzschean test: a demon invades your loneliest loneliness and asks if you want to live in the eternal recurrence of the same – the same spider, the same moonlight between the trees, and the same demon who asks the same question. Any philosophy that cannot live with and directly confront this nihilism provides no sufficient answer, since such a philosophy only makes the sick culture sicker, or in our time, withdraws into laughable philosophical memes circulating on social media.

The nihilism Valéry contested has been constantly nurtured by technological acceleration and globalization since the eighteenth century. As Valéry wrote towards the end of his essay:

But can the European spirit – or at least its most precious content – be totally diffused? Must such phenomena as democracy, the exploitation of the globe, and the general spread of technology, all of which presage a *deminutio capitis* for Europe ... must these be taken as absolute decisions of fate?²

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This threat of diffusion – which Europe may have attempted to affirm – is no longer something that can be confronted by Europe alone, and probably will never be completely overcome again by the European “tragist” spirit.³ “Tragist” is first of all related to Greek tragedy; it is also the logic of the spirit endeavoring to resolve contradictions arising from within. In “What Begins after the End of the Enlightenment?” and other essays, I have tried to sketch out how, since the Enlightenment, and after the decline of monotheism, the latter was replaced by a mono-technologism (or techno-theism), which has culminated today in transhumanism.⁴ We, the moderns, the cultural heirs to the European Hamlet (who, in Valéry’s “Crisis of the Spirit,” looks back at the European intellectual legacy by counting the skulls of Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Marx), one hundred years after Valéry’s writing, have believed and still want to believe that we will become immortal, that we will be able to enhance our immune system against all viruses or simply flee to Mars when the worst cases hit. Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, researching travel to Mars seems irrelevant for stopping the spread of the virus and saving lives. We mortals who still inhabit this planet called earth may not have the chance to wait to become immortal, as the transhumanists have touted in their corporate slogans. A pharmacology of nihilism after Nietzsche is still yet to be written, but the toxin has already pervaded the global body and caused a crisis in its immune system.

For Jacques Derrida (whose widow, Marguerite Derrida, recently died of coronavirus), the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center marked the manifestation of an autoimmune crisis, dissolving the techno-political power structure that had been stabilized for decades: a Boeing 767 was used as a weapon against the country that invented it, like a mutated cell or virus from within.⁵ The term “autoimmune” is only a biological metaphor when used in the political context: globalization is the creation of a world system whose stability depends on techno-scientific and economic hegemony. Consequently, 9/11 came to be seen as a rupture which ended the political configuration willed by the Christian West since the Enlightenment, calling forth an immunological response expressed as a permanent state of exception – wars upon wars. The coronavirus now collapses this metaphor: the biological and the political become one. Attempts to contain the virus don’t only involve disinfectant and medicine, but also military mobilizations and lockdowns of countries, borders, international flights, and trains.

In late January, *Der Spiegel* published an issue titled *Coronavirus, Made in China: Wenn die*

Globalisierung zur tödlichen Gefahr wird (When globalization becomes deadly danger), illustrated with an image of a Chinese person in excessive protective gear gazing at an iPhone with eyes almost closed, as if praying to a god.⁶ The coronavirus outbreak is not a terrorist attack – so far, there has been no clear evidence of the virus’s origin beyond its first appearance in China – but is rather an organological event in which a virus attaches to advanced transportation networks, travelling up to 900 km per hour. It is also an event that seems to return us to the discourse of the nation-state and a geopolitics defined by nations. By returning, I mean that, first of all, the coronavirus has restored meaning to borders that were seemingly blurred by global capitalism and the increasing mobility promoted by cultural exchange and international trade. The global outbreak has announced that globalization so far has only cultivated a mono-technological culture that can only lead to an autoimmune response and a great regression. Secondly, the outbreak and the return to nation-states reveal the historical and actual limit of the concept of the nation-state itself. Modern nation-states have attempted to cover up these limits through immanent infowars, constructing infospheres that move beyond borders. However, rather than producing a global immunology, on the contrary, these infospheres use the apparent contingency of the global space to wage biological warfare. A global immunology that we can use to confront this stage of globalization is not yet available, and it may never become available if this mono-technological culture persists.

§2. A European Schmitt Sees Millions of Ghosts

During the 2016 refugee crisis in Europe, the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk criticized Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel in an interview with the magazine *Cicero*, saying, “We have yet to learn to glorify borders ... Europeans will sooner or later develop an efficient common border policy. In the long run the territorial imperative prevails. After all, there is no moral obligation to self-destruction.”⁷ Even if Sloterdijk was wrong in saying that Germany and the EU should have closed their borders to refugees, in retrospect one may say that he was right about the question of borders not being well thought out. Roberto Esposito has clearly stated that a binary (polar) logic persists concerning the function of borders: one insists on stricter control as an immunological defense against an outer enemy – a classical and intuitive understanding of immunology as opposition between the self and the other – while the other proposes the abolition of borders to allow freedom of mobility

and possibilities of association for individuals and goods. Esposito suggests that neither of the two extremes – and it is somewhat obvious today – is ethically and practically undesirable.⁸

The outbreak of the coronavirus in China – beginning in mid-November until an official warning was announced in late January, followed by the lockdown of Wuhan on January 23 – led immediately to international border controls against Chinese or even Asian-looking people in general, identified as carriers of the virus. Italy was one of the first countries to impose a travel ban on China; already in late January, Rome's Santa Cecilia Conservatory suspended "oriental" students from taking classes, even those who had never in their life been to China. These acts – which we may call immunological – are conducted out of fear, but more fundamentally out of ignorance.

In Hong Kong – right next to Shenzhen in Guangdong province, one of the major outbreak regions outside Hubei province – there were strong voices urging the government to close the border with China. The government refused, citing the World Health Organization advising countries to avoid imposing travel and trade restrictions on China. As one of two special administrative regions of China, Hong Kong SAR is not supposed to oppose China nor add to its recent burden of underwhelming economic growth. And yet, some Hong Kong restaurants posted notices on their doors announcing that Mandarin-speaking clients were unwelcome. Mandarin is associated with virus-carrying Mainland Chinese people, therefore the dialect is considered a sign of danger. A restaurant that under normal circumstances is open to anyone who can afford it is now only open to certain people.

All forms of racism are fundamentally immunological. Racism is a social antigen, since it clearly distinguishes the self and the other and reacts against any instability introduced by the other. However, not all immunological acts can be considered racism. If we don't confront the ambiguity between the two, we collapse everything into the night where all cows are grey. In the case of a global pandemic, an immunological reaction is especially unavoidable when contamination is facilitated by intercontinental flights and trains. Before the closing of Wuhan, five million inhabitants had escaped, involuntarily transporting the virus out of the city. In fact, whether one is labelled as being from Wuhan is irrelevant, since everyone can be regarded as suspect, considering that the virus can be latent for days on a body without symptoms, all the while contaminating its surroundings. There are immunological moments one cannot easily escape when xenophobia and

micro-fascisms become common on streets and in restaurants: when you involuntarily cough, everyone stares at you. More than ever, people demand an immunosphere – what Peter Sloterdijk suggested – as protection and as social organization.

It seems that immunological acts, which cannot simply be reduced to racist acts, justify a return to borders – individual, social, and national. In biological immunology as well as political immunology, after decades of debate on the self–other paradigm and the organismic paradigm, modern states return to border controls as the simplest and most intuitive form of defense, even when the enemy is not visible.⁹ In fact, we are only fighting against the incarnation of the enemy. Here, we are all bound by what Carl Schmitt calls the political, defined by the distinction between friend and enemy – a definition not easily deniable, and probably strengthened during a pandemic. When the enemy is invisible, it has to be incarnated and identified: firstly the Chinese, the Asians, and then the Europeans, the North Americans; or, inside China, the inhabitants of Wuhan. Xenophobia nourishes nationalism, whether as the self considering xenophobia an inevitable immunological act, or the other mobilizing xenophobia to strengthen its own nationalism as immunology.

The League of Nations was founded in 1919 after the First World War, and was later succeeded by the United Nations, as a strategy to avoid war by gathering all nations into a common organization. Perhaps Carl Schmitt's criticism of this attempt was accurate in claiming that the League of Nations, which had its one-hundred-year anniversary last year, mistakenly identified humanity as the common ground of world politics, when humanity is not a political concept. Instead, humanity is a concept of depoliticization, since identifying an abstract humanity which doesn't exist "can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy."¹⁰ As we know, the League of Nations was a group of representatives from different countries that was unable to prevent one of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century, the Second World War, and was therefore replaced by the United Nations. Isn't the argument applicable to the World Health Organization, a global organization meant to transcend national borders and provide warnings, advice, and governance concerning global health issues? Considering how the WHO had virtually no positive role in preventing the spread of coronavirus – if not a negative role: its general director even refused to call it a pandemic until it was evident to everyone – what

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makes the WHO necessary at all? Naturally, the work of professionals working in and with the organization deserves enormous respect, yet the case of the coronavirus has exposed a crisis in the political function of the larger organization. Worse still, we can only criticize such a gigantic money-burning global governing body for its failure on social media, like shouting into the wind, but no one has the capacity to change anything, as democratic processes are reserved for nations.

§3. The Bad Infinity of Mono-technologism

If we follow Schmitt, the WHO is primarily an instrument of depoliticization, since its function to warn of coronavirus could have been done better by any news agency. Indeed, a number of countries acted too slowly by following the WHO's early judgment of the situation. As Schmitt writes, an international representational governing body, forged in the name of humanity, "does not eliminate the possibility of wars, just as it does not abolish states. It introduces new possibilities for wars, permits wars to take place, sanctions coalition wars, and by legitimizing and sanctioning certain wars it sweeps away many obstacles to war."¹¹ Isn't the manipulation of global governance bodies by world powers and transnational capital since the Second World War only a continuation of this logic? Hasn't this virus that was controllable at the beginning sunken the world into a global state of war? Instead, these organizations contribute to a global sickness where mono-technological economic competition and military expansion are the only aim, detaching human beings from their localities rooted in the earth and replacing them with fictive identities shaped by modern nation-states and infowars.

The concept of the state of exception or state of emergency was originally meant to allow the sovereign to immunize the commonwealth, but since 9/11 it had tended towards a political norm. The normalization of the state of emergency is not only an expression of the absolute power of the sovereign, but also of the modern nation-state struggling and failing to confront the global situation by expanding and establishing its borders through all available technological and economic means. Border control is an effective immunological act only if one understands geopolitics in terms of sovereigns defined by borders. After the Cold War, increasing competition has resulted in a mono-technological culture that no longer balances economic and technological progress, but rather assimilates them while moving towards an apocalyptic endpoint. Competition based on mono-technology is devastating the earth's resources for the sake of competition and

profit, and also prevents any player from taking different paths and directions – the "techno-diversity" that I have written about extensively. Techno-diversity doesn't merely mean that different countries produce the same type of technology (mono-technology) with different branding and slightly different features. Rather, it refers to a multiplicity of *cosmotecnics* that differ from each other in terms of values, epistemologies, and forms of existence. The current form of competition that uses economic and technological means to override politics is often attributed to neoliberalism, while its close relative transhumanism considers politics only a humanist epistemology soon to be overcome through technological acceleration. We arrive at an impasse of modernity: one cannot easily withdraw from such competition for fear of being surpassed by others. It is like the metaphor of modern man that Nietzsche described: a group permanently abandons its village to embark on a sea journey in pursuit of the infinite, but arrive at the middle of the ocean only to realize that the infinite is not a destination.¹² And there is nothing more terrifying than the infinite when there is no longer any way of turning back.

The coronavirus, like all catastrophes, may force us to ask where we are heading. Though we know we are only heading to the void, still, we have been driven by a tragist impulse to "try to live." Amidst intensified competition, the interest of states is no longer with their subjects but rather economic growth – any care for a population is due to their contributions to economic growth. This is self-evident in how China initially tried to silence news about the coronavirus, and then, after Xi Jinping warned that measures against the virus damage the economy, the number of new cases dramatically dropped to zero. It is the same ruthless economic "logic" that made other countries decide to wait and see, because preventive measures such as travel restrictions (which the WHO advised against), airport screenings, and postponing the Olympic Games impact tourism.

The media as well as many philosophers present a somewhat naive argument concerning the Asian "authoritarian approach" and the *allegedly* liberal/libertarian/democratic approach of Western countries. The Chinese (or Asian) authoritarian way – often misunderstood as Confucian, though Confucianism is not at all an authoritarian or coercive philosophy – has been effective in managing the population using already widespread consumer surveillance technologies (facial recognition, mobile data analysis, etc.) to identify the spread of the virus. When the outbreaks started in Europe, there was still debate on whether to use personal data. But if we are really to choose between "Asian

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authoritarian governance” and “Western liberal/libertarian governance,” Asian authoritarian governance appears more acceptable for facing further catastrophes, since the libertarian way of managing such pandemics is essentially eugenicist, allowing self-selection to rapidly eliminate the older population. In any case, all of these cultural essentialist oppositions are misleading, since they ignore the solidarities and spontaneity among communities and people’s diverse moral obligations to the elderly and family; yet this type of ignorance is necessary for vain expressions of one’s own superiority.

But where else can our civilization move? The scale of this question mostly overwhelms our imagination, leaving us to hope, as a last resort, that we can resume a “normal life,” whatever this term means. In the twentieth century, intellectuals looked for other geopolitical options and configurations to surpass the Schmittian concept of the political, as Derrida did in his *Politics of Friendship*, where he responded to Schmitt by deconstructing the concept of friendship. Deconstruction opens an ontological difference between friendship and community to suggest another politics beyond the friend–enemy dichotomy fundamental to twentieth-century political theory, namely hospitality. “Unconditional” and “incalculable” hospitality, which we may call friendship, can be conceived in geopolitics as undermining sovereignty, like when the Japanese deconstructionist philosopher Kōjin Karatani claimed that the perpetual peace dreamed of by Kant would only be possible when sovereignty could be given as a gift – in the sense of a Maussian gift economy, which would follow the global capitalist empire.¹³ However, such a possibility is conditioned by the abolition of sovereignty, in other words, the abolition of nation-states. For this to happen, according to Karatani, we would probably need a Third World War followed by an international governing body with more power than the United Nations. In fact, Angela Merkel’s refugee policy and the “one country, two systems” brilliantly conceived by Deng Xiaoping are moving towards this end without war. The latter has the potential to become an even more sophisticated and interesting model than the federal system. However the former has been a target of fierce attacks and the latter is in the process of being destroyed by narrow-minded nationalists and dogmatic Schmittians. A Third World War will be the quickest option if no country is willing to move forward.

Before that day arrives, and before an even more serious catastrophe brings us closer to extinction (which we can already sense), we may

still need to ask what an “organismic” global immune system could look like beyond simply claiming to coexist with the coronavirus.¹⁴ What kind of co-immunity or co-immunism (the neologism that Sloterdijk proposed) is possible if we want globalization to continue, and to continue in a less contradictory way? Sloterdijk’s strategy of co-immunity is interesting but politically ambivalent – probably also because it is not sufficiently elaborated in his major works – oscillating between a border politics of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party and Roberto Esposito’s contaminated immunity. However, the problem is that if we still follow the logic of nation-states, we will never arrive at a co-immunity. Not only because a state is not a cell nor an organism (no matter how attractive and practical this metaphor is for theorists), but also more fundamentally because the concept itself can only produce an immunity based on friend and enemy, regardless of whether it assumes the form of international organizations or councils. Modern states, while composed of all their subjects like the Leviathan, have no interest beyond economic growth and military expansion, at least not before the arrival of a humanitarian crisis. Haunted by an imminent economic crisis, nation-states become the source (rather than the target) of manipulative fake news.

§4. Abstract and Concrete Solidarity

Let’s return here to the question of borders and question the nature of this war we are fighting now, which UN Secretary-General António Guterres considers the biggest challenge the UN has faced since the Second World War. The war against the virus is first of all an infowar. The enemy is invisible. It can only be located through information about communities and the mobility of individuals. The efficacy of the war depends on the ability to gather and analyze information and to mobilize available resources to achieve the highest efficiency. For countries exercising strict online censorship, it is possible to contain the virus like containing a “sensitive” keyword circulating on social media. The use of the term “information” in political contexts has often been equated with propaganda, though we should avoid simply seeing it as a question of mass media and journalism, or even freedom of speech. Infowar is twenty-first century warfare. It is not a specific type of war, but war in its permanence.

In his lectures collected in “Society Must Be Defended”, Michel Foucault inverted Carl von Clausewitz’s aphorism “war is the continuation of politics by other means” into “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”¹⁵ While the inversion proposes that war no longer assumes

the form Clausewitz had in mind, Foucault hadn't yet developed a discourse on infowar. More than twenty years ago, a book titled *Wars without Limit* (□□□, officially translated as *Unrestricted Warfare or Warfare beyond Bounds*) was published in China by two former senior air force colonels. This book was soon translated into French, and is said to have influenced the Tiqqun collective and later the Invisible Committee. The two former colonels – who know Clausewitz well but haven't read Foucault – arrived at the claim that traditional warfare would slowly fade away, to be replaced by immanent wars in the world, largely introduced and made possible by information technology. This book could be read as an analysis of the US global war strategy, but also more importantly as a penetrating analysis of how infowar redefines politics and geopolitics.

The war against coronavirus is at the same time a war of misinformation and disinformation, which characterizes post-truth politics. The virus may be a contingent event that triggered the present crisis, but the war itself is no longer contingent. Infowar also opens two other (to some extent pharmacological) possibilities: first, warfare that no longer takes the state as its unit of measure, instead constantly deterritorializing the state with invisible weapons and no clear boundaries; and second, civil war, which takes the form of competing infospheres. The war against coronavirus is a war against the carriers of the virus, and a war conducted using fake news, rumors, censorship, fake statistics, misinformation, etc. In parallel to the US using Silicon Valley technology to expand its infosphere and penetrate most of the earth's population, China has also built one of the largest and most sophisticated infospheres in the world, with well-equipped firewalls consisting of both humans and machines, which has allowed it to contain the virus within a population of 1.4 billion. This infosphere is expanding thanks to the infrastructure of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, as well as its already established networks in Africa, causing the US to respond, in the name of security and intellectual property, by blocking Huawei from extending its infosphere. Of course, infowar is not waged only by sovereigns. Within China, different factions compete against each other through official media, traditional media such as newspapers, and independent media outlets. For instance, both the traditional media and independent media fact-checked state figures on the outbreak, forcing the government to redress their own mistakes and distribute more medical equipment to hospitals in Wuhan.

The coronavirus renders explicit the immanence of infowar through the nation-state's necessity to defend its physical borders while

extending technologically and economically beyond them to establish new borders. Infospheres are constructed by humans, and, in spite of having greatly expanded in recent decades, remain undetermined in their becoming. Insofar as the imagination of co-immunity – as a possible communism or mutual aid between nations – can only be an *abstract solidarity*, it is vulnerable to cynicism, similar to the case of "humanity." Recent decades have seen some philosophical discourses succeed in nurturing an abstract solidarity, which can turn into sect-based communities whose immunity is determined through agreement and disagreement. Abstract solidarity is appealing because it is abstract: as opposed to being concrete, the abstract is not grounded and has no locality; it can be transported anywhere and dwell anywhere. But abstract solidarity is a product of globalization, a meta-narrative (or even metaphysics) for something that has long since confronted its own end.

True co-immunity is not abstract solidarity, but rather departs from a concrete solidarity whose co-immunity should ground the next wave of globalization (if there is one). Since the start of this pandemic, there have been countless acts of true solidarity, where it matters greatly who will buy groceries for you if you are not able to go to the supermarket, or who will give you a mask when you need to visit the hospital, or who will offer respirators for saving lives, and so forth. There are also solidarities among medical communities that share information towards the development of vaccines. Gilbert Simondon distinguished between abstract and concrete through technical objects: abstract technical objects are mobile and detachable, like those embraced by the eighteenth-century encyclopedists that (to this day) inspire optimism about the possibility of progress; concrete technical objects are those that are grounded (perhaps literally) in both the human and natural worlds, acting as a mediator between the two. A cybernetic machine is more concrete than a mechanical clock, which is more concrete than a simple tool. Can we thus conceive of a concrete solidarity that circumvents the impasse of an immunology based in nation-states and abstract solidarity? Can we consider the infosphere to be an opportunity pointing towards such immunology?

We may need to enlarge the concept of the infosphere in two ways. First of all, the building of infospheres could be understood as an attempt to construct techno-diversity, to dismantle the mono-technological culture from within and escape its "bad infinity." This diversification of technologies also implies a diversification of ways of life, forms of

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coexistence, economies, and so forth, since technology, insofar as it is cosmotechnics, embeds different relations with nonhumans and the larger cosmos.¹⁶ This techno-diversification does not imply an ethical framework imposed onto technology, for this always arrives too late and is often made to be violated. Without changing our technologies and our attitudes, we will only preserve biodiversity as an exceptional case without ensuring its sustainability. In other words, without techno-diversity, we cannot maintain biodiversity. The coronavirus is not nature's revenge but the result of a mono-technological culture in which technology itself simultaneously loses its own ground and desires to become the ground of everything else. The mono-technologism we live now ignores the necessity of coexistence and continues to see the earth merely as a standing reserve. With the vicious competition it sustains, it will only continue to produce more catastrophes. According to this view, after the exhaustion and devastation of spaceship earth, we may only embark on the same exhaustion and devastation on spaceship Mars.

Secondly, the infosphere can be considered a concrete solidarity extending beyond borders, as an immunology that no longer takes as its point of departure the nation-state, with its international organizations that are effectively puppets of global powers. For such concrete solidarity to emerge, we need a techno-diversity which develops alternative technologies such as new social networks, collaborative tools, and infrastructures of digital institutions that will form the basis for global collaboration. Digital media already has a long social history, though few forms beyond that of Silicon Valley (and WeChat in China) assume a global scale. This is largely due to an inherited philosophical tradition – with its oppositions between nature and technology, and between culture and technology – that fails to see a plurality of technologies as realizable. Technophilia and technophobia become the symptoms of mono-technological culture. We are familiar with the development of hacker culture, free software, and open-source communities over the past few decades, yet the focus has been on developing alternatives to hegemonic technologies instead of building alternative modes of access, collaboration, and more importantly, epistemology.

The coronavirus incident will consequently accelerate processes of digitalization and subsumption by the data economy, since it has been the most effective tool available to counter the spread, as we have already seen in the recent turn in favor of using mobile data for tracing the outbreak in countries that otherwise cherish privacy. We may want to pause and ask whether

this accelerating digitalization process can be taken as an opportunity, a *kairos* that underlines the current global crisis. The calls for a global response have put everyone in the same boat, and the goal of resuming “normal life” is not an adequate response. The coronavirus outbreak marks the first time in more than twenty years that online teaching has come to be offered by all university departments. There have been many reasons for the resistance to digital teaching, but most are minor and sometimes irrational (institutes dedicated to digital cultures may still find physical presence to be important for human resource management). Online teaching will not completely replace physical presence, but it does radically open up access to knowledge and return us to the question of education at a time when many universities are being defunded. Will the suspension of normal life by coronavirus allow us to change these habits? For example, can we take the coming months (and maybe years), when most universities in the world will use online teaching, as a chance to create serious digital institutions at an unprecedented scale? A global immunology demands such radical reconfigurations.

This essay's opening quote is from Nietzsche's incomplete *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, written around 1873. Instead of alluding to his own exclusion from the discipline of philosophy, Nietzsche identified cultural reform with philosophers in ancient Greece who wanted to reconcile science and myth, rationality and passion. We are no longer in the tragic age, but in a time of catastrophes when neither tragist nor Daoist thinking alone can provide an escape. In view of the sickness of global culture, we have an urgent need for reforms driven by new thinking and new frameworks that will allow us to unbind ourselves from what philosophy has imposed and ignored. The coronavirus will destroy many institutions already threatened by digital technologies. It will also necessitate increasing surveillance and other immunological measures against the virus, as well as against terrorism and threats to national security. It is also a moment in which we will need stronger concrete, digital solidarities. A digital solidarity is not a call to use more Facebook, Twitter, or WeChat, but to get out of the vicious competition of mono-technological culture, to produce a techno-diversity through alternative technologies and their corresponding forms of life and ways of dwelling on the planet and in the cosmos. In our post-metaphysical world we may not need any metaphysical pandemics. We may not need a virus-oriented ontology either. What we really need is a concrete solidarity that allows differences and divergences before the falling of

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1
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2
Valéry, "Crisis of the Spirit."

3
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Yuk Hui, "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?," *e-flux journal* no. 96 (January 2019) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245507/what-begins-after-the-end-of-the-enlightenment/>.

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6
"Wenn die Globalisierung zur tödlichen Gefahr wird," *Der Spiegel*, January 31, 2020 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/coronavirus-wenn-die-globalisierung-zur-toedlichen-gefahr-wird-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000169240263>.

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Peter Sloterdijk, "Es gibt keine moralische Pflicht zur Selbstzerstörung," *Cicero Magazin für politische Kultur*, January 28, 2016.

8
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9
See Alfred I. Tauber, *Immunity: The Evolution of an Idea* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

10
Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 54.

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Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 56.

12
See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119.

13
See Kōjin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of*

Exchange, trans. Michael K. Bourdaghs (Duke University Press, 2014).

14
We also have to carefully ask if a biological metaphor is appropriate at all despite its wide acceptance. I contested this in *Recursivity and Contingency* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019) by analyzing the history of organicism, its position in the history of epistemology, and its relation to modern technology, questioning its validity as metaphor of politics, especially concerning environmental politics.

15
Michel Foucault, "Society Must be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (Picador, 2003), 15.

16
I develop this diversification of technologies as "multiple cosmotechnics" in *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics* (Urbanomic, 2016).

09/09

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 Yuk Hui
One Hundred Years of Crisis

Boris Groys

Anti-philosophy and the Politics of Recognition

01/07

It is a well-known fact that contemporary philosophy is pluralistic – it includes many conflicting and even mutually exclusive traditions, trends, and individual positions. In this respect, contemporary philosophy is reminiscent of the plurality found in Sophist schools of the pre-Socratic period. And today's reader is in a situation that is not very different from the situation in which Socrates found himself while listening to Sophistic speeches. From the perspective of the listener, every Sophistic speech seemed fascinating and persuasive. But the total sum of Sophistic discourse presented itself as a theater of the absurd – entertaining and idiotic at the same time. Instead of becoming educated and transcending the position of a listener, Socrates proposed a counterprogram: to radicalize this position, to turn it into a zero position of radical non-knowledge, and to reject even the knowledge that the listener believed themselves to have before listening to the Sophists. Socrates's counterprogram marked the end of the Sophist schools, but it was also the beginning of the one and only truly philosophical question: How to reach the zero point of knowledge, the state of suspension of all opinions? To use the vocabulary of Husserlian phenomenology: How can the philosopher commit an act of *epoche* – a suspension of all judgments and opinions – and thus occupy a meta-position in relation to the culture in which they live?

The difficulty in taking this philosophical position is more practical than theoretical. When confronted with the plurality of persuasive speeches, the subject can easily be resistant to making a choice, and try to analyze the logical structure of these speeches instead of simply accepting or rejecting them. However, the question remains: To what degree can philosophers free themselves of all opinions if they continue to live in the middle of a society whose opinions they reject? It is obvious that such a rejection makes life difficult, if not impossible. Socrates was killed by the society in which he lived. But the consequences of *epoche* should not necessarily be so dramatic as to make the life of a philosopher impossible. Even if philosophers are not directly endangered by the existing ideological powers, they are immersed in the everyday life of their society. Thus, to be able to survive in this society they have to accept almost all of its opinions. For example, philosophers have to eat and drink and so they have to accept societal opinions with respect to what is edible and drinkable and what is not. And in the contemporary world, they also have to cross the street on the green light and not the red light, and use their computers in an appropriate way. If philosophers found

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themselves unable to cope with everyday life and contemporary technology, they would die rather soon. Thus, in order to be consequential, the philosopher has to accept death as a possible and even probable result of the act of *epoche*. Socrates was ready to accept the death of his empirical self because he believed that a part of his soul remained immortal – and so he could sacrifice his earthly life in the name of eternal life in a society of gods.

The eternal part of the soul was obviously not involved in the struggle for economic survival or in political quarrels; that means it was not involved in practical life. Rather, this part of the soul allowed the philosopher to practice a life of pure contemplation. And crucially, this practice of contemplation let the philosopher participate in eternity and immortality here and now. For Plato, there was no difference between divine and human modes of the contemplation of geometrical figures and the logical and mathematical laws which they obey. A divine spectator does not see geometrical forms any differently than a human spectator – if this spectator is a philosopher. Geometry, mathematics, and logic do not change in time. That means that even if a philosopher contemplates them for a short period of time, they already become immortal and eternal during this period. In turn, this period of immortality means that the philosopher can see the world in which they live from the standpoint of eternity – from a divine standpoint – even if they remain mortal. The world is in flux, but squares and triangles do not change. That means that the philosopher is able to interrupt the flow of life by repeating these periods of contemplation. And what is even more important to understand is that this series of repetitions is not limited by the mortal life of the philosopher. Anyone who contemplates a square or a triangle would see the same thing the philosopher sees. Anyone who performs Cartesian radical doubt would find themselves in the same position as Descartes found himself. This series of repetitions, this possibility of returning to a past moment, also offers a standpoint from which a critique of society becomes possible. Society is permanently changing. One cannot move back in time and return to the same state of societal affairs. This means that participation in the life of society precludes the possibility of reaching the state of eternity, and thus prevents true wisdom. Through its permanent change, society demonstrates to us our mortality, finitude, and even irrelevance: because of the state of permanent change, everything that we do becomes cancelled by the next generation. Plato's answer to this problem is well known: one has to create a state that does not change in

time. The philosopher who lives in such an immortal – because unchanging and unchangeable – state can reunite the immortal and mortal parts of their soul. All the philosophical utopias that followed were also constructed as unchanging and unchangeable – as images of eternity, as expansions of the short periods of individual philosophical contemplation to the whole timeline of human history, as attempts to end history and enter an order that would last forever.

During the period of modernity and as an effect of secularization, belief in the immortality of the soul disappeared. It was replaced by a belief in the institution as bearer of the philosophical attitude – belief, in other words, in academia. Accordingly, the immortal component of the philosopher's soul was replaced by his or her academic position. Within this belief system, philosophers die, but their academic positions remain immortal: their books are reprinted, commented upon, and taught. In a certain sense academia was designed as an eternal Platonic philosophical state in the middle of ever-changing political realities. Thus, in modernity, philosophy became institutionalized and academicized: the philosopher became a professor of philosophy. This is not the place to trace the whole history of the institutionalization of philosophy, but in any case, within this trajectory, philosophers ceased to be subjects of contemplation. In our time, their position is no longer a meta-position, but rather an academic position. Accordingly, their main task is to transmit the knowledge of philosophy – defined as the sum of historically known philosophical teachings – to the next generation. Philosophy came to be part of a professional education, embedded in the system of production and administration of so-called “human capital.”

Soon enough, the supposedly independent and eternal character of academia was demonstrated to be an illusion. After all, academia is a bureaucratic institution embedded in the larger bureaucratic and institutional system of the modern state. The philosopher is expected to publish, to participate in university administration, and in many cases to practice fundraising. In other words, for contemporary philosophers, philosophy is a way to make a living – a means by which philosophers support themselves and their families. Accordingly, philosophers are involved in agonistic struggles for positions, prestige, publications, and salary. What the contemporary philosopher does not practice is the ideal of disinterested contemplation. In other words, throughout the period of modernity, philosophy was transformed from a mode of contemplation into a mode of work. The philosopher became a worker like any

other worker – including manual work, because the philosopher is supposed to write, and writing is basically manual work. Speaking in contemporary terms, philosophers have become “content providers” – but they are simultaneously unable to give form to the content they provide. This form is given by the regime under which they operate. That means precisely that philosophy ceases to be an autonomous, sovereign, and self-defined form of life. Instead, the life of a philosopher gets its form from the outside – from bureaucracy, political administration, or from an academic institution.

Hegel saw it very well: the only thing that the philosopher as a professor of philosophy can contemplate is the history of philosophy. Post-historical modernity, by contrast, is defined by a system of laws and rules that one cannot contemplate but can only respect and obey. So philosophy as the history of contemplation comes to its end – and a new era of working (writing and teaching) begins. And this teaching is not so much the work of persuasion as the work of dissuasion – the demonstration that the time of new insights and new evidence is over. According to Hegel, after the French Revolution all the masters had perished, and death remained the only but absolute master. As a worker among other workers, the philosopher is also subjected to the fear of death. And that means that philosophers can no longer overcome this fear through the act of *epoche*. Accordingly, they have to operate inside the system of laws that protect and at the same time limit them. When Husserl later tried to revive the old philosophical ethos and thematized the act of *epoche*, he understood it to take place in the realm of “as if.” Thus, the philosophical *epoche* was transposed into the realm of pure imagination – it was no longer a form of life but merely an artistically imagined form.

However, through this act of closure, the Hegelian system produced a new outside for philosophy. It was no longer a metaphysical, but rather a meta-institutional social space. It is in this space that the philosopher began to look for forms of life that were not regulated by the same system of rules under which the philosopher operated – as a professor, as a public servant, and as a fearful, law-abiding citizen. In other words, in this meta-institutional social space the philosopher found forms of life that suspended the fear of death – not as a result of a conscious decision, but rather in an involuntary manner. We can speak here about persecuted persons and also persons that take mortal risks by going into battle – whether military or revolutionary. Later I will write more extensively about these outsider, meta-forms-of-life. Here it is important to

underline that these forms of life are far from being contemplative. In this sense they are not only non-philosophical, but directly anti-philosophical. We are concerned here with meta-positions that are not consciously and strategically produced but imposed on subjects by their particular life situation. Such an involuntary, imposed meta-position cannot automatically lead to philosophical contemplation. But the position can be recognized – either by the subjects themselves or by a professional philosopher – as a point from which the world can be phenomenologically described. One can say that in this case the state of *epoche* is not produced by a philosopher but recognized as a philosophical readymade. Here an obvious analogy can be seen between anti-philosophy and anti-art in the sense in which we speak of anti-art as the use of readymades in the context of art, instead of the production of artworks. Analogously, one can speak about the use of the non-philosophical, involuntary states of *epoche* as philosophical meta-positions in the context of philosophy.

The first examples of such readymade meta-forms-of-life were proposed almost immediately after the academic success of the Hegelian system. Thus, Marx speaks about the proletariat as having no real, human life; he characterizes the proletariat as living the life of a machine in the dead zone of alienation created by the Industrial Revolution. For Marx, this makes the individual proletarian a universal individual, and the proletariat a universal class. In other words, Marx diagnosed the state of the proletariat as intolerable, but at the same time recognized that this state offers the possibility of a commitment that would lead the philosopher beyond the limitations of the society in which they live. That possibility gives philosophers a chance to reject their inherited class position, reject their role inside the academic system, and recognize the position of the proletariat as a true philosophical position, as a state of *epoche*. By doing so philosophers take a meta-position vis-à-vis society: they are able to describe this society in its totality and change it in a revolutionary manner. And here it is important to see that the philosophical tradition is the only one that allows for the recognition of the position of the proletariat as a meta-position, which has to be taken as a precondition for the revolutionary transformation of society.

Indeed, the word “recognition” is politically ambivalent. A politics of recognition is often understood as a politics of including the excluded. But such a politics of inclusion, which presupposes the improvement of the living conditions of the excluded, is precisely directed towards the elimination of the meta-position

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that is occupied by the excluded. The politics of total inclusion aims to get rid of the space outside of society, to eliminate any external, potentially critical position towards society as a whole. This politics calls for everybody to play by the same rules, to obey the same laws, to pursue the same goals, to be seen and treated like everybody else and to see and treat everybody else in the same way. Obviously, this inclusivist recognition runs contrary to a philosophical, exclusivist recognition that does not aim to integrate the excluded into the societal whole but rather uses the recognized precisely as a point outside the society from which this whole can be contemplated, criticized, and eventually transformed. Politically, here lies the difference between social-democratic and communist politics – between improving the situation of the working class inside the existing bourgeois society and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. It is important to see that the choice between inclusivist and exclusivist forms of recognition does not depend on “what the working class really wants.” The reason for this is very simple: the individual members of the working class are confronted by the same choice. They too can try to become integrated into society and make a career inside it, or they can try to change it in its entirety. If the subject chooses the path of philosophical recognition, they also choose the path of revolutionary activism – or in other words, they choose the risk of death.

Around the same time that Marx looked for those excluded from modern, industrial society – the excluded to whom a philosopher could be committed – Kierkegaard was interested in the act of commitment itself. In the Denmark of his time, there was no proletariat – no working class comparable to the English proletariat that Marx examined. Danish society was a Protestant Christian society. And so Kierkegaard asked himself how his contemporaries might have reacted to encountering Christ, and invited his readers to de-historicize the figure of Christ, to reenact the first meeting with Christ in their imagination. Here again there are two possible reactions to the figure of Christ. One can look at such an encounter from a sociological point of view and see in it a typical phenomenon of its time and milieu – as Kierkegaard says, there were many at that time who proclaimed themselves to be sons of God. In this case one should strive to reintegrate these unfortunate, delusional people into society. Or one could recognize Christ as the only Son of God – and follow him as the apostles did. This second option was of course dangerous, because it meant self-exclusion from the society of that time. And it also implied a risk of death. Thus,

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Kierkegaard develops the theory of a call that beckons the individual who follows it to leave the societal framework, but at the same time connects this individual to the universal. Such an individual can also commit crimes (if seen from the ordinary point of view) and in this way break their connection to social “normality,” but still remain faithful to a universality of a higher order. Kierkegaard speaks about the authentic call being radically new – and thus being opposed to recollection, or anamnesis, as practiced by platonic Socrates. Thus, there is no criterion that would allow the individual to make a choice between inclusive and exclusive recognition – between trivializing the other and ascribing to the other exclusive, superhuman, divine value. At the same time, there is no chance to escape this call through, for example, finding something like a neutral, secure territory beyond the choice that this call imposes. As a result, the individual is placed in a situation of infinite doubt, infinite hesitation that can be resolved only by a “leap of faith” – by a decision to commit to the other without any proof that the other is really Christ and not simply a person like everybody else. The leap of faith places its subject outside of society – and thus opens up the possibility of criticizing and transforming this society. Kierkegaard does not discuss another possible decision: to recognize the other as trivial, as human, all too human. Such a decision also closes the infinite perspective of doubt and hesitation. But it brings its subjects back into the social framework and does not allow them to take a meta-position towards their cultural context.

Here the decision to commit oneself to the excluded substitutes for the traditional philosophical self-exclusion through contemplation. The subject of this decision answers a call in the most radical way. So one could see here an anti-philosophical gesture, insofar as philosophy is understood as a resistance to all forms of persuasion. However, (anti-)philosophers follow only the call that brings them outside their society, their cultural context. In other words, they have a certain criterion for their choice – and are not in the situation of infinite uncertainty, indecision, and hesitation. The calls themselves are always new and historically contingent. But the decision to answer the call is a repetition insofar as it repeats the decisions of previous philosophers who answered the calls that brought them outside the social whole.

Now, it's possible to argue that even if the act of answering a call brings the philosopher outside their own culture, it is a voluntary act – and as such remains under suspicion of being produced by certain cultural determinations. Nietzsche seems to break with all these

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determinations, because his *Übermensch* acts under the pressure of vital forces that compel him to live dangerously, to risk death. The *Übermensch* has too much energy within him to contain it. He has to expend this energy – together with his life. Nietzsche presents himself as the most radical enemy of the traditional ideal of philosophical contemplation, and thus as the most radical anti-philosopher. He praises vitality, passion, strength, will to power – all the qualities that a typical philosopher obviously lacks. For Nietzsche, the traditional philosophical contemplative meta-position is simply a manifestation of the physical and psychological weakness of philosophers that prevents them from making war, struggling for power, and risking their lives.

At the same time, Nietzsche presents himself as an insightful psychologist who is able to differentiate between somebody who is too weak to become active in life and therefore prefers death, and somebody who goes towards death because his vital energy cannot be contained by his mortal body. Here one is confronted with a choice that is not so different from the choice that Kierkegaard described. Due to his preference for explosive vital energies over weakness, Nietzsche is able to take a meta-position not only towards the society of decadence and decay in which he lives, but also towards the whole history of philosophy. Here eternal vital energy replaces eternal cosmic order and the intensity of life and desire replaces mathematical evidence. This shows that the position Nietzsche and his followers such as Bataille or Deleuze take is, in fact, perfectly traditional. Energy, vitality, desire – all of these are impersonal and eternal forces that always already act in and through human beings and are only revealed in the moment of the ecstatic acceptance of the risk of death. This moment is unique, but the forces that are manifested in this moment are not. And philosophical discourse's appropriation of this moment as being analogous to the state of philosophical *epoché* is also merely a repetition.

One can argue that all philosophers following anti-philosophical traditions combined Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Thus Heidegger describes the state of philosophical *epoché* as a state of perfect boredom: one becomes bored by everything to the same degree and is thus able to discover one's own subjectivity as being bored by existence in the world. Characteristically, Heidegger describes the state of being bored at dinner with his academic colleagues as the closest thing to this radical boredom. This state of boredom is not sought by philosophers – it just happens to them. From a Nietzschean standpoint, Heidegger

describes the decadent state of weak life. But it is this boredom that makes the philosopher open to the clearings of Being (*Lichtungen des Seins*) that offer the chance to take a meta-position towards the whole of the world. According to Heidegger, these chances are always temporal and contingent, and because of that, always illusory. However, the philosopher's approach towards these openings should be one of decisiveness (*Entschlossenheit*) – meaning a readiness to enter these openings – if the philosopher wants to become important within the history of philosophy. Of course, Heidegger can be easily criticized for this requirement of decisiveness, which can be interpreted as political engagement. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger defends himself against this suspicion. He distances himself from Sartre and Sartre's call for political engagement by writing that he, Heidegger, is engaged by Being and for Being, and not by and for any political movement. However, the practical effect of this engagement with Being is not so distant from Sartre's. And Sartre's description of radical nausea as the beginning point of the philosophical mode of existence is not very far from Heideggerian radical boredom – which is also a decadent state of weakness that is compensated for by the energetic act of engagement as a reaction to a political call.

The problem of engagement is central for Derrida, who returns to Kierkegaardian indecisiveness in all his books, including *Spectres of Marx*, in which Derrida compares his attitude towards the spectre of communism to Hamlet's indecision towards the spectre of his father: both ask themselves to what degree the spectre is real. For Derrida, this ontological "indecidability" (in Derrida's term) is a precondition for a free political decision for or against communism – as Kierkegaard believed himself to be free to decide whether he was for or against Christ. However, this freedom of decision is illusory because the requirement to decide is imposed on the subject by an external call and by social pressure. In the case of Kierkegaard, it is the call of Christianity; in Derrida's case, it is the call of Marxism. And in the both cases it is obvious that the philosophical tradition requires the philosopher to recognize this call and make a choice one way or the other. To simply reject this call – and even to remain hesitant – prevents the philosopher from taking a meta-position towards the society in which he lives.

Indeed, one understands society much better from the position of exclusion than from living inside it. When one lives in society, one overlooks it, and its real mechanisms remain hidden. For the same reason, the majority is

structurally silent – it has no need to articulate itself. It understands itself without words. But if one is foreign, other, unexpected – then one shows oneself and has to practice self-explanation. And, as I said, when it comes to this necessity, it makes no difference whether I brought myself to this situation of exclusion or somebody else brought it about. The truth is always on the side of the excluded. To recognize the excluded means not to include the excluded, but precisely to recognize this truth – to accept the dignity of the slave by rejecting all property and working hard (Christianity), or to accept the dictatorship of the proletariat (communism). It would not make sense to give a saint or a revolutionary a regular income and a comfortable life of consumption.

But what about the contemporary situation? It was said that in the context of ancient Greek society the philosopher occupied a position of privilege, but one cannot say the same about contemporary society. Indeed, one can argue that Christianity already changed the situation of the masses vis-à-vis philosophy. Indeed, Christianization led to a radical transformation not only of the dominant culture, but also of the ordinary life of the population as a whole. Here ordinary people were affected to the same degree as the traditional elites. The call was directed towards everybody – and everybody had to make a choice: to accept Christianity as one religion among many others, and thus to incorporate it into the existing social whole, or to accept Christianity as a meta-position – and thereby subject this whole to Christian rule. The same question arose in the case of bourgeois democratic revolutions, and later, communist revolutions. Here what once seemed to be philosophical privilege becomes a mass phenomenon. However, as an effect of this development, the opposition between inclusion/exclusion becomes problematic, confusing, and controversial. One can argue that a certain social group is excluded, but then one can further argue that a certain other social group is even more excluded or that there is a group that is excluded inside the excluded group and, thus, doubly excluded, etc. We all know this problematic. What is the best way to deal with this problematic in the sense of a philosophical politics of recognition? This can be answered in the following way: the philosopher should always be on the side of exclusion and the excluded. The philosophical politics of recognition has often been criticized for wanting things to get worse (i.e., more confrontational). But this is not true. Philosophers are not misanthropic – they simply do not want to lose their view of the social whole.

However, one can argue that today, philosophers themselves are excluded as never

before. There are many reasons for this exclusion. But I would suggest that the most important reason is this: even if so-called postmodernity is over, one has a feeling that the most important philosophical positions, such as Christianity, democracy, and communism, have run their historical course and have become too compromised to remain promising and inspirational. In fact, we are still living in a post-Hegelian paradigm and tend to think that the time of big ideas is over and, accordingly, philosophy cannot offer us anything beyond the proof of its own irrelevance. Now, the examples that I have just cited show that even if a certain ideological phenomenon was already included in the historical process, its philosophical recognition requires seeing it as radically new, as if coming from outside of society. It is the same “as if” that Husserl speaks of when characterizing the philosophical *epoche*. Recognition is re-enactment. Thus, Kierkegaard, while living inside a society that considered itself Christian, imagined himself meeting Christ for the first time. To re-cognize certain ideas and attitudes means defamiliarizing them – to look at them as if they just emerged. Here again the analogy with the art of readymades is helpful. When an artist chooses a readymade and recognizes it as a work of art, they look at this readymade as new – even if it already circulated in the context of ordinary life. And when it is put into the museum, this readymade remains forever new – whereas similar objects are slowly destroyed in the context of their ordinary use. Analogously, philosophical positions remain forever new in the archive of philosophy – even if their realization in “real life” seemed to lead to their historical exhaustion. The philosophical archive is external to the world, excluded from ordinary life and the social whole. It is not accidental that everybody who thinks “practically” always despises philosophical ideas and positions, dismissing them as irrelevant in the context of “real life.” However, this externality of philosophy means precisely that certain ideas and positions can be taken from the philosophical archive, re-cognized as new, and implemented independently of their former historical use.

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

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Xiaoyu Weng
**An Informal and
Incomplete
Journey**

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The Futuristic

In January of this year, the world was watching China and perhaps taking some pleasure in its misfortune. For people outside of China, it was probably indeed thrilling to be (virtually) part of such an event. Here is how I both imagined and experienced the thrill unfolding in early 2020: even thinking about it secretly made your palms sweat. It was a real event in real time (more exhilarating than any Hollywood movie, video game, or any past catastrophe) but happening remotely (you knew you were safe or at least not in immediate danger); it was electrifying but not deadly (yet). Admit it! Just like Žižek did in late January:

I must admit that during these last days I caught myself dreaming on visiting Wuhan. Do half-abandoned streets in a megalopolis – the usually bustling urban centers looking like ghost towns, stores with open doors and no customers, just a lone walker or car here and there, individuals with white masks – not provide the image of non-consumerist world at ease with itself?¹

What Žižek describes is pretty much the best possible setting for an apocalyptic sci-fi movie.

It is particularly dangerous when something from the cultural imagination is later read as a reliable prophecy, since it renders the abstraction and alienation of human suffering as a set of perpetuating clichés. For example, the only similarity between the current pandemic and the “predictions” pulled from Dean Koontz’s 1981 novel *The Eyes of Darkness*, noted on social media this February, is a reference to a killer virus called “Wuhan-400” that emerged from the Chinese city of Wuhan. As the reality of the pandemic unfolds globally, “China” continues to operate as a spectacle in both intellectual gossip and pop-cultural speculation. But we need more than just an arbitrary imagination of the suffering. There is rage, confusion, fear, and despair: concrete and real.

In 2018, when I commissioned artists to create new work for the exhibition “One Hand Clapping” at the Guggenheim Museum, I prompted them to speculate on the future of China with keywords such as “technology, system, myth, ghost, disaster, chaos, absurdity, uncanny, medium, togetherness, existence, humanity, and utopia.”² Throughout the exhibition, we tried to expand discussions on the understanding of “China,” from a geospatial location to a framework of temporality. Such temporal fantasies of China have evolved significantly in recent years: from the cliché of a

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civilization with “five thousand years of history,” to a nation on the rise, ultimately “taking over the world.” We explored the West’s prevailing fear of the country’s economic and technological ascent, the myth of “happiness for all” promoted by the Chinese government, and the political imagination of a nation entirely managed by a totalitarian, AI technocracy. As futuristic or apocalyptic as all these visions may be, we did not think of another possible scenario, perhaps the most futuristic and apocalyptic of all: an unknown and highly contagious virus, originating in China from hard-to-identify sources, soon to spread across the globe.

Shanghai

My partner and I arrived in Shanghai on January 21 to celebrate the Spring Festival with my family. It was his first time in China, and we planned to spend a week in the city. The Spring Festival is my favorite of all holidays. Despite the highly globalized urban environment of Shanghai, many fond traditions still trickle down. Leading up to New Year, my family’s house is always bustling and filled with aromas. My father likes to decorate the apartment with seasonal flowers. About two weeks before, he had carefully placed narcissus bulbs with pebbles in

shallow water containers and eagerly anticipated their blossoming around New Year’s Day. Mom had begun preparing ingredients for the New Year’s dishes weeks ago. My favorite of her dishes is her thinly sliced homemade bacon, stir-fried with garlic scapes. Father usually prepares rolls and sheets of red paper so we can write couplets together and paste them onto the apartment doors; the Spring Festival couplets are composed of a pair of poetry lines hung vertically on both sides of the door, with a four-character horizontal scroll attached above the doorframe. The poetry, based in folk culture, often expresses people’s delight in the festival and their wishes for a prosperous life in the coming year.

According to legend, in the world of ghosts and spirits there is a rooster that perches in a big peach tree. He crows at dawn to call back all the traveling ghosts. People in ancient times believed that peach trees could scare and subdue evil things, so they hung peach-tree boards in front of their doors for protection. Over the years, the boards were replaced by paper, and people began to focus more on wishes for the future. Amulets became mascots. The tradition became part of the New Year celebration, and also formed its own vernacular

Is it safe to receive a package from any area where COVID-19 has been reported? (+)

Is there anything I should not do? (-)

The following measures **ARE NOT** effective against COVID-2019 and can be harmful:

- Smoking
- Taking traditional herbal remedies
- Wearing multiple masks
- Taking self-medication such as antibiotics

In any case, if you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early to reduce the risk of developing a more severe infection and be sure to share your recent travel history with your health care provider.

Q&A References (+)

who.int

接收来自据报有2019冠状病毒病疫情的任何地区的包裹安全吗? (+)

我不该做些什么事情? (-)

以下措施不能有效应对2019冠状病毒病，甚至可能有害：

- 吸烟
- 佩戴多个口罩
- 服用抗生素

无论如何，如果有发热、咳嗽和呼吸困难等症状，请及早就医，以降低发生更严重感染的风险，并应告知医务人员您最近的旅行史。

WHO TEAM

关于世卫组织

In the World Health Organization’s answer to the Q&A question “Is there anything I should not do?” regarding COVID-19 one of the lines included was “Taking traditional herbal remedies.” However, the line was not included in the Chinese version of WHO’s webpage.

literary genre. I love all these little heart-warming details about the holiday time. But this year, the red paper couplets were not very effective.

Just like my parents, people in the rest of the country were also busy preparing for the Chinese New Year. There is nothing unique about my family's traditions. These are the simplest but most anticipated activities of the year. They become even more precious for people like me, students and migrant workers who live very far away from their families and traditions. So we use the holiday period to travel across the country and the world to join our families. In 2019, the total number of domestic trips made across China for the Lunar New Year Spring Festival was nearly three billion. Nothing can stop us. Not even the virus.

Meanwhile, on January 18, just a few days before the complete shutdown of Wuhan, the Bai Bu Ting community organized their annual "Ten-Thousand Family Banquet," an event that asks every family in the community to contribute a dish to the Lunar New Year celebration. Held annually for the last twenty years, the banquet is less a collective meal than a local government showcase of the community's "prosperity." Over forty thousand families participated in the carnival, amidst the still "unknown" outbreak. This otherwise merry time set the perfect conditions for the spread of the epidemic.

January 22 was an uneventful day for us. We set out on foot to have lunch with a friend and walked around in the French Concession district. It was business as usual. Although I had many things planned for my partner, jet lag hit hard and we decided to go home that afternoon. There is always tomorrow, we thought. Later that day, we started to hear rumors that major tourist attractions were shutting down, including the Shanghai Museum that we had contemplated visiting that afternoon. My plan for a "perfect first impression of China" tour was falling apart.

Wuhan: Not in a Dream

A few hours later, the central government announced the lockdown of Wuhan. It was just one day before New Year's Eve. During the eight-hour window between the announcement and its implementation, millions of people fled Wuhan in a panic.

No one quite understood what a lockdown entailed until things started to get really bad. The social media posts were very sensational. It was literally impossible to separate real news from fake news. Many so-called rumors later became truths, and many official updates turned out to be lies and cover-ups. I started to give up on discerning what was real and what was fiction.

My heart broke when I read that a senior

citizen in Wuhan had to walk for hours to get to the hospital because public transportation in the city had stopped, only to get turned away because there were not enough beds and testing kits. I imagined the feeling of not be able to breathe despite the imperative to continue walking for miles. Then there was a young woman following a white van and crying in despair. It appeared to be a hearse carrying her mother's dead body directly from the hospital ICU to the crematorium. She did not get to say goodbye. Just a few days earlier they were preparing for the Spring Festival and buying groceries together. I imagined being that woman, because we were of similar age. There was also an ordinary middle-class family of five that was completely shattered in the span of a couple of weeks. The son was studying abroad in a foreign country alone. After his retired grandparents who had been doctors contracted the virus, his father, a local radio show producer, began taking care of them but soon fell ill too. The three of them died consecutively; it's possible that his mom tested positive too, though I don't know for sure. I imagined being that son: How could I face a broken family when I returned home from thousands of miles away? I had no time to reflect on whether my empathy was cheap, but it was certainly real. I could be any of them.

Over time, people compiled and edited an exact timeline of the missteps that the government had taken, leading to the disaster in Wuhan.³ Obviously the local government had known about this mysterious new virus for weeks (if not months) prior to the lockdown, but they were occupied by the annual plenary session of the local People's Congress and the local committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences, commonly referred as Lianghui (Two Meetings). During these five-day meetings, the two organizations make local-level political decisions. During these five days, everything is supposed to be perfect. How could there be a potentially deadly virus spreading around?

The internet exploded when, on February 7, a thirty-three-year-old doctor named Li Wenliang died in a local hospital in Wuhan after contracting the virus. Netizens called him a whistleblower and a hero. Several weeks prior, on the second-to-last-day of 2019, he had shared with a WeChat group of his old classmates his concern about a novel virus that seemed similar to the SARS coronavirus. He simply wanted to remind his fellow physicians to protect themselves and their families. He didn't expect that four days after posting this, he would be called to the police station to have a "conversation" and sign a "discipline paper."

The "official exhortation" in the "discipline



A Chinese social media post was written with emojis in an attempt to counter Government censorship.

paper” read: “The public security department hopes that you actively cooperate with our work, follow the advice of the police, and stop the illegal behavior. Can you do it?”

Li signed “Can” and pressed his fingerprint. The document continued: “We hope you reflect carefully and calmly. We solemnly warn you: if you are stubborn, do not repent, and continue to carry out illegal activities, you will be punished by the law! Do you understand?”

Li Wenliang, thus admonished, signed “Understand” and pressed his fingerprint again.⁴

The image of Li’s signed “Can” and “Understand,” along with his fingerprints in red ink, was made public and soon went viral. In addition to Li, seven other physicians were investigated by the Wuhan police for “rumor making.” A report about the local police heroically terminating the treacherous rumor was reported on CCTV’s prime news program and was relayed by numerous local channels. But people started constructing a counter-narrative on WeChat and Weibo by posting “Can’t” and “Don’t Understand” and demanding transparency and real information. For a brief moment in early February (until censorship kicked in), the top two trending hashtags were “#TheGovernmentOwesDr.LiWenliangAnApology” and “#WeWantFreedomOfSpeech.” There were even posts articulating a list of Five Key Demands, mimicking the format used by the Hong Kong protesters.

I have never seen such open and clear demands circulating on the internet in China in my lifetime. So I joined in. I had no time to reflect on whether my rage was insignificant, but like my empathy a week earlier, it was certainly real. I could not stop associating the image of Li Wenliang’s red fingerprints with a short story by Lu Xun called “Medicine.” Written in 1919, it tells the story of a sick boy who is fed a secret medicine to treat his tuberculosis: a *mantou* (steamed bun) soaked in human blood – more specifically, the blood of a rebel recently beheaded by authorities. Touted as a “guaranteed cure,” the *mantou* medicine fails to save the boy. He dies from his illness.⁵ The sight of Li Wenliang’s red fingerprints kept evoking in my mind the image of this blood-soaked *mantou*.

Chinese Medicine: Myth or Method

I return to Lu Xun over and over again. His stories never lose their relevance. “Medicine” has a clear resonance with the present, though I haven’t wrapped my head around whose blood might be saturating the *mantou* today. For Lu Xun, the “steamed bun dipped in blood” is a reference to traditional folk medicine, but also a metaphor for superstition. The current leadership in China has recently begun promoting traditional Chinese

medicine, not only as a complement to modern medicine but more importantly as an effective medical tradition, unique to China, that combines technological and cultural heritage and claims to achieve otherwise impossible results. In the battle against coronavirus, Chinese medicine has been recruited to the cause. For example, the China Health Commission’s “Diagnosis and Treatment Plan for COVID-19 Infection” lists a herbal formula named Lianhua Qingwen, which has ingredients such as honeysuckle, mint, and licorice, and which has become so popular that it’s constantly out of stock.⁶ However, no empirical scientific research has verified its antiviral properties, so its effectiveness remains “theoretical.”⁷

While Lu Xun was an avid critic of “old thinking” and a leader in the movement to modernize Chinese literature, he nonetheless had a profound love and appreciation for folk culture and traditions. He was often miscast as vehemently opposed to anything traditional. In fact, what he detested were simplistic generalizations about “Chinese culture.” Scholar Wang Hui pointedly argues that the essence of Lu Xun’s

criticism lies in revealing the historical relations between the common beliefs to which people have grown accustomed and morality – this is an historical relation that has never been separated from the social mode of the dominating and the dominated, of the ruler and the ruled. For Lu Xun, no matter how ingenious culture or tradition is, there has not been in history a culture or tradition that could break away from the relations of domination mentioned above.⁸

Following this line of thinking, it’s easy to see that the narrative of Chinese medicine is a strategy used to strengthen and legitimize the ruling powers within China – much more so than a strategy to export soft power. Based on thousands of years of practice, the story of Chinese medicine is more rich and complex than the version that the Chinese government is deploying. But it has a much larger mass base than more esoteric forms of ancient knowledge, making it ripe for nationalist exploitation. The revival in China of what some define as “neo-Confucianism” is expected to “contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”⁹ For the Chinese Communist Party, it doesn’t matter that the image and understanding of Chinese medicine remains a mythical blur, as long as the contrast between the abstract characteristics of “Chinese culture” and “Western culture” persists. This contrast renders Chinese heritage

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Film still of Wong Kar-Wai's movie *Happy Together* (1997) starring Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung Chiu-wai.

unique, invaluable, and profound, boosting national confidence. To keep Chinese medicine indecipherable to other systems generates a deliberate “space of imagination,” which in turn reinforces its nationalist value.

As the outbreak grew worse, the World Health Organization addressed the efficacy of herbal remedies in the Q&A section of its English-language website. In response to the question “Is there anything I should not do?” it listed “taking traditional herbal remedies,” alongside “smoking” and “wearing multiple masks.” But in the Chinese version of this page, the line about “herbal remedies” was omitted. (Later, the line also mysteriously disappeared from the English version.)¹⁰

Spectacles and Un-forgiveness

Lu Xun certainly warned us. In his eyes, “the heroic sacrifice of the few oftentimes only provides a ‘spectacle’ for the amusement of the pitiless masses.”¹¹ In the case of this crisis, medical workers, senior citizens, the less privileged, and even the citizens of Wuhan are the sacrificed few. Is the rage expressed on social media merely a time-sensitive response to this spectacle? Is the collective rant and rave itself a spectacle?

The media, along with the rest of us, have succeeded in generating many spectacles out of this crisis: the rapid construction of two emergency field hospitals in a week’s time; the overnight transformation of unused exhibitions centers and stadiums into hospitals; the transplanting of *guangchang wu* (plaza dancing) – an exercise routine made popular by middle-aged and retired women and collectivity performed to music in urban squares, plazas, and parks – to these field hospitals, led by nurses covered in protective gear; the arrival of thousands of volunteer doctors and nurses from numerous local hospitals across the country to the city of Wuhan and Hubei Province; and the motivational reportage about women doctors and nurses continuing to work on the frontline despite, for example, suffering an accidental abortion, or having to give up on breastfeeding their newborns. These spectacles not only feed the desire to know the “truth,” but also fuel the propaganda machine. By replacing truth with spectacle, the machine operates effectively.

Perhaps here lies the real intention of turning the sacrificed few into heroes: the diversion of attention means that the process of forgetting kicks in faster. In his late years, Lu Xun was extremely harsh and paranoid. He longed for revenge. He believed that maxims like “do not take revenge” or “forgive past traumas” were but the strategies of assassins and their stooges. The government knows this well. Before we have

time to mourn each new loss from the virus, there is already another wave of propaganda that is produced and circulated: the so-called “gratitude” genre to help us “forgive past traumas” and be thankful. This genre, exemplified by a music video featuring a young boy signing, perpetuates various narratives that thank the almighty Communist Party for stopping the spread of this evil virus. Of course, there are intellectuals today warning that “we must not forget” what happened to these whistleblower doctors. But how? There have not been any effective channels for expressing demands, not to mention means of self-organized protests, in Mainland China for several decades. Without such infrastructure for solidarity, we all slip into silent complicity.

However, I’m still uncertain whether the act of forgetting is indeed an agenda pushed by the system, or a built-in survival mechanism of humankind. If we make history immune to amnesia and resurrect atrocities of the past for the present, how can we endure the pain and trauma over and over again and continue to exist?

#404

The screenshots I saved on my phone after the virus first broke out have become especially precious to me. As the hashtags, demands, and articles that expressed opinions on transparency, freedom, and the government were swiftly deleted, the only way to repost, to continue sharing, or even just to save things for my own reading, was to encrypt the posts in some way. Simply reposting texts as screenshots soon lost its efficacy. When #404 became the norm, it gave birth to all sorts of creative anti-search encryption, such as vertical typesetting, reversed typesetting, and text written in oracles, emojis, Morse code, braille, and even Elvish and Klingon. As people collect and put these posts together, one question remains: Why are all the encrypted versions of these posts still deleted? Who in the community casually reports this “unlawful content”? Are the “internet safety officers” who review this content giggling while they press the “delete” button?

I laughed hard at a video collage that mashed together footage of various newscasters announcing that the whistleblower doctors in Wuhan were being punished in accordance with the law. The newscasters, all sitting in front of an almost identical blue background, read from the exact same script and have the same facial expressions. The video ends with a red palm mischievously slapping each of the newscaster’s faces, accompanied by a goofy sound effect. This wickedly funny video reminds me of a much older and now-classic work by artist Zhang Peili. The

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single-channel video *Water (Standard Version from the Cihai Dictionary)* features a famous newscaster, who was then the face of state-run television in China, reading a lengthy definition of “water” from a Chinese dictionary in a neutral and monotonous tone. I am not entirely sure what triggered this association. Is it the blue background that appears in both videos? Or is it that both videos ridicule institutionalized norms by replicating them?

The Anti-spectacle

Underneath the tentacles of the “almighty” government there are many “useless” individual stories. Everyday humor – mundane, dark, or absurd – functions not only as a survival mechanism but also an antibody against mainstream propaganda.

In Chinese cities, communities and housing complexes are managed in a unique way. There is a concept called *xiaoqu* – translated literally as “small neighborhood” – which is similar to a gated community. Depending on the size of a *xiaoqu*, there can be over a dozen or even a hundred residential units. Each *xiaoqu* is managed by a neighborhood committee. Its responsibilities are often administrative and practical, such as sanitation and building repairs, but it also has more cultural duties, such as mediating disputes between family members and neighbors. During the quarantine and self-isolation period, these neighborhood committees were assigned the new responsibilities of collecting patient data, coordinating hospitalizations, implementing isolation and quarantine controls, and delivering food and supplies. In order to enter and exit the *xiaoqu*, each resident would have to report to the committees at the gate, get their temperature taken, and state the reason for their necessary travel.

Such top-down and collective structures have proven to be highly effective in slowing down the spread of the virus, but they require a “sacrifice” of individual privacy and will. At the same time, they have led to the formation of new relationships.

Many announcements within the *xiaoqu* are made through loudspeakers, a management tool widely used in the early days of communism in China. There is a video that shows one such community in northeast China. The staff member on duty forgot to turn off the microphone after broadcasting the nightly notice, and fell asleep. As a result, the residents of the entire community were immersed in the sound of his snoring. The profound amusement in this slightly surreal scenario does not come from an intimate moment made public, but rather a strange state of collision of between being human and being a

cog in a bureaucratic machine. It is an accidental counter-spectacle – something deeply humanist.

This reminds me of the 2009 Lyon Biennale, curated by Hou Hanru. In the introductory text, he argues that in the age of globalization, we now live in a society where any “outside” of the spectacle has become impossible to reach. This is the very condition of contemporary life. It is a social order “guaranteed” by the established system of power. Hanru urges us to (re-)engage the idea of the everyday, the quotidian, proposing that this is the realm where new possibilities and alternatives can emerge. He discusses how art can actively appropriate the everyday to make it relevant again: “The Spectacle of the Everyday is fundamentally changing both the spectacle and the everyday!”¹²

New York

A couple nights before flying from Shanghai back to New York, we ventured to Pudong’s Central Business District. A spring mist had wrapped itself around the skyscrapers, making them look smaller. Only the red lights on their rooftops blinked through, occasionally indicating their real heights. We stepped into an almost empty shopping mall, and the scene was eerie. The evening drizzle had wet the marble-covered floor by the entrance, making it slippery to walk. The humid air was sticky, and the idea of the virus quietly and invisibly landing on my skin gave me goosebumps. There were two men eating a meal in the corner of the mall’s restaurant, which was otherwise empty. I peeked in while continuing to visualize the virus particles. Two sluggish security guards wandered around with their guard dogs, who looked much more exhausted than their human companions. Everything was slippery, wet, mildewy, and seemingly sprinkled with a dash of boredom.

Now, back in New York, the scene repeats itself. Familiar places here, such as the Fulton Center and Grand Central Station, are hauntingly still and vacant. An Evangelical Christian organization is building a field hospital in the middle of Central Park. New York City is now Wuhan 2.0. It is evident that the unprecedented spread of the virus is a result of globalization. It has materialized and concretized the otherwise imperceptible traces of human mobilization. I manifest this myself, as I may unwittingly be part of the second wave of the virus’s spread. A friend joked that if I had delayed my trip – staying in New York and then traveling to Shanghai – I could have dodged the peak of the outbreak in both places. I guess that is indeed the current strategy of many people with the privilege of international mobility.

As more cases are diagnosed and more

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people die, the world has finally realized that this is not a “China-specific” event. As the danger looms closer, we want, out of fear and ignorance, to attribute an agency – or a nationality – to the virus. But bacteria and viruses have no agency. They spread blindly and unpredictably where they can, their pathways facilitated by our ever more globalized world.

The Bat

In 2013, I was invited to contribute an essay to the expanded reader for the touring exhibition “A Journal of the Plague Year,” which originated at Para Site in Hong Kong.¹³ The exhibition and the eponymous book took a deep dive into the history of pandemic-induced racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. The year 2013 marked the tenth anniversary of the SARS outbreak, and of the death of Leslie Cheung, a pan-Asian pop icon and founding father of Canton Pop, whose performance in Wong Kar Wai’s *Happy Together* (1997) was famously mesmerizing.

I do not have much of a memory of SARS. That year, in 2003, I was in Shanghai, preparing for the National College Entrance Exam, commonly known as the *gaokao*, a grueling three-day standardized test that strikes fear into the heart of every eighteen-year-old in China. I was completely exhausted by my studies, but I do remember when Leslie Cheung decided to end his own life by jumping off the twenty-fourth floor of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Hong Kong at the height of SARS outbreak. Leslie had suffered from severe depression, apparently caused by prejudice against his sexuality.

The opportunity to write the “Plague Year” essay allowed me to return to 2003 and explore xenophobia and racism then and since. By 2013, I had lived in California for nearly eight years. Racism had turned from something relatively foreign to me into a reality. My essay took as its starting point the cover illustration of the November 1885 issue of the San Francisco-based satirical magazine *The Wasp*. The illustration features a winged devil sitting on top of a pillar with its legs crossed. Two tongues stick out of his grinning mouth. His ten claws reach out to offer various vices to an innocent Caucasian figure below. The title of the illustration expresses its message: *The Chinese: Many Handed But Soulless*.

I compared this image of this multi-handed monster to a cephalopod, which is often used to represent oppressive and unconquerable evil power. But now, as I reexamine the illustration, the figure looks more to me like a hybrid of a bat, an octopus, and a human. According to recent research on the origins of Covid-19, “In one possible scenario, the coronavirus evolved to its

current pathogenic state through natural selection in a non-human host and then jumped to humans.” Researchers have proposed that “bats are the most likely reservoir” of the virus, and another unidentified and “intermediate host was likely involved between bats and humans.”¹⁴ Along with this speculation, a video featuring two Asian girls eating a bat dish went viral on the internet when the epidemic first broke out in China.

When the bubonic plague flared up in San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1900, the disease was immediately associated with the “immoral nature” of the Chinese community. Already regarded as disreputable, Chinatown became a metonym for plague, evil, and death. Playing on the public’s anxiety over contagion, the negative portrayal of Chinese people found widespread acceptance, which not only dehumanized an entire population but also legitimized the violent repression and removal of Chinese people by local authorities. City officials needed a scapegoat; they also wanted to redevelop Chinatown.¹⁵ Since that time, our racial sentiments have not evolved much. History is doomed to repeat itself. As US politicians cross off “Covid-19” in their briefing notes and replace it with “Chinese virus,” we can plainly see that the hybrid creature has returned. It crawls and creeps, spreading its deadly poison.

It is not just politicians. Among the countless all-too-rushed critical analyses by impatient intellectuals, Alain Badiou wrote the following:

The initial fulcrum of the current epidemic is very probably to be found in the markets of Wuhan province. Chinese markets are known for their dangerous dirtiness, and for their irrepressible taste for the open-air sale of all kinds of living animals, stacked on top of one another. Whence the fact that at a certain moment the virus found itself present, in an animal form itself inherited from bats, in a very dense popular milieu, and in conditions of rudimentary hygiene.¹⁶

A seemingly factual description and quasi-scientific sketch, drawn in haste from some news images of Wuhan, legitimizes the attribution of culpability to the unhygienic Chinese way of life. Besides the fact that Badiou mistakenly calls Wuhan a province, he makes a specious generalization about Chinese markets – namely, that they’re all virus-generating, unsanitary shit holes. His ignorance is similar to that of the *Wall Street Journal* writer and editor who crafted the headline “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia” without basic research into the “sick man of Asia” reference and its history, or

into Chinese history at large.¹⁷ The phrase was a malicious, Opium War–era invention used by the British to humiliate and demoralize the Chinese (the word “sick” was used to describe those addicted to British opium). After facing criticism, the *WSJ* offered a flimsy defense: they thought the phrase echoed a description “familiar to American readers that cast the late Ottoman Empire as the ‘sick old man of Europe.’”¹⁸ Even if the virus initially arose in a Chinese market, its real origin cannot be understood without considering the dramatic ecological destruction that accompanies the rapid expansion of the cities in which such markets are found. This kind of intellectual laziness poses the greatest danger of all.

Wuhan is the name of the capital city of Hubei province. The two girls in that widely circulated video were in the Pacific nation of Palau, not Wuhan, and the dish is a local delicacy that is regularly served.

There is another reference to a bat that constantly haunts me. It is found in the old Aesop fable “The Birds, the Beasts, and the Bat.” The story goes like this:

The Birds and the Beasts declared war against each other. No compromise was possible, and so they went at it tooth and claw. It is said that the quarrel grew out of the persecution the race of Geese suffered at the teeth of the Fox family. The Beasts, too, had cause for fight. The Eagle was constantly pouncing on the Hare, and the Owl dined daily on Mice. It was a terrible battle. Many a Hare and many a Mouse died. Chickens and Geese fell by the score – and the victor always stopped for a feast. Now the Bat family had not openly joined either side. They were a very politic race. So when they saw the Birds getting the better of it, they were Birds for all there was in it. But when the tide of the battle turned, they immediately sided with the Beasts. When the battle was over, the conduct of the Bats was discussed at the peace conferences. Such deceit was unpardonable, and Birds and Beasts made common cause to drive out the Bats. And since then the Bat family hides in dark towers and deserted ruins, flying out only in the night.¹⁹

I often identify with the Bats – not because I am a political or deceitful person, but because I am constantly negotiating among different values, as a learned survival strategy. Everything that I’m experiencing now in New York feels like a flashback, but not from a remote time – from two months ago. It’s a strange feeling to witness the same mistakes repeated in such a narrow

timeframe: you see that many lives could have been saved if preventative measures were taken earlier; your understanding of individualism, collectivism, and universality becomes destabilized; your feelings about personal freedom and authoritarian control become ever more confusing.

A few Chinese friends and I initiated a support group so we could share information and vent our frustration. The anxiety of being Bats is not felt alone. We have a shared experience of perpetually living between different ways of life, different ideologies, different worlds. A question emerges: How to harvest the energy from such permanent existential untranslatability and transform it into something productive?

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Maria Lind

What Is Wrong with My Nose: From Gogol and Freud to Goldin+Senneby (via Haraway)

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What Is Wrong with My Nose: From Gogol and Freud to Goldin+Senneby (via Haraway)

I once had a boyfriend with a very sensitive nose. It wasn't that his sense of smell was particularly extraordinary; on the contrary, it was rather bad. It was that his nose could hardly be touched without him emitting a suffering *ouch!* and immediately protecting his organ from further violation. Needless to say, I often happened to be the involuntary cause of this pain, and of his exclamation "no, no, not my nose!"

I often remembered this ex-boyfriend's nose when I started to have issues with my own nose in the summer of 2016, although my symptoms were different. I also thought often of Nikolai Gogol's famous short story *The Nose*, as well as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical conclusions about the naso-genital relationship, the fetishistic allure of the nose's shine and phallic character. The latter was developed by Freud's close friend Wilhelm Fliess who – unfortunately, and almost fatally – convinced Freud of its relevance. All if this came back to me last year, when I curated "Insurgency of Life," a retrospective exhibition of Goldin+Senneby's work.

1. My Fellow Traveler

As for my nose, it has demanded special attention since I was a child. Being prone to allergies, I blow my nose often, and use nose spray regularly. In 2016, the issues began in May with a simple cold caught on a trip to Singapore, which settled firmly in my snout. Week after week, this fairly prominent organ of mine was blocked, while at the same time continuously running, regardless of how much I cleared it. Now, you might find this too private – other people's snot can be even more difficult to deal with than one's own – but it is necessary to outline how relatively common symptoms turned into something quite unexpected.

There was no fever – the rest of my fifty-year-old body felt perfectly fine. There was just this blocked, and simultaneously running, nose of mine. After a month, I went to see a doctor in Stockholm who prescribed a course of antibiotics. But the snot kept running and the nose remained blocked. Two weeks later I went back to the clinic and, as it goes with the medical system in Sweden, I saw another doctor, only to be prescribed another course of the same antibiotics. It was high summer in Sweden and I began to feel out of place with my out-of-the-ordinary nose. I had to organize a special high-volume delivery of tissues to the island in the Stockholm archipelago where I spent vacation. Still no improvement. It was exhausting, and terribly annoying.

There was no other choice than to visit the doctor again. This third doctor determined that the problem was the kind of antibiotics I had



Goldin+Senneby, *Insurgency of Life* at e-flux, New York, 2019. Installation view. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.



Goldin+Senneby, *Insurgency of Life* at e-flux, New York, 2019. Installation view. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.

been taking, and quickly prescribed another brand which would surely stave off the problem. This was at the end of July, the day before I would leave for South Korea to install and inaugurate the 11th Gwangju Biennale. Temperatures past 40 degrees Celsius and high humidity levels welcomed me there. All the while my nose was running, and still blocked. Then grinding headaches appeared with increasing intensity, which sometimes prevented me from speaking. Finally, my biennial colleagues convinced me to go to the emergency room at the local hospital, where I signed in at 5 p.m. on a Friday afternoon.

By 9 p.m. the same evening I was lying on a surgery table, surrounded by a swarm of people dressed in white. A scan had revealed that the entire sinus – from the hollow parts around the nose up to the forehead, and further still to the paranasal cavities in the cranial bones – was full. My brain and eyes were threatened. The sinus turned out to be completely stuffed with nasal secretion so thick that it could only be removed mechanically. I was put to sleep, and upon awakening, my nose was sore. Very sore. The anesthetics made me nauseous. Smiling, a friendly doctor reported that the surgery went well: my sinus had been successfully emptied. They had also identified the cause of my peculiar nasal adventure: a creature. To be precise, a fungus. This particular fungus is common in hot and humid areas across the planet, thriving inside human noses, where it is wonderfully warm, damp, and dark.

In other words, for almost three months I had lived with another living entity. But this fellow traveler was different from the kilograms of bacteria we carry around. This fungus had decided that my body, my sinus, was perfect for its development. Expressing my surprise to the doctor, he in turn shocked me when he confessed that while I was under anesthesia, he had taken the liberty of performing a nose job on me. Which he then followed by asking if I enjoyed downhill skiing in that faraway northern homeland of mine. Though downhill skiing always frightened me and I had gone to some lengths to avoid it at school, the news of the nose job frightened me even more. Considering how popular it is for women in South Korea to reshape their noses, which mostly means diminishing them, and not having looked at a mirror after the surgery, I feared the worst. In Korean terms my snout is big, and a nose job would have surely provided me with a smaller one. As I scrambled for my purse containing my pocket mirror, the doctor continued: we discovered that your right nostril was narrow and crooked, so we have widened it and straightened it out.

While this might have amused Freud, who also had issues with his nose, it would probably

have been less entertaining to his close friend, the nose, ear, and throat doctor Wilhelm Fliess. Interested in the relationship between the nose and the genitals, Fliess introduced the concept of “nasality” instead of “anality.” According to Fliess, the nose is simply a sign of the penis, with the swelling of nasal mucosa leading to a “Fliess syndrome.” Freud’s nose problems were subsequently treated by Fliess, an otorhinolaryngologist who experimented with cocaine as an anesthetic. Freud fared better than another of Fliess’s patients, Emma Eckstein, who was treated by Freud for hysteria and became a psychoanalyst herself. Fliess almost killed her by forgetting gauze inside her nose while operating on it. This unfortunate event led to one of Freud’s most well-known dreams concerning Irma’s injection, which became key to *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The dream is said to deal with Freud’s anxiety around allowing Eckstein’s mistreatment, through the dream function of displacing the latent content – which is connected to wish fulfillment – with manifest content, i.e., the scenario of the dream. It is noteworthy that the nose has played such a seminal role in the development of the principle of displacement – a major trope for today’s contemporary art.

Whereas Freud’s and Eckstein’s noses were given medical treatment, in Nikolai Gogol’s satirical magical realist story in St. Petersburg, the nose disappears. One morning a barber finds a nose in his breakfast bread, while at the same time a civil servant looking for a pimple discovers that his entire olfactory organ has gone missing. Wild speculation about the disappearance and fate of the nose arise, until one day it comes parading down Nevsky Prospect wearing a full uniform and a plumed hat. The sword-carrying nose continues traveling around the city claiming to be a state councilor until the police return it to its rightful owner, who returns it to its rightful place. Expressing his befuddlement, Gogol’s civil servant exclaims that authors ought to write about such a strange thing happening.

2. Enemy Invaders

And here I am, attempting to put my own nasal adventure into words. It feels a bit odd as I am not used to writing about myself, and even less about my body. And yet, this adventure was a transformative experience: a close, even intimate, encounter with another creature, a new arrival reminding me of the relentless contingency of the life I live alongside so many others. In Donna Haraway’s terms, I ended up *being-in-encounter* with another “critter.” I had an inner sputnik, a traveling companion – a stowaway to be precise. For a moment, our shared material habitat made us companion

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Goldin+Senneby, *Insurgency of Life* at e-flux, New York, 2019. Installation view. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.

species, where the one invisible to the naked eye almost knocked out the towering host. Not only did the experience lead to a very situated knowledge, it was indeed a multispecies encounter that surpassed sympoiesis to become making kin. I was forced to coexist with this other creature, and I had to deal with the situation and accept our shared condition. Eventually the kinship did not work out. I had the upper hand and forced the fungus out of my body, with the help of Western medicine practiced by a South Korean doctor.

Insisting on multi-relationality across conventional borders, Haraway's writing, and especially her neologisms, practice the "worlding" that she describes. She hints at this implying the creation of something that goes beyond the status quo: internally and externally, this planet can no longer afford to remain the same. Like artists, she gives form to what is not yet there for us to grasp. She is trying to take response-ability for the condition we are in by using a new vocabulary to emphasize critical points. A new condition inevitably demands other ways of describing and dealing with it. Just as a young revolutionary society like the nascent Soviet state and its hitherto unheard of form of society needed a new human, it also needed new forms of relationships between people. In this way, Haraway's "Terrapolis" – a speculative fabulation of a space for multispecies becoming-with – can be compared to the strongest contemporary art projects, or, in her words, "art science worldings as sympoietic practices for living on a damaged planet."¹

The allergic fungal sinusitis I was diagnosed with probably had to do with my allergic sensitivity to pollen and cats, as well as all fresh fruit and most vegetables. As a psychological and social tendency, oversensitivity is familiar in popular culture as well as in the fine arts. We know a lot about high-strung individuals and their inner life, whether male geniuses, hysterical women, or something in between. In comparison, physical oversensitivity is not very well understood in medicine, culture, or society. And yet I share the condition with many other people. The World Allergy Organization states that 10 to 40 percent of the world's population suffers from allergies. They predict that by 2025, half of the population of Europe will suffer from one allergy or another.²

It is well-known that allergies are the immune system's response to substances it cannot tolerate, treating otherwise harmless material in its environment as threats to be fought. The normal condition for the body should be peace – there is no reason per se to fight pollen, cats, fresh fruit, or even vegetables – yet this condition causes the body to forcefully

defend itself, even declare war against enemy invaders. It is a kind of corporeal alarm giving way to a state of exception for the organism. This in turn can easily become a semi-permanent or even permanent state of exception, as with long-term states of emergency in countries like Syria, where it lasted for nearly fifty years (1963 to 2011), or for two years (2015 to 2017) more recently in France.

In reality, this immunological condition is a distant relative to autoimmune diseases such as AIDS and multiple sclerosis. These diseases are markers of our time; where the former carries the burden of a stigmatized new disease signifying an important moment of both solidarity and hostility in Western societies, the latter primarily afflicts the wealthy northern hemisphere. Furthermore, multiple sclerosis is three times more likely to be found in women than in men, which is fitting for a disease first described in 1884 by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who famously researched female hysteria, and who also had considerable influence on Freud's work.

3. Insurgency of Life

Curating Goldin+Senneby's exhibition "Insurgency of Life" at e-flux in New York last year brought me back to issues of autoimmunity. The exhibition centers on a fungus called *Isaria sinclairii*, and was introduced by the artists with the following passage:

You remember it as a stressful period. You had started a new job and your relationship was out of balance. Your partner had left for France and communication was difficult. You travelled to Paris so you could talk. Your left foot went stiff. Part of your abdomen went stiff, just around the solar plexus. Actually maybe more numb than stiff. The kind of numb, tingling sensation that you can have when your arm falls asleep. The pins and needles sensation. For a moment you can't locate your arm. You can't move it. Only this time the moment of numbness, of paresthesia, was extended. It went on too long. Your foot was numb. Your solar plexus was numb. And it wouldn't go away. You assumed it was psychological. Related to stress. The emotional stress of your crumbling relationship.

In an elongated clinical space with pale violet walls and bleachers at either end, the *Isaria sinclairii* fungus was cultivated with vast amounts of nutrient agar in a stainless-steel

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Goldin+Senneby with Johan Hjerpe, *Illustration in Seven Layers*, 2019. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.

pool on legs. Contrary to that of my ex-boyfriend, when unblocked my nose is one of my most developed senses. Already before entering the exhibition during install I was worried about the potential smell of this impressive fungal pool, and the prospect of another habitat being made in my nose. As I entered, the smell was distinct but faint, vaguely similar to a forest. Used as a youth elixir in traditional Chinese medicine, this fungus is hyper-selective, or we might say oversensitive, in its choice of habitat. In the wild, it seeks out and exclusively grows on cicada nymphs when they are hatching below ground. After colonizing the cicada, the fungus eventually grows and sprouts from its head. This violent drama, whose visual appearance is not unlike images of the so-called mushroom clouds of atomic bombs, was captured by Goldin+Senneby on a large X-ray photograph hung on the wall facing every visitor entering the exhibition space. Again, I was reminded of “my” fungus, which similarly threatened my eyes and my brain.

The *Isaria sinclairii* fungus cultivated in the exhibition is used in a medication called Gilenya, which 50 percent of Goldin+Senneby, Jakob Senneby, used to take for multiple sclerosis. Diagnosed with the nervous system disease in 1999, Senneby participated in a clinical trial for this new medicine developed by the pharmaceutical multinational Novartis as the first ever pill-based MS treatment. As all treatments of autoimmune conditions suppress the immune system, the long-term consequences of such treatments are still largely unknown. In the US, the FDA recently warned that stopping Gilenya could cause severe flush-out effects that can worsen the condition severely and irreversibly. It is well-known that pharmaceutical companies, like insurance companies, are some of the most aggressive data harvesters of our time. Learning from patients posting tutorials on YouTube, the artists had ten Lego robots made, each carrying a smartphone rocking back and forth to making the pedometers tick. The rocking sound became a soundtrack that might have sounded like grown-up cicadas at dusk who, unlike their young counterparts, escaped the cruel fungus.

These DIY cheating machines are meant to trick the insurance companies who monitor physical activity to discount the cost of health care. Similar to the demand that Facebook should pay wages to those who indirectly work for them by providing content through our online activities, the Lego robots restore value to those who are deemed sick. Just as we might demand the restitution of ancient artworks and other objects, we might do the same with the most intimate of things: our body. As a way to reclaim

the biological human body – and prevent the invasion of privacy – the Lego robots are a refusal to comply with a wholesale capitalization of very individual experiences, extracting ever more data, presumably indexical data, to most likely be used for marketing or research, the risks of which became apparent to Senneby in the Novartis trial.

As a focal point in the exhibition, the fungus-cultivating pool took as a reference Lucas Cranach the Elder’s painting *Fountain of Youth* from 1546. Set in a forest with fantastical mountains in the background, the painting centers on a rectangular pool with steps on each side descending into the water. If the exhibition space at e-flux bore some resemblance to an anatomical theater, the painting offers the image of a stage for a drama of revitalization. Herodotus described how the fountain of youth’s magic water grants eternal life, and Cranach’s painting depicts old, crippled, and feeble women being taken to the pool in carriages and wheelbarrows to receive a rejuvenating bath, from which they emerge on the right side of the painting with smooth and erect bodies and long, wavy ginger hair. Awaiting them on this side are knights and other men with whom the rejuvenated maidens dine, dance, and probably engage in some amorous activities. In our own era, such erotics of longevity and immortality are expressed differently, from Silicon Valley executives receiving transfusions of teenage blood to more general longings for healing, convalescence, and recovery from any and all disease.

In a small room at the back of the exhibition space, a series of surrealist drawings bore the iconography of the story of “Insurgency of Life.” Each drawing was made of ten layers stacked on top of each other, with cut-out holes in each layer, and were inspired by Tove Jansson’s acclaimed 1952 children’s book *The Book About Moomin, Myrtle, and Little My*.³ As a story about a motley crew of critters imbued with a strong sense of both magic and realism, they could be a distant cousin of Gogol’s story, giving space to the fantastical while the relationships and feelings of the characters are plausible and realistic. A unique feature of Jansson’s book is that each spread has a hole allowing the reader to peek onto the following spread. In the story, Moomin – who, like all Moomin trolls, has an enormous round nose that would have intrigued both Freud and Fliess – is supposed to bring a bottle of milk to his mother. Carrying it through a forest and a rocky landscape, Moomin encounters a mix of scary and friendly creatures, all sharing the harsh weather conditions. When he finally reaches his mother’s sunny, blossoming garden, the milk is sour. But rather

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than the storyline, it is the form of the book that is of interest: the peek onto the next spread underscoring connections and relations, continuity and storytelling.

To work sequentially with a particular project over an extended period of time is characteristic of Goldin+Senneby's work. Each component leads to the next, planting seeds for the sequels. Made up of multiple parts, this long-haul tactic requires a sort of persistence to be able to "stay with the trouble" (in Haraway's words) and tell an incredibly complicated story emphasizing interconnectivity, causality, and a certain kind of feedback. Yet, despite the physical body of the artist being out of sight, it is at the very center of "Insurgency of Life." It is *the* site. Like in Mary Kelly's 1976 feminist classic *Post-Partum Document* – a six-year inquiry into childbirth and the development of the relationship between the mother and the infant – the body itself is nowhere to be seen. Such a displacement is followed by "real" indexical objects: for Kelly, diapers and parts of blankets, while for Goldin+Senneby the body is displaced by the body of the fungus. Avoiding anthropomorphism without abandoning the materiality of the body becomes a way to make something highly personal without being private. Simultaneously, and in contrast to their previous work, the artists are suddenly present in the flesh, doing a lecture performance at the opening.

4. Climate Change from Within

With "Insurgency of Life," life itself has broken into the work of Goldin+Senneby, opening a view onto a situation that has accompanied the duo since they started working together fifteen years ago. However, this situation – and its stark medical reality – has not been detectable in their art until now. Between care and extraction, this version of the retrospective traced a physical condition, not a sequence of works. Forming the third and final part of a trilogy of retrospectives, the New York edition quite literally entered a different kind of biopolitics than both their previous work and their retrospectives in Stockholm and Brisbane.⁴ In New York, the duo relied again on a group of steady collaborators, outsourcing many parts of the work. Compared to their multi-year project *Headless*, "Insurgency of Life" is less concerned with neoliberal subterfuge. While they still outsource many tasks, with time, their service providers have become more like collaborators. In this way, they are foregrounding a network of dependencies more than one of anonymities. Accepting this kind of proximity and continuity does appear to become a process of immunization.

The exhibition was also the beginning of a

new novel, written incrementally by the acclaimed author Katie Kitamura. As opposed to *Headless*, Goldin+Senneby's experimental 2015 novel, this new novel has exited the world of offshore finance only to enter the field of gene manipulation and bio-capitalism. During the course of the exhibition, a performance entitled *Crying Pine Tree* took place at Triple Canopy, where Kitamura read from her first chapter of the new novel. Here, the main character, a gene-manipulated and autoimmune pine tree, encounters an investor and a geneticist who accelerate and exaggerate the immune system of the conifer in order to make it produce more sap. As a source for clean energy, the sap might prove in the long run to be a kind of liquid gold, in addition to being a natural disinfectant used since antiquity to treat wounds. Hovering between science, art, and fiction, the narrative of the novel displaces the immunological concerns of MS onto the flora. For years to come, the writer and the artists will feed each other's creative process by allowing each step to infuse the next one.

But what is the body at stake here? It is an artistic double-body – individual and singular, yet at the same time collective – which already complicates the tradition of retrospective exhibitions. Compared to a lot of performance and body art of earlier decades, the relation of this double-body to the self is already intensely, and differently, politicized. Whereas before, it elaborated the elusive anonymity of offshore finance in Goldin+Senneby's *Headless*, today it opens onto the absolute situatedness of disease. Now it is springtime again, and as I am blowing my nose in self-imposed quarantine due to Covid-19, I have begun to suspect those of us affected by immune-related conditions to be an involuntary avant-garde. Placed at the forefront of how illnesses develop today, our bodies become the site for a parallel climate change from within. In order to begin to grasp this, we need, among other things, a sequel to Michel Foucault's 1961 *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Perhaps it should be called something like *Oversensitivity and the Planet: A History of Immunity in the Age of Profit*.

x

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1

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 67.

2

"This 150 million figure is predicted to increase exponentially and it is estimated that by 2025 more than 50% of all Europeans will suffer from at least one type of allergy, with no age, social or geographical distinction"
https://www.eaaci.org/documents/EAACI_Advocacy_Manifesto.pdf.

3

The direct translation of the original Swedish title is "What Happened Next?"

4

Such a long-haul trajectory is echoed in their series of retrospectives that have been going on for four years. Since the birth of retrospective exhibitions in the early nineteenth century, a retrospective typically entails temporarily assembling as many works as possible by one single artist under one roof during a few months – the purpose being to make artistic developments manifest, and offer the chance to compare them to other artists' developments. As is obvious, Goldin+Senneby have chosen other routes. The first retrospective in their trilogy, "Standard Length of a Miracle," encompassed a set of existing works displayed in five different locations across Stockholm, most of them non-art related. At the same time, a handful of brand new works were presented at Tensta Konsthall and Cirkus Cirkör, all feeding on a "protocol," a short story commissioned for the occasion from the author Jonas Hassen Khemiri. At the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, the second retrospective consisted of bootleg copies of old works.

Jonas Staal
**Climate
Propagandas**

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e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 Jonas Staal
Climate Propagandas

Just half a year after Australia elected yet another climate-sceptic government, the country was set ablaze by tornadoes of fire. In November 2019, a few hours after the Council of Venice rejected a climate crisis plan, its parliament literally flooded.¹

If any illusions remain that only humans have world-making agency in our ecosystem, the consequences of the racial Capitalocene are forcing these to an end.² The Capitalocene's trajectory was to establish "capitalism as world-ecology," but the truth is that the brutal realities of its extractivist industries have enabled various parts of our violated ecologies to strike back: by hurricane and earthquake, by plastic flood and toxic fire.³ And now, the coronavirus pandemic predictably makes visible how structural inequalities are accelerated through what is still a relatively containable crisis, and this tells us much about what to expect from the current world order when faced with vastly more aggressive climate catastrophe-fueled pandemics, failed harvests, and millions of climate refugees.

The Capitalocene's burning of fossil fuels has accelerated our becoming fossils-in-the-making.⁴ Thus, human propagandas – narratives, imaginaries, and even infrastructures – can no longer claim to solely author the world, as if that world was a mere passive resource waiting to be extracted from and molded in our interests.⁵ Now other actors and agents in that same world – such as extreme weather – extract from and author us just the same. Even our choreographies are beginning to turn Pyrocentric, relating to fire and lack of oxygen, as was demonstrated at the visionary 2019 *The CyberCunt Mini Ball* by Father Chraja Kareola, where one performance category was based on the structural absence of oxygen and performers were equipped with breathing masks in order to inhale air necessary to enact their next move.⁶ Quoting from the program, led by the House of Kareola: "Oxygen has come to be a luxury only for the rich few. Tell us your own suffocatingly musical story, wearing an oxygen mask in order to be able to survive."⁷

Nonetheless, our propagandas will still substantially define whether humans will have a place in the future worldings of this world and whether meaningful survival within it remains an actual possibility. Considering the present pandemic, what are the current climate propagandas that compete over the possibility of human existence in our new ecosystem of floods and toxins?

1. Ecocidal Markets, the Flat Earth Anti-globe, and the Specters of Eco-fascism
While neoliberals, libertarians, right-wing



The CyberCunt Mini Ball, 2019. TRES, Athens, October 5. Photo: Konstantinos Andrikoula.



Digital rendering of floating island by *The Seasteading Institute* and *Kostack Studio*, 2017. Originally to be trialed in French Polynesia, the government revoked its deal with the institute in 2018.



Flat Earth activist Chris Pontius working on his anti-globes in his studio. Still from Daniel J. Clark's documentary, *Behind the Curve* (2018).



Still from the “I’m Inevitable” Trump War Room campaign video, depicting Trump as *The Avengers* character Thanos, 2019.



Extreme weather turns metaphor for the Trump regime in Robert King, Michelle King, and Phil Alden Robinson, *The Good Fight* (2017–present).

conservatives, conspiracy theorists, and the alt-right might at large deny the reality of climate catastrophe or severely downplay its impact, ecocide nonetheless serves as the raw material for these political ideologies to spin climate propaganda of various kinds. Think of what T. J. Demos describes as the “neoliberalization of the Anthropocene,” in which the collapse of ecosystems is primarily perceived as a resource for new geo-engineering industries.⁸ In this propaganda narrative, a market structured on the resource of our impending extinction is the only way to overcome that very extinction and brand a future for us in the process: whether it is through Peter Thiel’s libertarian Seasteading Institute that aims to produce floating stateless islands where Ayn Rand–style objectivism rules, or through Elon Musk’s SpaceX, which aims to terraform Mars for the sake of the survival of the earth’s one percent.⁹ The futurological appeal of Thiel and Musk’s biosphere architectures – situated in a flooded world or terraformed planet – results from a public-relations approach that markets ecocide as an investment opportunity. Furthermore, the new infrastructures of this flooded world are already manifesting in real time: in the form of giant dams to enclose the North Sea, or the use of “sea barriers” to block (climate) refugees from navigating the Great Drowning, to give just two examples.¹⁰

For the more traditional brand of neocons on the other hand, climate catastrophe has been a vivid reminder of the need to reestablish US empire in the context of the ongoing War on Terror. Joseph Masco reminds us of the conservative reporting on Hurricane Katrina, which did not address the causes for this unnatural disaster and its racialized origins and impact, but instead framed it as an anti-terrorism exercise and call for further militarization: if this *would have been* a terrorist attack, does it not prove how badly prepared the United States would be to face the next Axis of Evil?¹¹ Neoconservative climate propaganda refuses to acknowledge either the material reality of neocolonial extraction as a material cause of climate catastrophe, or the fact that the Capitalocene has equipped parts of our ecosystem with additional worlding agencies. Instead, the agencies unleashed through the climate catastrophe are turned into a *political metaphor*: nature acts as an allegory for the true danger, which is the human nature of the terrorist.

For the thousands of conspiracists who have joined various competing “flat earth societies” – some of which have developed theoretical frameworks and scientific experiments to prove that the earth is, in reality, flat – climate catastrophe is nothing more than a

plot by NASA and its globalists compatriots, who have engineered the majoritarian conception that the earth is round. Their propaganda takes sculptural form in their production of flat-earth spatial models that aim to prove, among other things, that day and night are mechanically engineered in a Truman Show–style hoax – an obscure doubling from globe to anti-globe that has manifested in a similar way in the propaganda of Naomi Seibt, the climate-change-denying “Anti-Greta.”¹² According to flat-earthers, it is not just climate catastrophe but our whole ecosystem that serves as a stand-in for the curtain behind which a secret, global, elite governing body engineers our fate.¹³

While these various propaganda narratives have enabled the increasingly uninhabitable earth that we are confronting at present, they have not yet reached their most dangerous phase. As Naomi Klein points out, a right-wing narrative that actually recognized the climate catastrophe as real would enable an even more violent specter of eco-fascism.¹⁴ Such a specter manifests in Elvia Wilk’s novel *Oval* (2019), where we are introduced to an eerie near-future Berlin haunted by unpredictable weather, where most residents seem to be flex-based consultants, some of which struggle for survival in geo-engineered environments such as the “Berg,” a fake mountain covered with malfunctioning eco-huts. This synthesis between brutal neoliberal precarization and doctrines of enforced, commodified sustainability shows the materialization of eco-fascism against the background of Berlin’s club aesthetics and synthetic drugs such as the Oval pill, which gives the book its title.¹⁵

An even darker take on the eco-fascist specter is seen in the popularity of the hashtag #ThanosDidNothingWrong, popularized on Reddit and other platforms, which references the cosmic opponent Thanos from the *Avengers* superhero franchise. In the two-part finale to the franchise, Thanos “solves” what he considers multi-galaxy climate crisis and overpopulation by annihilating half of the living beings in the universe – akin to the type of genocidal engineering that eco-fascism aims to bring about.¹⁶ Right-wingers who realize that ecocide is real will not respond by redistributing means for common survival, but by doubling down on the question of who has the superior racial right to survive and who does not – which, as Sherronda J. Brown argues, is one more reason to refrain from declaring humans the “virus” in the current coronavirus pandemic.¹⁷ That an official Trump War Room 2019 reelection video shows the president as Thanos, adopting the character’s words “I’m inevitable,” can be considered an early start to eco-fascist

propaganda campaigns to come.¹⁸

The terrifying intersection of these climate propagandas – neoliberal, libertarian, neocon, conspiracist, and alt-right – culminate in the world aptly described by Octavia Butler in her novel *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Here we witness the rise of Texas senator Andrew Steele Jarret, who becomes the presidential candidate of the Christian America Movement, campaigning with the slogan “Make America Great Again,” in a world torn apart by extreme weather. In this deeply polluted and unstable landscape shaped by warring gated communities, where Thiel-style tech-corporations engineer contracts for lifelong serfdom, Jarret’s ultranationalist evangelicalism provides a sense of both moral superiority and a nostalgic return to an imagined past, as a substitute for real change. As protagonist Lauren Olamina observes: “Jarret insists on being a throwback to some earlier, ‘simpler’ time. Now does not suit him ... There was never such a time in this country. But these days when more than half the people in the country can’t read at all, history is just one more vast unknown to them.”¹⁹

None of the examples of right-wing propaganda I have discussed so far attributes any efficacy to the various other-than-human agencies – from fire to flood, toxin to plastic typhoon – that now constitute our increasingly violent ecosystem. For neoliberals and libertarians, climate catastrophe is simply another market resource. For neocons, unnatural disaster is merely a metaphor for the real threat of terrorism. The conspiracists consider fires and storms nothing other than an attempt to distract us from globalist dominion. And the eco-fascists, once they do acknowledge the life-threatening changes in our ecosystems, consider it their closing argument for the rationale of (inter)planetary genocide. And all of this propaganda culminates in the uninhabitable world so aptly described in Butler’s futurological study – a future that, in far too many ways, has already become the present.

2. Liberal Climate Metaphors, Attenborough’s Empire, and a Novelization of the Green New Deal

While the liberal-democratic spectrum embraces climate science as proof of its superiority over what Hillary Clinton termed the “basket of deplorables,” it nonetheless propagates its own form of climate denial. We should not forget that the Andrew Steele Jarrets of this world – from Trump to Bolsonaro – are not the cause of climate catastrophe. Supposed common-sense liberals and greenwashing CEOs were aware of the ecocide to come for decades. The Bidenesque call to return to the status quo preceding

the post-truth era amounts to a call for continuing the mass murder of terrestrial life, just with added presidential decorum.

In popular culture, this propaganda leads to a paradoxical *recognition without recognition* of the reality of climate catastrophe. For example, such (non)recognition pervades the recent third season of *The Good Fight* (2017–present), the “woke” sequel to the ultra-white *The Good Wife*, set in a majority-black Chicago law firm built by a veteran of the civil rights movement. Throughout the season, lawyers from the firm take on judges and alt-right agitators connected to the Trump regime, while trying to maintain a steady cash flow from their high-net-worth clientele. Extreme weather features in several episodes, culminating in a final episode where a “lightning ball” threatens the city. Nonetheless, not a single lawsuit brought by the firm addresses the need to reconceptualize rights beyond the human, as proposed by Radha D’Souza, who argues for a rejection of the liberal construct of “human” rights altogether.²⁰ Instead, extreme weather does not lead to an acknowledgment of redistributed forms of agency in our ecosystem, but is simply reduced to a metaphor for the extremity of the Trump regime.



David Attenborough narrates the returned wildlife in Chernobyl: “In driving us out, the radiation has created space for wildlife to return.” *Our Planet*, 2019.

Even when it comes to liberal climate propaganda, as seen in the David Attenborough–narrated documentary *Our Planet* (2019), we have to be alert to the underlying ideological machinations. Attenborough’s benevolent voice of reason – also featured in recent high-budget and highly popular documentaries like *Planet Earth*, *Frozen Planet*, and *The Blue Planet* – is supposed to teach us both the beauty of nature and the threats “we” pose to it. He narrates footage taken by high-res cameras that penetrate ever deeper into remote forests and seas, extracting images of highly endangered species. The territorial British Empire might have crumbled, but its gaze, now

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Tandem et al, Green New Deal poster series, 2019.

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Molly Crabapple et al., *A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2019. Film produced by The Intercept.

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Masked Halla takes down a drone by bow and arrow in the movie directed by Benedikt Erlingsson, *Woman at War* (2018).

directed through an army of cameras, still reaches into the far corners of our planet, always accompanied by that authoritative British voice that tells us how history began, how it will end, and how it can be saved. Is it not this obsessive gaze, this violent extractive gaze, that sealed the fate of the drowning polar bear featured in the series?

Attenborough is certainly not the main enemy here, but it is wildly inaccurate to suggest that a generic “we” – rather than fossil fuel CEOs and other climate criminals – bears responsibility for climate catastrophe, and the notion that human benevolence and individual choice is what is needed to “save” the planet seems closer to the problem than to a solution. We must instead acknowledge that our ecosystem is changing. It no longer consists merely of forests and icebergs, but also of toxic flooding and geographies of plastic. These new forms of agency must be the start of a broader political, economic, and social change. More than preservation, we need transformation.

A propaganda that does acknowledge the transformative agencies unleashed by climate catastrophe can be found in the Green New Deal, as formulated by figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Yanis Varoufakis.²¹ However problematic the conception of a “green industrial revolution” might be, with its embrace of the modernist category of “progress,” this project stands out by fully recognizing the transformations taking place in our ecosystem. Instead of denying their agency, it embraces them as a chance to massively invest in sustainable infrastructure, planet-wide wealth redistribution, colonial reparations, and a recognition of the frontline leadership of indigenous communities and people of color, who are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. In the Green New Deal, we change with – as *part of* – the climate.²² This opens up a pathway that is fundamentally different from what is referred to as “deep adaptation,” moving towards *deep transformation* instead.²³

This egalitarian climate propaganda has also been translated into new forms of cultural production. One example is the Green New Deal poster series created collaboratively by Ocasio-Cortez, the artist Gavin Snider, and the design firm Tandem. Its retro-imagery depicts monumental landmarks in green public spaces crisscrossed by high-speed electric trains, the font and print style evoking the aesthetics of the Federal Art Project, a program of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s original New Deal. Playing out imagined pasts and futures, the poster series reads as climate fiction with a vintage filter. A less nostalgic take on the imaginary of the Green New Deal is the video “A Message from the

Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” (2019), developed by artist Molly Crabapple in collaboration with Naomi Klein and Ocasio-Cortez, which moves from *cli-fi* to *climate realism*. Speaking from a future where the Green New Deal has already been implemented, we hear Ocasio-Cortez narrate how impossible this political and economic transformation seemed in our present *present*, compared to how its principles – from sustainable infrastructure to universal healthcare and publicly funded elections – are the new normal in her future *present*. The closing statement of the film – “We can be whatever we have the courage to see” – emphasizes the role of the artistic imaginary in a climate propaganda that constructs a new reality – a new realism – in which we do not merely survive, but transform.²⁴

Another aspect of the Green New Deal’s climate realism, which has been around as a conceptual platform since the early 2000s, is reflected in Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *2140* (2017). Robinson’s narrative is situated in New York a century from now. The city is underwater after two massive planetary floods (the First and Second Pulse) that caused the seas to rise fifteen meters (fifty feet). Billions perished. While awaiting more extreme weather to come, cooperatives in the city’s so-called “intertidal zone” conspire to avoid yet another wave of gentrification, as speculators run wild in what they consider the “SuperVenice” of New York. For them, the rising water is nothing but a new market opportunity to buy up and resell high-rise apartments with seaside views, all part of the new century’s “high-frequency geo-finance.”²⁵ But a new unexpected mega-storm lays waste to the coasts and pits the two forces – cooperative socialism and disaster capitalism – against one another. Banks demand that the government save them, whereas the cooperatives demand that the government nationalize the banks to fund a planetary Green New Deal and a new infrastructure for twenty-second century democratic socialism. In the wake of the First and Second Pulse, a new culture of resistance has emerged in a drowned New York, now capable of turning the shock doctrine against itself. As a citizen in the novel recounts:

Hegemony had drowned, so in the years after the flooding there was a proliferation of cooperatives, neighborhood associations, communes, squats, barter, alternative currencies, gift economies, solar usufruct, fishing village cultures, mondragons, union’s Davy’s Locker freemasonries, anarchist blather, and submarine technoculture, including aeration and aquafarming. Also sky living

in skyvillages that used the drowned cities as mooring towers and festival exchange points; container-clippers and townships as floating islands; art-not-work, the city regarded as a giant collaborative artwork; blue greens, amphibiguity, heterogeneticity, horizontalization, deoligarchification; also free open universities, free trade schools, and free art schools.²⁶

In Stanley Robinson's futurological study, climate catastrophe is not turned into a metaphor, but acknowledged as a deep and real transformative force that opens a pathway towards comradely coexistence and sympoetic collaboration between the various agents – human, nonhuman and other-than-human – that make up this new ecosystem. But there is a problem with his basic premise, in which it takes a monumental planetary crisis a century from now to create the conditions for realizing the modest demands of the Green New Deal. This part of Robinson's "realism" comes dangerously close to political nihilism. There have been too many sacrifices already, but in Robinson's narrative the death of billions is needed to successfully implement a Bernie Sanders-type platform. Considering that the Green New Deal is already the absolute

minimum we should demand for our present, this is ultimately unacceptable as a demand for the future.

Parallel to the Green New Deal – but critical of its progress-driven narrative – has been the emergence of Extinction Rebellion, which relies on civil disobedience, especially swarm tactics: interventionist blockades and "die-ins" that temporarily sabotage the consumer-driven and fossil fuel-reliant dynamics of urban environments. The cinematic equivalent of this civil disobedience can be found in Benedikt Erlingsson's *Woman at War* (2018), in which the protagonist Halla employs contemporary guerrilla tactics to sabotage extractivist energy industries in Iceland and keep the government from signing a deal with China to open a new aluminum smelter. She writes in her anonymous manifesto: "I urge everyone to rise up and use their ingenuity to cause damage to these enterprises. That's the only thing those psychopaths, those global multinationals, can understand."²⁷ Halla's actions focus on sabotaging energy supplies and include blowing up electricity transmission towers, but like Extinction Rebellion, she makes sure to cause no harm to humans. Nonetheless, the corporate media portray her actions as leading inevitably to

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Jonas Staal in collaboration with Jonas Stuck and Caroline Ektander (Toxic Commons) and Zayaan Khan, *Redistribute Toxicity* (2019), SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin.



A diorama by Not An Alternative's *The Natural History Museum*, produced for an exhibition at the American Alliance of Museums Annual Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, 2015. Installed on the trade show floor across from the American Museum of Natural History's traveling exhibition booth, it critically revised a diorama found in the American Museum of Natural History's 2008–09 *Climate Change* exhibition with the inclusion of a Koch Industries pipeline. Photo: Not An Alternative / The Natural History Museum.



A totem pole blessing ceremony led by members of the Lummi Nation at the opening of *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea*, an exhibition by The House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and The Natural History Museum at the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida, 2018. Photo: Kristen B. Grace.

physical violence – showing that in the era of the Capitalocene, disrupting industry is treated as equivalent to taking human lives. However, Halla remains troublingly blinded by her whiteness (not unlike aspects of Extinction Rebellion).²⁸ A South American backpacker suspected of committing Halla's acts of sabotage is arrested multiple times, while Halla herself, as a white native Icelander, easily passes through checkpoints with winks and smiles. The film seems to make light of this embodied privilege when Halla wears a Nelson Mandela mask to avoid facial recognition by a police drone, perversely inverting the title of Frantz Fanon's famous book: instead of *Black Skin, White Masks*, we see *White Skin, Black Masks*.

In contrast to liberal climate propaganda, which turns climate catastrophe into a metaphor and implies that mere human benevolence can "save nature," democratic-socialist climate propaganda, embodied by the Green New Deal, highlights the transformative capacity of the crisis. In the case of Extinction Rebellion, we see a similar acknowledgment of the material reality of a changing climate and the need to restructure our society accordingly – although with severe racial blind spots when it comes to who has been the most impacted by climate collapse, and who has been on the front line in the battle against it. Nonetheless, these propagandas envision the possibility of a changed but potentially inhabitable earth. Or one where, at the very least, we can begin to redistribute extinction equally.

3. A Cosmopolitical, Terrestrial, and Primitive Communist Climate Propaganda of the Toxic Commons

What other climate propagandas aim to establish new comradely ecosystems between humans, nonhumans, and other-than-human actors, grounded in a fundamental historical awareness of the unequal distribution of extinction? Shela Sheikh builds on the work of Isabelle Stengers to propose a "more-than-human cosmopolitics," in which "nature is imagined not only as a rights-bearing subject, but also a potential political subject – as a 'citizen' of a 'cosmopoliteia.'"²⁹ Sven Lütticken argues along similar lines that such a cosmopoliteia could take the form of a twenty-first-century "Terrestrial," an organization modeled after the twentieth-century communist International, but now as an "organizational form for Terrans" that aims to deepen the fundamental opposition "between the Terrans and their Human enemies in (trans)national guises."³⁰ For the research group Toxic Commons, it is crucial to recognize the agency of toxins in the raging ecologies of the climate catastrophe.³¹ While mapping the

neocolonial dynamics of the global toxic waste trade, Toxic Commons also calls for coexisting with our own toxicity: in-sourcing rather than outsourcing the agencies unleashed through extractivist industries.

Such endeavors to imagine more-than-human ecologies of comradeship are part of what the collective of artists, academics, and indigenous activists Not An Alternative refer to as the specter of "primitive communism." The collective writes that primitive communism names a "collective mode of life that neither capitalism nor settler colonialism could fully manage, contain, or eradicate."³² This specter could not be more fundamentally opposed to the specter of eco-fascism I started with. Not An Alternative's battleground is the natural history museum, which has historically perpetuated the idea of a passive nature external to humans, which is simultaneously contemplated upon and extracted from. In radical contrast to this is the indigenous idea of the natural world as articulated by Not An Alternative, building on the work of indigenous academic Nick Estes, who is a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe: here nature is "inalienable," and rivers and forests are "nonhuman relatives" that cannot be commodified. They continue: "The specter, as an absence that insists from within the capitalist world, connects living communists to their ancestors – the primitive communists of pre-capitalist times – and their descendants, those who have yet to take up the cause."³³

Not An Alternative's climate propaganda manifests in their ongoing organizational artwork of institutional liberation titled *The Natural History Museum* (2014–ongoing). As part of this project, in 2015 they displayed a series of dioramas at the annual convention of the American Alliance of Museums – an organization of which they managed to strategically become a member. These dioramas illustrated what they called our "fossil fuel ecosystem," highlighting in particular the impact of corporations owned by David H. Koch, the sponsor of the exhibition.³⁴ Behind glass, a stuffed polar bear was surrounded by broken TV sets and car tires. This is nature in the racial Capitalocene: a combination of wretched earth, toxins, and nonhuman comrades struggling for survival in an altered ecosystem.³⁵ But the work of the collective does not limit itself to these necessary forms of institutional critique. Their project *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea* (2018) concerned the endangered orca, known in the language of the indigenous Lummi Nation as "Qw'e lh'ol mechen" (our people that live under the sea). This project involved bringing a whale totem, created by Lummi Nation carvers Jewell James and the House of Tears Carvers, into the

Florida Museum of Natural History. The totem had already traveled to various sites of environmental struggle across the country. Turning the exhibition space into a site of collective ritual, elders of the Lummi nation guided visitors in laying hands on the totem, collectively evoking the specter of a radically different natural history. This specter makes visible an opening (which Not An Alternative refers to as “the gap”) that has not been foreclosed by the racial Capitalocene, one that leads towards the possibility of a “dialectical struggle between extinction and resurrection.”³⁶

From a more-than-human cosmopolitics to the Terrestrial, from our toxic commons to the specter of primitive communism – these forms of climate propaganda envision a radically different ecology where human, nonhuman, and other-than-human comradeship enables not merely survival, but transformation.

x

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María Iñigo Clavo

Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable

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[Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable](#)

1. Art-K'uh

There is no word in the Mayan languages to signify “art.”¹ When contemporary indigenous artists, educated in Western metropolitan art schools, started to look for a term for art in their languages, many different ideas were proposed. *Naoj* in Kaqchikel refers, in a general sense, to “knowledge-wisdom-understanding”; *X’ajaan* in Tz’utujil connotes sacred feelings and respect²; and *K’uh* in Q’eqchi refers to something that is imbued with “a sacred state of thinking-feeling.”³ This equivalence of the sacred in Mayan spiritual practices with Western conceptions of art symptomatizes how the latter still reserves a sacred sense for art, even if inexplicitly. Art is preserved and displayed in museological temples, where paradigmatic artworks are exhibited as altars to be worshipped. When indigenous artists translate the meaning of art with “sacred” connotations (*X’ajaan* or *K’uh*), the process reveals the latent cultish devotion to objects that remains in the Western art circuit. Throughout Western history, questions regarding the role of art and its sacred status, whether conferred through religion or so-called secular means, have formed battlegrounds.

The idea of the “sacred” or “transcendental” in art in Western culture has most clearly manifested itself in the expropriation of objects from non-Western communities. This occurred most explicitly during the colonial era, when “foreign” objects were plundered and then placed in museum collections as demonstrations of national power – a practice that became especially commonplace in the nineteenth century. Yet, even though it is less pronounced now, this process of designating something other than Western art as “sacred” in order to exercise power continues today in various other forms. For example, in her recent book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), filmmaker and theorist Ariella Azoulay remarks that turning an ethnographic artifact into a (transcendental) piece of art necessarily involves a process of salvaging, classifying, preserving, authenticating, evaluating, and handling it. She notes that there is an implicit expertise and claim of scientific “neutrality” when non-Western artifacts are turned into transcendental, elevated, and universal artworks in the Western sense. This process of conversion also legitimizes the historic theft of these objects and their isolation from the communities and cultural contexts in which they were produced. This is “constitutive of the various scholarly, curatorial and professional procedures (in which collecting is but one example) which have transformed world-destroying violence into a decent and acceptable occupation.”⁴



Antonio Pichilla, *Abuelo (grandfather)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Rene De Carufel.

For this reason, Azoulay proposes a different potential art historical narrative that can account for the history of plunder, in which the act of creating (art historical) knowledge has itself been a medium of colonization. This narrative has been the subject of several artistic and curatorial practices since the end of 1980s that fostered complex debates on the complicities between colonization, museums, and academia. For two instances, the artwork of artist Fred Wilson and exhibitions by curator Susan Vogel – who have both experimented with the display of ethnographic artifacts in different kinds of exhibition rooms (white cubes, ethnographic suitcases, nineteenth-century-style exhibition salons) – demonstrate the colonial violence of reducing artifacts to objects of study, consumption, or contemplation as “transcendental art.”⁵ However, the art historical canon has not always been inclined to question its methodologies and discipline along the lines that Azoulay so brilliantly outlines.

2. Translation as Method

Following from the translation of art as *K’uh*, and its allusions to the “sacred,” this text is a modest record of encounters between Western and non-Western apparatuses of knowledge as places of untranslatability and instigation. I intend to question whether translation is an appropriate tool of communication when it comes to making other epistemologies comprehensible and visible. Spirituality will be my indicator – the measure and thermometer – for identifying the limits of translation as a method not only for knowing, but also for communication between Western and non-Western contexts. The senses of culture and politics may be so different between different cosmologies that they cannot ever be fully translated.⁶

For a generation of postcolonial artists and theorists since the 1980s, translation is knowledge and knowledge is translation. Scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Walter D. Mignolo, Gloria Alzandúa, Haroldo de Campos, Édouard Glissant, and many others are interested in the process of translation as a site of negotiation. For them, translation is a means to challenge obsessive modern European purity, changing the paradigm to allow for hybrid cultural identities.

For Glissant, for example, translation is a tool for re-negotiating places of utterance that could “barbarize” or “creolize” European intellectual production. Alzaldúa speaks from personal experience, describing how she inhabits two languages and cultures simultaneously and lives on the borderline between them. Bhabha sees translation as a place of dissidence and negotiation. His classic

text “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817” parodies nineteenth-century colonizers’ panic about the mistranslations of the “European book” (the Bible) by the colonized. Mistranslating the book, writes Bhabha, was a method of caricaturing Western culture: Indian spiritual leaders may have used the translated bibles distributed to them, but clarified to missionaries: “To all the other customs of Christians we are willing to conform, but not to the Sacrament, because Europeans eat cow’s flesh, and this will never do for us.”⁷ For Bhabha, as with most of the authors mentioned, translation is a metaphor for the “in-between” postcolonial condition, but in order to translate their findings, such authors often had no choice but to present them in the language of metropolitan intellectuals in order to validate their condition within Western academia, which was itself in the process of “multiculturalization.” This “hegemonic postcolonial theory” was made by intellectual elites from postcolonial countries, educated in Western universities. Even though they engaged with non-Western epistemological frameworks, they could not put these “other ways to know” into practice.⁸

In the 2000s, concepts such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s “ecologies of knowledges” began to signal a shift in approach. De Sousa Santos and others suggested that each epistemology had its own wisdom to share, making evident the weaknesses of translation that uses just one specific epistemological frame. Today, a new generation of thinkers are taking up the question of translation as a reliable space of negotiation. Scholars such as Métis Zoe Todd and Anishinaabe Vanessa Watts have written on how non-Western epistemologies have been misappropriated or abstracted. For example, Watts takes up Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory – which popularized the notion of the interconnection between humans and nonhumans – to argue that Latour nonetheless maintains a hierarchy of beings with humans at the top. According to Watts, this misunderstands the Amerindian sense of nonhierarchical confluence between humans and the “natural”/nonhuman world.⁹ José Carvalho calls this attempt to adopt or assimilate non-western cosmologies in an hegemonic frame the creation of an “epistemological counterpoint,” in which new concepts are only allowed to be part of the “score” as long as they follow a principal (Western) melody.¹⁰ This critique of textual and conceptual translation is equally applicable when it comes to the visual arts and their modes of display.

3. Gestures of Subordination

Guatemalan writer Javier Payeras describes a photograph taken in the 1970s, in which painter Francisco Tún, one of the most prestigious indigenous artists of Guatemala, poses with two collectors of his work:

[T]he painter is motionless looking towards the ground, with his hands joined in a gesture of innocence, dressed in a suit and tie. For some reason, this image reminded me of the vast documentation that exists of peasants portrayed, for a fleeting moment, alongside their bosses. My assessment may be extreme, but it is necessary that the reader judge for himself.¹¹

What Payeras describes is the sense that indigenous art and artists are continually subordinated in the Western art circuit, even or especially when the work is included and attempted to be translated for Western audiences. This subordination shows up not only in the framing and treatment of such work, but in many works of contemporary art themselves. This is evident in two recent installations by Brazilian artists: Ernesto Neto's 2017 work for the Venice Biennale work and Bené Fonteles's

2016 work at the São Paulo Biennale.

After its exhibition, Neto's *Um Sagrado Lugar (Sacred Place, 2017)* provoked strong criticism by a delegation of thirty-two emerging and established indigenous curators from Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Canada. For the work, Neto invited six Huni Kuin shamans, indigenous people originating in the Amazonian state of Acre, to participate in different activities and public talks inside an installation Neto built for the event. The installation took the shape of a tent, which the artist described as "a place of sociality, political meetings and spiritual ceremonies of the Huni Kuin,"¹² and which he further explained can bring a magic ontology that is absent in our sick Western society, allowing us to hear the voice of nature.¹³ The Huni Kuins' words, translated from Portuguese to English by Neto, speak to the urgency and responsibility we have toward the natural world. In conversation, the Huni Kuin people spoke of Boa tea, or *ayahuasca*, the plant-derived psychedelic that they described as their DNA or God. Neto presented these and other ideas as motifs in the installation, which took the shape of DNA helixes—seemingly attempting to bridge Western rationality and non-Western spirituality. Neto had already worked with Huni Kuin people years

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Portrait of José Francisco Tún and collector Edith Recourat-Chorot, Esso Art Salon. Date unknown, c. 1971.

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Antonio Pichilla, *Envoltorio (Wrapper)*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

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Edgar Calel & Rosario Sotelo, *Abuelos (Grandparents)*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists.

before, asking them to guide private ayahuasca ceremonies for selected guests in art installations he had built.¹⁴

According to indigenous curator Ryan Rice, Neto's work – located in what the Biennale curators called the "Pavilion of Shamans" – was a colonialist, appropriative gesture lacking in any deep collaborative work with the Huni Kuin people,¹⁵ who, per Neto, would receive just 20 percent of the sale price if the work were sold. During debates about the installation, curator Candice Hopkins expressed her concerns that the exhibition was reminiscent of nineteenth-century European universal exhibitions, which also put indigenous people on display. She pointed out the importance of departing from a recognition of the agency of the invited indigenous groups, rather than reducing their presence purely to audience consumption.¹⁶ The presence of the Huni Kuin in this contemporary art exhibition amounted to a fair example of Slavoj Žižek's criticism of multiculturalism's tenuous acceptance of the Other – an acceptance that only occurs when the Other provides a service or becomes an object of consumption, only when rendered a source of "benign Otherness."¹⁷

Similarly, Bené Fonteles's work for the main pavilion of the 2016 São Paulo Biennale brought non-Western imagery into the museum. For *Oca Tapera Terreiro*, he reproduced an *oca*, a type of Brazilian indigenous housing. The word *terreiro* in the title refers to a space of celebration common in certain Afro-Brazilian groups. Among other activities in the *oca*, Fonteles organized events with music and rituals to be observed by spectators. In his description, Fonteles remarks that he was looking for a modernist representation of Brazilian nationality as a universal entity as enunciated by poet Mاريو de Andrade in the 1920s.¹⁸ The structure also housed Fonteles's collection of indigenous and popular cultural artifacts, including photos of indigenous leaders, musicians, and important personalities from Brazilian intellectual history. Thus, he gave the indigenous architectural frame the functions of a Western museum: classification, exhibition, and display. He invited a great number of (male) intellectuals to share the space and speak or perform, some of them indigenous activists who denounced the Brazilian political sphere.¹⁹ For Fonteles, the aim of these meetings was to celebrate the Brazilian national soul that, in his words, needed to be "healed." *Oca Tapera Terreiro* provides a good document of how Brazilian intellectuals deal with indigenous elements and defend nationalist discourses, given that the nation is one of the main accomplices of the (post)colonial project that homogenizes difference in the name of a

national (*mestizo*) identity.

Both Fonteles and Neto share the goal of challenging Western categories of science and erudition by pointing out their supposed separation from popular and indigenous knowledges. They implicate themselves, according to their own desires, in indigenous spirituality and cultural practices, referring to their works as potential tools for a process of healing Western society.²⁰ They think of their artworks as contexts for fostering public debates and supporting indigenous people politically. But, both are in fact examples of how the intellectual classes of Brazil turn themselves into mediators of Otherness and translate the Other into a subordinate position: either using them as objects of consumption (Neto) or as an element in a national paradigm (Fonteles). They position themselves as mediators of indigenous wisdom and healing, while maintaining power relations, evidenced by statements like: "Now we are within Neto's art," from an unidentified Huni Kuin participant in Venice. These two cases are symptomatic of how the Western epistemological apparatus attempts to translate non-Western cosmologies without upending the hierarchies that make translation necessary in the first place.²¹

I agree with the above critics that these artworks create spectacles out of non-Western cultural practices, and that there are dangers in bringing rituals into the art space. Yet I am also concerned with how this criticism reflects the limitations of translation, as these limitations will always mislead us into interpreting these artworks as exercises of spectacularization or performance, corrupting the essence of the ceremonies. In using translation as a tool to understand the unknown, what potentialities are we missing? Even though I don't agree with their ways of doing it, I agree with Neto and Fonteles that by locating "healing" ceremonies within Western museums and exhibition rooms, frictions are created between two approaches to understanding the world: the spiritual and the scientific. The scientific approach has difficulties in dealing with what cannot be translated, while spirituality is a great channel for the untranslatable. To introduce a healing ritual into a museum is to suggest that something in the museum needs to be repaired, and that non-Western knowledge could be in charge of this process. If spirituality has always been present in Western art, as evidenced by the term's translation into indigenous languages, perhaps this spirituality could be repurposed toward transforming the institution itself.²²

4. Knowledge-Spirituality

Since 2012, the revolutionary Brazilian project

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“The Meeting of Knowledges” has brought indigenous teachers, craft-makers, and Afro-Quilombo activists to teach in different Brazilian university contexts. The project intends to challenge the Western scientific way of understanding Otherness as an “object of study” and instead invites the Other to join as interlocutor to create a pluri-epistemic University. The group quickly reached the conclusion that for these guests it was not possible to separate spirituality from knowledge production. The invited teachers, or *sabedores* (those who know), include spiritual practices in their lectures on medicine and curative plans, turning the classroom into a spiritual space.²³ “Spirituality is the base of knowledge,” and politics are initiated and rooted in the spiritual collective, as expressed in the First Indigenous Women Summit of Americas, held in 2002.²⁴ At the summit, speakers clarified that spirituality is not confined to any particular religion or culture but allows a cosmic vision of life and provides a survival tool for indigenous people. Following from the “Meeting of Knowledges,” one of the participating universities, the Federal University of Minas Gerais, introduced a series of courses led by spiritual leaders of African matrix religions in 2016.²⁵

But can – or should – spirituality be taught? Is it possible for an institution such as a university to accept or acknowledge precisely what science has dismissed and disavowed? How could this be made possible if this exclusion is not merely incidental but part of the very constitution of the sciences themselves?²⁶ What frictions emerge from the coexistence of different epistemological frameworks in the context of the university, the temple of Western universalism?²⁷ For one example, Kwakwaka’wakw geographer Sara Hunt describes how knowledge in the West is inherently connected to *fixing* and specifically contradicts worldviews based on *becoming*. Unlike Western rationality, worldviews based on *becoming* posit a constant process of interlocution and inter-relation that cannot be apprehended:

The heterogeneity of indigenous voices and worldviews can easily become lost in efforts to understand Indigeneity in ways that fix Indigenous knowledge, suppressing its dynamic nature ... One starting place might be accepting the partiality of knowledge. Its relational, alive, emergent nature means that as we come to know something, as we attempt to fix its meaning, we are always at risk of just missing something ... In brief, we must be cautious that “Indigenous” does not come

to signify engagement with “the other” without an actual shift in disciplinary ontologies and epistemologies.²⁸

If fixing and objectifying are our “ways of knowing” in the West, we need to create other ways to relate to non-Western knowledges and learn to liberate ourselves of the compulsion to fix. Nonetheless, I am concerned with whether Western epistemology has the conditions to accept other epistemological frames, or in fact, to create joint methodologies to achieve what Hunt proposes, and how this would be possible. How can one recover the potential for confrontation between two epistemologies without attempting to reconcile them? Is this possible in the exhibition spaces of Western institutions?

Denise Ferreira da Silva defines three terms (derived from Hegel) that reveal how Western epistemology learns and knows the world: separability, determinacy, and sequentiality.²⁹ The first relates to defining things, considering them within a space and time of reference, through their specific qualities. The second refers to the possibility of determining what something is by producing “formal constructs” as a consequence of the classification and evaluation of a thing’s qualities. Finally, sequentiality relates to the evolution and self-development of Spirit in history, dependent upon its teleological destiny through repetition.³⁰

Anishnaabe scholar Vanessa Watts explains it as such: “The epistemological-ontological removes the *how* and *why* from the *what*. The *what* is left empty, ready for inscription. [...] These distinctive domains provide evidence that humans are assumed to be separate from the world they live in, in order to have a perception of it.”³¹ So, Western epistemological frames construct definitions or delimit meanings to try to translate epistemologies with inherently process-based ways of thinking. Can Western methods of *fixing* and *determining* that in turn isolate the *what* from the *how* be compatible with non-Western relationality based on processes and connections between the *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*?

5. Confessional Ontology

In a video by the Kaqchikel artist Fernando Poyón, *Contra la Pared* (Against the wall, 2006), a group of indigenous women are lined up as soldiers in formation and beat their chests. One can read their lips as they repeat the well-known mantra: “It’s my fault, it’s my fault, it’s my most grievous fault.” While watching stifling close-up shots of their faces, we hear ecclesiastic music instead of their voices. The title “Against the wall” refers to the state of being immobilized by

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Edgar Calel, *B'atz constellation de conocimientos (B'atz constellation of knowledges)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

religious colonization and patriarchy, without any possibility to act. Like science, religion was a historical tool of control in Western society, and one of its main technologies was the imperative to confess one's sins.³² Liberation is promised only when the sinners profess their own guilt. In his writing, Glissant analyzed the link between knowledge, possession, and control, observing that the etymology of the word *comprendre* (to understand) derives from *prendre*, meaning to grab hold of or to grasp something.³³ The ongoing Western colonial desire for transparency, despite the impossibilities of clarification, is what I term a confessional ontology, where *to know* also involves a certain ownership of things, nature, and other humans – the Western fantasy for control. In this ontology, extracting secrets is an important part of maintaining power – and spirituality contains many secrets. However, to decode spirituality is to undermine its potential and – worse still – to risk destroying that potential once and for all.³⁴

In response to this drive toward knowledge as possession, Glissant posed the right to opacity, arguing that only by insisting on the importance of opacity can we vindicate that which we cannot understand grasp (*comprendre*). One of the questions that arises is how to communicate with that which should remain unknown.³⁵ In 2006, De Sousa Santos wrote: “I am looking for an appropriate epistemology to understand the World Social Forum, an alternative globalization, knowledges that come together, and I am not just thinking of translation between cultures but also, for example, between sciences and poetry.”³⁶ And poetry, in fact, is one of the few places where opacity is validated in Western culture.³⁷

Tz'utujil artist Antonio Pichilla's 2007 sculpture *Envoltorio* (Wrapper) is an unknown object wrapped in red fabric. In Mayan cultures, there is a tradition of wrapping things for various purposes. Food, personal belongings, and objects with special spiritual energy such as bones, the objects of ancestors, or stones, might be wrapped in textiles that serve as protectors of the object's magical energy. Each community has its own traditional textiles of different colors, and knowledge about them is ancestrally passed through generations. The textiles operate as the connectors between two worlds: the magic/spiritual/unknown and the material human realms. Wrapping is an act of secrecy, and this privacy and opacity carries a sacred sense.³⁸

Wrappers pose a dilemma for a Western researcher. On the one hand, respecting the opacity of another culture requires admitting the limitations of Western epistemology in dealing with the untranslatable and the unknown. On the other hand, in order to heal the violence wrought

by exactly these epistemologies, it is important to name and acknowledge the colonial wound. For many indigenous Mayan artists, art-making is part of a process of healing colonial memories communally. Given the importance of healing, could the wounds and the traumas remain unnamed in the confessional terms of Western psychoanalysis, but named in different, opaque ways? Could we overcome the Western imperative to name, fix, reduce? Or it is necessary to name trauma and violence to heal and repair? Without naming, what would reparation look like?³⁹

6. *Winaq*

Between 2013 and 2014, Kaqchikel artist Edgar Cael and U.S. artist Rosario Sotelo presented the artwork *Abuelos* (Grandparents) in an art space in Comalapa, Guatemala – Cael's hometown. After the exhibition opened, Cael organized a ceremony in which their installation turned into an altar for their ancestors and other members of the indigenous community. Fruit was laid upon stones – a common practice with pre-Hispanic roots in Mayan ceremonies – to symbolize the presence of their ancestors. For the Maya, ceremonies are one of the most important moments of interchange, during which the process of personification and communication takes place. The sense of time contained in past, present, and future temporalities is personified through the figure of the grandparent – spiritual references and the analogy between grandparents and saints are recurring, for example.⁴⁰ The artists used the exhibition space as a sacred site for celebration; it was not a large public spectacle, and only a few regular practitioners and neighbors were involved.

In Mayan cosmologies, humans are not necessarily given the status of person, and personhood – achieved through a relational process – carries a superior status to humanity. Persons are recognized as such through a process of interlocution. In Mayan languages, *winaq* means “person” or “complete being,” and the term has no gender. In their 2011 book *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, Mayan translators Ajb'ee Jiménez and Héctor Aj Xol Ch'ok write that *winaq* “refers to processes of giving and acquiring life in parallel, of transforming into life or transforming life, of making life and forming collectivity.”⁴¹ The authors call this process *winaquisition*.⁴² When Pichilla wraps a stone with traditional textiles in his work *Granfather* (2015), for example, he performs the process of personification or *winaquisition* that takes place in ceremonies during which interaction with stones connects people with their ancestors. Before they were

displayed as artworks, the stones were used in private ceremonies in sacred places. Placed into a different context, they impart the energy of that private place into the public art sphere.⁴³

In his photograph *B'atz Constellation of Knowledges* (2015), Calel stands in the middle of a corn plantation and stares at the viewer. He is wearing a jumper on which he has embroidered the names of the 22 Mayan languages. On one hand, these names speak to the knowledges of Mayan peoples; each language serves as the expression of a certain culture and cosmology. The process of planting and harvesting corn marks the seasons; the activity has a sacred quality in Mayan communities and is one of the fundamental sources of knowledge and cosmology. In ancient Mayan iconography, a common image shows humans turning into corn and vice versa. The expression *Hal Winaq* means the exchangeability of the corn and the human. The Mayan word for “mother corn,” *Qtxu' Axi'n*, expresses the renewal of life.⁴⁴ Thus, it's evident that the personification of nonhuman beings is key for the decentralization of the human, and the possibility of being able to “feel among equals” with all other beings.⁴⁵ We can see in Calel's artwork the importance of the “place-thought” described by Vanesa Watts, “based upon the premise that the land is alive and thinking, and humans and non-human agency comes from the extensions of the land.”⁴⁶

What is crucial for Calel's *B'atz constellation of knowledges* is the fact that he directly confronts the viewer with his gaze.⁴⁷ Unlike the photograph by Francisco Tún referenced above, by turning his own gaze to the viewer, Calel asserts his personhood and status as an artist.⁴⁸ His presence addresses what collectors do not want to see when they buy indigenous art or artifacts: the indigenous person who created them.⁴⁹ Decolonial theorists have pointed to the potential embedded in the confrontation, linguistic and visual, to overcome Western colonial exploitation – to overcome being made an object of study. Following from this thinking, one can question whether it is possible to separate Western approaches to Amerindian thinking from Amerindian thinking itself. In other words, for instance, can we consider Mayan cosmology as a philosophy in its own right rather than mediating or translating it to fit into Western philosophy? To find out, we must interrogate how Western academies function as mediators when translating other schools of thought into poststructuralist frames.⁵⁰

In their translations of art referenced throughout this text – as “knowledge-wisdom-understanding” or a sacred sense of feeling and respect – it becomes evident that different cultures locate their experience of spirituality

within the artwork itself. The works are not necessarily spiritual, but operate from a spiritual place. In discussing the terms, I have used my own frame of knowledge to offer an interpretation of the untranslatable elements of other epistemologies. The fact that we can only use our own frames of knowledge is the same predicament that the indigenous artists discussed here expose in the exhibition space, mediated by poetry (one of the few Western tools in which opacity is considered legitimate), making evident the limitations of our epistemological tools and the aporias of theory. My words and interpretations of the experience of spirituality will never be able to translate experience itself, and will always risk suffocating it.⁵¹

Translation is a faulty tool for subordinating epistemological frames, but can there be any coexistence without an attempt at translation? Does any language have the resources to communicate without translating? Is translation – the need to transfer knowledge from one framework to another – really necessary? Might communication, affection, and healing be possible in other ways, without fixation, nominalism, or transparency?⁵² As Glissant claims, we can instead learn ways of coexistence that accept the untranslatable, the uncertain, and the unknowable. We can learn ways of interlocution that maintain two or more different epistemological frameworks in the same conversation, learning from each other. As Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser show, a cultural frame creates the conditions for the thinkable and the unthinkable – thus, a fundamental question in inventing political resistance must be to widen the space of the unthinkable.⁵³ In de la Cadena's view, this interlocution with the frameworks of spirituality-place-thought could be a starting point for “the political” beyond current modern macropolitical models.⁵⁴ And, from that place where neither knowledge is subordinated in any epistemological counterpoint, perhaps we can re-invent new hybridities, contaminations, influences, mutual inspirations, appropriations, and impurities.

×

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1
I am not an anthropologist and am not attempting to write as an expert on indigenous cultures or cosmologies. I would like to state that I do not believe that non-indigenous people cannot address indigenous spirituality, or research or make art about it. Rather, I think that an utterance from any place can contribute to the processes of collective healing and learning from each other, and thus, I assume that the place from which my utterance (as any place) comes involves its own blind spots.

2
Antonio Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2020.

3
Sandra Monterroso, "Del arte político a la opción Decolonial en el arte Contemporáneo Guatemalteco," *Iberoamericana social*
<https://iberoamericasocial.com/del-arte-politico-a-la-opcion-decolonial-en-el-arte-contemporaneo-guatemalteco/>.

4
Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unearthing Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 64.

5
Some examples are Fred Wilson's *Rooms with a View: The struggle between culture, content and the context of art* (Longwood Arts Projects, 1987), and the exhibitions *We The People* (Artists Space, 1987) and *Art/Artifact* (The Center for African Art, 1988). See Olga Fenández, "The Uncertain of Display: Exhibition In-Between Ethnography and Modernism," in *The Ruined Archive*, eds. Iain Chambers, Giulia Grechi and Mark Nash (Mela Books, 2014), 145–162.

6
See Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, *Cultura com aspás* (Cosac Naify, 2010).

7
Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

8
As Mayan anthropologist Aura Cumes points out, this meant that they neglected historical, local, indigenous struggles and the epistemologies beyond their national discourses of *mestizaje* that devalue the indigenous difference. So, translation has always been a process that they addressed within Western frames and without questioning its epistemological frames.

9
She also references Donna Haraway, remarking that "Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* (1988) also contributes a valuable discussion of how the localized knowledges ... provide a space where the dominant boundaries of this heteropatriarchy can be imploded. However, Haraway resists essentialist notions of

the earth as mother or matter and chooses instead to utilize products of localized knowledges (i.e. Coyote or the Trickster) as a process of boundary implosion." Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013), 28.

10
See José Carvalho, Juliana Flórez, and Mancel Martínez, "Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriépistémica," in *Saeres nómadas: Derivas del pensamiento propio*, eds. Nina Cabrá and Camila Aschner (Bogotá: Universidad Central-lesco, 2016).

11
Javier Payeras, "After Tún," *20 Bienal de Arte Paiz*, exh. cat. (Bienal de Arte Paiz, 2012, 66).

12
From the artwork's caption, which references the tent or *Cupixawa* he constructed <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2017/viva-arte-viva/photos-arsenale-2/ernes-to-neto-huni-kuin>.

13
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTPauQb0IKI>.

14
This installation was called *Em Busca do Sagrado Gibóia Nixi Pae*, (In the search of sacred *Gibóia Nixi Pae*, 2014) and was installed at the macro exhibition "Histórias Mestizas" at the Tomie Otake Contemporary Art Institute. The artist had his first contact with this Huni Kuin community in 2013.

15
"The Huni Kuins' translated words spoke to the urgency and responsibility we have to the natural world. Neto, whose presence evoked the cult leader of the mission in the 2015 film *Embrace of the Serpent*, rambled between art speak, capitalist patter and hobby ethnography." Ryan Rice, "Trouble Me Venice: An Indigenous Curator's View of the Biennale," *Canadian Art Magazine*, May 30, 2017 <https://canadianart.ca/revIEWS/ryan-rice-venice-biennale/>.

16
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTPauQb0IKI>.

17
Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (September–October 1997): 28–51.

18
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f9gxXxJbQ>.

19

For one example, Indigenous activist Ailton Krenak painted a column of the Modernist Niemayer building as an act of cultural *anthropophagy* intervening in Western frames.

20

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X60snHMi80A>.

21

Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Marisol de la Cadena show how the sense of culture for indigenous people is very different from the Western sense. Da Cunha speaks about “culture” (with quotations marks) to indicate that the term is not translated by some Indigenous people in their languages. The authors use the Portuguese term instead of attempting to translate it, to maintain the Western meaning and to be able to inhabit this hegemonic frame in which they survive. This “culture” is related to International Platforms (like Biennales) that would allow them to create international networks, visibility, funding, and tools for their survival and the survival of the planet facing the ecological crisis. For example, Marisol de la Cadena writes about how the Quechua people in Peru have to negotiate these different senses of culture-nature, politics-spirituality-respect in conjunction with literate modern politics in order to maintain a conversation with Western frames.

22

Marisol de la Cadena, “Política indígena: un análisis más allá de ‘la política.’” *WAN journal*, no. 4 (January 2009).

23

See Carvalho, Flórez, and Martínez, “Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriepistémica.”

24

Primera cumbre de mujeres indígenas de América, México, Fundación Rigoberta Menchú, 2003. A cosmology has been defined by Mexican anthropologist Alicia Barabas as a sum of collective discourses of a sacred nature that possess an important emotional and normative knowledge. See Alicia Barabas, “Cosmovisiones, mitologías y rituales de los pueblos indígenas,” in *Cosmovisión mesoamericana*, eds. A. Gámez and A. López (El Colegio de México, Fondo de cultura económica (FCE)-Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2015).

25

See Carvalho, Flórez, and Martínez, “Encuentro de Saberes, hacia una Universidad pluriepistémica.”

26

As Michel de Certeau writes: “Theoretical questioning ... does not forget, cannot forget that in addition to the relationships of these scientific discourses to

one another, there is also their common relation with what they have taken care to exclude from their field in order to constitute it.” Michel De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (University of California Press, 1988), 61.

27

Bonaventura de Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el Saber, Reinventar el Poder* (Ediciones Trilce-Extensión Universitaria, 2010), 22.

28

Sarah Hunt, “Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept,” *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 5.

29

The three terms as enunciated by Da Silva: “(a) separability, that is, the view that all that can be known about the things of the world is what is gathered by the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality – everything else about them remains inaccessible and irrelevant to knowledge); and consequently, (b) determinacy, the view that knowledge results from the Understanding’s ability to produce formal constructs, which it can use to determine (i.e. decide) the true nature of the sense impressions gathered by the forms of intuition; and finally (c) sequentiality, which describes Spirit as movement in time, a process of self-development, and describes History as the trajectory of Spirit.” Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference without Separability,” in *Incerteza Viva: 32ª Biennial of São Paulo*, eds. Jochen Voz and Julia Rebouças, exh. cat. (MAMBO, 2017), 57–65.

30

Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “On Difference without Separability.” In his seminal work, *The Location of Culture* in 1994, Bhabha speaks of the indeterminacy of the colonial encounter. He describes how the Hegelian tools of separability and determinacy cannot truly “fix” anything during a colonial encounter with the colonized. It’s for this reason that Bhabha dedicated so much time to thinking about the compulsive use of stereotypes in the colonial context, which act to dismiss the colonized through by fixing their identities into discreet categories. See Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

31

Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!),” 210.

32

Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” *boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (Autumn, 1993): 65–76.

33

Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 189. Azoulay’s proposal of reparation is to cease the “movement that fuels the world of (transcendental) art and its insatiable quest to discover what is not yet known, discovered, named, shown, or created, in the form of the new, the extravagant, and the spectacular.” Azoulay, *Potential History: Unearning Imperialism*, 154.

34

Nuto Chavajay, in conversation with the author, 2015.

35

As Glissant wrote: “Opacities must be preserved; an appetite for opportune obscurity in translation must be created; and falsely convenient vehicular sabirs must be relentlessly refuted. The framework is not made of transparency; and it is not enough to assert one’s right at linguistic difference or, conversely, to intertextuality, to be sure of realizing them.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 120.

36

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Renovar la teoría crítica y reinventar la emancipación social* (CLACSO, 2006), 39. In the original: “Yo estoy buscando una epistemología adecuada para entender al FSM, una globalización alternativa, los conocimientos que se juntan, y no estoy pensando solamente en traducción entre diferentes culturas, sino por ejemplo entre poesía y ciencia.”

37

I wish to add that poetry is present in art, but also in philosophy. Furthermore, when I address “Western culture” in this text I refer mainly to Western academia’s “ways of knowing” that are linked with Modernity – still latent today in its “cultures of rigor” and their permeation into everyday life. Nevertheless, I am aware that within academia and Western Philosophy there are important attempts to challenge this (mono)culture of rigor and demands for transparency, often undertaken with the help of poetry. See Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el Saber, Reinventar el Poder* (Trilce-Extensión Universitaria, 2010), 22.

38

As noted to me by Antonio Pichilla, humans are also wrappers that contain the unknown and the opaque. Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2020.

39

This has been an important problematic faced by psychotherapists working in post-war Guatemala. They realized that healing, for

example, was not a private experience, as thought in Western culture, but rather a collective one. For example, the word that the Kumool Association of Ixil and k’iche women use for “trauma,” *Txitzi’n*, literally meaning “deep pain,” is the same word used to refer to an internal mystic experience in which healing takes place.

40

María José Pérez Sián, “Nos-otras. Ancestras descoloniales,” in *Miradas en torno al problema colonial: pensamiento anti-colonial y feminismos descoloniales en los sures globales*, ed. Karina Ochoa Muñoz (Akal, Inter Pares, 2019), 139.

41

In the original: “Específicamente, se refiere a procesos de dar y paralelamente adquirir vida, transformarse en vida o transformar la vida, hacer vida y formar colectividad” Ajb’ee Jiménez and Héctor Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya* (Iximulew, 2011), 41.

42

Carlos Lenkersdorf called *winaquisation* this intersubjectivity that happens where *tojolabal* sentences such as “I speak” are not unidirectional but bidirectional and require a response to be complete: “I spoke and you responded.” Bidirectional sentences involve two subjects and not a passive object of the action or passive indirect complement, in grammatical terms. The sentence includes a plurality of subjects with different functions in a unique action/verb in horizontal positions (coordinated and not subordinated) to express the event of communication between two subjects. Having several subjects means there are no indirect or direct objects and no passive positions, as both parties share the authorship of the action. Carlos Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal* (Pórrua, 2005), 113–117.

43

Pichilla has also worked with stones bearing candle marks that suggest that they had been previously used in Mayan ceremonies in which the artist had participated. The marks are the trails of ceremonies. *Glifos de Kukulkan* (2011) seeks to show these marks as a kind of spiritual writing.

44

Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, 44.

45

Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq: Fundamentos del pensamiento maya*, 43.

46

Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst

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Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!),” 210. For example, national colonial policies in Canada have resulted in a disembodied sacredness in which ceremonies are dislocated from original places, dismissing the importance of the relationships with the place.

47

According to Calel, *B'otz* is a *nawal*, a person with magical powers that can transform into the shape of an animal.

48

This is precisely the argument made by Javier Payeras about a new generation of indigenous artists from Guatemala such as Nuto Chavajay, Fernando and Ángel Poyon, Manuel Chavajay, Sandra Monterroso, Edgar Calel, Antonio Pichilla, and others that don't have their gazes in a subordinating position as Tún's was in the past. See Javier Payeras, “After Tún,” *20 Bienal de Arte Paiz*, exh. cat. (Bienal de Arte Paiz, 2012, 66.

49

Antonio Pichilla, in conversation with the author, 2015.

50

Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch'ok explore the foundations of Amerindian cosmologies to vindicate their philosophical status. They reach similar conclusions with regards to ways of knowing to those expressed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his writing on “Amerindian perspectivism.” But it seems to me that he was more interested with defending his discipline, anthropology, rather than in the Indigenous thinkers he references or in questioning the colonial structures of Western knowledge. Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, *Metáforas Caníbales* (Katz, 2010).

51

Most of these artists think in their original languages, and in the process of making their artwork public have to negotiate how to interpret their epistemologies in the Spanish language. In my case I am taking a two further steps, into English, and then, into academic language. Antonio Pichilla and Manuel Chavajay, in conversation with the author, 2015.

52

Two authors interested in untranslatability, Franco Moretti and Barbara Cassin (2004-2005), have proposed that mistranslations are centrally characteristic to a global world. They opted for collaborative laboratories of translation and academic displacement in order to experience untranslatability as a symptom of the limits of our cartographies. See also Emily Apter, “Untranslatables: A World System,” *New Literary History* 39, no. 3. (Summer 2008): 581-598.

53

Marisol De la Cadena and Mario Blaser, “Introduction,” *WAN journal*, no. 4 (January 2009).

54

Marisol de la Cadena speaks about two epistemological frames for politics in Peru, where indigenous people have vernacular politics that are invisibilized by modern literate politics. When both coexist, indigenous people are forced to renounce their own understanding of politics as the framework for political conversations in favor of the Western one; when the indigenous epistemological framework (and its understanding of politics) begins to be included is where she locates the beginning of “the political.” See Marisol de la Cadena, “Política indígena: un análisis más allá de ‘la política.’”

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Daniel Muzyczuk

Alienated Accumulations: Does Time- Based Media Belong in the Museum?

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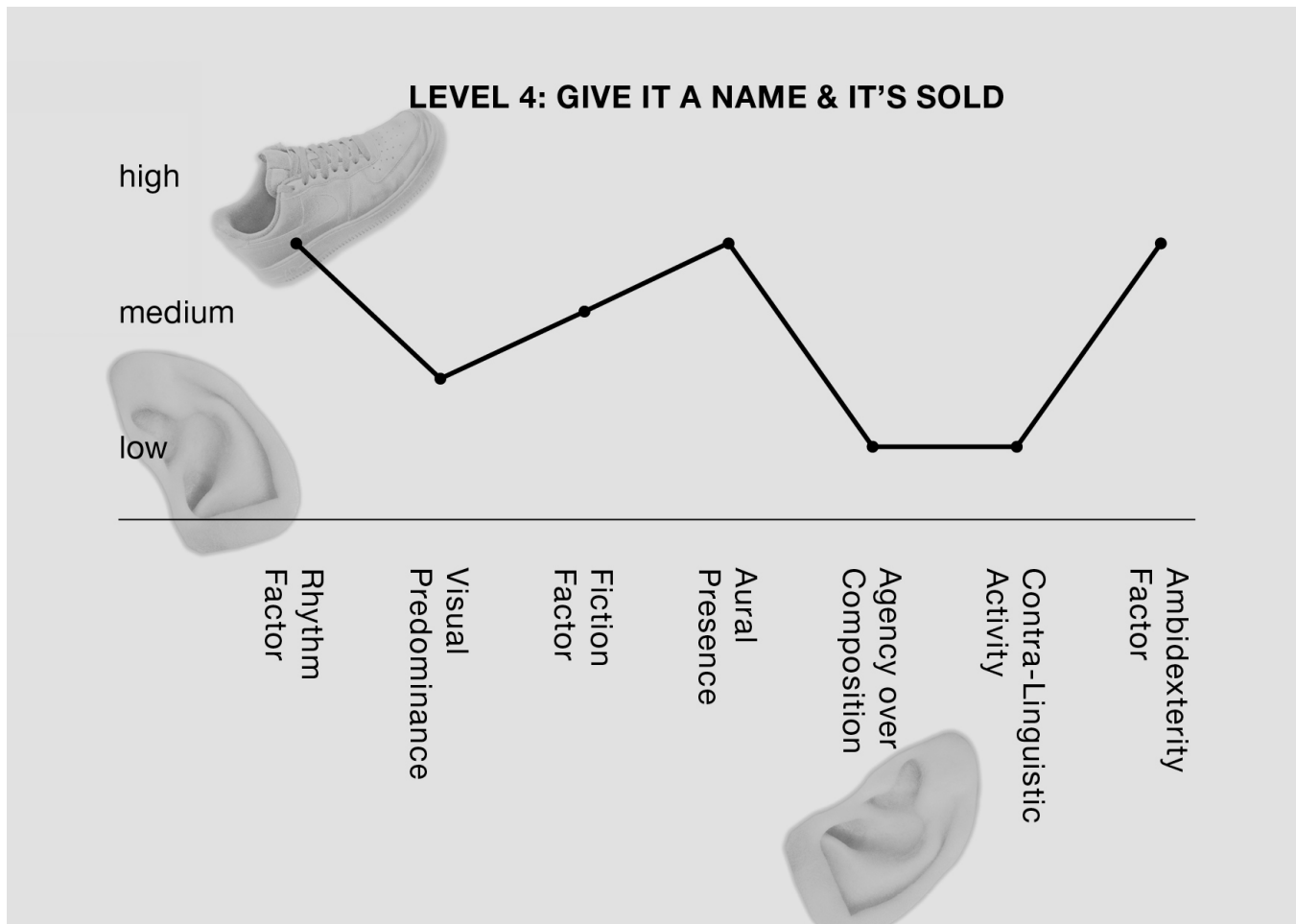
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I mean something. Or maybe I don't mean anything. I am the resurrection of the SPACE and I am the resurrection of TIME.
– Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*

Beginning in April 2016, for about a month, several dancers and choreographers occupied the first floor of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.¹ The exhibition “Frames of Reference: Choreography in the Museum,” curated by Katarzyna Stoboda and Mateusz Szymanówka, transformed the museum’s spaces into open studios, which in turn made visible to the public the working methods of the choreographers. The experience of observing the dance in its nascent form questioned the institutional framework in which the unfinished pieces were presented, redirecting the spectator’s focus towards critically assessing the institution’s structure. Not experiencing a dance as a finished piece left many of the visitors baffled. Yet, it ultimately revealed the significance of including time-based art in an institution – a testimony to how time can be abstracted, documented, and held in reserve.²

The first floor of the building (once a nineteenth-century palace) was sectioned into rooms that were distributed to individual artists to use as their studio and rehearsal space. While some of the artists arranged the rooms into small-scale installations, others transformed their entire workspaces into exhibiting institutions. The artists performed new movements connected to current projects they were researching and developing. Since these were unfinished pieces, there was, in fact, nothing “to be seen,” only fragmented movements like exercising, resting, reading, and, as was often the case, distracted browsing of the internet. Artists previously in need of rehearsal spaces turned the museum into a real estate market of new time-based work.

The act of handing over museum rooms to be filled with expanded choreographic forms had a dual effect. It not only allowed the spectator to witness the development process and be offered tools to better understand the pieces; it also rendered each room an area of artistic autonomy, given that the now alienated artists were not obligated to respond to each other. These “living spaces” – unable to share in one, singular narrative – required that each artist stand on their own. The resulting alienation effect brings to mind the duality of “synchronic” and “diachronic” exhibitions discussed by Rosalind Krauss. Krauss reformulates the tension between institutions dedicated to the preservation and presentation of contemporary



Adam Linder, *Auto Ficto Reflexo*, 2015. Interpretive diagram. Courtesy of the artist.

art, and the logic of late capitalism. This reformulation came after Krauss spoke to Thomas Krens, who at the time was the director of the Guggenheim. As Krauss recounts, Krens described his vision of a new type of relation between artistic production and its spatial presentation:

What was revealed to him was not only the tininess and inadequacy of most museums, but that the encyclopedic nature of the museum was “over.” What museums must now do ... was to select a very few artists from the vast array of modernist aesthetic production and to collect and show these few in depth over the full amount of space it might take to really experience the cumulative impact of a given oeuvre.³

Krauss points out that this “discursive change” Krens imagines is one that shifts from diachrony to synchrony. She explains that through this transformation, the entire model of the museum – which previously exhibited works in a way that connected different eras and forms of art into a whole and coherent story – now becomes a space for the presentation of a disconnected selection of artists. The key difference for the spectator is that instead of time, it is the experience of space and the use of architecture as a tool that enhances the art. This transformation can be seen as an evolution of installation art as it intersects with the increasingly autonomous role of the artist. The logic of capitalism had stripped bare the

museum’s pretensions to historical preservation, now revealing a relation that epitomizes the commodification of art.

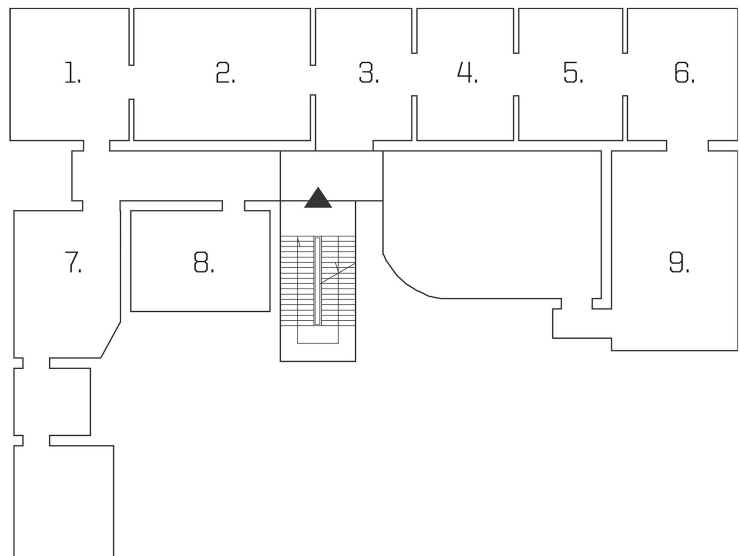
In its nascence, installation art can be seen as an attempt by artists to gain autonomy over the context of their work as they push against the institutional–curatorial mediation complex. Until then, the historiography imposed by institutions was a one-way street. Individual pieces of art were instrumentalized and robbed of their singularity in order to render a teleology that established a history of art as a common task and shared fate. Artworks, formerly points in a grand narrative woven together by institutions, now asserted their own independent, unshared space – a hidden aspect overlooked by Szeemann’s notion of “individual mythologies.” Artists, now directly addressing the varied spaces and frameworks in which their works were being presented, defined art’s singularity as an “accumulation of space.” While such utopian spaces might have been intended by the artist to serve nonconformist ends, they also prepared spectators for a reformulation of the capitalist logic of work. While the spaces exhibited and enabled autonomy, they also simultaneously promoted liberalism and staged market-driven values. In this way installation art, at its beginning, embodied a paradox – subversive works presented in an institutional space reaching a new level of commerce.

While Krauss was concerned with installation art, the tension between art, the institution, and the market she examined can also illuminate the logic of the rise of time-based

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msl
Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi
ul. Więckowskiego 36

1. Ramona Nagabczyńska
2. Przemek Kamiński
3. Alex Baczyński-Jenkins (08.05)
4. Kasia Wolińska
5. Magdalena Ptasznik
6. Agata Siniarska
7. Iza Szostak
8. Anna Nowicka
9. Marta Ziółek



Floor plan of the exhibition “Frames of Reference: Choreography in the Museum,” 2016. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki.

art in the contemporary museum, especially new media such as film and video. When it comes to these forms of artistic expression, the role of the spectator is vexed and baffling – not unlike the spectator of performance-based work in museums. Museum visitors know all too well the fragmented attention that film and video works induce. While it cannot be argued that film and video don't belong in the art space, their successful presentation depends on very specific conditions.

A screen is a technology that creates the illusion of space, with the effect of localizing the viewer. In a movie theater, the comfortable chairs form part of an apparatus whose function, in preventing movement, is to create a passive subject. Bernard Stiegler describes the full cinematic effect that is desired by the spectator:

The coincidence between the film's flow and that of the film spectator's consciousness, linked by phonographic flux, initiates the mechanics of a complete adoption of the film's time with that of the spectator's consciousness – which, since it is itself a flux, is captured and “channelled” by the flow of images. This movement, infused with every spectator's desire for

stories, liberates the movements of consciousness typical of cinematic emotion.⁴

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While Stiegler was writing about cinema, film in an art institution can only partly resemble this experience, which completely immerses the viewer and removes them from real time. By contrast, the museum visitor, with distracted attention, roams through the museum from object to object in search of something to focus on – an experience of art that is shaped by rest and movement. Unlike in a cinema theater, the viewer in an exhibition is conscious that there is always something more to discover, constantly delaying a sense of completeness. Attempting to reconcile this conflict between different modes of attention, the institution tries to either transform, as much as possible, a gallery space into a cinema space, or to reformulate a film into art that can be viewed in parts (it's crucial that the film's general atmosphere be more important than the narrative plot). This constructed experience oscillates between concentrated attention and distracted spectatorship, with the film on infinite loop – a mechanism of eternal return for the film or video material. Since the film or video is often available in its entirety



Adam Linder, *Choreographic Service No.1: Some Cleaning*, 2013. One dancer, duration variable. Pictured in this image is Enrico Ticconi at Kunstverein Hannover (2016). Courtesy of the artist.



Alessandro Bosetti, fragments of the gesture based score for *Acqua sfocata, utilità del fuoco ed altre risposte concentriche*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.





outside the institution, the spectator rarely watches it until the end. There is much more to uncover elsewhere. The rhythm of movement that is common to viewing, for example, an exhibition of paintings, is replaced by an elongated version in which rests are much longer than movements. But just like the synchronic spaces that Krauss discusses, the temporal dimension of moving-image works in exhibition venues transforms into abstracted time. As the presentation space mimics a cinema-like non-space – which could very well be exchanged for anyplace else – the time of a projection is removed from its original context. It now confronts an attention span that is continuously distracted by thoughts of what else there is to see in the exhibition.

Distraction in the exhibition space is further encouraged by the growing multiplicity of different media. As Peter Osborne writes:

This need for distraction is readily fulfilled by the gallery: by the sounds and movements and sight of other viewers, by the beguiling architecture of gallery-space (which so frequently overwhelms the works), the view out the window, the curatorial information cards, the attendants, by the gallery shop, the café – as well as by other works. Perhaps this is the function of grouping works together in the same visual space: they provide a psychic space of distraction which eases the anxiety involved in giving oneself up to a particular work. Other works “gaze” at the viewer behind his or her back, making their own claims on their time, providing the reassurance of possible distraction.⁵

This “psychic space of distraction” also sets the conditions in which performance and live art are experienced within the museum. However, dance, and more generally performance art, must not only acknowledge these conditions of distraction as a symptom of capital. They must also challenge them. We can identify two distinct situations or “places” in which time-based work is typically presented in a museum context: one is a replica of the performance art venue, while the other uses the specificity of the exhibition space to expose the constraints of that space.

While exhibition venues are sometimes reconfigured to look like concert halls or theaters, these transformations are merely temporary – for the duration of the performance. Rather than the physical setting adapting to the performance, it is the performance that is required to adapt to the conventions of the exhibition space, including the conditions of attention and distraction. Claire Bishop refers to

these transformations as the “retemporalization” of performance – an adjustment of “event time” to “exhibition time.”⁶ This adjustment could also be compared to the change from the diachronic to the synchronic. And while it may seem that live art reintroduces narrative into the museum, performance also invites fragmented attention and partial spectatorship in a “psychic space of distraction.” As a result, the narratives take the shape not so much of connected sequences of movement, but rather of semi-independent parts that can be fully understood without having to experience the work in its entirety.

Sometimes these works also consciously take into consideration the institutional framework of the performances, turning the work into a form of institutional critique. An example of this is the work of Adam Linder, who has said of his choreography, “If it’s institutional critique, it’s located in the transaction of the bodies.”⁷ Here the choreographer seems to reference recent discourse on the presence of dance in museums. Most notably, this includes the work of Sven Lütticken, whose article “Dance Factory” applies the ideas of Italian operaist thinkers to dance. Just as Krauss observed the logic of capitalism at the core of museum presentation, Lütticken sees the museum’s growing interest in the works of choreographers as reflecting exploitative relations of labor in the wider economy. Delegated performance is often criticized for instrumentalizing the performer, or worker, while not offering them prestige and wealth equal to that of the choreographer. Linder uses such criticism to reflect on the ways that art might reveal the limitations of choreography. His pieces that offer “choreographic services” are comprised of both the live performance as well as labor contracts – an integral part of the work that sets the service relations in motion and structures the performance itself. *Choreographic Service No. 1: Some Cleaning*, for example, was partly based on a set of movements used in cleaning.

The act of revealing the hidden work of maintenance and care involved in exhibition spaces can be traced back to Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Linder, by contrast, represents the act of service in the performance itself. For Linder, the institutional critique is oriented towards the expectations of the audience, which desires a self-reflective work rather than one that is directed towards the institution. Works like these raise the concern that a bold and possibly risky practice based on realism might be replaced by well-known and safe representations. Linder positions his works on this shaky foundation:

There are two factors that allow me to

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DD Dorvillier, *Catalogue of Steps*, 2015. Casa de Serralves Collection: rehearsal and presentation. Photo: Filipe Braga, Copyright: Fundação de Serralves, Porto.

propose this work in the visual arts. One is that the rules of the game that go along with a format like the services have a tension because the dominant operation in art is with objects, and dance has such a different way of being handled. The other is that I think that the theatre world is less interested in thinking about and has less of a history of dealing with notions of “context”: It’s a metaphor, but remember in the theatre the space that surrounds the focalized activity is still dark. Thinking of a work not just as a discrete thing but as the conditions that bring it into being is not that common in dance, in the theatre – at least not among the people I’ve thus far encountered. I think that somehow the field of visual arts has allowed me to work through these ideas in a way the theatre has not.⁸

Alessandro Bosetti, a composer interested in the musicality of language, establishes a different kind of social relation through the performance of his scores. At the Serralves Foundation in 2017, he realized a version of *Acqua sfocata, utilità del fuoco ed altre risposte concentriche*, a five-hour durational work with twelve volunteer performers and himself as conductor. He devised a set of gestures and operations that enabled him to control the volume, frequency, and modulation of the voices of the ensemble as they naturally conversed with one another. For a viewer just peeking in, the performance might at first have seemed like a chaotic panel discussion. However, in the work – based on the idea that a set of voices can be treated as a bank of samples or set of plug-ins manipulated in real time – Bosetti conducts the forms of speech. A seemingly casual situation is in fact a highly controlled process where the performer has liberty only with the subject matter of their speech.

The notion of involuntary speech is central to Bosetti’s practice. In his words:

We are “spoken” by a voice that comes from elsewhere but disguises itself as “our voice.” I have to think of why in many of my pieces I am so obsessed by dubbing, speaking in *unisono* with other voices. I always try to speak along with them. Never to succumb to the illusion that this is me. “Me” is “me” and “them” is “them,” there should be two hearable voices there at the same time to save me from confusion. One is the corpse and the other is me. The ideal situation would be that of having a time machine allowing us to know in advance everything that will be said in the future. If,

for example, we are invited to a dinner we will already know every single word that will be spoken at the table. We could then learn it by heart and speak it in *unisono* with the others. We will speak our part and then all other parts as well.⁹

Unisono, or two or more sounds in the same pitch, is intersubjective and enabled by a score that determines the mechanism of operations rather than the sequence. Nonetheless, the score still represents time and space in reserve, and forms a plateau on which the voices can, for a moment, form a community. Like duration, the space in which the work happens is a secondary consideration. The piece consists of bodies consistently activated and put to rest by the conductor. Labor, then, is alienated from the individual and becomes part of the intersubjective task. While the work isolates itself from other events in the museum, diachrony is reintroduced and becomes integral to the piece. Since the narrative is replaced by a sequence of orchestrated but largely nonverbal utterances, the piece produces a sense of staging a mnemotechnical device that activates accumulated speech. In a manner similar to Linder’s work, Bosetti uses the score to create a discreet community with bodies uttering words in reserve. The musicality of cut-and-pasted parts of speech offers a synchronic reading of the piece. The listener is led from an initial impression of a synchronized community into constant disruptions of any sort of continuity.

Choreographer and performer DD Dorvillier provides a more direct take on questions related to the spatial and temporal localization of live art:

I don’t think there’s any way of making dance anything but dance. Dance is a time machine. I want to touch the French soldier’s calves dancing the gavotte. I want to sniff the hair of the Haitian dancer at the crossroads. I want to be there when Mr. Wiggles wiggles. I want to hear the clunking toe boxes of all the ballerinas exiting the stage at once. I want to be there when they throw tomatoes at Nijinsky. I want to be there in Tiananmen Square, in Ramallah, in Bulgaria, for all those dances, and all those reasons for dancing. These are images of dance, a mere pinch of salt from an inexhaustible mountain that continues for days, weeks, years, forever.¹⁰

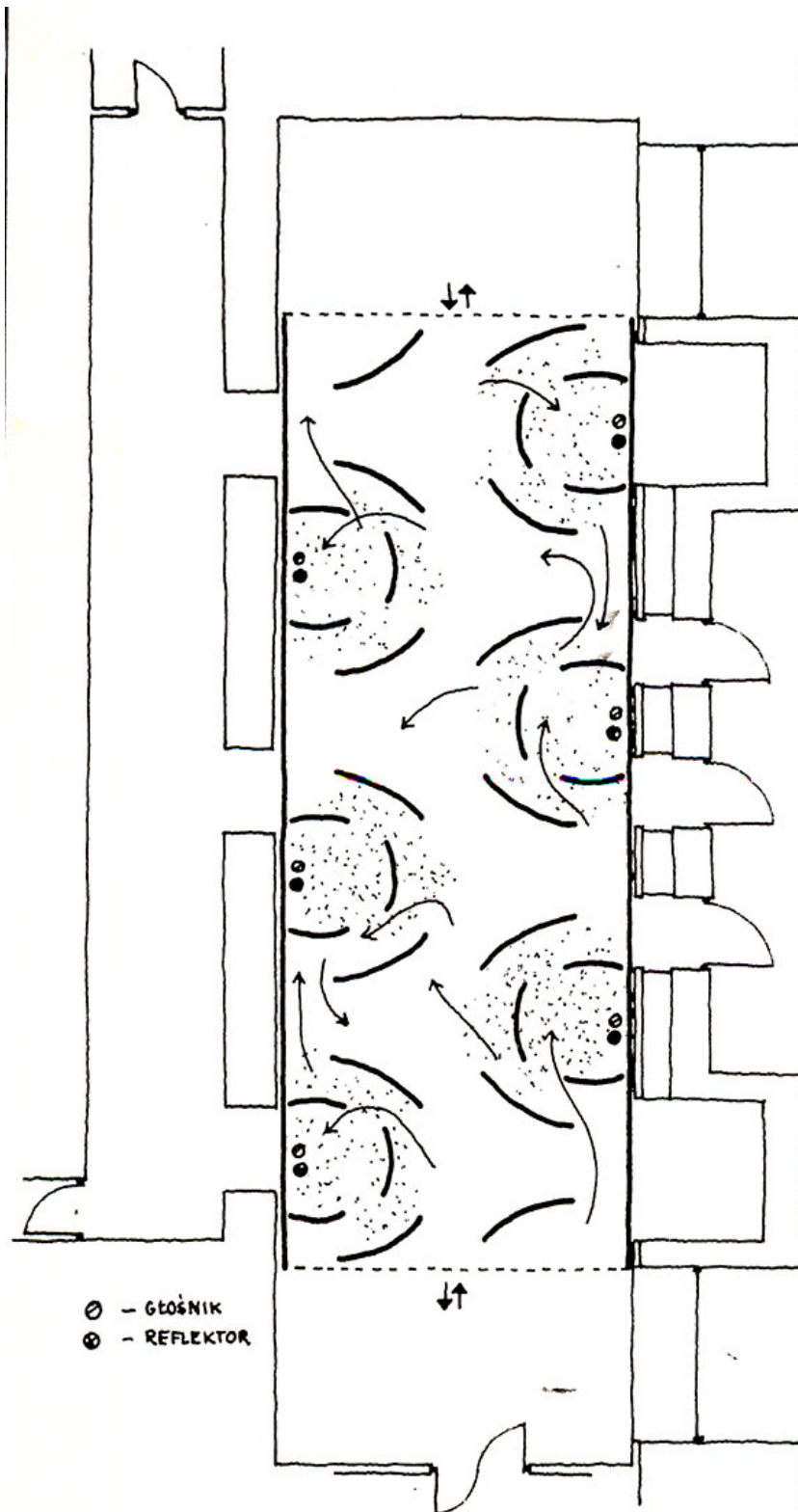
The multi-layered temporality experienced in Dorvillier’s works is further enhanced by the notion of accumulated spaces within them. That is to say, each work is performed in a real space,

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Ramona Nagabczyńska in "Frames of Reference: Choreography in the Museum," 2016. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2016. Photo: J. Kostarska-Talaga. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki.



Floor plan for *Spatial-Musical Composition* by Teresa Kelm, Zygmunt Krauze and Henryk Morel, 1968. Galeria Współczesna, Courtesy of the artists.

and is also a sum of abstracted and past rooms. She recounts one of her pieces:

I was making *No Change* for over a year and a half, in lots of different spaces. Every time I rehearsed in a new place, I repeated what I did the day before in the studio. It was about reproducibility: everything had to be same. So, if today there's a window here but next month I'm working in another country, and I have studio time for a few hours after class, and there's no window there, I still refer to that place as a window and I still try to look through the window; I still put my arm out the window even though it's a wall ... I started using a trashcan and then the trashcan finally became a bucket. But every room I went into I had to find a container that was like a trashcan. So, each space that I worked in was an accumulated space.¹¹

In considering these multiple layers of context that simultaneously root and displace the work, she continues: "I have gotten so much energy from discussing my work in places that aren't typical dance institutions, the kind of discourse that has been extremely limited for years in the dance world."

An art institution is a repository of spaces where previous time-based media has already occurred. An exhibition can be treated as an extended event that continues past the media it initially presents. Dorvillier's observation points to a recent institutional drive towards the reconstruction of music, performance, or installation from an intermedia moment during which ephemeral pieces were beginning to be established in museums – namely, the work of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and '70s. After all, this was the era of the first massive inclusion of time-based media in the art institution. Recently reignited interest in figures like Tony Conrad may represent an attempt to rewrite the history of art from the last century in terms of the interests of the present moment. For example, in writing about Conrad in 2008, Branden W. Joseph proposes developing a new genealogy with the phrase "minor history."¹² While Conrad, Catherine Christer Hennix, and Marianne Amacher are missing links in the formation of art music and its presence within art institutions, Simone Forti might also signify a similar process of reprisal and revival that establishes the foundations of choreography in the museum. The ephemeral character of these works is obviously one of the primary issues in reimagining the past. As a result, these artists' more complex works were never preserved. The drive to reconstruct these moments of inclusion

signifies the need for grounding the new wave in the past. For years, the pioneering works of time-based art were only accessible through documentation, providing only an idea of the event through photographic witness.

How is it possible to reconstruct such a movement? Just as Dorvillier writes of accumulated spaces, we should be thinking of the accumulated time that an institution can activate through performance. David Crowley and I faced a similar set of problems earlier this decade, while seeking to reconstruct the histories of audiovisual experiments in the Eastern Bloc. In 2012, the exhibition "Sounding the Body Electric" addressed the history of authorities on experimental art and new technologies – primarily in the cooperation between visual artists and musicians. The archival materials, not originally intended as works of art, needed to enter the exhibition and become primarily visual objects. Much of this material was prepared by composers from the late 1950s who found themselves doing films and developing new languages for graphic scores. These archival materials helped to decode the works of intermedia art, and subsequently led to a unique realization: the institutional frame is strong enough to turn a musical score from an object used to record and originally transmit music into an object of aesthetic contemplation. Performances of reconstructed time-based audiovisual pieces are arguably similar to the instruction-based works of conceptual art or Fluxus event scores. The common grounding of these materials within the art-institutional framework allows an architectural floor plan that uses the language of space to become a time-based audiovisual score. A 1968 sound installation at Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw entitled *Spatial Musical Composition* provides another example of music being transformed into an art object. The architect Teresa Kelm, composer Zygmunt Krauze, and the sculptor Henryk Morel created a corridor with six sound booths, each lit by a different color and equipped with a source of sound. Extended soundproof walls allowed for soundtracks to be mixed in the separated spaces. Equipped with tools offered by the artists, the visitors moved freely between the spaces in order to create their own version of the composition. The simple project was powerful in its installation: it enacted a model of working with taped music so that sound, organized in intersecting layers, became a means of handing control of the audiosphere over to the listener. In this way, the installation challenged the passive activity of listening to music in a concert hall. The modular character of the composition made it easy to separate and blend the tracks and

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Teresa Kelm, Zygmunt Krauze, and Henryk Morel, *Spatial-Musical Composition*, 1968–2012. Reconstruction at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki.



Alessandro Bosetti, *Acqua sfocata, utilità del fuoco ed altre risposte concentriche*, 2017. Performance in Serralves. Photo: André Delhay Copyright: Fundação de Serralves, Porto.

allow the audience to acknowledge the principles of recording and mixing tools. The artists note:

The piece is composed of several audio layers, each being emitted at the same time by a single speaker installed inside a soundproof booth. Moving from booth to booth, the listener integrates the separate tracks into a single whole. Unlike in the concert hall, the piece does not unfold in time in front of a passive listener, but rather the listener can shape the piece depending on the path they take and the time they spend in the designed space.¹³

As the first sound installation in Poland, it was frequently referenced in literature on experimental music, but essentially unavailable to entire generations of researchers. The work was a missing link in the reception of the avant-garde in the 1960s. The connection between this piece and, for example, the early audiovisual works of Krzysztof Wodiczko, would be based solely on written accounts.

Questions surrounding the later accession of an audiovisual work of art posed by our reconstruction of *Spatial Musical Composition* can also be found in Robert Ashley's composition *Yes, But Is It Edible?* (1999). The performance instructions here were simple: the lines should be uttered in one breath, and after each line is a mark with a cluster of sound coming from a piano. Ashley argued that part of the revolution of graphic notation was that it also involved space:

There was a lot of experimenting that ended about thirty years ago based on the "hypothesis" that "space" equaled "time" in musical notation. These were experiments, because in the traditional notation of Western music space had never been equated with time except in transcription. The experiments were designed to determine if musicians could learn to "read" space (on paper) as time.¹⁴

Ashley's observation seems to directly address Kelm, Krauze, and Morel's work – the floor plans of which resemble a mix of spatial arrangement and musical notation, rather than simply a work of architectural design. Kelm and Krauze's description of their piece points to this possibility: "Music and architecture thus form an integral whole here and can only exist *in mutual connection*. Architecture, like an instrument, is indispensable for the piece to be performed. The operation of the piece of music can be connected to that of the visual sequence."¹⁵ Today, a leaflet

from the original exhibition can be treated as an instruction for the work to be repeated, reperformed, reinterpreted. In this sense, it becomes achronological. With this reasoning in mind, Muzeum Sztuki acquired the work not as a physical object, but rather as a set of instructions for realizing a musical piece. Now the piece has a transitory character within the museum setting: it is available as archival material, but can also be performed in the space for a special exhibition. So far, the museum has performed it twice.

Like the works of DD Dorvillier, the two performances of this piece occupy real space while also constituting an afterimage of the 1968 installation. There is a serious obstacle, rooted in modernist aesthetics, to the methodology of treating installation art as a performance of a score: the question of authenticity and originality. But were the Fluxus event scores or Sol Le Witt's instructions so different than a "Structure That *Wants* to Be Another Structure"? As shown above, recent developments in the area of performance offer new tools for revisiting founding moments of time-based media. Delegated performance is, after all, also a method of preserving ephemeral art, and its popularization pushes against the requirement of authenticity as a valid criterion of value.

The extended definition of a score that addresses its own spatial design is a mechanism, based on mnemotechnics, which renegotiates the temporal and spatial coordinates of the action. For Linder, the score can be the work contract that questions institutional regulations. For Dorvillier, it is an accumulated space in which movements are set into motion. And for Bosetti, it is the accumulated involuntary speech that forms an alienated speaking sculpture. Using a score as a pretext to the performance never proves neutral towards the sensation of time. The score is time in reserve. But it can also be an accumulated space that allows for the activation of reserved time. Strangely, this takes us back to the moment of Krauss diagnosing the relation between the logic of capitalism and the structure of the museum exhibition. The operation of time as labor addresses performance as an oscillation between synchrony and diachrony, which doubles as a relation of capital. Accumulated time can be exchanged for space, since both share the same logic and both are units of the same currency. We can attribute the expanded logic of notation to the condition that allows the synchronic to gain dominance. A score does not care for the date – every single iteration of a performance is unique and equivalent. Since only the date of the composition matters, the chronological continuity of both grand and

smaller narratives is disrupted and alienated.

Returning to Stiegler, he claims that:

It is this general equivalence in which time gives way to a spatial figure that allows for what Marx calls the “general equivalent”: capital, as currency accumulating an abstract value because of its manipulability, is thus also time placed in reserve, preserved, in some sense crystallized or congealed, as Queneau has said. Tertiary retention, whose most abstract form is money, and which produces abstraction through the correspondence principle, at the same time opens up the possibility of abridged manipulation in which positional numeration is a systematic exploitation in the form of a system of spatial equivalences (images and numbers), of temporal operations (enumerations as the fallible streaming of consciousness).¹⁶

Stiegler introduces another important element into the equation of performance and spectatorship: the technical devices that enhance memory can be seen as tools of tertiary retention. A museum that is formed as a mnemotechnical instrument accepts live art as it disrupts narrative, spatial, and temporal constants. After all,

Diachrony and synchrony are tendencies that form and re-form ceaselessly, and we will see that they cannot be in opposition over a significant amount of time without tragic consequences. Yet their composition is precisely what from the hyperindustrialization of temporal objects constitutes the possibility of de-composition.¹⁷

The brief moments of rest in the oscillation between diachrony and synchrony reveal the exploitation of temporal objects. But within these hidden islands or cracks is also a hope for a renegotiation of potentialities, just as Susan Howe imagines in the evocations of music:

Listening now, it’s as if a gate opens through mirror-uttering to an unknowable imagining self in heartbeat range. When we listen to music we are also listening to pauses called “rests.” “Rests” could be wishes that haven’t yet betrayed themselves and can only be transferred evocatively.¹⁸

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Audio credits:

12.21.20 / 22:29:30 EST

Piotr Kurek, *Falling*, from: Piotr Kurek, *A Sacrifice Shall Be Made / All The Wicked Scenes*, LP, MondoJ, 2020
<https://mondoj.bandcamp.com/album/a-sacrifice-shall-be-made-all-the-wicked-scenes>
Robert Piotrowicz, *Flares Et Wasser Hole*, from: Robert Piotrowicz, *Euzebio*, LP, Bött Records/Recognition/Musica Genera, 2019
<https://robertpiotrowicz.bandcamp.com/album/euzebio>

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1
This article was written long before the Covid-19 pandemic, and it touches on experiences that are now unavailable to most of us. The current situation has generated a wave of attempts to move the culture of museum participation online, creating new relations mediated by the internet. I don't believe this evolution contradicts the arguments in this essay, and it might even represent a logical implication of them – but that discussion must be left for a future essay.

2
Other projects with a similar agenda include, among others, the film exhibition "Inoperative Community," curated by Dan Kidner; "Notes from the Underground," an exhibition on music and the counterculture in the Eastern Bloc curated by David Crowley and myself; and, most recently, "Codex Subpartum," which involved transforming works from the Muzeum Sztuki collection into graphic scores prepared by Barbara Kinga Majewska, Michał Libera, and Konrad Smoleński.

3
Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October*, no. 54 (Autumn 1990), 7.

4
Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford University Press, 2011), 12.

5
Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2013), 186.

6
See Claire Bishop, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention," *The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018).

7
"Dance in the Ruins: David Everitt Howe Talks to Adam Linder," *Mousse*, no. 50 (October–November 2015), 81.

8
Uri Aran, "I wanted to teach the white cube how to take theatricality," interview with Adam Linder, *Spike*, November 1, 2017
<http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/i-wanted-teach-white-cube-how-take-theatricality>.

9
"A Conversation between Sound Artist Alessandro Bosetti and Philosopher Alexander Garcia Düttman," <http://www.melgun.net/read/a-conversation-between-sound-artist-alessandro-bosetti-and-philosopher-alexander-garcia-duettman/>.

10

DD Dorvillier and Jenn Joy in conversation, in *Diary of an Image*, eds. Jenn Joy and DD Dorvillier (Danspace Project, 2014), 14.

11
"DD Dorvillier by Suzanne Snider," *BOMB Magazine*, September 24, 2012
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/dd-dorvillier/>.

12
Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (Zone Books, 2008).

13
Teresa Kelm and Zygmunt Krauze, *Spatial-Musical Composition* (Galeria Współczesna, 1968). Quoted in David Crowley and Daniel Muzyczuk, *Sounding the Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957-1984*, (Muzeum Sztuki, 2012), 149.

14
Robert Ashley, "Yes, But Is It Edible?," in *Yes, But Is It Edible? The Music of Robert Ashley, for Two or More Voices*, eds. Will Holder and Alex Waterman (New Documents, 2014), 131.

15
Teresa Kelm and Zygmunt Krauze, *Spatial-Musical Composition*, 149.

16
Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 3, 54.

17
Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 3, 3.

18
Susan Howe, *This That* (New Directions, 2010).

Franco “Bifo” Berardi and
Massimiliano Geraci
**Killing Swarm,
Part 3**

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Killing Swarm, Part 3

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In the House of the Everpresent

He reached Metropical by late morning. He had the entire afternoon at his disposal, and he wanted to spend it in the pavilions of the House of the Everpresent. According to House philosophy, Federica was not buried. She was paused, or preserved.

The word “preserved” made Isidoro think of colorful boxes in a sad supermarket. The idea of being “paused” was like saying she was waiting – but waiting for what? A change of her state of matter? The trumpets of the Resurrection? For a man like him, distanced from any religious feeling, those linguistic formulas had the false ring of consolation. Paula had wanted to entrust the remains of their daughter to this eccentric New Age cemetery, which was very costly.

The entrance to the House of the Everpresent seems like an azure lounge bar. A massive, translucent Persian blue dome filters dreamy turquoise light. The light is uniform, its source untraceable. It is motionless and mineralized and forms a sort of hill at the center of the entrance hall. You could even get lost inside it. Music more delicate than silence accompanies your footsteps, melancholic visitor in search of the slab that conceals one of the many eternities. All around, pitifully, phosphorescent epigraphs say the opposite of the truth. Isidoro looked around to survey the space and let his eyes get used to the half-light between the rows of dark marble slabs. Beside them were small hemispheric booths on three floors. He climbed to the second floor of the East wing, headed to Row 74, and recognized from a distance the hologram emblem of Federica, turning her face towards him with a slight smile.

Once he entered the booth, Isidoro sat on the wooden bench and the screen immediately lit up on the wall across from him. The Cells of the Everpresent had curved screens across which the lives of the departed ran nonstop. On the concave back wall runs a trembling, electronic afterlife. Ectoplasms of the past are continually rearranged by grabbing brief fragments of video recordings from the prior existence, and combining them with clips from the present. Friends and relatives are televised, sending in images where they recollect the one lying beneath.

Probabilistic Conversation

In the nine months following his daughter’s death, Isidoro had tried to hide from himself the senseless void of the event. He hadn’t asked questions, he hadn’t tried to understand. But now he would have liked to be able to ask her, “What happened to you, my girl, my little bat pup? What happened to you in the final months of your life, when I wasn’t there to protect you?”



Illustration by Claudia Di Leonardo.



Illustration by Flavio Marziano.





The flow of images across the screen in the Remembrance Booth could not answer his questions. There were mysterious and disturbing frames, whose meanings Isidoro could not understand. He wanted to go beyond the images and know more, divine something, speak with her as though she were really there. He decided to use the probabilistic conversation device. In the nine months that had already passed since her death, he had never accepted the idea of speaking to that frozen hypothetical construct of his daughter. But this time he needed to. He set up the system. He formulated a question, the first one that came to his mind. It wasn't a specific question; it was the vaguest, most unanswerable one.

"Were you ever happy?" he asked, typing on the keyboard and awaiting a reply.

The automatic responder took about ten seconds, examining thousands of interpretable utterances. It searched the archives of the dead woman's memory, processed the general meaning of her speech, and then, in her voice, it reacted in the only way possible: with a disconnected stream of memories and feelings.

"I'm beautiful. Everyone says so. I let people touch me hoping that someone will find me ..."

I was afraid of myself. I made the noise of an object. Inside of me was the metaphysical solitude of objects. I run along all the concatenations. I am every one of them. Every me every you every all of you every pronoun. *And I like to be you.*

Every node is aware of every other one. In every moment. And even of the fish flopping in the net.

"My first date with Luca, the one who made me happy and who made me eternally unhappy. His voice on the phone had a very professional tone. He said that he'd read my thesis on grace and he wanted to talk about it. He suggested we meet at the Green Bar where there was a Beckett Marathon and he lent his voice to the final rumblings of *The Unnameable*. Then, silence.

I wanted to follow him to his apartment. Zones of chaos alternating with flashes of maniacal order. I kept the nape of my neck in the hollow between his knees. I looked up. With his speech he slowed down the flow of things. His shirt was open. We started talking as though we could have stopped if we'd wanted to. Precisely because we look for a way to quiet things, the conversation continues. Nevertheless, I'm scared. Scared of what his words will do to me. His voice was calm and milky. Certain syllables pushed air forwards, others sucked it in. Still others stopped, pulsating. They melted. They trickled. They smelled of cinnamon. I shivered.

I was drowning in a flood of words. "Our world is nothing but a dense shadow rippled by

words and I can modify it by pulling the right strings. Open chasms wide and fall into them, or build myself bridges to cross them."

To Luca everything was a flood of associations. A merciless association machine.

"I am crouched down in a corner of my body. Your voice resounds in me as though inside a hollow statue.

Enormous.

Thoughts roll around my head dragging it from one place to another.

The gaze of a tightrope walker without a net.

I am late even for appointments that were never made. Everything I touch I transform into pain."

The Future Never Ends

He was looking for the words to ask her if Federica was his daughter. But Paula got there first.

"Maybe it's better if I go," she said. "While we're talking, the sun is getting older. And I can't possibly help you in any way, Isidoro. No one can help anyone, don't you see? Your problem is you don't know how to do anything but think about the past. A person who is determined to dig in the past will only wind up falling into it. And they won't be able to come back out, even dragging themselves by the elbows. I'm not interested in the past. I want to think about the future."

"The future?" stammered Isidoro. "What are you talking about? Do you not understand that our biological existence has reached its final chapter? Don't you see that entropy has seized our neurons, and it's making the world crumble?"

He had struck a nerve. For a moment, Paula was quiet. Then she pulled herself up and hissed angrily, "The future never ends."

As Paula walked away stiffly, an unforeseen, infernal abyss of the future opened in front of Isidoro Vitale. Beyond the large windows, the city had plunged into darkness. Now he could see the distant towers of the Allegorical Orphanage, which were slowly leaning to the left.

Paula's last sentence echoed in his ears the whole night.

The future does not end. Does not end. Does not end.

Nothing ever happens, but everything continues to happen.

He wanted to leave Metropical as soon as possible, and return to Martina. That was the only thought that relaxed him a little. He thought about the Borgosano mall, where they had met before all of this happened. Before the lid blew off and all the evil sprayed out and invaded the world.

Lucid Coma

It is a time of immobile gulls in the sky nailed to the freezing blue their beaks opened and empty and it is a time of dusty ruins. You must listen to the song of the seismographs that trace disconnected lines on temples sobbing thoughts under stroboscopic light that prevents seizing the passageways and always strikes you in between poses and hides the beginnings and the ends, the naked fissures of the eyes. You embrace the toilet to vomit and someone is above you stroking your forehead and kissing it and soon after you get lost in the rows of cars in the garage rows of pills on the pillow and the high and low points of the sine wave of the coma climb and slide down until a clang of thought a piercing fibrillation that leaves you breathless grips your arm and shoves you and you're on the cold blue floor with the shrieks of gulls lacerating your conscience and an unprovable theorem on your face.

I was sitting on the Miss Blanche chair,¹ its rose petals immobilized in coagulated transparency. No shape, all gesture. Matter is transcended, there is only my body floating in the air, among the petals.

Federica's house is all luminous transparency, liquid shapes. Even the wardrobes are made of acrylic. The function of concealment is overturned by a casual display. In the living room, a couch by Sturm und Plastic.² The bookshelves, the dining table, everything transparent. No shelter on which to fix your gaze.

Litracon walls, made of concrete shot through with millions of optical fibers that let light filter in, decomposing it into an infinity of luminous points. Federica's body behind it, in her room, slides, springs, and imitates existence, like in a shadow play.

In that room, I conceived the algorithms of psychoconnection. Projected at a fractal screen saver's center, bilious fragments of offal are divined. Liters of neurotic plasma. Cortical networks traversed by electronic liquids to produce extra-synaptic connections, white spinal fluid, lukewarm ejaculations of myelin. Dendritic trees sizzle, armies of axons stand at attention.

I saw air turbulence coagulate in human form, figures that moved only at the edges of my field of vision and spoke in faint whispers.

They rustled in my electric head charring my thoughts as though they were insects. The same stubborn insects that had taken my life by storm, attacking it obstinately from below. They tore off a piece at a time, unraveled it and covered it with their acids, venomous juices that melt your legs. The numbers trickled in dense streams on the monitor, forming hexadecimal puddles. For hours, I stared at the screen's icy blue discharge with a heart of amethyst at the center.

The People of the Sacred Waterfalls

Yonder, a blanket of clouds cloaks the Upper Amazon Basin flowing towards the West – where it collides with the cordillera of Ecuadorian Andes, icy waters flow down the mountains into the misty forest, beyond a tangle of difficult rapids, and where the rivers finally begin to wind in a more placid way – is the home of the Shuar people. They are the People of the Sacred Waterfalls, those liquid bulwarks that have protected them for millennia from their enemies. And they have had plenty of enemies.

In the early sixteenth century, just before the arrival of the conquistadores, the Inca emperor Huayna Capac had tried to subjugate the region. He was forced into an undignified retreat, and declared the Shuar unworthy of being his subjects.

In 1549, a few years after the death of Pizarro, a Spanish expedition came down from the source of the Upano River to its confluence with the Paute River and declared the region of the Shuar too inhospitable and its inhabitants too hostile and savage (*jíbaros*) to merit their attention.

Moved by avarice, the Spanish managed nonetheless to found there some years later a citadel, at some distance from the Shuar. This functioned until the Revolution of 1599, when the bellicose people decimated them, chasing them away for two centuries to come.

The governor was captured the first night, bound hand and foot, his mouth propped open with a bone, and fed to death with gold nuggets.

An *apací* woman, who looked as white as the Spaniards to their eyes, was unworthy of becoming a shaman and would never acquire the *arútmá wakán*, the spirits that would make her invincible, the powers through which to shape reality.

But Hilmegard was determined, and knew that in those impassable canyons she would be able to complete her training. The time she had spent with Marina Solos had earned her the esteem of the Unión Chamánica, which confederated shamans all the way from Alaskan ice to Tierra del Fuego. The Shuar had joined reluctantly, even though they understood it was the only way to save themselves from extinction. They could not, then, oppose the unwanted visit of that woman.

Hilmegard was put up near the cabin of Entsákua ("boiling river"), who lived with his mother's clan, composed of 26 family members. With her haughtiness and her indisputable ability to travel in the realm of the dead and in infinite cosmic frequencies, Hilmegard was accepted in just a few weeks.

She stayed with the women to ferment



manioc roots to extract for beer, or she took care of the vegetable garden or the little ones. Until one night, when Entsákua returned from a hunt, and said solemnly, “We’re ready.” The next day they would set out in the forest.

It took two days of machetes to reach a reddish bank where the river tied itself in a knot like the coils of an anaconda. The forest was alive, swollen, sexual. Swollen with clamor, rumbling, and endless chirping. Hilmegard was stripped naked and immersed in the water, in a recollection of amniotic fluid and birth.

And she was left alone for three days.

The mothers had given her a wet bolus of manioc, as big as the head of a newborn, for her journey in the forest. She would peel away its wrapper of leaves and eat it slowly, starting on the early morning of the second day. As for the rest, there was water all around, there was even too much of the green tobacco infusion, and two terracotta bottles which contained the sacred hallucinogenic brews that were full enough to surely convince some *arútmá wakán* to appear.

The mothers had revealed the secret names of the mixtures to her, without telling her too much about the recipes. Hilmegard knew well that one of them contained ayahuasca. In those regions, they prepare it with the ubiquitous banisteriopsis caapi, the sacred vine that reaches to the sky, and the chaliponga leaves. In the other bottle was *toè*, a potion derived from a species of Brugmansia which induces multisensorial and multiplanar visions. The frequency of the world that this tea gives access to is an irresistible call to the *arútmá wakán*.

Hilmegard drank some. And waited.

Nude. On the teeming cloak. Soil alive with a thousand voices. The leap was unexpected. She felt sucked into the air and at the same time permeated by decomposition on the ground. And in perpetual renewal.

The vision was of an intense midnight blue, with sharp flashes of amethyst.

Tarantulas rustled towards her pulling sparkling webs behind them, the color of darkness. From the hinges of the world, they slid towards her, converging at her navel, intent on receiving a short prayer in a mute language. A language that is not a language. A vibratory awareness that runs over their infinite legs.

And from her navel, then, sprang a paunchy tarantula, fatter than the others, that spat and spouted strands of spittle in the shape of words.

Hilmegard had to make a great effort to return herself to the awareness of being before a language. Such an insufficient system of signification. Graphic weaving on whose surface she was reflected. Which sent her image back to her. And infinite others. In rapid succession.

There were stars everywhere. Poor imploded

stars, with trails of meaning. Verbal and bodily comets. Sentient and triggering sensations. Federica. Grace. The mantra of the vision. The Zeminooatl. Hilmegard knew that the diaphanous girl, Federica, would return, bound as she was to her fate.

[...]

Entsákua took his leave of Hilmegard leaving her the most sacred *tsantsa* of his clan. A reddish-purple head with a strip of coarse cloth around the forehead, black hair and a flowing mustache. Hilmegard laid it in her bag and at dawn, she entered the forest again.

The Trumpet to the Morn

The azure Sea of Trees: This was what they called the forest that gently lapped against the hills around the city, stretching as far as eye could see.

Some nights you see the phosphorescent breath of the dead exhale from fronds rippled by the wind. Other nights it seems studded with light lures adrift on waves of vegetation: they dredge the bottom in search of what they could not find in life. Or what they lost.

[...]

This was a forest where at one time, intellectuals and lovers were overcome by cold. The Suicide Forest. More than thirty in the previous two months. But in this era of sad passions, any romantic or tragic aura is gone, and suicide has become a small gesture like any other. You open the drawer and a black hole like an open mouth or the Bible in the nightstand at a motel by the highway like a wing encircling your head or a gunshot right to the sunken chest on a forgotten night or like that frigid vortex inside the moth-eaten felt hat held between knees at the supermarket exit with dogs held back to keep from trembling and the entire universe doesn't know whether to keep going and you aren't sure you should keep going either opening drawers to swallow pills for headache for fatigue and pills for forgetting everything except the road taking you to work a black ribbon on a white page and slender fingers leaf and leaf through pages and you feel more and more weighed down and you are buried alive under blank pages like the life story you stopped telling yourself the bedtime story you don't quite recall and the entire winter since last winter has encrusted your walls and you can't get rid of it just by breathing on it and scraping at it with broken fingernails you paint purple and red green and gold you fill your lungs to fill your head with ring-around-the-rosies and you fell on your ass laughing your head off kissing the wet earth and you looked at the trees the stars your friends all together in a fragrant vortex and you were drowning but it was just pretend and you got back up and you ran and ran



until you left your life behind you and before you now is just this drawer that you open just like every day like a hundred times a day a small gesture like any other and inside you find something like an open mouth or a Bible or a black circling wing or a gunshot report so many years ago this black hole that draws you in and you are in the forest of the bedtime story you told yourself innumerable times but you don't remember it well you only know that you don't make it out.

[...]

They say that dying together is easier. Not because you encourage each other, but in terms of deference and respect for those who can't abide hesitation. If you change your mind, don't drag the others towards saving YOU. To them life is still a jagged ravine that devours.

There is a place where it's roomy to lie there is enough space for a last goodbye my silvery shadow of the evening farewell I say with balled fists I hold back the memory of the last canvas on the easel the last red that furrowed your face the blue(s) of the infinite moribund marine night it froths in your mouth it engulfs your soul your lungs goodbye

goodbye I tell myself
a damper on the trumpet to the morn
too quietly it calls us to convene again.

Chaos

"I hide myself back here to view them from above on the balustrade, while they wander around in the hall between 11:30 and 11:45. Like terrified gazelles they remain in unstable equilibrium leaning their chests over slightly and supporting their chins with their hands and looking off into the distance where there is nothing to look at that I can see.

They speak very little. But sometimes they speak in a frozen, refined language, as though they were knights from some age of crystal. They emit rapid sounds of rebuke, they warn each other of danger. I don't think they think of themselves as young humans. In fact, to be precise, I don't think they think of themselves at all. They don't think, their gaze rests on unrecognizable objects, and they compose elaborate sequences of functional gestures. The word is detached from the affectionate heat of bodies, so their bodies no longer know how to speak of themselves, and their words regress to abstract digits or guttural gestures.

Let me say even more. Erotic seduction is progressively disconnecting from sexual contact, and becoming purely aesthetic solicitation. The perfection of the frozen dance, the implacable automatism."

Professor Forza's words had such magnetic intensity that Alex, listening, had the feeling of

being lifted up. He spoke with refined proficiency, even if the sentences that he was constructing had no meaning at all.

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Flottements

Luca in the hospital. Immobile on his comatose meditations.

What matters is to eat and excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles.³

What if I ended it? If I decided right now to end it? Not to continue to get it over with, to finish again and again and not ever finish with the end – this ending that doesn't want to end. End in the true sense of the word or the untrue sense of the word. There wouldn't be any more words – just think – !not even "end."

Because of me, innocents have been slaughtered even if I couldn't prevent it and to tell the truth I haven't decided a damn thing. My life happened to me and that's it. And the lives of others happened to them without my being able to do anything about it.

... *flottements*, the coherence gone to pieces, the continuity bitched to hell because the units of continuity have abdicated their unity, they have gone multiple, they fall apart.⁴ I squatted in the dark.

Whose are the voices speaking in my head?

[...]

I don't know what I'm talking about I just need to talk. To not end or for to end yet again. This is what I've done so far, it's the only thing I know how to do. I'm speaking now of me: yes, henceforward I shall speak of none but me, that's decided, even though I should not succeed.⁵ Yes, my resolutions are remarkable in



this, that no sooner are they formed than something always happens to prevent their execution.⁶ I fail like no other dares fail. I won't speak of myself simply because I don't know what "myself" means. I watched people for hours. Sitting on a bench or on the ground leaning against a post, I listen to the conversations of others or I invent them based on a sign, a smile. I don't even know what I'm doing in this piazza thick with anemic mumbling existences. With this book of photographs in my hand. These fragments of a frozen time when light is reduced to pure geometry. A spindly child with bony legs like long sticks of wood. And in the background the black sea, the white sand, and all the rest is gray. The voices of the fishermen, the fish traps lined up, and the nets. Nets of memories, of silence, at times tattered, at times patched with unexpected connections and what the alcohol and the acid suggest, delivering words to you picked clean, in their natural whiteness. Words. Mother-water that generates life. Perhaps I overindulge in them. I use them as pillars to prop up my past and my future, to keep them from crumbling on top of me. This is why I invent stories. I know that sooner or later words will betray me. I can feel it. They will escape. Then I will be pushed back into primordial silence, an uninhabitable silence in which I will lose myself ...

On the Bridge

The staff in the Scientific Department managed to decipher the words written on Federica's note with great difficulty, and only in part.

Just a year ago I didn't know you existed, and now your existence bursts out of every nook and cranny ... I believed you, Luca. I loved you. But it wasn't enough. I wasn't happy. And I don't think you were, either (if my opinion still matters to you at all). I wasn't tidy. I was out of focus. Chott el Djerid. A portrait of light and heat.

What I remember of our nights together is unzipping and zipping back up and getting stuck, ripped clothing and asking and giving amid too much logic.

That night I asked you things I'd never ask you again: "What do you want from me?" I was confused. You confused me. You laughed and said, "Nothing, you know... really, nothing." Nothing, nothing, nothing... Me? Want something from you? Obsessing, I loved you for that nothing.

But there was still something I needed to know. Something of myself that I needed to discover. A buried clod that you could not break apart. This is why I had to leave, yelling at you that the Laws of Correspondences are bogus, that we can't all live inside a metric grid with all the accents in the proper place, that numbers don't explain everything. I tried to slip into silence. Into inner stillness. I tried to pull myself up by my hair and rip my own head off. To stick a hand down my throat and pull my stomach out. To never stop screaming against this incoherence. I needed wrinkled surfaces that go numb, organic matter that sticks to you, that makes you feel like you have a skin, that you are a goddamn skin!

The endless expanses of pure logic you disclosed at the start scared me. This dazzling ice that cannot be walked on. I needed Hell then. That's where I needed to go to find myself. Grab my own arm and wrench myself out of this life.

My body was so demanding it walked out on me. Before that you were still here, my love. So, I followed the man who bought my soul... What were we, Luca, if not this shortness of breath, this mosaic of disappearances and reappearances, an endless sowing of little signals so as not to lose ourselves entirely?

I am with you my love only with you forever with you wherever with you but not with you, only with you, without anything, nothing else.

Fiat Lux

They set Isidoro's body down on a white shroud under a surgical light to wait for Doctor Sibelius to finish his intense consultation. The old professor was not yet entirely dead, but his eyes seemed to be oblivious of everything in this world. Only that ring of light invaded his perception. The blinding lamp above him shone through the forests of neurovisual receptors and excited the impressionable spirit that was slowly making its way up the Eternal Steps. And now he remembered and whispered:

There in Heaven, a lamp shines in whose light
the Creator is made visible to His creature,

whose one peace lies in having Him in sight.

That lamp forms an enormous circle, such that its circumference, fitted to the Sun as a bright belt, would be too large by much.⁷

He sighed.

His eyes, invaded by the infinite brilliant shimmer, saw that Paradise was opening before him. In his ears, regular breathing and distant death rattles, faint voices, unintelligible words.

Advancing to the highest point, towards the still center, he recited to himself in a low voice:

Experiencing that Radiance, the spirit is so indrawn it is impossible even to think of ever turning from It.

For the good which is the will's ultimate object is all subsumed in It; and, being removed, all is defective which in It is perfect.⁸

Doctor Sibelius decided there was no urgent need to operate. He turned towards the nurse at his side who was watching Isidoro's lips move, and asked her, "Why should we inflict a postponement on this man, my dear Milena?"

The nurse replied, grimly, "It's terrible how stubbornly the soul wraps around the body."

Doctor Sibelius nodded his head in agreement, and reflected for a moment. Then he replied, pensively, "The blind persistence with which the soul refuses to pull away ... its infantile fear of solitude, and perhaps the terror of the cold beyond the atmosphere. The attachment to the horror of this life is incomprehensible – the unbridled need to be something instead of nothing."

Isidoro only heard distant whispers. Celestial choirs. And he continued to see the staircase of light.

As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find the emotional impression of his vision still powerful while its parts fade from his mind –

just such am I, having lost nearly all the vision itself, while in my heart I feel the sweetness of it yet distill and fall.⁹

Doctor Sibelius seemed surprised. "This man is

speaking!"

"He's not speaking, he's *whispering*," Milena corrected him. "Can you understand what he's saying?"

Sibelius moved his ear closer to listen.

Nor were my eyes confounded by that sea and altitude of space, but took in all, number and quality, of that ecstasy.¹⁰

"He's reciting lines from Dante's *Paradiso*," said Sibelius, standing back up and tugging his goatee.

"Whatever happened to Purgatory?" asked Isidoro in a small voice, mistaking Doctor Sibelius for the Eternal Father.

"You must have mistaken me for someone else," replied Sibelius, barely stifling a laugh. He continued, abruptly, "I'm not a guardian angel from on high."

Isidoro seemed not to understand.

Doctor Sibelius moved away, followed by Milena who impatiently walked into a private room. She rolled back the left sleeve of her smock and snapped her tourniquet.

Isidoro then saw a scene unfold through his mental fog.

Lucifer approached the throne and challenged the Creator. "You programmed an error. It's my job to free the world from the effects of the Head Programmer's schizophrenia."

The Creator turned his blinding gaze towards him, full of hatred. He could see the future and he could see the inevitable. He saw his children weeping as they moved away from the Garden. He saw the temptress, he saw the serpent. He saw heaps of corpses blackened by smoke and incandescent pincers harpooning the flesh of the suffering. And all of this was his own gift, offered to the innocent, unreasonably called forth from the belly of nothingness.

Lucifer courteously pointed that out, because Lucifer was no idiot. He was a gentleman with good manners. The slobbering Old Man was aware of His incontinence, and of His nightly, guilty, libidinous, nocturnal emission that turned against Him, baring His teeth.

Blood on His teeth, like Goya's Saturn, mauling flesh with his teeth.

"That's what you know how to do, you know how to maul," said Lucifer, the beautiful prince, laughing.

And the Old Man flung the prince of nothing headlong into the distance with an all-powerful gesture.

And then He asked him, as though he needed to apologize for all the programming mistakes, "Isn't the author perhaps an element of the code which he can't escape from? Isn't the

code, then, the real culprit in all this?"

Isidoro opened his eyes, and dissolved in his mind the vision of the Creator punished by Lucifer. Then he recited his last words, which, as usual, were not his own.

Within the depthless deep and clear
existence
of that abyss of light three circles shown -
three in color, one in circumference;

the second from the first, rainbow from
rainbow;
the third, an exhalation of pure fire
equally breathed forth by the other two.

But oh how much my words miss my
conception,
which is itself so far from what I saw
than to call it feeble would be rank
deception!¹¹

Then his lips became immobile and quiet.

The spirits in the room craved nothingness,
that beneficent atheist divinity, to whom even
the god Time bows down. And nothingness
reached them.

God said: *Fiat Lux*.¹² And darkness
appeared. Forever.

In the meantime, the Creator took the form
of a spider and hurried to string its spittle from
one beam to another of Luca's attic.

Satisfied, the repugnant spider scurries to
the center of the room, having done its work. The
attic, illuminated by the first rays of dawn, is now
a forest of slobbery threads. There are excited
footsteps down below. Someone is pushing in
the door. It is Alex, who has reached Luca's
address, after reading his revealing letter
addressed to Professor Vitale.

The slobbering spider is excited. The
throbbing beast weaves forever and ever.

Ghost Track

A deserted place: full moon, dilapidated building.
Ruins of a partially uncovered prison cell with
bars on the tiny window. A shred of moon slithers
across the wall, vibrating with the rapid passage
of clouds. There is a clanking of chains. A man
appears, walking with a solemn gait on unstable
legs that look to have been immobile for
centuries. His wrists are bound in irons. In front
of him, pulling him by a chain, is a young woman
with a red hoodie over her shoulders. The hood
conceals part of her hair. Other than this, she is
nude. Her body is entirely covered in a thin layer
of what looks like white clay, which is slightly
cracked. They pass through a network of tunnels.

From darkness to semi-darkness to the
moonlight that bursts forth through a breach in
the wall.

They pass the entrance to the cell, which is
missing a door. The woman accompanies him to a
wall and unchains him. Hanging from the wall is
a violin bow of unusual design. Worn out by time
and use, the bow swings in the wind sending
forth flashes of moon.

In one of the corners opposite the entrance,
a second man, an enormous one, is sitting on a
small stool facing the wall. He is semi-nude,
covered with a heavy layer of white greasepaint.
On his tattooed back is a dark green spider with
eight hooked legs. The man sets a large metal
pail on the floor, which he had been holding in
midair, as though he had just finished drinking
the contents.

On the bottom of the pail are four short
metal posts, like chair legs.

The prisoner takes the bow and moves to
the center of the cell. Flecks and smears of dried
blood are all around the peg from which the bow
hung.

Between the squeaking and puffing of
compressed air, the limbs of the pail are set in
motion, and it moves towards the prisoner,
stopping in front of him. He takes the bow and
gets ready to play. In place of the usual horsehair
are blood-stained metal fibers.

There is a rubbing of strings that vibrate
with difficulty. The melody is plaintive and sweet,
heart-rending and unsettling.

Sprays of red hit the man's clothes and face.
More blood drips into the pail.

Now we see the violin. It is the very arm of
the violinist. The strings are veins, tense and
throbbing. The expression on his face is
engrossed, concentrated so as not to feel the
pain.

The music becomes more violent, the sound
deeper. Serious. A vein-string breaks with a dull,
watery snap. A slight grimace of pain on the
violinist's face does not interrupt the
performance.

Blood sprays more quickly, reaching the
back of the fat man who is almost immobile. A
slight shiver shakes him from neck to buttocks.

We see the contents of the pail. A dark red
abyss only slightly agitated by widening jagged
circles.

Another vein bursts. The music drags on
towards the end, frenzied.

Blood pours into the pail.

A third vein blows. Now the piece is being
played on a single string. The highest one.

x

Excerpted from *Morte ai Vecchi* (Baldini & Castoldi, 2016).
This excerpt is translated from the Italian by Deborah
Wassertzug. Illustrations commissioned by the authors. All

illustrations by Flavio Marziano, unless otherwise noted.

15/16

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci
Killing Swarm, Part 3

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

Massimiliano Geraci is an anti-prohibition activist, expert in psychedelia, poetry, visionary art, and pop surrealism, and has edited the art books *True Visions* (2006) and *Mutant Kiddies* (2003).

1

Translator's note: Shiro Kuramata, *Miss Blanche Chair* (1988), paper flowers, acrylic resin, and aluminum.

2

Translator's note: A group of designers specializing in the use of plastic materials.

3

Translator's note: This is a reference to Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (Grove Press, 2006), 179.

4

Translator's note: This is a reference to Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (Grove Press, 1984), 49.

5

Translator's note: This is a reference to Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (Grove Press, 2009), 392.

6

Translator's note: This paraphrases Beckett, *Three Novels*, 27.

7

Dante, *The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (Penguin), lines 100–105.

8

Dante, *The Paradiso*, lines 100–105.

9

Dante, *The Paradiso*, lines 58–63.

10

Dante, *The Paradiso*, lines 118–20.

11

Dante, *The Paradiso*, lines 115–23.

12

Translator's note: From the Latin "Let there be light."

Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich
Obrist

Futuro, Presente, Passato: Remembering Germano Celant (1940–2020)

01/10

e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist
Futuro, Presente, Passato: Remembering Germano Celant (1940–2020)

The art historian, critic, and curator Germano Celant passed away on April 29, 2020, in Milan. Perennially clad in black, his hair a mane of swept-back white, he was as distinctive a physical presence as his presence has been in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Described to us once as “a living Vasari” – a reference to the pioneering sixteenth-century author of *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* – Celant’s sustained output over the last six decades is a map that connects Italian avant-gardes to accelerated internationalism. Celant’s love for history’s radical turns in turn became the very engine through which he managed to shape institutions old and new. Celant produced and reproduced reality, par excellence. Here, we recall how he did this, and why that mattered.

Baroque Beginnings

Celant studied the Renaissance and the Baroque with the legendary art historian Eugenio Battisti at the University of Genoa in the early 1960s. Battisti’s 1962 book, *L’antirinascimento* (The Anti-Renaissance), became one of Celant’s formative influences. *L’antirinascimento* was later described by Christopher S. Wool as covering “a whole range of material and topics that don’t fit – automata, magic and talismanic images, wonders and portents, the *Wunderkammer*, astrology, alchemy, the topoi of the witch and the old man.”

This eclectic synthesis of knowledge fields became a model for what Celant would later pursue. And from Battisti’s understanding of the Baroque, Celant told us he discovered that “there was no distinction between architecture, design, decoration.”¹ What emerges is a total space where disparate categories can meet. The Baroque’s heightened use of sensory effects to stage drama and emotion, the “need to be surrounded by something,” as Celant said, also became the DNA for all that was to follow in his output.

Guerrilla Warfare

In 1963, Celant started to write for *Marcatré*, the leading interdisciplinary magazine in Italy, where art sat alongside cinema, design, and theory. Soon he also joined the architectural journal *Casabella*. In his capacity as art critic for both publications, he began to visit and befriend artists of previous generations, such as Lucio Fontana. But more importantly, he developed relationships with artists of his own generation throughout Italy.

This led Celant in 1967, at the young age of twenty-seven, to curate his first seminal show, “Arte Povera – Im Spazio,” in Genoa’s Galleria la Bertesca. It marked the beginning of Arte Povera

as an aesthetic, philosophical movement, whose ideas were refined in a manifesto-like text published in *Flash Art* the same year, entitled “Notes on a Guerrilla War.” Two years later, an eponymous book was released that included the artists Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and many others.

As Celant put it, “each of these artists chose to live with direct experience, and feel the necessity of leaving intact the value of the existence of things.” (These now feel like premonitory words in relation to the extinction and environmental crisis we face today.) Celant described the need for a “shift that has to be brought about ... the return to limited and ancillary projects where the human being is the fulcrum and the fire of research, in replacement of the medium and the instrument.” Arte Povera therefore is “an art that asks only for the essential information, that refuses the dialogue with the social and cultural system and aspires to present itself as something sudden and unforeseen.”

It acted as ballast against the loudest art at the time: that of American Pop, which was already perceived as an imperialistic presence in postwar Europe. Indeed, in 1964, Donald Judd

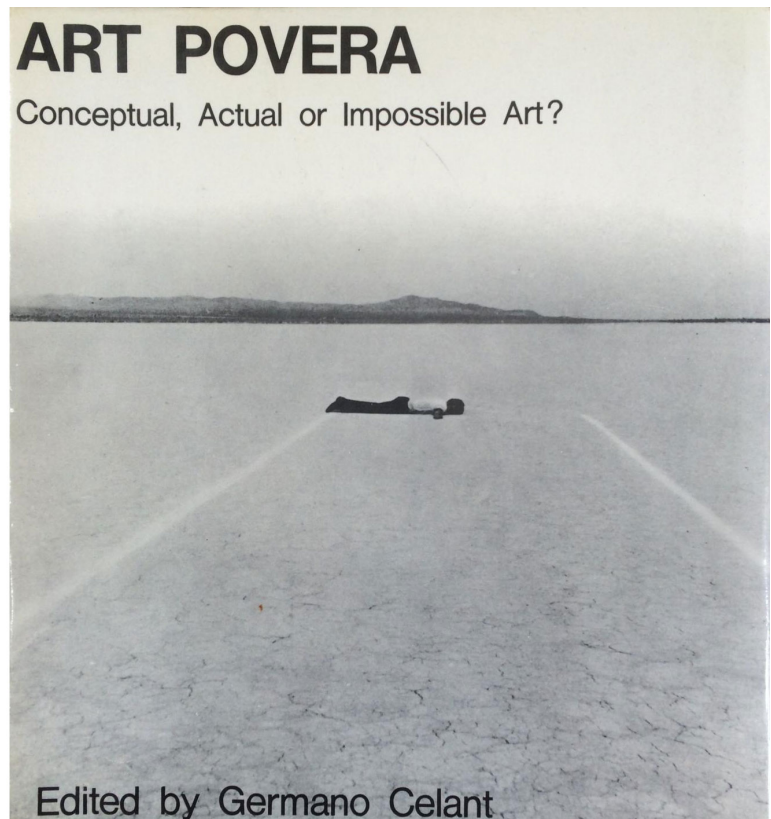
had dismissed European art as mere “decoration.” Arte Povera, through Celant’s skills of rhetoric, friendship, and flair, proved there were alternative narratives, and that Italian culture was renewing its critical, countercultural vigor.

02/10

Art and its Environments

In the 1970s, Celant started to work more internationally. He became one of the first truly itinerant curators, similar to his friend, the Swiss Harald Szeemann, who had coined the term “*Geistiger Gastarbeiter*” to describe this new global vocation. Celant would work simultaneously in many cities at once, “*N’ETRE QU’ENTRE*,” to quote the poet Camille Bryen.

The 1970s also marked Celant’s first larger exhibitions. When, in 2016, we invited him to the Global Art Forum, alongside Francesco Vezzoli, we asked Celant to present a case study of what we feel was and remains his most influential show of that time: “Ambiente/arte dal futurismo alla body art” (Environment/Art: From Futurism to Body Art) at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Installations by Dan Graham, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, and others were placed into dialogue with immersive works from historical avant-gardes – works by Theo van Doesburg, El



Covers of the books *L'Antirinascimento* (1962) by Eugenio Battisti and *Art Povera* (1969) edited by Germano Celant.

Lissitzky, and Piet Mondrian.

“The first political gesture was to take away the walls, to clear the space,” Celant told us. “Whenever you enter an institution, you have to bring the space with you.” What was at stake for Celant was not a show *about* objects, but being *surrounded* by art, which, throughout the avant-garde, he said, has regularly taken the form of rooms. “Environments are very important elements in our culture,” he explained. “It’s a totally different experience to walk into a room by Lucio Fontana than see a piece by Fontana.”

And here, again, we go back to his beginnings with the Baroque. What reigns supreme is not a collection of isolated fragments (where art has the status of domestic decoration), but instead a symphonic *totality*.

Reread History

“I reread history through the contemporary,” Celant admitted to us. Seeing history “in reverse” meant that working with contemporary artists (something that Nancy Spector described as Celant’s “alchemy”) would lead to conversations about their roots. This telescoping – from the extreme present to the just past and the deeper past – would ultimately allow Celant to perceive and present history differently, as something constantly evolving.

For example, during his inaugural visit to Los Angeles in 1972, Celant “discovered emptiness” in the light artists of Robert Irwin and Maria Nordman. This discovery informed one of the guiding principles of the exhibition

“Ambiente/arte” four years later – the emptying of what was already in the Venice exhibition space when Celant arrived to fill it. Erasure as gesture.

The second instrumental move in “Ambiente/arte” was how, in these stripped spaces, Celant reconstituted enactments of historic shows and exhibition displays. This has nothing to do with nostalgia. The broad range went from Lissitzky, Puni, Mondrian, and Kandinsky to Claes Oldenburg, Sol Lewitt’s bedroom, and Arman’s “Le Plein” (the 1960 Iris Clert gallery show that acted as a riposte to Yves Klein’s earlier “Le Vide” show at the same gallery).

Celant told us that “nobody is collecting the artist’s studio.” The studio is also very seldom reconstructed, despite the fundamental role it plays as the laboratory of art. Examples like Francis Bacon’s studio in Dublin, or Alberto Giacometti’s and Constantin Brancusi’s studios, both in Paris, are notable but rare. However, already in “Ambiente/arte,” Celant reconstructed Giacomo Balla’s studio as one of its revelatory environments.

At its core, “Ambiente/arte” argued that the history of art is not made up only of fragments of the market, but of holistic ensembles. Given that we mostly only ever know seismic moments of exhibition history through either oral testimony (since only a few people may have seen them directly) or limited photographs, Celant believed there was a necessity to communicate the experience of these exhibitions through

03/10



Germano Celant presenting at the Global Art Forum in 2016, behind a powerpoint image of the Mondrian installation at "Ambiente/Arte," Venice Biennial, 1976.

reenactments. While this may now seem like a familiar technique employed by culture everywhere, in 1976 this was not yet the case.

Attitudes and Forms

In 2013, at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, Celant reenacted Harald Szeemann's infamous exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form," originally presented at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969. Together with a display feature conceived by the architect Rem Koolhaas, a ghostly outline of the Bern Kunsthalle was imported into Palazzo Corner della Regina's eighteenth-century interiors. Even 1960s period radiators were added.

Without forced fetishism, this reincarnation allowed us to experience a show we all knew from the catalogue at the time, and from installation photos. Here, Celant, along with Koolhaas and the artist Thomas Demand, were making a contemporary statement based on a historic case study.

Celant told us that it was his dream to one day reenact Marcel Duchamp's exhibition design for the 1942 "First Papers of Surrealism" show, held at the Manhattan offices of the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies. Here, Duchamp used a "mile of twine" to create a

web-like intervention between the displayed works. Our late friend Leonora Carrington told us about this extraordinary occasion, where one needed scissors to cut the twine and enter the space.

Metamorphosis

In 1988, the Guggenheim's new director, Thomas Krens, appointed Celant curator of contemporary art. The *New York Times* announced the European's arrival thus: "Mr. Celant (whose name is pronounced jer-MAN-o che-LANT) was born in 1940 and is representative of a new kind of curator, one who functions as an impresario or guest-artist in one city after another, moving from place to place and from commission to commission."²

He followed Harald Szeemann's example of a "permanent impermanent" curator, who is attached to an institution and at the same time remains a free spirit. (This too was Szeemann's arrangement with the Kunsthau Zürich.)

Years ago, Szeemann told us that as an independent curator, one is always invited to do group shows. But, in the long run this is not satisfying. One wants to go deeper with artists in solo shows.

04/10



Installation view of "When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013" Fondazione Prada, 1 June – 3 November 2013. Photo: Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

Celant did stage solos at the Guggenheim. They included Mario Merz, Rebecca Horn, Ettore Spalletti, and Haim Steinbach, with whom he inaugurated his younger artists program series called “Osmosis.”

However, Celant’s milestone of this period was a historical group exhibition in 1994 entitled “The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–68,” masterfully designed by Gae Aulenti. Here, again, the DNA of his time in Genoa with Battisti and the Baroque asserts itself. Celant believed that exhibitions, like painting, were a language, and, in order to articulate them fully, every great exhibition also needed to deliver an appropriate display language with it. And, if one wants to surround the visitor with architecture, one needs to work with architects, such as Koolhaas or Aulenti. As well as being a close friend to our mentor Zaha Hadid, Celant advocated for architecture throughout his career, from the radicals of Archizoom and Superstudio, to later becoming a curator at the Fondazione Aldo Rossi.

Indeed, “The Italian Metamorphosis” included architecture in its exhibits, alongside film, photography, fashion, design, as well as staples of painting and sculpture. Calling upon the expertise of a nine-curator team, more than a

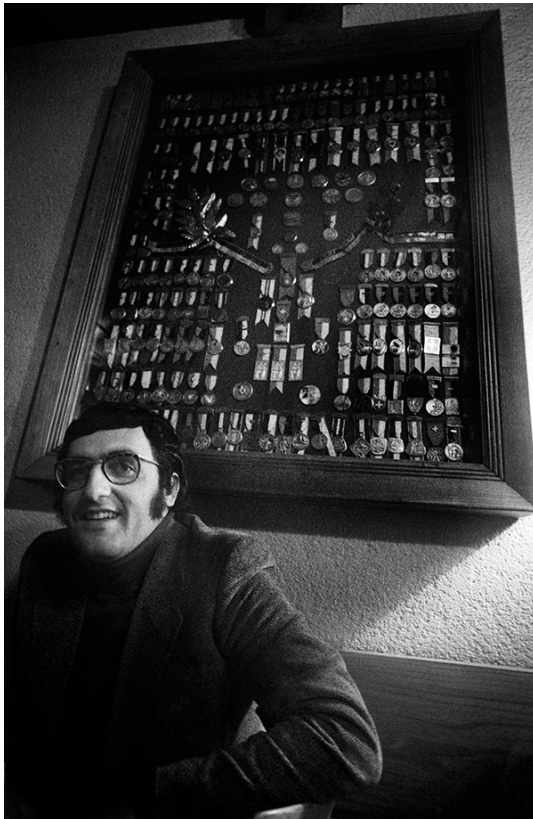
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thousand objects – mixing typewriters, cars, jewellery, furniture – drew equivalence between high and popular arts, as well as fighting against the segregation of disciplines. He wrote in his catalogue essay that Europe and America’s rejection of postwar Italian art and culture “may also have been caused by its sensual and ‘Baroque extremism.’” From that moment on, this extremism would be considered a unique cultural asset.

Serious Fashion

The February 1982 “special issue” of *Artforum* magazine featured neither an artwork nor an artist on its cover. Instead, it simply showed a woman with her hair scraped back, one hand on her hip, against an anonymous grey background. What mattered was what she was wearing: a sculptural bamboo cowboy dress, accented in red filaments, designed by Issey Miyake.

The cover was considered scandalous. It had been the idea of *Artforum*’s then thirty-year-old editor, Ingrid Sischy, and contributing editor Germano Celant. Never before had clothing adorned the hallowed magazine. To regular readers – steeped in structuralist theory and conceptual treatises – the cover was heresy.



Germano Celant in Bern, 1969.
Photographer unknown.
Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

Reflecting back on this moment in 2011, Celant said that he and Sischy had strongly believed that fashion was “a serious language,” deserving of serious attention.³ He explained that two parallel tendencies in the 1980s led art and fashion to develop intense interest in one another. Firstly, artists – like Julian Schnabel and David Salle – became stars, communicating themselves through media rather than exclusively through galleries. “They use media to affirm their image,” Celant said. “In the process, they become fashionable. And mass market.” At the same time, certain fashion designers turned away from the mass market. Instead, they chose to sell “idea products.” Here, fashion found itself craving contemporary art’s validation. The convergence resulted in a new power coupling.

Such mutual affection became the basis for the inaugural Biennale di Firenze, entitled “Time and Fashion,” held in 1996. It was cocurated by Celant, Luigi Settembrini (who was previously responsible for the fashion parts of “Italian Metamorphosis”), and Ingrid Sischy. Across nineteen of Florence’s museums, forty-nine fashion designers were showcased within installations overseen (once again) by architect Gae Aulenti. A strand included collaborations between fashion designers and artists – Helmut

Lang with Jenny Holzer, Gianni Versace with Roy Lichtenstein – in seven pavilions designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. While the “art–fashion complex” feels utterly ubiquitous now, “Time and Fashion” was one of the very first large-scale attempts to put the two disciplines on common ground.

Restless and Useful

A year before the Biennale di Firenze, in 1995, Celant had been appointed the director of Fondazione Prada, which, for the previous two years, had been known as PradaMilanoArte. This surely explains why one of the collaborations at “Time and Fashion” was between Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst.

Celant was no fan of fashion houses appropriating artists’ work to produce decorative textiles, or window-dress their boutiques. Instead, he told us, what interested him was “coproduction.”

The ensuing spirit of Fondazione Prada seemed to come from this notion of equal, experimental collaboration between artists and fashion houses, as well as Celant’s critique of historical museums, where departments work in silos, rarely collaborating. “Museums are past,” Celant informed us. “There’s no chance they can



Portrait of Germano Celant in the exhibition “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943,” 18 February - 25 June 2018, Fondazione Prada. Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

compete anymore as *laboratoriums*. There is no institution that dissolves languages. That will be the future of the institution.”

A quick glance over the twenty years⁴ he directed the Fondazione Prada attests to this restless, anti-museological mission, which came out of constant conversations with Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, as well as with a close constellation of artists, philosophers, filmmakers, architects, and designers they forged together over time. While the core organizational team of the Fondazione Prada has always been a tiny fraction of the hundreds of staff that power New York’s MoMA or London’s Tate, its neurology has always been tentacular, and its interests agile.

Pre-metamorphosis

In 2015, when the Fondazione Prada moved to its current location at a former spirits distillery in Milan, Celant became its “Artistic and Scientific Superintendent.” The year 2018 saw Celant mount one of the most ambitious projects of the Fondazione’s history: “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918–43.”

On reflection, this may well have been a kind of prequel to his “Italian Metamorphosis” exhibition at the Guggenheim, which had covered the years 1943–1968. Celant, like Szeemann,

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preferred not to do group shows, but when he did, they tended to have a historical rubric. Through a chronological timeline of exhibition reenactments (part photographic, part loaned works) designed by long-term collaborators Michael Rock / 2x4, “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum” told a maddeningly encyclopaedic history of Italy’s interwar period, which saw the rise of political fascism, and consequently, its enveloping effects on art, media, and culture.

At a time when far-right and neofascist politics has been sweeping across Europe over the last several years, to the horror of many of us, “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum” was a visceral reminder of the tools with which fascism not only creeps into power, but also into the cultural imagination.

Memento

All of this brings us to the last show of Celant’s we saw firsthand: the posthumous retrospective of Jannis Kounellis at the Fondazione Prada in Venice last year. As we made our way through the exhibition, we were able to chart not only Kounellis’s artistic legacy – as one of Arte Povera’s best-known protagonists – but also significant moments of exhibition history.

Starting from his early works, we were able to experience how after 1967, Kounellis turned



Exhibition view of “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943,” 18 February - 25 June 2018, Fondazione Prada. Photo Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. From left to right: Adolfo Wildt, *Vir temporis acti (Uomo antico)*, 1913; Adolfo Wildt, *Amen*, 1914; Adolfo Wildt, *Ritratto di Augusto Solari*, 1918; Adolfo Wildt, *La Concezione*, 1921; Adolfo Wildt, *Maria dà luce ai pargoli cristiani*, 1918; Adolfo Wildt, *Carattere fiero – Anima gentile*, 1912; Adolfo Wildt, *L’anima dei padri*, 1922.

even more radical by embracing concrete and natural elements including birds, soil, cacti, wool, coal, cotton, and fire. When we heard a cello playing Johann Sebastian Bach (starting in 1970 Kounellis began to include the presence of musicians in his works), vivid memories of our last interview with Kounellis came back to us. We remember how he told us about the works coming “alive with music,” and how the music would guide the improvisations of the dancers who were also present – dancing in front of the work and creating a repetition unified within itself, “never reaching a totality.” The aliveness of works was always expressed in Kounellis’s move outside of the painting – and yet, he always considered himself a painter.

However, the strongest inscribed memory for us remains the olfactory dimension of the Venice show. Starting 1969, Kounellis brought smell into his works. At the Ca’ Corner della Regina venue, Celant had installed shot glasses of grappa on the top floor, whose sharp scent filled the room, while on the staircase, the walls were lined with delicately balanced pyramids of coffee grounds. We were immersed in the immaterial.

While Kounellis had passed away just two years prior, there was nothing archaic or

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mournful about this show. It felt alive and fresh, resonating with recent practices that employ living sculptures, both human and nonhuman. As Celant wrote in his catalogue essay, “By getting the public to react emotionally and physically, [Kounellis] tried to bring people closer to reality, where art is not a dead indication, but life.”

This leads us to another memory, when Tino Sehgal and Dorothea von Hantelmann suggested that we revisit Margaret Mead’s 1943 text “Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology.” Here Mead approaches the exhibition form as a ritual, appealing not only to the visual sense but every type of sense experience. Mead wrote:

For art to be Reality, the sensuous being must be caught up in the experience. Our present practices by which people sit on stiff chairs and listen in constrained silence to a piece of music or wander in desultory unpatterned groups in an art gallery looking at framed pictures ... is the very opposite process. One sense might be heightened, one emotion sharpened but, except in rare cases, there is no increase in the whole individual’s relationship to the whole of life.



Left: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1967. Iron, flame, rubber pipe, gas tank; Right: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1968. wood, wool. Installation view from “Jannis Kounellis,” Fondazione Prada, 11 May – 24 November 2019. Photo: Agostino Osio/Alto Piano. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

The Game

Germano Celant insisted to us that, above all things, he was an art historian – although the way he dressed, with his many turquoise rings, his cowboy belts, and his leather gilets, was not what the typical art historian ever looked like. The typical art historian was also not to be found at the front row of Prada fashion shows, sitting next to the latest Hollywood ingénues. Celant always felt distinctly ageless to us, and therefore, implicitly immortal too.

We remember the first time we visited Celant's house, where he lived with his wife, Paris, and his son, Argento, and where his studio is also located. A former paper mill converted in 2006, it contains one of the most exquisite private collections of art, furniture, tapestries, paraphernalia, and books we have ever encountered. Every item had a story. Every story came from a time that Celant worked with someone over those six decades. A personal barter economy, bypassing the art market. This house-museum made us think of Curzio Malaparte's phrase *casa come me*, "a house like me," where a space and its contents are a portrait of its inhabitant, a portrait of a life.

"Being a one-person band all my life," Celant told us, "I could do things, because I was associated with museums, but also, freelance: 30% with the Guggenheim, 30% with the Fondazione Prada. I always play the game of getting an idea through and not following the institution."

In 1967, in that era-defining *Arte Povera* manifesto, Celant wrote: "Freedom, in the visual arts, is an all-contaminating germ." In 2020, as we face an unprecedented planetary pandemic, which has taken so many loved ones away, we reread Germano's words with hope. After all, the future is invented with fragments of the past.

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Futuro, Presente, Passato: Remembering Germano Celant (1940–2020)

1

Quotes taken from "The Future is the Past: Germano Celant and Francesco Vezzoli interviewed by Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist," Global Art Forum 10, Art Dubai, March 16, 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhPA63IEqfk&feature=youtu.be>.

2

John Russell, "Guggenheim Names Curator," *New York Times*, December 1, 1988
<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/01/arts/guggenheim-names-curator.html>.

3

"Fashion Houses Art Patrons: Grazia Quaroni and Germano Celant interviewed by Philip Tinari," Global Art Forum 5, Art Dubai, March 16, 2011.

4

See "History: Fondazione Prada – Activities" at the Fondazione Prada website
<http://www.fondazioneprada.org/history-en/?lang=en>.

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