



# Thinking art

materialisms, labours, forms

edited by  
**PETER OSBORNE**



Thinking art

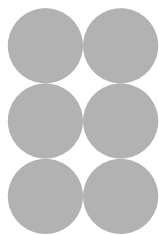


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# Contents

## **Preface**

PETER OSBORNE

ix

## **MATERIALISMS**

### **1 Digital materialism: six-handed, machine-assisted, furious**

CAROLINE BASSETT

3

### **2 The consolation of new materialism**

KESTON SUTHERLAND

29

## **ART & LABOUR**

### **3 Art's anti-capitalist ontology: on the historical roots of the artist as an anti-capitalist**

DAVE BEECH

61

### **4 Art, life and labour: Carla Lonzi's existential feminist critique**

GIOVANNA ZAPPERI

80

### **5 Night cleaning at the bank: Sanja Iveković's screen tests for invisible women**

KLARA KEMP-WELCH

101

## **INSTABILITIES OF FORM**

- 6 Arting philosophy**  
LUDGER SCHWARTE 127
- 7 The situational diagram: on rendering the  
de/recomposition of context and form  
in contemporary art**  
JALEH MANSOOR 140
- 8 Notes on form**  
PETER OSBORNE 159

## **SOCIAL ECOLOGIES, INTIMATIONS OF CATASTROPHE**

- 9 Black Atlantis: the plantationocene**  
AYESHA HAMEED 183
- 10 Strangers at home:  
from referential to compositional artworking**  
CHRISTIAN NYAMPETA 194
- IMAGE CREDITS 211  
CONTRIBUTORS 212  
INDEX 214



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# Preface

The contributions to this second volume of essays derived from events organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) have their source in the conference ‘Thinking Art’, held at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) London on 29 February 2020, immediately prior to the Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>1</sup> As previously, the idea was to assemble an eclectic range of national and international speakers to present parts of their ongoing research, in order to provide a snapshot of current work on topics in which philosophical and general-theoretical issues are at stake within and across a range of related disciplines. Here this includes digital humanities, poetics, fine art, art history, gender studies, philosophy itself, visual culture and postcolonial studies. In its broader sense, philosophy is conceived here as a transdisciplinary medium through which connections may be made between, and critical reflection provoked about, the general-theoretical aspects of concrete investigations. The fourfold thematic constellation of materialisms, art and labour, instabilities of form, and social ecologies and intimations of catastrophe – plucked from the ether of the

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1. Klara Kemp-Welch and Christian Nyampeta were unable to attend the conference, but have generously made their work available here.

present – functioned both to connect and to hold apart the various presentations.

The unifying conceit, on this occasion, lay in repeating a trope from the ICA's past – 'Thinking Art'<sup>2</sup> – not in order to return to that time, but rather to take the measure of the present's distance from it, registered in current preoccupations and concerns. Back then, at the outset of the 1990s, interrogation of the relationship between philosophy and art was still largely driven by the critical and political legacies of conceptual art, and the various anti-aesthetic agendas they bequeathed to academic study of art. The theoretical resources deployed, in the UK, were largely those of German critical theory, French philosophies of difference (including Lacanian psychoanalysis) and feminist art history. The polemical context was the attempt to maintain the momentum of the critical movements of the 1960s and 1970s beyond a traditional aesthetics which was being revived at that time, mainly in phenomenological forms, on the back of the so-called 'return to painting' of the 1980s, spearheaded by German neo-expressionism.<sup>3</sup> The lines of engagement were clearly drawn.

In the decade that followed, however, those lines quickly became blurred, as post-phenomenological French philosophies of 'affect' moved into the conceptual space vacated by 'aesthetic', in a manner that combined claims to philosophical radicalism with an artistic conservatism and covert political romanticism.<sup>4</sup>

2. See Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds, *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), 1991 – the inaugural publication of the ICA's Philosophical Forum, set up the previous year by its then Director of Talks, Linda Brandon.

3. In the UK, the emblematic exhibition was *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1981. Work by artists from that show have been reassembled this year, at the Whitechapel Gallery, in *The Return of the Spirit in Painting*, alongside a companion exhibition, *Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium*. Whether this pair of shows reveals the enduring 'radicalism' of painting (qua painting) or merely reaffirms the deepening conservative political function of its cyclical 'returns' is a moot point.

4. The rhythm of this movement was overdetermined by the somewhat haphazard temporality of translation. Lyotard's 1974 *Libidinal Economy* first appeared in English in 1993; Deleuze's 1981 *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (the most influential of these texts) in 2003. Meanwhile, Lyotard's more philosophically significant work of 1971, *Discourse, Figure*, was not translated into English until 2019.

At the same time, new forms of cultural management appropriated, academicized and contained the critical tendencies of the 1980s within the new cultural-industrial forms imposed on universities (including the incorporation of the art schools), in a series of ideological waves, the neoliberal force of which continues to build.<sup>5</sup> With the decline of the supportive political cultures from which they had arisen, art practices concerned to triangulate relations between *concept*, *politics* and *critique* retreated in the face of institutional developments associated with the growing primacy of markets, involving not only the integration of museums, galleries and other kinds of art spaces into the entertainment industries, but the institutions of art education themselves. Critical conceptions of the culture industry were displaced by affirmative, governmental concepts of 'creative industries'. In the new university art schools, little art-theoretical reflection, or even more straightforward forms of art-historical knowledge, were judged necessary for the projected vocational aspirations of students redesignated as clients. This was the point at which right-wing attacks on the 'elitism' of the arts and humanities provided 'market democracy' with its most effective political argument – three decades after the left-populist version of that critique had begun to transform those disciplines themselves, in a process derided by the Right as 'dumbing down'.

Today, the philosophical debates that set the intellectual tone of the anglophone artworld largely concern so-called 'new' – especially 'vital' and 'speculative' – materialisms; the changing and precarious character of labour; the dematerializing effects of social relations and technologies on the destabilization of formal categories; and ecological crisis, postcoloniality and the Anthropocene. The four sections of this book take up variants

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5. The Hochschule der Künste Berlin became a university in 2001, for example; University of the Arts London was formed in 2003–4 out of the bulk of the London arts' colleges.

of these themes, respectively, in variously critical ways. What unifies the essays is not any particular theoretical stance, but a concern to maintain a thinking of art and its related discourses that is sceptical of all attempts to use the new eco-naturalisms and vitalisms as an alibi for stopping thinking about art socially. In an art context, the flight from thinking socially cannot avoid becoming a neo-aestheticism – whatever its theoretical modalities and purported political intent.

The question that opened the Introduction to the previous collection of essays with the same title as this one, thirty years ago – ‘In what way, if any, does art need philosophy, or philosophy art?’ – unanswered then, remains as open and contested today as it ever was; and equally, if not more likely to provoke anxiety, on both sides. All the more reason, one might think, for continuing to ask it.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Richard Birkett for initiating the renewed collaboration between the ICA London and CRMEP in 2018, which led to the conference from which this book derives; and the ICA curators Nydia Swaby and Sara Sassanelli, for taking it on and seeing it through to completion with such equanimity.

PETER OSBORNE, JUNE 2020





# **MATERIALISMS**



# 1

## Digital materialism: six-handed, machine-assisted, furious

CAROLINE BASSETT

Take a look around, then cut through.

Hélène Cixous<sup>1</sup>

New media materialism is a mode of digital media studies that declares itself closer to the ‘truth’ of things, and that rejects other approaches as representational, as interested in the image and distortions – and therefore further from this reality or truth. This judgement is founded on a presumption that matter – in this case, the specific materials of computational and digital technologies and what they enable – is at the very heart of the matter. Consonant with this research priority are explorations of the ‘weird materialities’ of the medium-specific, or considerations of the dynamics of information systems that are determinedly post-critical. There is nothing underneath to be revealed, nothing beyond, and almost nothing before to condition what has come, or what will come after.

This vision needs exploding, in the interests of technological feminism as a political project that addresses gender injustices, experienced in particular ways as they intersect with other

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1. Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, Summer 1976, pp. 875–93, p. 892. The original, ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’, appeared in *L’Arc*, 1975, pp. 39–54.

discriminations, or, to put this more systematically, understood as always already entangled with other forms of inequality – those of race, class, sexuality, ableism, notably.

This vision also needs exploring, because even if new media materialism is problematic it responds to a moment, addressing a need – a demand for engagement and encounter with emerging forms of technology – that insistently provokes questions not only about what we mean by activity or agency (that of human users, that of machines, their interactions) but also what we mean by animation, liveness, intelligence, intelligent life.

This essay at once constitutes a specific investigation of new materialist media studies and explores an earlier response to the broader conjuncture, *Furious*, a jointly authored monograph/manual demanding a reconsideration of material studies of the digital and insisting that such a reconsideration can be critical.<sup>2</sup> It recognizes the appeal of new materialism for digital media studies, the difficulty of finding a critical perch in the contemporary situation of pervasive computation, and problems with purely representational analysis. We are also materialists, although not ‘new materialism’ materialists – not least because we do not recognize the absolute cleavage between material analysis and historically materialist analysis that new materialisms insist upon.

*Furious* responds to the claims of new materialism, in part, through a defence of embodiment; understanding rationality as embodied, passionate, affective, as well as a matter of logical ratiocination. Moreover it uses embodiment (the materiality of bodies) to think about the materiality of informatics. Doing so, of course, it attaches itself to an expert tradition: feminism has thought about technology, epistemology and ontology and/in relation to the (differently available) possibilities of becoming in

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2. Caroline Bassett, Sarah Kember, Kate O’Riordan, *Furious: Technological Feminism and Digital Futures*, London: Pluto, 2020.

a particular world order for decades now. Moreover, it has always been interested in instantiation as excessive and untidy, as incomplete. As Hélène Cixous put it in a 1975 address to women, 'At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her differences.'<sup>3</sup>

*Of lists* What are the politics of the relationship between new materialism, digital technologies and vitalism? How does this relationship matter now? To frame the question this way is already to make an assumption, or to prioritize a particular mode of investigation. It is to presume that there *is* a relationship to be explored, and that its significance is political. Some might prefer to talk of the material, the digital and the vital, and to join them only through the 'gentle knot' of the comma.<sup>4</sup> This might produce a connection purged of those irritating 'extra' isms (feminism, for instance) that are felt by many new materialisms to screw *things* up.

Whichever way these connections are made (much hangs on that) questions concerning materialisms, vitality and the digital or computational arise with a particular force in the current conjuncture.<sup>5</sup> Digital developments in general and in AI in particular give revived salience to long-standing popular associations or even equivalences: between the liveliness of machines and considerations of organic or human 'life' itself; between human and the machinic agency; and between the capacity of the medium to constitute itself as the message (McLuhan memorably understood the light bulb as a medium technology) and vitalism which is often also understood as 'without content'.<sup>6</sup>

3. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 893.

4. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 38.

5. "[C]onjunctural analysis" can be broadly defined as the analysis of convergent and divergent tendencies shaping the totality of power relations within a given social field during a particular period of time.' Jeremy Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 96, 2019, pp. 5–37.

6. See, for example, Scott Lash's discussion of Agamben in 'Life (Vitalism) 2', *Theory*,

How these associations are understood and what their significance might be preoccupy current digital scholarship, and figure largely in public culture – as media art, in debates, in fiction, for instance. A feature of this discourse taken as a whole is its tendency to fuse the actual with the predicted; imaginaries of technological futures with extant possibilities. This tendency is also in evidence in more specialist registers where it may produce a validatory (short) circuit. The AI algorithms instantiated in machine learning systems in social media systems, for instance, might be grounds for the identification of a kind of machinic vitalism in extant computational systems. Their real existence is then taken as evidence of the reliability of predictions of what will soon arise, true intelligence, or Singularity, in some cases taking the form of awakening artificial life. Let us call this rising a form of post-human vitalism.

Whether such a development would be likely to be for good or ill divides opinions among those who most confidently predict its coming. Some Singularity adherents are markedly enthusiastic about emerging forms of future life; others, fatalistically sure of the advent of Singularity, are more pessimistic about the prospects for future (human) being it opens up.<sup>7</sup>

***Of fury*** A different response to ‘all this’, to the current conjuncture as it looks, as it feels, as it operates and as it orders, is fury. And that is where I want to begin. I assert that fury is a justifiable response to development priorities and trajectories of the tech industries as these operate at various scales across multiple fields; a justifiable response to the ways in which these trajectories are shaped and determined, and to what their imaginaries

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*Culture & Society*, vol. 23, nos 2–3, 2006, pp. 323–49.

7. ‘Optimistically’, these new people will be ‘us ... greatly changed’; pessimistically they are humanity’s successors, ‘a new race, the inheritors of the earth ... usurpers’. Russell Blackford, ‘The Great Transition’, in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, London: Wiley, 2013, pp. 421–9, p. 442.

promise. It is a fury that is justified because of what is being damaged, curtailed, undermined and taken away, now and for the future. A key problem is a lack of ambition, a lack of proper *care* for all that which exceeds the value it is given by the market, even as it is bound up within its constraining logics.

Further, I argue, theorizations that bind up invocations of vitality with assertions of the prior external determination of material digital things (ontological claims for priority) and attach both (or, certainly, fail to detach them) to the promise of digital advance as progress (more computation, more life), as an unexamined good, are in danger of producing a formation bound up with, underscoring and ultimately *helping to deliver* these kinds of trajectories. This rather than, for instance, opening up possibilities for creating and deploying intelligent technologies to rethink the horizons of the possible, and the shaping of desire. I am interested in both the ideological heft of this kind of anti-ideological formation and in the material operations and impacts it produces or endorses, these being entangled.

If fury seems too strong as a response, consider the invocation of AI solutionism in relation to environmental crisis; space exploration as a response to planetary devastation, or the promise of renewed life in some cryogenically accessed and medically advanced future time. There's always another space, always another time, to be had in these kinds of solutions. Or consider the 'friendship packages' offered by service robots designed for old people. Fungible robotics are here being offered in exchange for the specific other, my friend, that person. This an exchange underpinned by the appeal of the robot as the almost really alive. Can this robot be my friend? It can if your mind is not what it was and if you (your NHS) cannot afford 'human' care. The issue here is not the automation of particular tasks per se, nor the expanding agency of machines, but the substitutional fakery

entailed in the promise of this kind of (anti-) social contract – and its reliance on *pricing*.

These are brutal examples. They are invoked here to insist on how political these issues are, and to ask *how* they are political, which is not quite the same thing. I hope they gesture toward ways in which the promise of life, the full life of Singular AI or, in more mundane spheres, the quasi-vitalism ascribed to particular forms of computational activity (machine learning, emergent agency, robotic personality) can align with, indeed can *contribute* to, the structuring of computational capitalism with its obscene inequalities. Artificial friendship is a contradiction in terms. Another relationship is possible.

***Compulsory (computational) capitalism?*** The AI technologies at the heart of robotics (or at the head of them) are of course digital technologies, and high-end AI projects and imaginaries can be understood as an exotic (but just as unreal) moment in the larger scene of what Mark Fisher memorably called capitalist realism,<sup>8</sup> now taking on computational form in ways we are familiar with. These ways include machine learning, big data, platform capitalism, pervasive censorship, further automation in the everyday and at work. Ellen Meiksins Wood claimed capitalism became ‘compulsory’ when the market could not be escaped; we might say the same for computational capitalism as a variant of this.<sup>9</sup> We cannot simply *choose* to ‘escape the infosphere’, as some suggest, given its global reach and its pervasive scaling – from the interior of the body and far below that scale, right up to the satellite.<sup>10</sup> Anti-computing, a selective rejection of the computational rather than the social relations it articulates, does not

8. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2009.

9. Ellen Meiksins Wood, ed. Larry Patriquin, *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader*, Leiden: Brill, 2012.

10. See, for example, Irmgard Emmelhainz, ‘Can We Share a World Beyond Representation?’, *E-Flux Journal* 106, February 2020.



provide the basis for a critical technical politics, because the two categories cannot be unbound, or not without damage to each side. Responding to the situation of enclosure, however, is not impossible, even if it may all too easily appear to be unrealistic. Fisher's point about capitalist realism, after all, was that it produces the appearance of inevitability – and projects that into the future.

One reason to be furious right now is that the technological future could be different if the horizon of the market could be exceeded – so that care, for instance, was recalibrated, or so that interactions between intelligent machines and humans could be more creatively, fruitfully and less reductively explored, or so that space was not viewed as a universal market. This case is the harder to make because of ways in which the computational is coming to us, is being *given* to us.

What I am concerned about in particular here are the ways in which claims made about the material specificity of technical media as that which underpins contemporary forms of life (digital being, artificial being, cyborg being) and claims about artificial life or agency or vitality come to support each other. They thereby function to obfuscate a series of distinctions or conjunctions between forms of agency and modes of action, and between activity and autonomy. These distinctions, their maintenance or dissolution, demand interrogation. In some forms their elision contributes to producing a felt material 'reality' (a realism) that may not be contested (in that it is based on ontology) but only modified or modulated (and is in this sense 'post'-critique). The non-contestable, which derives from the ontological, is to be distinguished from the compulsory, as that which, to recap, is ordered through social relations, as a techno-social order, which may be refused.

It is perhaps salutary here to recognize that connections between intelligent machines and artificial life or

agency, which are being made afresh in this era, are also long-standing. The rise of the robotic uncanny in films and elsewhere from the early twentieth century points to this. *Metropolis* would be the obvious example. However, these connections are worked through in different ways and take new forms – this being necessary perhaps because if, on the one hand, the link seems to demand to be made – the liveliness of machines points to their agency – on the other it entails an uncomfortable joining. Consider that the computational is often valued for being *dead right*, for being impartial, neutral, passive, for running the numbers. Criticism when the programme conspicuously fails to run as planned often focuses on the failure of an automatic process to be automatic or artificial enough. Human bias got into the algorithm. The concern is with the human corruption of the ‘soul’ of the new machine: at one end of this scale, mass media training data-producing ‘Nazi’ robots; on the other, academics’ inveterate tendency to *theorize*.

Or take Singularity discourse, a synecdoche for a more general formation, and useful to press home the tensions arising here. Singularity science certainly subscribes to the preference for the calculable and is focused on this when assessing material developments in this field – developments such as what a computer may do if it surpasses a particular number of calculations a minute, let’s say. On the other hand, it entertains a mostly unexamined vitalism operating on a grand scale. The paradox of vital life and absolute instrumentalism is thus writ large in Singularity debates. It is also found operating in a different register in more mundane contexts. I am pointing here to the general circulation of a similar discourse of tensioned or paradoxical equivalence – the one that says life is coded, and so algorithmic code is life. *Are we our virtual selves?* This question is routinely asked.

**Digital materialism(s)** A question asked less often, figuring in more theoretical registers, is whether this equivalence or conflation is constituted through a mode of reduction or abstraction (via a cybernetic account based on systems analysis in which machine and human actions are rendered into systemic abstraction) or by way of a new or revived form of post-human (or anti-human) vitalism. The two approaches in fact tend to reverse into each other. A decade ago Scott Lash noted that the rise of digital media systems produced the revival of a form of vitalism that understood not ‘media in terms of life, but life in terms of media’, producing talk of ‘information is alive’.<sup>11</sup> This is not quite a vital materialism, but digital material(ism) as entailing the description of a vital material. Lash suggested that this revival (the rise of what he terms a neo-vitalism – which we might term a digital vitalism) occurred ‘because content itself and indeed life itself is swept up in the global flows of finance, information and media’. He thus argues that this form of vitalism has its roots in a media or information heuristic. This might be the more persuasive if we accept – *pace* McLuhan – that the dominant content of new media is the medium itself. Remediation theory, with its obsession with the forms of old media, and which accepts as fixed a hard content/medium division that is contingent, and that also exhibits a problematic sense of medium seriality, is overplayed.

**From media to material** How do different understandings of the *material* of digital media give rise to different characterizations of the relationship *between* the vital and the digital? Specifically, how do various forms of medium theory adopting strong new materialist approaches respond to the message from the Silicon Valley, articulated in its products and evident in its discourse: the

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11. Lash, ‘Life (Vitalism) 2’.

message about progress, about more – more technology, more activity, more agency, more control, more *life*? This is a message that is at odds with computational instantiations that often work to produce the opposite of all of that for the many (differentially for all of us) living within its compulsory grounds. My answer is that in so far as these accounts accept rather than question the priority of a particular sense of material advance, and therefore also precondition a response to vitalism (which is permed out from a media heuristic that is not curious about itself) they do not offer an adequate response. Thinking through, or working from, a feminist perspective that is not aligned to new materialism but rather questions its assumptions is one way to explore why not.

But this is not *my* answer entirely. And I am not the only one who is furious.

Kate O’Riordan, Sarah Kember and I published *Furious* as a six-handed, machine-assisted, techno-feminist production, arguing for other ways to think about digital materialism and/ in its relationship to questions of the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, the vital, the human and the machine. *Furious* seeks to generate a form of digital materialism that breaks with new materialism(s) in general, even while it is sympathetic to, and values the restorative work of, some of its exponents. It argues that a feminism that continues to value critique can point to why new approaches are needed to grapple with computational developments that blur still further divisions between meaningful forms of agency and who or what may hold agency, or be an agent, and that feminist epistemologies can suggest way to generate them. Contra Rosi Braidotti and a feminism of affirmation we assert the continuing possibility of this mode of feminism, although we also recognize the necessity of rethinking how and where it might be undertaken, what its possible situation might be, and how it might be *composed* or *assembled*.

To the extent that it follows the arguments of *Furious*, this essay is not mine at all. It is ours, a six-hander at least – and all of those hands are augmented.

So where are the others? The digital media artist Hito Steyerl once gave a performance lecture at the ICA in London centred on a bullet that wasn't there, although it was constantly invoked through gesture.<sup>12</sup> A space in the talk was reserved for the bullet. Its spectral presence was felt – although it couldn't fire. Writing this essay, an elaboration of a talk also given at the ICA, in part a retrospective, I too am aware of a structuring absence: I am missing the virtuous armature of my co-writers. If I now invoke them, this is not only with the aim of shoring up my position or amplifying my firepower; nor is it done only in the interest of citational ethics. It is because *Furious* set out to respond to questions about feminism and digital materialism(s) through a writing process, as well as by producing an output – this was one of the ways it was itself at some distance from the representational mode of inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

*Furious* explored what a digital writing body can be by producing a body of writing: a redoubled embodiment, then, and one that located itself within an increasingly pervasive (compulsory) media system but did not see itself as entirely defined by its place there. *Pace* Joanna Drucker, who declares the end of the individual voice, its dispersal into networks, and the confusion of writing and code,<sup>14</sup> we claimed a body, an augmented body, that was ours. Our technical extensions were continuous with us, but they did not claim us. Perhaps the simplest way to put this – and one that I will come back to since it relates to questions of

12. Hito Steyerl, *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, talk delivered to the ICA, London, March 2014.

13. Cixous: 'To write, an act...'; 'it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech'. 'The Laugh of the Medusa', pp. 880–81.

14. Johanna Drucker, 'Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice', *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, April–May 2012; [https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/drucker/Paris/PoetryNewsletter\\_IndVoice.pdf](https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/drucker/Paris/PoetryNewsletter_IndVoice.pdf).

differential agency, that of humans and that of things – is that we claimed authorship.

*Furious* was an experiment in authorship when the latter is construed not only by exploring what is authored (a body of work) but also by considering what/who *authors*: those writing hands, those technical prostheses and/in their afforded but non-equal relation, those other processes of production, circulation, distribution. It sought to be what Walter Benjamin, in a peculiar exploration of authorship and political intent, once defined as ‘operational’<sup>15</sup> – the key to this being a certain correspondence between a political and literary ‘tendency’. *Furious* connects to this in the sense that the form it takes extrudes the hope it expresses, and in both cases the extrusion and the expression are meant *politically*. I take operationalization here to imply a material or literary articulation and also, now following Franco Moretti rather than Benjamin, and moving onto digital terrain, to entail the construction of new concepts.<sup>16</sup>

One of these is a radical intersectionality. *Furious* begins and ends by locating computational capitalism within the contexts of the (misnamed) Anthropocene; the latter being taken as continuous with all human and non-human future possibilities, and as essentially experienced in relation to difference in situation, position, exclusion, discrimination and violence. This is the starting point for the identification of the need to elaborate a mode of intersectionality that begins with but does not stop at human crossings; that opens up the category ‘human’ even as it simultaneously explores the boundaries between human and non-human. This draws on, but also breaks with, Karen Barad’s new materialist sense of intra-activity as a way to understand

15. Benjamin declared that ‘the literary tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct’, adding that ‘the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency’. ‘The Author as Producer’, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, London and New York: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 768–81, p. 769.

16. See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London and New York: Verso, 2013.

the agential. It recognizes the intention of materializing what might otherwise be invoked through discourse, in accounts of the formation of personhood and more broadly in accounts of agency or the capacity to act and respond in the world as valuable. But it is at odds with the degree to which intra-activity founds all that is inaugural (all that matters) in the unprevisible<sup>17</sup> encounter. To put it tongue-twistily, a putative politics based on the intra-sectional could allow matter itself to matter more than it mattered before (Barad's demand being that it should),<sup>18</sup> but the problem that then arises is how to account for that which is brought to the intersection, that pre-existing experience, or condition, or history. All these factors contribute to *why* an intersectional politics is found necessary, to why its importance continues to be demonstrated.

So, recognizing a need to re-materialize intersectionality in relation to the demands made urgent by the Anthropocene, we did not seek to develop an intra-sectional account but rather to build a radical form of intersectionality. This expands agency, recognizes a diversity of agents, acknowledges the futility of assuming all are (in the last analysis) agents of the human (the fantasy of mastery), but asserts nonetheless the distinctiveness of (post-) human being, as a form (of) being alive which stands in contradistinction to the presumption of a heterogenous vitality – whether this is spread thin or thick – and insists on the distinctiveness of specifically human actions. It enables critique.

***Furious laughter?*** It also allows for laughter. Indeed it in part works through it. *If Furious* advocates the construction of a radical

17. The neologism is from Beckett and is a play on the French *prevoir*. Beckett talks of the 'ultimately unprevisible atom' (cited in Conor Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the Visual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 57).

18. See Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, Spring, 2003, pp. 801–31. 'Discourse matters. Culture matters ... the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter' (p. 801).

intersectional politics as a response to the digital condition, it also sought to make operational in its own approaches some of the elements that might be important in that politics. Specifically, *Furious* invoked Hélène Cixous, who declared the laughter of the god-slayer Medusa a feminist weapon, a way for feminism to at once affirm *and* critique, claim rationality *and* undermine the exclusionary claims of a rationality that works by excluding much that matters – including bodies that matter. Laughter allows writing to become full-throated, to be excessive, and may be a means through which to refuse/confuse/defuse divisions erected between materiality and its meaning. It is also a means through which to assert or explore distinctions between writing and code, even while one is constantly articulated through the other. Laughter, then, was one of our operators. It can disturb naturalized claims and assumptions, including those that conventionally divide the rational and the affective, ideation and the material, nature and culture. Laughter moreover can enable a mode of argumentation that is predicated not on deliberation alone (certainly not to the degree that this implies an always possible reconciliation through modulation) but that also rests on antagonism. Laughter calls out stupidity – the latter defined, following Patrick Crogan, who is concerned in particular with digitally realized stupidity, as failing to ask how we are governed.<sup>19</sup>

***Laughter, new materialism and media theory*** Laughter communicates. This was also of use to us. Laughter can respond mockingly to the entirely serious and very fierce attention paid to the material ‘truth’ that characterizes the approach of various contemporary digital media materialisms. This latter is an attention that misses its mark because it refuses to see what is (also) there, all that which thickens, symbolizes, *communicates*. We may

19. Patrick Crogan, ‘Indie Dreams: Video Games, Creative Economy, and the Hyperindustrial Epoch’, *Games and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2018, pp. 671–89.



as well admit now that one of the spurs to writing the book was a kind of fury with the suggestion of excommunication; as that situation which will come, on whose doorstep we sit. Meanwhile, it is argued, communication itself is in trouble. Alex Galloway's account of this trouble begins with hermeneutics and immanence, which are then superseded by a third mode, designated by his invocation of the Furies (animals, 'bitches', defiling creatures), who come to define that condition of networked complexity we are now in.<sup>20</sup> Against the daemonic intensity of the (entirely inhuman) Furies, and the post-critical response their figuration would seem to curate, we set the furious laughter of Medusa. For Cixous laughter is *meaningful*. It may therefore disrupt or dispute the seriality of the ex-communicative account (hermeneutics, symptomatics, swarms/systems) and for that matter the translation of these to the media forms/formats they are said to define: the text, the image, the system (the machine, the network). Contra Galloway's claim, the last 'system' does not have to, or does not always or entirely, 'combine and *annihilate*' the others.<sup>21</sup>

*Furious* understands systems thinking, and accepts a networked condition, but does not 'abdicate' presence or difference, nor is it inhuman. On the contrary, as a contingent post-human body, writing furiously and with shared intent, we seek to find ways to do more than 'put the world in flight' through 'infuriation' and we have a different sense of what antagonism can imply, of what a response to 'furious media' might be.<sup>22</sup> We are not entirely writing against the Furies here. There is also the fourth way suggested by Galloway: a love in the middle of execrable, insufferable sweetness, standing for something beyond antagonism and difference. We'd back the Furies against this any

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20. Alex Galloway, 'Love of the Middle', in Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2013.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 62.

day, and we think they may have their reason(s). In a different era, Cixous suggested two aims for women writing: to ‘destroy’ and to foresee the unforeseeable, which is to say to ‘project’. In other words, ‘break up the “truth” with laughter’ and then ask what may be newly affirmed.<sup>23</sup> This might also mean that the prospects of what lies beyond the portal (or what stronger AI, for instance, might open up as ‘alien’ media) could be explored in less schismatic ways. Perhaps that is gnomic. Some explication might be necessary.

Let us note here that excommunication theory (to call it that) is only one variant of new media new materialism, which itself swims in a larger sea. New materialism is a label given to four or five strands of thinking – speculative realism, objected oriented ontology (OOO), digital materialism as medium theory, new materialist feminisms – those of Barad (quantum materialism as post-critique)<sup>24</sup> and to some extent Braidotti (with a more or less Deleuzean slant), notably. Braidotti herself rightly questions the claim to new materialism as ‘new’ in these formations, acknowledging traditions of materialism that pre-date many of the present forms.<sup>25</sup> Feminism, after all, was thinking about bodies as well as texts long before Harman and the OOO, speculative realism, software studies and attacks on Kantian correlationism. On the other hand, these forms of new materialism (or quasi-new materialism) share what has been called an ‘atmosphere’,<sup>26</sup> a more or less contemporary discontent with post-structuralism *and* a hostility to historical materialism, critical theory and the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (as Keston Sutherland notes in this volume), which takes new forms.

23. Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 888.

24. See Jussi Parikka’s characterization of Barad as insisting on ‘the mode of ‘critique’ as harmful for contemporary cultural analysis. *Machinology*, 2014, jussiparikk.net, n.pag.

25. Rosi Braidotti, ‘Borrowed Energy’, interview by Timotheus Vermeulen, *Frieze*, <https://frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy>, n.pag.

26. Simon Choat, ‘Science, Agency and Ontology: A Historical-Materialist Response to New Materialism’, *Political Studies*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2017, pp. 1027–42, p. 1028.

This means that exploring what Jussi Parikka has called the prospects for ‘new materialism as media theory’<sup>27</sup> demands acknowledgement that we are breathing in this ‘atmosphere’ (perhaps this could be defined as a conjuncture), and also perhaps an acknowledgement that even within media theory there are different variants. In what follows, I shift the focus of attention from critical theory (Galloway) towards German medium theory/media archaeological materialisms in order to pursue, or to re-find, a linkage between the vital and the digital.

***Dead or alive? Media without mediation?*** A rapid detour through Jane Bennett’s influential discussion of vital materialism is useful here. Bennett finds in assemblages of many kinds (non-differentiation is part of the point) a vitality or agential capacity that she explores as ‘thing power’. In *Vibrant Matter* she argues that ‘edibles, commodities, storms and metals act as quasi agents with their own trajectories, potentialities and tendencies’ and contribute to what makes networks or assemblages operational. A force inheres in objects that is not fully comprehensible in human terms, a force that must be found in the object itself, its material. Bennett can thus ask:

What counts as the material of vital materialism? Is it only human labour and the socio-economic entities made by men using raw materials? Or is materiality more potent than that? How can political theory do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in every event and every stabilization? Is there a form of theory that can acknowledge a certain ‘thing-power’, that is, the irreducibility of objects to the human meanings or agendas they also embody?<sup>28</sup>

Bennett is clear that she prefers the more potent materialities of what might have previously been thought inert over entities

27. Jussi Parikka, ‘New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter’, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 2012, pp. 95–100.

28. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

dominated by human ‘things’ (socio-economics, for instance), and while humans (among other actants) retain forms of agency in the models she envisages this is reduced: as things become live humans are viewed as more inert – they are also kept apart; no prosthesis or extension is allowed. Scott Lash has noted that vitalism has historically never been much preoccupied with the human, and this is evident here too. It may be partly why what is made by ‘men’ (*sic*) sits uneasily in Bennett’s account since it certainly relies on a mode of vitalism. It is that which provides for forms of agency, for a potency that sometimes appears charged with an *élan vital*. There are mystical undertones to the potentialities Bennett finds in multiple things and in their assemblages. How the latter are assembled is less clear, and if they communicate they certainly do not *mediate*.

New materialist analyses of new media, also concerned to understand material force and also confronting the question of how that force is lively, or how it operates (and doing so in relation to that cathected relationship between a technology invested in the automation of cognition and matters of agency, and liveliness), operate at a different set of borders. This time the task is not to blur boundaries dividing inanimate things (and their agency) from conscious beings. Rather, but also in the interests of a (new) materialism, a rather different set of boundaries are to be reinstated.

The point is to divide media from medium, the real from the representational. Bennett listens in and hears something like a life force. New media materialism makes it a priority to strip away the barnacles of what is imputed to digital materials or to digital operations (including Bennett’s mystic encrustations) in order to look harder at the real thing. Where Bennett wants to wrinkle a thing out of its perceived inertia, seeking ways to understand its aliveness and its agency, new materialism as a medium theory works instead to wrinkle the media thing out of

its historical contexts, its horizons, and in doing so to strip it of its accretions, its *secondaries*, which are regarded as unhealthy. Technical media objects and systems not representations. Description of what is there, not theorizations that might encrust it.<sup>29</sup> You might say the material turn in digital medium theory produces an insistence on finding the essence of the thing. The rest is thought inessential, an outer skin to be sloughed off, a rind we could do without or a filter habit we need to get over; the habit being to believe in magic (Bennett's work has been rejected for this) or in mediation, the latter being a habit of accepting that the world comes to us as we are able to sense it and as we make it meaningful. This is the route that will produce an understanding both of technical media and of its (real) power; that which stands and operates prior to matters of significance as these might be interpreted and assessed.

In that strand of German Medium Theory embodied in Kittler's work and latterly developed through Wolfgang Ernst's work on temporality, which is in the same tradition and which has come also to be defined as a form of media archaeology, these arguments find full expression. They produce both a diagnosis (as Kittler put it: codes 'determine' us today)<sup>30</sup> and a demand. The demand is for a particular form of analysis or approach to the study of mediatic forms. For both Ernst and Kittler this is at once a response to developments, since the rise of technical media makes such investigative orientations necessary, if they were not before, and constitutes an overdue recognition of what might have always been necessary to investigate technical

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29. The distance here from 'thing theory' might seem great. But there are obvious connections. In an eponymous article Bill Brown begins by wondering if things may not be let alone; 'let them rest somewhere else ... beyond theory ... [in] some place of origin unmediated by the sign ... something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction.' Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28, Autumn 2001, pp. 1–22; 'fat chance', he goes on to add.

30. Friedrich Kittler, 'Code (or, How you can write something differently)', in Matt Fuller, ed., *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2008, pp. 40–46, p. 40.

media. Jussi Parikka, writing in more or less the same tradition, pushes this claim further and gives it an ontological justification when he argues that ‘new materialism is already present in the way technical media transmits and processes “culture”.’ This claim is somewhat peculiarly expressed,<sup>31</sup> but it usefully indicates the degree to which approaches developed by Kittler and Ernst, around very specific technical media, have broadened to become a general orientation extant across a range of new-materialism-inspired forms of investigation of the computational. It also points to the degree to which (or why) new media materialists regard themselves as *insiders* – their analyses being immanent to the material they are studying. This produces a series of accounts that are affirmative, ‘non-ideological’, and that regard themselves by virtue of their position as exceptionally *effective*.

It is striking that in these approaches the central kernel to be reached, or the essential matter to be explored, is variously determined as software, hardware, code, algorithm. The process of sloughing off of everything else, purging it of the dirty real (all that dirty realism, for instance)<sup>32</sup> thus produces not one, but a number of things. That essence is not as easy to get hold of as it might appear to be. We are at any rate entitled to ask again what kind of media objects are these?

The claims made for them are big. They are often big objects: big data, powerful algorithms, global networks. Their scale and reach are also expanded by way of the promissory notes attached to them, which they seem to articulate or even materialize.<sup>33</sup> Big data points to the coming of even bigger data, and even towards complete data and the end of all necessity for interpretation: ‘all

31. Jussi Parikka, ‘New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter’, *Communications and Critical Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2012, pp. 95–100, p. 95. Bill Brown argues that each new media form reorganizes the relationship between people and things (‘Thing Theory’, p. 16).

32. See Fredric Jameson on dirty realism as a form of vital intensity: *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 145.

33. Dana Boyd and Kate Crawford, ‘Critical Questions for Big Data’, *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2012, pp. 662–79.

the numbers', meaning 'no more theory'. Un-accidentally this now notorious suggestion from Chris Anderson first gained traction in *Wired* magazine.<sup>34</sup> Or consider the algorithm, and its proving power, or claims made for machine learning and emergence. These examples point to the degree to which these things bloat; they threaten to become unreal objects, as Kate O'Riordan would put it.<sup>35</sup> But there is also shrinkage. Look harder and these things become increasingly less substantial; they shrink. They become almost imaginary; imaginary because the imaginary, which is an intrinsic part of the constitution of these technical things, if these technical things are to work, has been stripped out of them. Abstraction not process is key here, and yet this operation/orientation through which an object is discerned, out of which it is materialized, is claimed to get to the heart of things, to get at that which animates things. This constitutes a form of fetishism.<sup>36</sup>

To refer to the classical invocation,<sup>37</sup> while disputing its claims to organize our desire,<sup>38</sup> *absence* covers a *lack*. In attempting to distil the thing itself, the thing itself is radically diminished, and its relation to the world and the *vibrancy* of its material appeal are dimmed. In place of the latter, what returns might oddly enough be the magical. The fetish perhaps invites a mode of vitalism back in, since traditionally what is hidden may have unacknowledged powers. How does this fetish work? Is this a medium fetish? Wendy Chun and others have pointed to the

34. Chris Anderson, 'The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete', *Wired*, 16 July 2012, [http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb\\_theory](http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory).

35. Kate O'Riordan, *Unreal Objects*, London: Pluto Press, 2017.

36. Alex Galloway would say perhaps we would say that. He comments that 'the ultimate villain for hermeneutics is fetishism'. 'Love of the Middle', p. 44. But we were never only hermeneutical; that is the point of insisting on writing and theory's productivity.

37. See Boštjan Nedoh, *Ontology and Perversion: Deleuze, Agamben, Lacan*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, p.102.

38. Cf. Cixous: 'But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack.' 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 885.

fetishization of code within software and code studies, but this version might be more thoroughgoing.<sup>39</sup>

The fetish is based on lack that is not recognized, or that is covered over (disavowed). An adherence to the material, a fetishization of 'the material', allows digital materialism to say that it grasps the real while other accounts lack substance or reality. Their charge is not that what is missing in other accounts of technical media is a recognition of media power (though that is part of the argument made by Ernst, for example). The point is that the most necessary dimension, indeed the only really necessary dimension of technical media, is missing; that materially given technical capacity, which is said to be ironed out into discourse or representation, flatlined even, in accounts relying on second-order representations (dealing in dead simulation or reflection). A consequence of this (it is argued) is that the allocation of agency is misunderstood; too much being given to humans, and too little to the determining operations of technical systems – which do not so much mediate as order.<sup>40</sup>

Thinking about medium fetishization might be a way to account for the hostility found in medium theory towards other accounts of new media that tangle with other forms of fetishization (and with alienation and misrecognition): Marx's account of commodity relations, in which relations between people are mistaken for relations between things, and Freud's, in which desire is misrecognized, producing a form of self-alienation.

In general, new materialism would sweep away such formations as (almost literally) without substance, as looking in the wrong way, at the wrong thing (perhaps as simply looking backwards).<sup>41</sup>

39. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Sourcery or Code as Fetish', *Configurations* 16, 2008, pp. 299–324.

40. On dimensionality and animation, see Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, London: Verso, 2004.

41. Brown points out that the fetish has long been associated with a particular kind of 'thing theory'; for example, in Arjun Appadurai's work. Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 6; Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction' in *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.



However, exploring new materialist media theory through the perspective of the fetish provides a means through which to adumbrate what is missing in new materialist accounts of digital media. In them, the question of commodity relations and the matter of desire are present in their absence, are part of what the fetishized account covers up – cannot deal with – which may also be why it cannot or does not wish to think in terms of sex–gender distinctions, and also does not see why a systematic account of gender necessarily intersects with other elements of the same system (this being so even when a sympathetic orientation towards tackling discrimination is evident, as for example is the case for Parikka). Today a version of that misrecognition that Marx saw in social relations (where relations between people are mistaken for relations between things), which he also always understood to operate on bodies (to contribute to harming them), now operates on the bodies of the dividuated, data-produced, responsabilized, largely de-agentialized and discriminated subjects of information; operates on the social relation in general and on each of our lives. Going by way of the fetish is not the only way to go. We ourselves certainly would not parallel the two canonical forms it has taken ‘in theory’.<sup>42</sup> But it is laughable indeed to consider that it is possible to reach around the instantiated relations, the material complexities and imbrications, the imaginaries these formations point to, and still produce or find the kernel or the ‘truth’ of the digital object.

In some of its defiantly post-political veins, new materialist media analysis doesn’t actually care (much) about these things, being more interested in issues beyond the human entirely. It is in this sense, or in this variant, anti-human. Or it may care but presume such issues may not be approached except by way of what is viewed as ‘prior’ (Ernst), or structurally determining (Drucker). Seen in its own terms, the graver charge against

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42. ‘Break the old circuits... Let us defetishize’, Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 891.

new media materialism, which it would of course seek to refute, might be that its claims to the real are undermined by a failure to grasp the full dimensions of those materials it is seeking to engage with. One way to put this is to suggest that it cannot generate a response (critical or otherwise) to the formation it finds itself in but is on the contrary (simply) continuous with it.

***'Thus, to resist the present, I propose', or, a goldfish responds***<sup>43</sup>

In the interests of linking this back to vitality and life, I want to rapidly jump from theory to a goldfish. More precisely to Matthew Weinstein's animated video *E Lobro*,<sup>44</sup> at the centre of which are the sinuous perambulations of a feminized goldfish – at once mocking life and human gender divisions and enacting them, as it slides between skeletons that are spindly and overgrown like the plants in a goldfish bowl.<sup>45</sup> Weinstein's fish is just as dead as his skeletons, and we are endlessly sure that none of them has ever quite lived, although all are highly animated. The aesthetic here might seem to resonate with what Claire Colebrook has described as a queer vitalism – passive vitalism as a field of potentialities that would enable life (including gendered life) to actualize – but might also be its obverse: dealing in a dead potentiality.<sup>46</sup> Early explorations of artificial life tended to work through the uncanny, founding this on that sense of life found where it should not be (*Metropolis*, again, might be a canonical example). Here though, that has been routed. We are left, perhaps, with what Rosalind Galt has explored as the pretty or the decorative.<sup>47</sup>

43. The phrase is Irmgaard Emmelhainz's. 'Can We Share a World Beyond Representation?', p. 10.

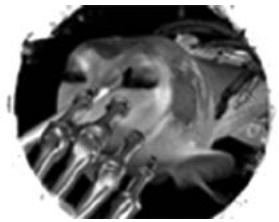
44. [www.matthewweinstein.com/works/e-lobro-15/video?view=slider](http://www.matthewweinstein.com/works/e-lobro-15/video?view=slider). I am grateful to Matthew Weinstein for permission to reproduce a still here.

45. Martha Cook has written a beautiful account of *E Lobro* in an MPhil essay. I am indebted to her.

46. Claire Colebrook, 'Queer Vitalism', *New Formations* 68, 2010, pp. 77–92, p. 80.

47. Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Weinstein's work both enacts the fetish of the digital, as medium fetish, and comments on it. In doing so a way is found to look *askance* at the online, constructed, on-screen bodily condition. This work is certainly not pedagogic and nor is it resistive exactly, but it is diagnostic and revelatory of ways in which a particular distribution of the sensible is currently operated and makes its appeal. By contrast, disregarding the imaginary, unable to deal with the fetish it enacts, hard medium materialism all too easily (not inevitably) does not interrogate, but simply drifts into alignment with, that vision of the future offered by industry. One of the odder things about new media materialism is the extent to which, insisting on the material, it is in the end following the industry hype. Perhaps we might say it is dazzled by extant unreal objects.



Also interested in looking askance, *Furious*, as a writing body and as a body of writing, constitutes another kind of not entirely human response to new media materialism as a normative perspective for thinking about new media. It is also, by the way, a body we do not fetishize. We stand behind it, I and I and I, recognizing our limits of movement, and our accountability, but not registering an absence. It is by way of an authorship at once asserted and partially refused (or defused so that its authority questions itself), which is conspicuously different from an actualization, but which shares with it a sense of affirmation, that we find room to move while also recognizing our place and location. The point was to find a place to write neither from the impossible outside, where the fantasy of un-mediation might place us, nor as entirely secured from within – as a new materialist medium theory that takes its status as ontologically determined in precisely the same way as the materials it studies believes itself to be. Against the fetish of the material which produces

an account that is lacking while insisting it is affirmative – and insists it is entirely true – *Furious* responds by insisting on the specific materiality of writing (including in this its automation, as well as the labour it demands by hand) as well as the materiality of the digital. It insists on their co-dependence.

We affirm the open potential of digital media and of digitally mediated bodies and worlds. Our resistance to compulsion/the compulsory is not located in relation to technology, let alone information technology. We are interested in precisely how it may fracture (rather than confirm) a series of divisions, including those between forms of activity and agency, and those that organize life in human terms/hierarchies. But we maintain our (post-) humanity and recognize our situated position in computational capitalism – also a system, but not that derived from an entirely informational or cybernetic account – in which feedback is indifferent to intent, including intent to make, inaugurate, author.

This also points the way for a rethinking of that political relationship between vitalism, the digital and materialism by opening – as a suggestion at least – the possibility of rethinking agency in terms that go beyond a division between vitalism (as an inhuman life force) and life as confined to the all too often normatively inscribed body. This task might entail a rethinking of a peculiar limitation that is ‘traditional’ in digital theory: to the extent that Donna Haraway (or her cyborg) has become a founding figure of cybercultural theory, it is even hallowed. It is the one that says, ‘as machines become more lively, we become more inert’. But why should this sum add up? The system (does not need to be) closed. There is activity all around. Finding new ways to calculate it and doing so as part of a technophile project of feminist technoscience is an urgent task. As Cixous put it: ‘Not a minute to lose. Let’s get out of here.’<sup>48</sup>

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48. Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 885.

## 2

# The consolation of new materialism

KESTON SUTHERLAND

The dismal half-heartedness of new materialism's professions of antipathy to capitalism shapes and colours all its pronouncements on the future of life. Capitalism is reproved, indistinctly and in passing, as if with due diligence, for a catalogue of oddly abstract vandalisms: everything from squashing with its 'axioms' the 'multi-directional opening out' of 'social and cultural movements' and 'multiple curiosity-driven knowledge practices' to preventing the 'virtuality of the cosmos' from remaining 'as a form of commons for all life'.<sup>1</sup> Capitalism evidently is the target of these remonstrances because it is called out by name, and these certainly are undesirable things for capitalism to get up to, and it may seem a bit sulky not to link arms with new materialism in its dauntless proclamations of the new resistance. Resistance it must be, because this word, too, is a keyword. Why would any honest hater of capitalism shrink from 'taking "living matter" as a *zoe*-geo-centred process that interacts in complex ways with the techno-social, psychic and natural environments and resists the over-coding by the capitalist profit principle (and

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1. Rosi Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2018, pp. 31–61, p. 53; Elizabeth Grosz, 'An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz: Geopower, Inhumanism and the Biopolitical', interviewers Kathryn Yusoff and Nigel Clark, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 34, nos 2–3, 2017, p. 132.

the structural inequalities it entails)' and by opposing 'end up on an affirmative plane of composition of transversal subjectivities'? What could possibly be the harm in 'a posthuman thought that might inspire, work with or subtend informational and scientific practices and resist the trans-species commodification of life by advanced capitalism'?<sup>2</sup> Resistance, surely, is welcome, whatever process of complex interaction or subtensive thought it comes from. If it cannot exactly come from humans, it can still be of benefit to (some of) them. 'The inhuman within the human, as resistance, is the creative force that enables (some) humans to transform their conditions of existence, to make, create, invent.'<sup>3</sup> (The parenthesis will be understood to signify, very efficiently, acknowledgement of the diversity of humans and the obviously very different positions they are in relative to the inhuman within the human, and humility with respect to the fact that not all humans will be equally enabled to transform their conditions of existence by making new use of this creative force.)

Resistance that must not come from humans may ultimately be provided by matter itself, understood in the new way, following Derrida's explanation of 'the desubstantialization of matter that occurs as a result of the deconstructive inscription of materiality as the impossible relation to the other', no longer as matter, but now as 'the force of materiality' that is impossible. Matter in this new sense may even in addition represent the most sophisticated method of avoiding the human altogether, which would in turn liberate resistance from politics. 'As the undoing of the power of the subject, the force of materiality cannot lead to a political program.' The force of materiality as resistance that cannot lead to a political program also frees the opponent of capitalism, whose power as a subject has at last been altogether undone, from the dead end of a future that can

2. Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 42.

3. Grosz, 'An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz', pp. 135–6.

be anticipated. 'Because it refers us to the radically other, materiality is also the opening of an unforeseeable future, an *à-venir* (to come) that cannot be anticipated as a form of presence.' Resistance by referral to the radically other, or 'the impossible' that 'is curiously more material and real than concrete actuality', can allow no exceptions to its more radical undoing, irrespective of history; the most revolutionary critique and even revolutionary warfare is no different from any other 'purposive or end-oriented action that is based on rational calculations or the projection of an ideal end', since the force of materiality that is impossible and more real than concrete actuality 'resists and confounds' all this along with 'any teleology such as that of Marxism'.<sup>4</sup>

The resistance of capitalism and the resistance of Marxism are, to use Cheah's word, 'curiously' alike, or even identical, for new materialism, and it is a curiously short hop from one to the other. Marxism, once it has been successfully resisted, in the new way, in the name of the force of materiality, the inhuman and transversal subjectivities, turns out to be not the revolutionary critique of capitalism that its diehard adherents even now persist in mistaking it for, but, like capitalism, a morbid precursor to the vitality of the posthuman plane of immanence to come, that minoritarian paradise full of the flourishing of 'new kinds of economically productive practices in a market economy liberated from capitalist axioms'.<sup>5</sup> And the beautiful thing is, what a simple thing it is to get there. It is as easy to enter as the heaven on earth accessed by somebody else bringing the washing in from the back garden in a Craig Raine poem. We need only give up our 'Promethean ideas of human mastery over nature' and

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4. Pheng Cheah, 'Non-dialectical Materialism', in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 75–81. As Byung-Chul Han has pointed out, it is not deconstruction but capital that 'wipes out' teleology, along with 'every in-order-to', with the result that 'life has never been so fleeting as it is today'. *Topology of Violence*, trans. Amanda Demarco, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2018, p. 19.

5. Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 53.

Marxism, along with the ‘kind of species-narcissism’ defined by the toxic imperative that “‘life” must remain special – that is, radically other to matter’.<sup>6</sup> Materialism is still, or, rather, is now for the first time, the proper vehicle for this transformation, provided that ‘the legacy of Marxism and its particular claim to materialism’ is first swiftly reevaluated in the light of the ‘paradigm shift from the (time-honoured and still prevalent) conflation of materialism with economism to a revamped materialism defined primarily as signification and subjectivity-in-process.’<sup>7</sup>

### **Or Dietzgen, for example**

Materialism, in the sense in which Marx, Engels, Dietzgen, Plekhanov, Lenin, Luxemburg and other revolutionaries used the word, was never merely a theory of matter or materiality, but always also, and primarily, a revolutionary pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> It was how groups of individuals who dedicated their lives to the destruction of capital disciplined their ‘thought-capacity’ and taught themselves and each other about the world. Most of this teaching went on outside institutions of learning, or in defiance of their culture, and had little or nothing to do with the production imperatives of academic capital and the academic career. (The thought that this revolutionary materialism would one day be pensioned off or archived for being too romantic about subjectivity, for clinging to the outmoded human, and for being credulous enough to try to anticipate in detail and work out in practice forms of future social relations, instead of standing back and gapping at ‘the

6. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’, in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 17; Jane Bennett, ‘A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism’, in *ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

7. Rey Chow, ‘The Elusive Material, What the Dog Doesn’t Understand’, in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 226.

8. As Susanne Lettow has explained, throughout the works of Marx and Engels ‘practice, activity, production, and conditions of life are all characterized as material ... the adjective “material” functions as placeholder for a whole bundle of bodily, natural, technological and social issues.’ ‘Turning the Turn: New Materialism, Historical Materialism and Critical Theory’, *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 140, no. 1, 2017, pp. 106–21.



opening of the unforeseeable'; and the thought that, in preference to the old, crude revolutionary materialism that flourished in defiance of academic capital, the thinkers of this new future would find proof of the vitality of the new and improved materialism in 'the exuberant growth' of 'new fields of scholarship ... concentrated in a number of creative trans-disciplinary hubs, which have generated their own extra-disciplinary offspring'<sup>9</sup> – for the old dialectical gropers in the dark of 'socialist humanism', this thought would have been the definition of the foreseeable: it was the academy they already knew.) When Joseph Dietzgen, the self-taught 'philosophical working man', a tanner by trade, and the most dedicated exponent of revolutionary materialism among Marx's friends and contemporaries, wrote of 'us dialectical or Social-Democratic materialists', he meant, and was understood by his comrades to mean, those of us who are the implacable enemies of capitalist society and bourgeois thought, who study nature and the world in all its detail in order to learn how to destroy capitalist society.<sup>10</sup>

The first and fundamental lesson of the revolutionary pedagogy of materialism, according to Dietzgen, is that consciousness – not excluding such rare examples of consciousness as the thought that 'the desubstantialization of matter occurs as a result of the deconstructive inscription of materiality as the impossible relation to the other' – is to be explained 'from the

9. Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 38.

10. Joseph Dietzgen, *Excursions of a Socialist into the Domain of Epistemology* [Streifzüge eines Sozialisten in das Gebiet der Erkenntnistheorie] (1887), in *Some of the Philosophical Essays on Socialism and Science, Religion, Ethics, Critique-of-Reason and the World-at-large*, trans. M. Beer and T. Rothstein, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906, p. 294. Dietzgen was dubbed the 'philosophical working man' by Bruno Wille in an article recollecting Wille's visit to Dietzgen's tannery in *Der Sozialistische Akademiker*, 1896, cited in Eugene Dietzgen, 'Sketch of the Life of Joseph Dietzgen', *Some of the Philosophical Essays*, p. 19: 'I discovered by his very first sentences that he was perfectly at home in the regions of higher mental life. Not a trace of the dust of the shop was on his soul. No professor could rise from his desk more spiritualized than this tanner did from his manual labor. In a few minutes, we were deeply engaged in a discussion of philosophical books and problems. ... This philosophical working man had even occupied himself with antique literature, and with better success than is generally shown by a graduate of a college, in spite of the fact that he was not familiar with Greek and only a beginner in Latin.'

way and manner of bread-winning'. Or, as Dietzgen more expansively put it, 'that the way ... in which man earns his daily bread, that the level of civilization on which a generation physically *works*, determines the mental standpoint or the way in which it conceives and must conceive the True, the Good and Right, God, Freedom and Immortality, Philosophy, Politics and Law.'<sup>11</sup> This fundamental knowledge, which may indeed be dogmatic, cannot be reached by any temporary theoretical accommodation. It can only be lived. It is true and it makes sense only for the determined revolutionary who accepts it wholeheartedly and radically internalizes it; it is then no longer merely a proposition, but a 'critically firm, undoubted standpoint'. (Dietzgen explains that it was his experience of the revolutions of 1848 that awoke in him a great 'desire to acquire a critically firm, undoubted standpoint': essential to the idea of materialist pedagogy is some kind of originary seizure or captivity of life by a singular pitch of desire, an experience of intensity that can only be made to erupt by living in and through a moment of real revolutionary possibility).<sup>12</sup> Once this knowledge is a firm standpoint, it makes sense of everything else. But it does not make sense of anything in the way that a Promethean intellect astride the world (or its new materialist caricature) would make sense of everything. It does not lead to and is not the product of an omnipotent human mastery; in fact, it is almost the very opposite.

Dietzgen's revolutionary materialism is rooted in permanent wonder at the inexhaustibility of everything that can be thought, examined, learned, understood, picked up or tried out. It is a revolutionary pedagogy for which the power of

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11. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, pp. 300, 279. For a useful overview of Dietzgen's work that argues that Dietzgen should be credited as the inventor of 'dialectical materialism', see Tony Burns, 'Joseph Dietzgen and the History of Marxism', *Science & Society*, vol. 66, no. 2, Summer 2002, pp. 202–27. Burns concludes with the disappointingly sober judgement that Dietzgen's contribution to Marxist theory was minor and that his philosophy was not very original. But Burns says nothing about Dietzgen's ideas (crucial for the present essay) about the relation of thought to work.

12. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 279.

the work of learning consists in the reality that this work is never done, not because the human intellect is too little or too restless, but because ‘the stuff that is given as material for our thought-capacity is as infinite as space’.<sup>13</sup> This is true of every object, every life, every idea, every possibility: nothing is ever exhausted by thought, not even when it is present or foreseeable, but there is always more that thought can do, always more to find, always more to sense and to know. ‘Whether one wants to measure the Infinite or merely the smallest atom, one always has to deal with the Immeasurable’, Dietzgen wrote. ‘Nature, both as a whole and in its parts, is inexhaustible, not knowable to its last particle – consequently without beginning and end.’<sup>14</sup> This is a ‘social democratic’ type of infinity: its emphasis falls squarely on the inexhaustibility of the object and the therefore endlessly compelling, endlessly frustrating, endlessly rewarding work of discovery that follows serious engagement with any object at all, by anyone at all who really tries.

What the intellect – or in Dietzgen’s aggressively direct materialist language, what the ‘head’ – does with this infinite stuff, when activated by materialist motives, is work. ‘Thought is work.’<sup>15</sup> The revolutionary materialist determination to reconceptualize work has remained fundamental for Marxist feminist critique and for contemporary social reproduction theory. As Nancy Hartssock wrote:

The liberation of women – and all human beings – depends on understanding that work is essential to our development as individuals and on creating new places in our lives for our work. We must develop a new conception of work itself. To begin this process, we must clarify what is wrong with the capitalist and patriarchal organization of work and define the requirements of *human work*.

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13. Joseph Dietzgen, *Das Wesen der Menschlichen Kopfarbeit* [The Essence of Human Headwork], Stuttgart, 1903, p. 64; my translation.

14. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, pp. 317–18.s

15. Dietzgen, *Das Wesen der Menschlichen Kopfarbeit*, p. 58.

'Human' evidently does not mean, here, 'not animal' or 'not machine', but 'what we have been prevented from doing together, for ourselves, by capitalism and by patriarchy'.<sup>16</sup> Human work in this sense might very well be work that animals or machines could do: the point is, we have to fight to find out). Materialist motives are motives of the whole body, not only of the head. 'Thinking is bodily work', Dietzgen the proletarian philosopher insisted.<sup>17</sup> Sensory experience is a kind of thought, and thought is a sensory experience. Contrary to the curious idea, central to the criticism of many new materialists, that 'the predominant sense of matter in modern Western culture has been that it is essentially passive stuff',<sup>18</sup> for Dietzgen, who with Engels was the most prominent exponent of materialism in the Marxist tradition, matter is everything and everywhere, active and passive, in the most intimate activity of the mind as well as in the force of gravity.

We, modern Socialists, are not of the narrow opinion that the ponderable and tangible matter is matter *par excellence*. We hold that the scent of flowers, sounds and smells are also material. We do not conceive the forces as mere appendices, mere predicates of matter, and matter, the tangible one as 'the thing' which dominates over all properties. Our conception of matter and force is, so to speak, democratic. One is of the same value as the other; everything individual is but the property, appendix, predicate or attribute of the entire Nature as a whole. The brain is not the matador and the mental functions are not the subordinate servants. No, we modern materialists assert that the function is as much and as little an independent thing as the tangible brain-mass or any other materiality. The thoughts, too, their origin and nature, are just as real matters and materials worthy of study as any.<sup>19</sup>

16. Nancy C.M. Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, Boulder CO: Westview, 1998, p. 45.

17. 'Denken ist eine leibliche Arbeit', in Dietzgen, *Das Wesen der Menschlichen Kopfarbeit*, p. 64.

18. Diana Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh', in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 17.

19. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 301. Dietzgen would have been surprised by the new materialist complaint that 'humanism and dialecticist thought' is all about 'prioritising

Dietzgen's materialist wonder at the inexhaustibleness of infinite nature and the infinity of every object for the head and the senses remained fundamental to the character of revolutionary materialism in the Marxist tradition for many decades, as did his contempt for the infantile and fantastical idea of man or the human as a Promethean project manager squatting on the cosmos and dominating everything. 'The outer world, the objective world, does not exist only outside me, but also within me, inside my own skin', wrote Georgy Plekhanov, the most influential proponent of Marx's revolutionary materialism in Russia before the revolution of 1917. 'Man is only a part of nature, a part of being; that is why there can be no contradiction between his thought and his being.'<sup>20</sup> For Plekhanov, as for Dietzgen, there can be no meaningful materialism, or, in other words, no pedagogy for revolutionaries determined to destroy capitalist society, without a theory of work rooted in wonder at the inexhaustibleness of everything that remains to be learned, understood, known, and, consequently and ultimately, realized or *won* as reality for workers who, until that time, are condemned under capital to exist in crushed and voided states of indirect or direct slavery. There can be no revolutionary materialism that is not a theory of work. Dietzgen's theory of work is about both the work that we do now, work that is done already as 'thought' and as 'breadwinning', and work that is not done yet, but that might yet be done, if and when we free ourselves from capitalist relations of production, and dedicate our lives to exploring the infinity of nature, of thought itself, of others who work with us, and of every object that seriously engages our attention. The work of thought that is necessary now to conceive these new,

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mind over matter, or culture over nature'. Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, 'The Transversality of New Materialism', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010, pp. 153–71, p. 156.

20. G. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, ed. D. Ryazanov, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937, p. 13.

future forms of work and exploration of the inexhaustible is also how the absolute poverty of existence under capital can be made more and more excruciatingly explicit. Materialism must learn 'how the unknowable changes into the knowable', Dietzgen wrote;<sup>21</sup> and for a materialist this is true in two cases above all. The materialist must study how the suffering inflicted on the worker by the capitalist crushing of life – suffering that is certainly felt and endured, but that may yet be 'unknowable' for what it is – can be clearly and firmly known. And the materialist must study how the world that may be won and the life that may be lived after the destruction of capital can be kept as fully as possible within reach: as vision, as poetry, as fantasy, as science, as prediction, as teleology, as desire, as a programme or as a dream; in any case wholeheartedly, and always at the most vivid point of tension and overlap between the unknowable future, or what cannot yet be drawn up as a blueprint for society, and the knowable future, or what people who are crushed do know that they want above all else and would even risk life to get. These are simple thoughts, rough even, and philosophically primitive: thought is work, thought is bodily labour, consciousness is determined by the manner of breadwinning, the world is inexhaustible for thought, we never get to the end, there is always everything still to learn and to win. They are simple thoughts in the sense that they do not require a very complex logic, and in the sense that they leave out of consideration a great number of complexities and contingencies, almost to the point where it is difficult to believe that contingency has really been reckoned with at all. As lessons of a revolutionary materialist pedagogy, they are not difficult to understand. They are easy to understand, but intensely difficult to live with.

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21. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 327.

## Work: from Engels's (anti-poetic) to Marx's (poetic) materialism

Engels concluded the chapter on 'work' in his *Dialectics of Nature* with an irritable footnote on the perils of confusing 'the concept of work in the physical sense of the word' with work 'in the economic sense'.<sup>22</sup> The 'concept of work in the physical sense of the word', says Engels, is how 'modern mechanics expresses the conversion of mechanical motion into another form of motion'.

If, as in a steam or heat engine, heat is converted into mechanical motion, i.e., molecular motion is converted into mass motion, if heat breaks up a chemical compound, if it becomes converted into electricity in a thermopile, if an electric current liberates the elements of water from dilute sulphuric acid, or conversely, if the motion (alias energy) set free in the chemical process of a generating cell takes the form of electricity and this in the closed circuit once more becomes converted into heat – in all these processes the form of motion that initiates the process, and which is converted by it into another form, performs work, and indeed an amount of work corresponding to its own amount.

Work, therefore, is change of form of motion regarded in its quantitative aspect [*Arbeit ist also Formwechsel der Bewegung, betrachtet nach seiner quantitativen Seite hin*].<sup>23</sup>

For Engels, it is obvious that any account of nature that is truly materialist will comprehend and make use of the discoveries of modern mechanics. But an account of nature that is not only materialist but also dialectical will go further yet. A dialectical materialist will not merely make use of the discoveries of modern mechanics, but will work out their truth by means of the logic of contradiction and identity. Engels singles out for praise the *Lectures on Mathematical Physics* of Gustav Kirchoff, and cites from that work Kirchoff's exemplary dialectical

22. Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987, p. 391.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

definition of the state of rest: 'Rest is a special case of motion' (*Die Ruhe ist ein spezieller Fall der Bewegung*).<sup>24</sup> According to Engels, Kirchoff 'thus proves that he can not only calculate but can also think dialectically'.<sup>25</sup> Thinking dialectically, Engels warns, requires conceptual clarity, and for this the materialist must be careful about words and exercise strict lexical discipline. The footnote that ends the chapter on work in *Dialectics of Nature* explains that, because in German the word *Arbeit* has been used for both 'the concept of work in the physical sense of the word' and work 'in the economic sense', 'it has been possible in recent pseudoscientific literature to make various peculiar applications of work in the physical sense to economic conditions of labour and vice versa'.<sup>26</sup> Engels's prescription is that the German word *Werk* should be used for the conversion of mechanical motion in order to distinguish this from the work that is sold as labour-power, which is called (and was always called by Marx) *Arbeit*.

This footnote is Engels showing off his anti-poetic tendency. It is the same Engels who wrote to Marx after he first read the completed manuscript of *Capital* to complain bitterly that the work had not been organized in the style of a textbook, to make it as easy as possible to read and to absorb. But despite the apparently indelible reputation of Marx as a 'dialectical materialist', what Engels calls 'thinking dialectically' with strict lexical discipline, or 'dialectical materialism', was less interesting to Marx than what Engels derogatively calls 'peculiar applications' of the discoveries of modern science to the economic conditions of labour. For Marx does in *Capital* precisely what Engels the dialectical materialist says must not be done. Marx calls the worker in the chapter of *Capital* on relative surplus value a 'repellent

24. Gustav Kirchoff, *Vorlesungen über mathematische Physik*, Teubner, Leipzig, 1876, p. 32; my translation. Kirchoff echoes the young William Wordsworth: 'Calm is all nature as a resting wheel'.

25. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, p. 388.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 391.



but elastic natural limit' that exists in order to be crushed flat under the force of valorization.<sup>27</sup> This force is what Marx calls in the *Grundrisse* the 'specific gravity' of capitalist society.<sup>28</sup> The worker is aggressively defined by Marx in *Capital* as precisely nothing but an example of the conversion of mechanical motion (the motion of the body voided in the form of 'living labour') into another form of motion, what Marx famously calls, in the *Grundrisse*, the 'moving contradiction' of capital itself.<sup>29</sup>

Marx's whole description of the universe of the so-called 'capital-relation', which he describes as a universalized non-relation – from the violently separated 'speck-like' existence of the individual labourer right up to the sublime heights of the infinity of the spiral of limitless accumulation – is one great 'peculiar application of work in the physical sense to economic conditions of labour'. This is, on Engels's terms, strictly speaking, not a disciplined, dialectical materialist account of capitalist production, but a vivid confusion of physics and economics, at all points *quasi una fantasia*, an inexorable nightmarescape of deliriously 'pseudoscientific' illuminations of the hell of 'work-torture'.<sup>30</sup> What for Engels the dialectical materialist is lexical indiscipline liable to produce confusion and give support to 'pseudoscience' (in this case, mixing up the work done by matter with the work done by human beings) is poetics for Marx. The tangling up of mechanics and economics is at the core of the consciously deranged, wildly catachrestic, revolutionary poetics of *Capital*. Marx's description of 'labour-power' is a specifically poetic image of work 'in the economic sense' as a mechanical

27. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 527; translation emended. The original German is *die widerstrebende, aber elastische menschliche Naturschranke*. Fowkes ties this up into 'obstinate yet elastic barrier'.

28. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 106.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 706.

30. For Marx's description of the 'speck-like' existence of the worker, see *Grundrisse*, p. 385. For the neologism 'work-torture', see Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 548; translation emended. Fowkes softens *Arbeitsqual*, literally 'work-torture', to 'drudgery'.

force or performance of work in the sense understood by physics: the ‘peculiar application’ of one to the other is not verbal slip-page or a category mistake; it is the hell of valorization.

The capitalist hell of valorization is where matter is ‘a matter of complete indifference’. The specific materiality of every person or thing, even of nature, is of virtually no consequence in this hell, where all that matters is the production of surplus value, or the emptying out of value, from no matter what character of human, animal or mechanical vessel. Hell is essentially logical before it is material. The fate of matter damned to the hell of capitalist logic is to exist only in what Marx calls ‘value-objective’ (*wertgegenständlich*) form. The conspicuously hideous neologism *Wertgegenständlichkeit*, or ‘value-objectivity’, is a ‘peculiar application’, to borrow Engels’s phrase, of one logic to another, each one mutually repellent: Ricardo’s to Hegel’s. ‘However important it may be to value that it should have some use-value to exist in, it is still a matter of complete indifference what particular object serves this purpose’, Marx serenely explains.<sup>31</sup> The grotesque inversion is essential to the poetics: not what is important to human beings, but what is important to value, as though value could find anything important, is what matters. Human beings need not even be directly mentioned here, since they will be understood to be comprehended under the category of ‘object that serves a purpose’. Marx found this thought about the ‘indifference’ of objects, which he developed into a thought about the indifference of materiality and the indifference of forms of labour, or the indifference of matter and life, in Mercier de la Rivière’s *L’Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1767). The specific resonance of the word, not merely its meaning for the logic of value, is what excited Marx, who consistently read works of political economy, as well as works of science, in

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31. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, pp. 310–11.

the attitude of a satirical poet, permanently on the lookout for slips of the concept, always listening out for bits of idiomatic dissonance, ironies and unintended creeps of connotation that could be grafted onto or parodied in his own critique, to make his reader wince, recoil or heave. Mercier de la Rivière's *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* was the literary source of a specific poetic inspiration: the idea of the indifference of matter and human beings. 'With silver', writes Mercier de la Rivière,

one buys commodities, and with commodities one buys silver: selling or buying is in every case ... the exchange of any value for any other value: that one of these values should be silver, or that both should be useful commodities, is a matter of complete indifference in itself.<sup>32</sup>

*Rien de plus indifférent en soi.* So long as the perfected form of mechanical motion, the *perpetuum mobile* called the valorization of values, continues unobstructed, the material form of the object sent spinning round this spiral to infinity is a matter of complete indifference, and vice versa. In capitalist logical hell, indifference is the 'in-itself'. Polystyrene, human being, exoplanet or bat shit, none of this need be brought down to the same level by a 'flat ontology', because everything is already equal. Capital takes care of that. Objects already 'have a life of their own', prior to the vivifications of new materialism: an indifferent life.<sup>33</sup> Everything is 'some use-value' for value 'to exist in',

32. Pierre-Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière, *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques*, Librairie Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1910, p. 261; my translation. Cf. another of Marx's source texts (and the target for some of his best signature vitriol), Antoine-Elisée Cherbuliez, *Riche ou Pauvre. Exposition succincte des causes et des effets de la distribution actuelle des richesses sociales*, Paris: Librairie d'Abel Cherbuliez, 1840, p. 32: 'There is no difference between a capital and any other portion of wealth: it is only by the use that is made of it that something becomes *capital*.' My translation.

33. 'If materiality is agentive, then objects have a life of their own; they actively interact with, resist and co-shape other entities, including humans.' Hans Schouwenburg, 'Back to the Future? History, Material Culture and New Materialism', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 59–72, p. 65. Who ever doubted that humans are resisted and shaped by objects?

and it is 'a matter of complete indifference what particular object serves this purpose'.<sup>34</sup>

This is the truth about 'indifference', the truth that Marx makes resound by a poetic specification of the extinction of material specificity. Truth like this could not be made to resound as it does in *Capital* without intense, compelling poetic aggression. Partly for the reason that there is no aggression in it, or none that is compelling, and partly for the reason that it is not remotely poetic, new materialism's version of this thought about the equality of all matter ends up feeling like a late blossoming of the species of florid reverie that Marx called 'utopian'. The problem with utopian thought, according to Marx, was not that it was too fantastical or that it envisioned a world too good or perfect for reality; the problem was that it never could specify the work that is actually necessary to get to the world it envisioned. It was not interested in how to get there, because it was not really interested in violence: neither in the forms of violence that are inexorable in the capitalist process of production, the violence that exists now and that must be fought and abolished, nor in the revolutionary violence that will unavoidably be necessary and essential to finding and building the world that we know we want. Theoretical solutions suffice for envisioning a world that need only be desired in theory, and are good for human beings who are not crushed right now, every day, unbearably, to the point where their existence feels unendurably speck-like, and for whom every possibility of exploration of the infinite is cut off and shut down. But for human beings who are

34. It is not clear why Bruno Latour thinks that it remains the urgent 'political task' of theory and science to 'establish the continuity of all entities that make up the common world', or why he thinks that 'the common world' will not show up until that 'task' has been completed. The continuity of all entities was easily established, in plain logical terms, in *Capital*. Admittedly, it was a bad, not a good continuity, or, in Latour's other terms, a bad and not a good 'composition', and it did not bring about a world that was common enough. Was this failure down to Marx's faulty concept of continuity, or did he not establish the continuity well enough? Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 3, Summer 2010, pp. 471–90, p. 485.

crushed like that and do feel all those things, every day, and who have no way out, reticent and cautious styles of theorizing about aggression and violence, or theories that simply avoid aggression and violence altogether, are not only risible, but obscene.

'The focus on life itself', writes the new materialist Rosi Braidotti, 'may encourage a sort of biocentred egalitarianism, forcing a reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity in terms of "life-forces."' This focus that encourages egalitarianism and forces reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity also

dislocates but also redefines the relationship between self and other by shifting the axes of genderization, racialization, and naturalization away from a binary opposition into a more complex and less oppositional mode of interaction.<sup>35</sup>

The oppositional mode of interaction, whatever that might be, is the regular target of new materialist demurrals. In their introduction to the volume of essays they co-edited, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost carefully say that one thing the diverse field of new materialist thinkers all feel in common is an 'antipathy toward oppositional ways of thinking'.<sup>36</sup> Oppositional ways of thinking cannot, presumably, just be opposed, but can be and regularly are dispreferred in principle in favour of something 'more complex' to do with 'shifting' things. The lesser complexity of oppositional thinking itself is no longer up for discussion. The primitive forms of complex thinking that start with recognition of an impasse of opposed forces or irreconcilable differences that cannot be dissolved but must be lived (as fully as possible, for as long as it might take, however slow the progress) and ultimately destroyed are skipped over in silence. But it was this form of thinking, 'oppositional' in the old sense that it was a

35. Rosi Braidotti, 'The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying', in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 204.

36. Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', p. 8.

conflict to the death, that was responsible for transforming the materialism of the eighteenth century into a 'weapon of critique', in Marx's famous phrase, and a revolutionary pedagogy. Opposition – steadfast, irreconcilable, absolute – was not merely the condition of this transformation, but also the whole point of it. For Dietzgen, the point of the new materialism of Marx and Engels was precisely that it is the 'materialism of Social Democracy', a weapon in the hands of revolutionaries opposed to the bourgeois state and the domination of life by capital. The new materialism of Social Democracy is the opposite of the old 'metaphysical materialism' that was concerned only with the nature of concrete phenomena and not with the relation of mind to matter and therefore not with the whole of nature understood as comprehending the immeasurable' (revolutionary materialism 'embraces in one conception both true fancies and true paving stones').<sup>37</sup>

Whether one wants to measure the Infinite or merely the smallest atom, one always has to deal with the Immeasurable. Nature, both as a whole and in its parts, is inexhaustible, not knowable to its last particle – consequently without beginning and end.

This sounds like mysticism, until it is recognized for what it really is: a proletarian exhortation, a call to seize hold of the whole of experience, to explore all of life and the world, to keep looking, to keep the greatest conceivable goals in sight, and never to give up. The impossibility of knowing anything 'to its last particle' does not have the character of a legislative restriction on thought: it is not a figurative simplification of Kant's critical establishment of the limits of knowledge. The point of Dietzgen's essentially exhortative principle is that it is useful as a weapon in the hands of the proletariat: a means of fighting off the agonies of inhibition and hacking clear of intellectual paralysis. The

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37. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 335.

philosophical cover story is the Hegelian one about refusing to accept the idealist ejection of reality in the form of ‘thing in itself’ into a region beyond the reach of knowledge and experience. But the vital emphasis for Dietzgen is on the assertion that nothing can be known in the sense of being exhausted.

Nothing in the world, not an atom of it, is to be known out and out. Everything in the world is inexhaustible in its secrets, no less than it is imperishable and indestructible in its essence. With all that, we learn every day more and more to know the things, and learn that there is nothing which is closed to our mind.<sup>38</sup>

For Dietzgen, this was the theoretical bedrock of specifically revolutionary or ‘Social Democratic’ materialism. Revolutionary materialism is not a philosophical doctrine or world-view, simply, but a pedagogy: it is how ‘we [revolutionaries] learn every day more and more ... and learn that there is nothing which is closed to our mind’ – just as, and for this very reason, there is no form of relation, no form of work, that is closed to our lives. Revolutionary materialist pedagogy cannot do without the ‘immeasurable’, the ‘infinite’ and the ‘inexhaustible’, not only because this materialism must fight against a society in which it is only (as Proudhon put it) ‘the power to consume’ that is allowed to be infinite, but more fundamentally because learning ‘every day more and more’, learning everything possible from experience, is what keeps alive the possibility of a human subject full of potential to be developed, the same subject that capital systematically sucks empty and hollows out into the grotesque parody of a subject, ‘labour-power’. The materialist who confronts an ‘inexhaustible’ world, no part of which is ‘closed’ to the mind, is the opposite of the worker who exists only as a quantity of socially necessary ‘labour-power’ to be exhausted, and who is, value-objectively speaking, of no consequence before or after the duration of the

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38. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

process of that exhaustion. This opposition of the life activated by materialist pedagogy to the grotesque emptiness of existence as nothing but ‘the subjective element in the production process’ is not a mere opposition of categories – a product of the ‘oppositional ways of thinking’ that new materialists of every sort apparently find ‘antipathetic’ – but a struggle that is deeply felt by the worker and a source of pain that must be lived with and lived up to, every day, and even ‘every day more and more’.

This opposition is simply not dismissible by talk of the outmodedness or insufficient complexity of binaries. It is an opposition that workers are fundamentally stuck with, a basic determination of life. Contradiction, of the kind passionately characterized by Feuerbach as ‘abhorrent contradiction’ (*abstoßender Widerspruch*), is intrinsic to this opposition.<sup>39</sup> The parody form of the subject that is nothing but the exhaustion of a nonhuman power is *crushing*: it is the felt fact of unlived life.<sup>40</sup> This is the truth of Marx’s long familiar but even now scarcely understood or only delicately grasped description of the commodity form in *Capital* as ‘sensuous-supersensuous’ (a predicate that Marx lifted from Hegel, as usual in satirical style). The commodity is felt unlived life.

At one pole, a subjectivity that can be realized ‘every day more and more’ in the work of discovering the true inexhaustibility of others, objects and the world; at the other pole, the blanking

39. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Werke* 3, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, p. 32. ‘logical being is in direct, unmediated, and abhorrent contradiction with the being of the intellect’s empirical and concrete perception.’ Ludwig Feuerbach, ‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy’, in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, trans. Zavar Hanfi, London: Verso, 2012, p. 76.

40. On being crushed, see Alexander García Düttmann, ‘Against Self-Preservation, or can SCUM be Serious?’, *World Picture* 9, Summer 2014: ‘In conclusion, it can be said that the question of seriousness, a question that no doubt sounds ceremonious to many ears, needs to be understood as a wreath that binds together, if only loosely, at least four distinct, conflicting and at the same time interdependent questions, four questions posed against self-preservation, against the background and against the imposition of self-preservation. The four questions are: “What can I do to avoid being crushed?”; “What do I judge to be important in my life?”; “How can I be old and young enough, old enough to be young enough?”; and “How can I, how can creation, disclose eternity?”’



out and blocking in of that subjectivity by its indifferent conversion into labour-power that exists only in order to be exhausted in the valorization of value. This polarization is what, in *The German Ideology*, Marx calls 'the contradiction between the individuality of each separate proletarian and labour, the condition of life forced upon him'.<sup>41</sup> Labour, in this specifically capitalist form as a 'condition of life' that grows steadily more 'hateful in its contentlessness' the longer the proletarian is forced to submit to it, is contradictory in the sense that for the proletarian it is both everything and nothing. Labour is all that the proletarian is 'for the entirety of his life', and at the same time labour is 'separate' from or 'outside' of the proletarian and even out of his reach, not only in the sense that he cannot determine for himself what activity it will be, or how long he will do it for, or where and when he will do it, but also, and most importantly for Marx, that he cannot get past its contentlessness and fill it with the truth of discovery described by Dietzgen in his revolutionary materialist exhortation to a kind of learning from experience that discloses the true inexhaustibility of the world. A form of work that is really free would do precisely that, and would be 'every day more and more' knowledge – of oneself, others, of objects, of the world – even when it is frustrating, painful or otherwise unproductive. Dietzgen makes sense of this idea of materialism with a musical analogy:

In my opinion only that person is able to understand the nature of a violin who knows thoroughly how to play it – who knows what there is in it and what is to be done to bring it out of it.<sup>42</sup>

It is after playing the violin for decades that the infinity of the infinitesimal movement of a fingertip begins to appear in reality – that is, really to be felt and known – as the sort of 'substantial

41. *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 5: 1845–1847, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, p. 79.

42. Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 264.

truth' that Dietzgen describes. This is where the infinitesimal becomes infinite for real: sensation becomes truth 'conceived through the eyes, ears and hands' that is the 'product of universal life'.<sup>43</sup> The material human being is in this sense strictly like the material violin: the point of knowing each other is to learn how to know each other thoroughly, to find out what there is in ourselves and what is to be done to bring it out of us, and the point of revolutionary materialism is to teach ourselves how to transform socially productive work so that we really do learn about ourselves and others by working together. Production will then be the production of our own lives.

The work is infinite because individuals are inexhaustible. The new materialist or post-human caricature of Marxism as a philosophy of domination over nature fails to recognize this vision of a fundamental relation of work to the inexhaustible, and misses its poetic character. This is not surprising, because new materialism has nothing to say about work.

### **Old anti-Marxisms**

Only a theory that is well defended against recognition of the reality of this struggle – its reality today, for the vast majority of people alive now – could reinterpret this revolutionary optimism about the power of materialist pedagogy to disclose the inexhaustible as an outmoded fantasy about the masterful or Promethean human being standing astride nature and trying to dominate or colonize everything. The relation that Dietzgen

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43. 'Truth is of a substantial nature and not of an ideal one; it is materialistic; it is not to be conceived through thoughts alone, but also through the eyes, ears and hands; it is not a product of thought, but on the contrary, the thought is a product of universal life.' Dietzgen, *Excursions*, p. 313. Masterfully knowledgeable movement of the fingers is in this way not merely analogous to conceptual thinking (understood narrowly as thinking with the use of concepts), but is essentially the same thing. Dietzgen quotes Hegel: "The contentedness in receiving and the parsimony in giving are not virtues in the domain of science," says Hegel in the preface to his "Phenomenology of the Mind." (*Excursions*, p. 329). Neither are they virtues in the movement of a fingertip, or in sensation.

and Marx tried to conceptualize – poetically, passionately and with philosophical daring, in the name of the proletariat and for individual workers – is not between a masterful human subject who knows everything and a nature that is there only to be dominated or colonized; the relation is between work and the inexhaustible. If mastery of a kind is nonetheless essential to the work that might be done to actualize this relation, it is because it is at the far reaches of discovery that work in this sense tends to get most seriously arduous, compelling, demanding and intense.

But if actual oppositional thinking is antipathetic for new materialists, some signifying of opposition is nonetheless permissible, for the purposes of keeping up appearances. ‘A Marxist label’, write Coole and Frost of some of their fellow new materialists, ‘has helped to signify their opposition to dominant neoliberal trends.’ The next sentence of the introduction makes clear that when they say ‘label’, they mean it. ‘Coming after poststructuralism and its criticisms’, they write, ‘no workable version of Marxism can advance a historical metanarrative, aspire to the identification of determining economic laws, valorize an originary, pristine nature, or envisage communism as history’s idealized material destiny.’<sup>44</sup> Marx’s own thought would certainly not qualify as a ‘workable version’ of Marxism, according to the tough new standards of new materialism. For contrast, some workable versions of ‘poststructuralism and its criticisms’ are provided in the *New Materialisms* volume by Pheng Cheah and Rey Chow. Cheah explains that Marxism’s stubborn attachment to the ‘proletariat as a sociohistorical subject’ stops it from recognizing that the ‘relation to alterity is more material than matter as substance or presence’.<sup>45</sup> Because Marxism cannot or will not let go of class, history and subjectivity, and all the other hang-ups of oppositional thought, it is stuck with a concept of matter that is not material enough, a

44. Coole and Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’, p. 30.

45. Cheah, ‘Non-Dialectical Materialism’, p. 75.

matter that is less material than Derrida's 'materiality without materialism and even perhaps without matter.'<sup>46</sup> This explains the failure of Marxists to grasp that 'the impossible is curiously more material and real than concrete actuality.' The new materialist's matter is more material than the old materialist's matter, and this new, more material materiality makes life harder in theory for the new materialist than it was for the Marxist, who could still naively enjoy the delusion that economic laws can be identified and communism can be envisioned. The new materialist has to deal with a more material materiality that is no longer 'easily instantiated by concrete figures that are recognizable by political discourse', like the working class.<sup>47</sup> Easily instantiated concrete figures like the working class are not workable in light of the more material materiality of the impossible. Yet the new materialist need not despair, because the question what concrete figure might be available to instantiate materiality is after all not even a new question; 'perhaps the better question to ask', Cheah consolingly suggests, 'is not that of the relevance of these new materialisms to political thought and their implications for concrete politics but how they radically put into question the fundamental categories of political theory including the concept of the political itself.'<sup>48</sup>

New Materialist Rey Chow has another idea for a better question than the old unworkable Marxist one about how to change the world. In a spirit of liberal non-exclusivity that here extends right up to the periphery of the Marxist scrapyard, she asks: 'what if we were to adopt Marxism's focus on materialism/materiality (as a way to critique the philosophy of consciousness), yet without defining it (as Marxism tends to) as an agency of change-as-improvement?'<sup>49</sup> Jane Bennett is comparably

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46. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 77.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Rey Chow, 'The Elusive Material, What the Dog Doesn't Understand', in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 224.

hospitable to a certain Marx, to borrow Derrida's phrase. The Marx of *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* may no longer be workable, since that Marx was a humanist, but room can be made in a roster of honorary proto-new materialists for 'the Marx of his dissertation on Democritus' – that is, for the one piece of writing that Marx did according to university regulations for submission, while he was a member of a university, constrained by the norms of academic intellectual decorum.<sup>50</sup> Contrary to the spirit of this early work and its promising intimations of the budding new materialism, Marx would shortly leave the university, and would become an aggressive, loud-mouthed, wildly poetic communist whose pre-deconstructive obsession with the 'sociohistorical subject' of the worker led him into the error of overvaluing human beings. He ended up a casualty of what Bennett calls 'species-narcissism', a kind of deep numbness to things other than ourselves, nourished by the toxic belief that human life is 'special – that is, radically other to matter'. There is nothing wrong with thinking that we are alive; the trouble starts when 'we humans ... think of ourselves as the *most* special of [life's] expressions'.<sup>51</sup> No polystyrene, bat shit or exoplanet would be so narcissistic, so why should we?<sup>52</sup> Can it be that humans are uniquely susceptible to 'humancentric prejudice'?<sup>53</sup> (Dietzgen was

50. Jane Bennett, 'A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism', in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 48.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

52. Slavoj Žižek, in 'Marx Reads Object-Oriented Ontology', describes a similar sort of elective emptying out performed by new materialism in its anxiety to prevent us humans from overvaluing ourselves: 'the vision of "democracy of objects" where all objects occupy the same ontological standing, or the "inhuman" view of an assemblage deployed by Jane Bennet [*sic*], are only possible from the standpoint of an (empty) subject.' Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda and Agon Hamza, *Reading Marx*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018, p. 58. My criticism is related to this one but is different. Once new materialism has uncritically misidentified the problem with humanist ontology as 'narcissism', it then anxiously sets about contriving a corrective ontology answerable to the imperative to stop being so narcissistic.

53. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Liberation for Straw Dogs? Old Materialism, New Materialism, and the Challenge of an Emancipatory Posthumanism', *Globalizations*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 134–48, p. 138.

apparently never prey to such anxieties about narcissism, despite being an old materialist, a humanist and an un-deconstructed revolutionary: 'Men are, and have a right to be, proud of their intellect, but it is puerile to give to a thing, which appears to them of primary importance, the primacy of the world.'<sup>54</sup> New materialist Rosi Braidotti, in an idiom reassuringly similar to that of a marketing pitch for a new technology, celebrates the arrival in new materialism of the posthuman that is at last 'empirically grounded, because it is embedded and embodied' and that 'functions less as a substantive entity than a figuration' and that 'is a theoretically-powered cartographic tool that aims at achieving adequate understanding of ... processes of undoing the human' and that 'provides a frame to understand the ongoing processes of becoming-subjects in our fast-changing times', while it also 'enables us to track, across a number of interdisciplinary fields, the emergence of discourses about the non/in/trans/meta/post-human, which are generated by the intersecting critiques of humanism and of anthropocentrism'.<sup>55</sup> But even in this light of the new dawn of the new, one sober note of caution is found to be necessary. All these gains may yet be reversed, says Braidotti, by 'the reinvention of a pan-human', which is 'explicit in the conservative discourse of the Catholic Church, in corporate pan-humanism, [and] belligerent military interventionism', but which, more ominously, 'is more oblique but equally strong in the progressive Left, where the legacy of socialist humanism provides the tools to re-work anxiety into political rage'.<sup>56</sup>

Instead of wallowing in political rage fabricated out of anxiety using the tools of the legacy of socialist humanism, and instead of the old humanist Marxism that does not meet the requirements of signifying opposition to dominant structures by means

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54. Dietzgen, 'Social-Democratic Philosophy' (1876), in *Some of the Philosophical Essays*, p. 176.

55. Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 4.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of a label, new materialists often like to quote Deleuze. But the Deleuze they embrace is not the foul-mouthed, aggressive co-author of *Anti-Oedipus*, whose question for the academy was ‘Should one, or should one not, suffocate from what one eats, swallow air, shit with one’s mouth?’<sup>57</sup> New materialism prefers a muted palette of Deleuzian motifs, the greys and beiges of the late philosophical writing about immanence, cuts, folds, planes and becoming. The savage palette of Deleuze, the really lurid primary colours, the fauvist Deleuze full of the aggression and violence that he loved and idolized in Nietzsche, is passed over in polite silence. The Deleuze of *Anti-Oedipus* was the ‘active, aggressive, artistic, productive, and triumphant’ Deleuze, the lover of ‘wild production and explosive desire’ and of ‘openly malevolent activity’, the Deleuze whose ultra-violent, ‘schizoanalytic’ attack on the logic of ‘representation’ is now almost insufferably untimely (‘The whole of desiring-*production* is crushed, subjected to the requirements of *representation*, and to the dreary games of what is representative and represented in representation’).<sup>58</sup> This certain Deleuze was obsessed with ‘the truth that sexuality is everywhere’, such as in ‘the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat’ and in how ‘Hitler gave the fascists hard-ons’.<sup>59</sup> This certain Deleuze has suffered at the hands of new materialism the very fate whose despicable morbidity he spelled out in his 1965 essay on Nietzsche: ‘he ceases to be a poet and becomes a “public professor”’.<sup>60</sup> As Lenin said, with reference to another episode in the long history of ‘antipathy to oppositional ways of thinking’, ‘professors use and desire to use the freedom of the universities not to fan the conflagration but to extinguish it.’<sup>61</sup>

57. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, London: Continuum, 2012, p. 41.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3, 62, 123, 61.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

60. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman, New York: Zone, 2005, p. 69.

61. V.I. Lenin, ‘The Lessons of the Moscow Events’, *Collected Works*, 4th English edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, vol. 9, p. 381.

All this comes back to poetics, and ultimately back to the poetics of Marx's *Capital*. The theorizing that Braidotti calls 'undoing the human' and Bennett calls getting over our 'species-narcissism' is fundamentally about proscribing the really violent and revolutionary poetics of self-extinction. New materialism proclaims its renunciation of the grandiose self, the inflated ego, the self astride the world, the self that is different from and better than animals and matter, but in fact it keeps all these objectionable personae alive on a formula of repudiation liberally administered by drip-feed. The self that is actually written out of new materialism's theory of everything is not the egomaniacal or hyperbolized self but the one that is crushed, emptied and infinitely diminished: Marx's worker, whose existence in the capital-relation is 'specklikeness' in a blizzard of indifference.<sup>62</sup> By theorizing a new 'egalitarianism' intrinsic in matter itself, by rolling out the new concept of matter so that it comprehends life, the universe and everything that could ever be valued, and by insisting that this materiality is a more material materiality than any oppositional mode of thinking (or revolutionary social criticism) ever dreamt of, new materialism in effect papers over the bottomless crack in social reality where the speck of existence that is yet to be materialized is stuck in a perpetual plummet. One way of saying what this means is to say that new materialism casually abolishes the logic of potentiality that Marx developed out of Aristotle to create the figure of the worker who is not yet anywhere near being able to live the life that we know is meant for us; the living individual who is blocked, crushed and emptied by the world and who precisely for that reason was

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62. Cf. Grit Höppner, 'Rethinking Socialization Research through the Lens of New Materialism', *Hypothesis and Theory*, 13 September 2017, p. 6: 'Since new materialist scholars do not center agency in a single human who has a preexisting disposition in processing meaning and knowledge, they refuse to think of a human as origin or result of agency, as is common in a concrete way of thinking that argues for childish, youthful or adult forms of agency. In new materialism, agency is negotiated by heterogeneous "mediums." New materialist scholars ask: who actually socializes whom or what – does the wheelchair socialize the person or does the person in fact socialize the wheelchair?'



long ago equal to any and every material thing, even prior to the good news about the new egalitarianism, since the human being and polystyrene are perfectly alike in being 'value-objectively' a matter of complete indifference.

Another way of saying the same thing is that new materialism specifically evacuates the aggression that has been essential to the history of materialist criticism as a form of socially revolutionary thought. Marx's writing is full of violent critique: a violence that does not merely condemn, or mimic, but that reacts against and sparks off the violence of social relations, by testing to conceptual and imaginative extremes the strength of the logic of those social relations to hold up under the derangements of poetic fire. Marx's materialist critique proceeds not like a textbook but by spinning out into deliriums of pseudoscientific or cognitively intractable conceptualization, jamming together the sensuous and supersensuous, physics and economics, Ricardo and the werewolf, bat shit and Hegel, grabbing at the language of political economy and pulling out its gruesomely obtruding ironic innards, violating at every turn the lexical discipline of its own logic of categories. All this is Marx's *poetics*: the materialism of Marx's thought is right there, not in the familiar, and in fact lazy and fictitious, projections about so-called teleology, or the passive and inert world of matter astride which stands the great Promethean human being swinging his dialectics, which is just the liberal propaganda of professors, but in the logically fucked-up, fantastical, intolerably true description of the extinct self and life of the worker as an atomic speck crushed under the spiral of valorization's infinity. Marx's materialist vision of human life puts intense pressure on the subject to experience this truth, which means, as the manual labourer and old materialist Dietzgen once wrote, to feel it like a fire in the brain.



# **ART & LABOUR**



### 3

## Art's anti-capitalist ontology: on the historical roots of the artist as an anti-capitalist

DAVE BEECH

Historically, 'the art question' – what is art? – has been principally concerned with the classification of objects and their effects, although since the 1960s it has been redirected somewhat towards the institutional procedures by which objects are marshalled across the threshold of art.<sup>1</sup> This essay maps a route out of the opposition between an ontology of art objects and an institutional theory of art by retracing the history of the art question, which, I will argue, is rooted in disputes over labour. My point is not that the 'real' referent of inquiries into the definition of art is artistic or aesthetic labour (Marcuse's concept of art as non-alienated labour),<sup>2</sup> nor that the artist is the decisive factor in determining what is or is not art (Judd's dictum).<sup>3</sup> My

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1. The phrase is from Nigel Warburton, a British analytical philosopher (*The Art Question*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002). Here, I link it to the more 'continental' idea of art's ontology. My purpose is to comment on the way both traditions interrogate the peculiarity of art, as well as to contribute to debates within the social history of art which overlap them.

2. Herbert Marcuse, 'The Foundation of Historical Materialism' (1932), in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, trans. Joris de Bres, London: New Left Books, 1972. The notion of the artist as the exemplification of non-alienated labour is perhaps expressed more clearly by Braunschweig, Sánchez Vázquez, Schapiro and Brantlinger.

3. This is Judd's dictum: 'If someone says his work is art it's art' (Donald Judd, 'Statement' in the exhibition catalogue *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975*, Halifax NS: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York: New York University Press, 1975, p. 190). The phrase 'Judd's dictum' comes from Art & Language, responding to Joseph Kosuth's comments in his essay 'Art After

aim, rather, is to resituate the art question within the history and legacies of the confrontation between art, handicraft, commerce and industry during the prolonged struggle in Europe to elevate art above manual labour during the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The inquiry into the ontology of art which was inaugurated by the Jena Romantics arose historically out of debates about the grouping, status and common features of painting, sculpture and related arts, which ran from the Renaissance to the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Vasari's category of the *Arti del disegno* and Batteux's 1746 theory of the *Beaux Arts* bookend an ambitious project to draw a new line of demarcation within the hierarchy of the liberal and mechanical arts in which certain specified arts are grouped together and reclassified. The aim was to promote painting and sculpture (and related arts) from the mechanical to the liberal arts, but the struggle culminates instead with these arts being assigned a name of their own – the *beaux arts*, fine arts, *die bildende Kunst*, *Fri Konst* and cognate terms.<sup>5</sup>

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Philosophy'. See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991, pp. 84–5; Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966–90*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991. Also, for a discussion of these ideas, see Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', in Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp. 47–65.

4. I will distinguish the terms 'art', 'arts' and 'fine arts'. Although these terms are often treated as interchangeable, and common language allows them to be used as synonyms, I will use them to refer to historical forms of the classification of labour. 'Arts', in the plural, refers to specific skilled practices such as cooking, fishing, basket weaving and rhetoric, which historically were divided in to the mechanical and liberal arts. 'The fine arts' are the group of specific arts attached to painting and sculpture. 'Art' in the singular refers to the concept of art in general, which is not reducible to painting, sculpture or any of the specific arts. The concept of art in its generality is first formulated by the Jena Romantics as the question: 'what is literature?' This question is marked by transition from the numerous specific arts to art in general. For them literature is conceived not narrowly as one of several arts but as an abstraction: 'art considered as literature ... [and] literature considered as the essence of art'. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 83.

5. Poetry and music had always been included within the liberal arts, and therefore the challenge to the classification of painting, sculpture and architecture as mechanical arts began without them in the idea of the arts of design. Later poetry, music, painting, sculpture and dance were grouped as the fine arts, but the exact selection was never completely settled.

This episode in the historical reclassification of painting and sculpture (and related arts) has something to tell us not only about what art is but also about how this question comes to have a meaning for us, and how it might be answered in a more satisfactory way. In place of identifying the features that objects must have in order to be categorized as art, or displacing that inquiry to investigate the conditions of art's heavily policed borders, or acknowledging that there is no limit to what can be included in the category of art, I want to reconsider the indeterminacy of art as a category by reconstructing how it was formed through contingent social processes.

While the historical claims made for painting and sculpture (and related arts) ultimately came to be expressed in the alleged properties of objects – and the experience of them – they were initially assigned to types of labour. The ostensive qualities of works of art were initially understood as the result of specific forms of labour; that is to say, the concrete combination of mental and manual capacities needed to produce a range of products within each specific art.<sup>6</sup> My argument re-emphasizes the significance of labour, but instead of claiming that art is the result of a certain kind of labour I want to characterize the contested and shifting boundary that is formed and reformed around art as a highly codified representation of struggles over labour. My intention is to clarify questions about the relationship between art, on the one hand, and handicraft, manufacturing, commerce and industry, on the other, by reconnecting questions about the relative merits and implied ontologies of various categories of object to a lingering but

6. André Félibien's famous elaboration of the hierarchy of genres, delivered in a lecture at the Académie Royale in 1669, is clearly articulated around a hierarchy of labour. His elaborate scale of works of art is based on a binary distinction between mechanical and mental procedures for making paintings. At one end of the scale is the copying of nature ('the representation of a natural form which consists simply of drawing lines and mixing colours is considered to be work of a mechanical kind'), and at the other end is the genius painter ('an ingenious and learned Author; as he invents and produces thoughts quite his own'). See André Félibien, 'Conférence de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture' [1669], trans. Linda Walsh, in Steve Edwards, ed., *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1999.

largely unacknowledged history of the differentiation of types of activity appropriate to them.<sup>7</sup>

### **Art and the marketplace**

To judge from the panic which erupts in the discourses of art every now and then, art is not a specific kind of object but the effect of a specific kind of economy. For certain art historians, critics and artists it seems the existence of art is perpetually threatened by its contact with, or – more seriously – its descent into, culture produced entirely for commercial gain. The stooge can be graphics or the culture industry or kitsch or commodity production, and any number of other specimens, but the logic remains: art is not *x* or *y* and therefore art is diluted or negated by becoming (more like) *x* or *y*. T.J. Clark, speaking in 2000, tells this familiar tale with some urgency:

Is not visual art in the process of becoming simply and irrevocably part of the apparatus of image life production? Is not this the real sense of the much-noticed fact (a flip through the pages of *Artforum* or *Parkett* confirms the fact, relentlessly, monotonously) that the one demarcation between visual art and the fashion industry, for example, simply does not exist any longer? Not only does it not exist but art glories in its non-existence. The non-existence is one of art's great present themes... Modernism always stood in close, dangerous proximity to the realm of appearances it fed on.<sup>8</sup>

Clark understands the critical demands of operating at the uncomfortable points of contact between art and popular

7. Here is a typical example of the philosophical inquiry into the ontology of art that defines the category by focusing on the properties of objects rather than the history of struggles over labour: 'The central question for the ontology of art is this: What sort of entities are works of art? Are they physical objects, ideal kinds, imaginary entities or something else? How are works of art of various kinds related to the mental states of artists or viewers, to physical objects, or to abstract visual, auditory or linguistic structures? Under what conditions do works come into existence, survive, or cease to exist?' Amie Thomasson, 'The Ontology of Art', in Peter Kivy, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 78.

8. T.J. Clark, 'The Painting of Postmodern Life?', *Quaderns portàtils* 20, Barcelona: MACBA, 2000, pp. 7–8.



culture, but in this instance the politically charged subversion of the distinction of art from commercial culture appears to him to have gone too far.<sup>9</sup> Here, the ideological demarcation of art as a practice is not completely independent from its material and economic conditions. In my analysis, emphasis will be placed in particular on the historical construction of a specific mode of production for artworks, including the specific social division of labour in which the artist is assigned a place of privilege. So, Clark's anxieties about art's proximity to the fashion industry, on my reading, is an instance of the complete erosion of the divide between art and design, that is to say of art becoming nothing but a commercial activity, which he highlights by taking fashion as the exemplification of commercial culture. His analysis of the collapse of the distinction between art and commerce falls mainly on artworks themselves and the failure of nerve of a generation of artists who no longer demonstrate fidelity to the modernist romance of aesthetic labour, or the elitist opposition of avant-garde and kitsch, or the formal scrutiny required for the critical deployment of popular forms within practices of negation.<sup>10</sup> What it rests on, though, is a keen sense of an implied antagonism between art and the marketplace.

I do not want to overstate the specific case. Clark has his own variant of this narrative of art's threat from commercialization, but the pattern of thought is common. Andrea Fraser, reflecting

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9. Clark's entire body of work, it could be said, interrogates the traffic between art and popular culture, or art and the horizons of official taste. Here is a typical example: 'what is special about Abstract Expressionism – what marks it off from all other modernisms – is that the engagement is with the vulgar as opposed to the "popular" or "low". I think we should understand the "popular" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art as a series of figures of avoidance of the vulgar: that is, figures of avoidance of art's actual belonging to the pathos of bourgeois taste: a perpetual shifting and conjuring of kinds of simplicity, directness, naivety, sentiment and sentimentality, emotional and material force, in spite of everything about art's actual place and function that put such qualities beyond its grasp.' T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episode from a History of Modernism*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 379.

10. The phrase 'practices of negation' is Clark's own. See T.J. Clark, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art', in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, London: Harper & Row, 1985, pp. 47–64.

in 2004 on a work that she produced which consisted of having sex with a collector, puts the same opposition to work for somewhat different ends:

Well, yes, it's art, and the question I'm interested in posing is whether art is prostitution – in a metaphorical sense, of course. Is it any more prostitution because I happen to be having sex with a man than it would be if I were just selling him a piece? In fact, I remain much less comfortable with selling the DVDs of 'Untitled' than I was with producing the piece. The 'normal' sales situation that one has in the art world feels much more exploitative to me than any aspect of my relationship with, or the exchange with the participating collector. That's where I lose control of it. That's where the speculation begins.<sup>11</sup>

The sale of art, in this scenario, represents a crisis for the artist that is at once moral and economic (subjecting the artist to both discomfort and exploitation). These tropes, perhaps, link anxieties about art sales to the concept of alienated labour and the activist tradition intent on abolishing it. But I want to investigate the more specific assumption, here, that art and commerce are seriously at odds. If Clark only implied by association that art is endangered by the marketplace, in Fraser the antagonism between art and commerce is as explicit as when this idea was first formulated. The conception of art as antagonistic to sales is firmly established by the time of Kant's formulation of the twofold freedom of the fine arts. These specific arts, he said, must be free in the sense that they have no extrinsic purpose, but also 'free in the sense of not being a mercenary occupation and hence a kind of labor, whose magnitude can be judged, exacted, or paid for according to a determinate standard'.<sup>12</sup>

The history of art's antagonism to commerce is a component of art's elevation above handicraft and other commercial activities.

11. Andrea Fraser, 'In Conversation', *The Brooklyn Rail*, <https://brooklynrail.org/2004/10/art/andrea-fraser>; accessed 21 May 2020.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 [1790], p. 190.

Currently, political activism within art's institutions has shifted from the ideological critique of institutions to the demand for artists and art workers (interns, studio assistants and others) to be paid by them.<sup>13</sup> My inquiry into the history of the antagonism between art and capitalism is a rebuttal to forms of 'capitalist realism'<sup>14</sup> in art that declare artworks are commodities, artists are workers, and the myth of the artist as antagonistic to commerce contributes to the exploitation of artists as unpaid labourers. My purpose is not to endorse the condemnation of design, craft and kitsch as a warning to artists but to investigate the history of anti-capitalism within art.

What is the historical source of the idea that art is antagonistic to commerce or sales? In some sense, we might say, concerns about the corruptions of buying and selling are not limited to the field of art and are present in one form or another throughout history. However, the origin I have in mind is not unearthed by identifying the first formulation of the idea. Nor is the structural antagonism between art and the marketplace realized when individual painters and sculptors in the Renaissance manage to secure certain privileges within the feudal organization of the arts in the guilds and court. We need to unpick the relationship between the specific rejection of commerce in art and the longer tradition of the noble amateur, a task that is hampered by the history of borrowing, substitution and transformation between the two.

Since amateurism is a norm for the nobility, and this survives in modified forms after the bourgeois revolutions, the reformation of art according to the principle of the rejection of commerce is difficult to pinpoint, especially if we restrict our view to a history of ideas. Some clarity is brought to this investigation,

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13. See Dani Child, *Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*, Bloomsbury, London, 2019; Precarious Workers Brigade, *Training for Exploitation?* London: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2017; Leigh Clare La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

14. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: O Books, 2009.

however, if we focus our attention on the changing mode of production of art. This amounts to indexing the art question in philosophy and the normative separation of art from commerce in art's discourses to the study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism – with the proviso that this historical passage does not see art adopt a standard capitalist mode of production, since the latter consists principally of a confrontation between capital and wage-labour that is almost entirely absent in the production of artworks.<sup>15</sup> During the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism the social relations of work which had prevailed within the guild system were opposed and ultimately overrun by the wage system. However, painters and sculptors were not converted from members of the guild to either wage labourers or capitalist employers, as artisans typically were. Instead, the rejection of the guilds took a different turn.

### **The long road to the art market**

The emergence of a concept of the artist distinct from the artisan is a vital ingredient of the contested transition from the classification of painting and sculpture (and related arts) from the mechanical arts to the fine arts and, subsequently, from the several specific arts to art in general. Steve Edwards recalls this passage in his account of how photography has historically been distinguished from art and how, within photography, the document has been distinguished from the picture.

Most of these oppositions have their roots in the distinction between the 'liberal' and the 'mechanical arts' ... [and] in a protracted struggle to raise the status of ... painters [who] sought to distinguish themselves from wheelwrights, barrel-makers, and others with whom they were frequently classed. To do this they

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15. For a more detailed analysis of the various ways in which art does not conform to the capitalist mode of production, see Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

insisted that their work was a liberal art and not a lowly artisanal (or mechanical) trade.<sup>16</sup>

The art question pivots around a relationship between art and handicraft that prioritizes not only the liberal arts over the mechanical arts but also the noble value of amateurism over trade. Edwards notes that a 'decisive turning point in artists' protracted struggle over status occurred with the establishment of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris in 1648'.<sup>17</sup> So, let's look at how this event has been understood in the history of art's economic and normative transformation.

Cynthia and Harrison White, in their influential book on the emergence of art's modern institutions out of the 'medieval painters' guilds' via the founding of the Académie Royale, write that painters 'chafed under guild restrictions' and that the Académie Royale 'was at first merely independent of the guild, but soon dominated and then replaced it in power and prestige' before the advent of the 'critic-dealer system'.<sup>18</sup> This compacted account remains, in many respects, a useful road map, but each section of the narrative needs to be reconsidered according to the perspective of the social relations of production. For instance, the narrative of succession – guild to academy to art market – sacrifices diachronic nuance for synchronic drama. We can overcome this, partly, by acknowledging that various academies for painters and sculptors existed in parallel with the guilds from the fourteenth century onwards and that the Académie Royale ran parallel with the guilds for almost 150 years before they were both abolished by the revolutionary government.<sup>19</sup>

16. Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 14.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

18. Cynthia White and Harrison White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*, New York: John Wiley, 1993 [1965], p. 5.

19. The earliest academies of painting were in Florence and Rome. Academies which were not physical institutions but a type of meeting also existed in England and elsewhere. For an account of the abolition of the guilds by the National Assembly in 1791,

Indeed, the academies grew out of the dual system of guild and court to bolster the position of painters and sculptors in the court, and the royal academy established in the seventeenth century formalized and extended the privileges of court painters and sculptors. The Renaissance academy was not a teaching institution, but the statutes of the Florence Academy of Design specify that three members of the academy would be selected annually to visit young practitioners in their workshops to give friendly advice. Workshop activities not only went on in parallel with the academies but were necessary for its functioning. However, from the outset, lectures were a regular feature of the academies, initially as a device to raise the status of certain arts – specifically painting and sculpture – from the mechanical arts to the liberal arts on terms set by feudalism, but also later, I would argue, as a method to differentiate the artist within the social division of labour from the wage-labourer, artisan, manufacturer, shopkeeper and industrial capitalist.

White and White's procession of painters in three historical modes – guild, academy and market – is set up as an episode in a linear tale of emancipation from feudal constraints. This modernist narrative follows a path familiar to historians of economics, namely the liberal tale of the rise of *laissez-faire* against seemingly obsolete forms of feudal regulation and intervention. It is instructive to reread this narrative through the extraordinary efforts of the advocates of the fine arts to designate guild artisans as mechanical copyists in contrast with the inspired, original and scholarly activities of the academicians. Christian Michel points out that the modernist critique of the academy 'strongly resembled the critiques levelled by the Académie against the guild'.<sup>20</sup> Both, we can observe, stressed the mechanical and

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see William Sewall, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

20. Christian Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the*

manual limitations of its opponent. So, when White and White say the academy 'emphasized a new conception of the artist: no longer an artisan or a low-caste hawker of wares, he was instead a learned man, a teacher of the high principles of beauty and taste', we get a glimpse, also, at what was at stake in the modernist rejection of the academy as a place of rote learning, doctrinal stiffness and centralized bureaucracy.<sup>21</sup>

White and White and others argue that art emerges from the arts as a result of the transition from patronage to the art market. This argument has the advantage of pointing towards structural economic changes but the disadvantage of focusing on changes in circulation rather than art's mode of production: it blocks the analysis of changes in the social relations of the artist's studio and its supply chains, the division of labour between artists and their assistants, the division of labour between the artist, the art dealer and the art tutor, and so forth. While it has certainly not gone unnoticed that painters and sculptors in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance worked collectively in artisan workshops, art historians have tended to focus their attention on certain exemplary individuals and often exaggerated the degree to which they operated outside the artisan workshop system, and abjured the use of assistants and apprentices.

The border between art and handicraft is forged as a differentiation between the guild and the academy, both exclusively male provinces, but by the end of the eighteenth century the dividing line takes on an emphatically gendered quality. Sir Joshua Reynolds, who had been taught to paint by his sister, an accomplished watercolourist, led the charge to disallow watercolour paintings from the annual summer exhibition, alongside pictures made of hair, paper cut-outs and other images with a

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*French School, 1648–1793*, trans. Chris Miller, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018, p. 200.

21. White and White, *Canvases and Careers*, p. 6.

strong whiff both of craft and of femininity. By comparison, it is easier to acknowledge the guild master's dependence on apprentices, day-labourers and their household more generally than it is to recognize the full cast of workers who contribute to the production of art by an individual artist in a studio. This misrecognition was built into the academy system.<sup>22</sup>

The academy was not a self-sufficient body. For instance, the Académie Royale appeared for the most part to draw the best of the painters and sculptors from the guild. Academies did not teach painting or sculpture in any technical sense but restricted admission to candidates who could demonstrate facility in one of the fine arts through the presentation of a 'reception piece'. 'An apprenticeship in handling a pencil and acquiring a good eye, first by copying drawings and engravings and then by drawing from three-dimensional forms, was a condition of admission to the Académie, but drawing was not taught there.'<sup>23</sup> As such, the Académie continued to rely on a type of formal or informal apprenticeship as a preliminary stage of education for its students.

Accounts of the passage from the artisan to the artist view the historical transformation of the social relations of artistic production from the narrow perspective of two individual producers. Actually, this transition consists of the geographical dispersal of numerous tasks previously conducted within the workshop. Each single artisan within the cooperative workshop was capable of several jobs that would later become specialisms, namely skilled worker, manufacturer of tools, supplier of materials, designer, teacher and dealer. Hence, the artisan does not exclusively turn into the artist but also into all these other specialisms. The

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22. For the most part, artisan workshops were within or attached to the living quarters not only of the 'master' and his or her family but to the household in general, including apprentices and day labourers. The exclusion of women from full guild membership (there are cases of female apprentices and masters but these are an institutionally imposed minority) is picked up by the academies which almost completely excluded women from their ranks.

23. Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, p. 243.



passage from the artisan to the artist is accompanied therefore by the passage from the artisan to the materials supplier, from the artisan to the technician or assistant, from the artisan to the teacher or dealer, and so on. That is to say, the division of labour within the workshop is converted into a social division of labour in society as a whole mediated by market exchange.<sup>24</sup>

Focusing for a moment on the spatial aspect of the reorganization of artistic labour during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, we must consider not only the spaces in which artistic labour takes place, as a passage from the artisanal workshop to the artist's studio, but more fundamentally as the transition from the integration of a range of activities within the guild workshop to the spatial dispersal of activities that come to take place within and between the studio, gallery, art school, museum, fabricators' workshop and all the supply chains that provide their tools, machinery and materials for the production and circulation of art. The purchasing of supplies from commercial artisans, and all the other specialisms that developed out of this exodus from the workshop, converted the technical division

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24. Marx explains: 'the numerous analogies and links connecting them, division of labour in the interior of a society, and that in the interior of a workshop, differ not only in degree, but also in kind. The analogy appears most indisputable where there is an invisible bond uniting the various branches of trade. For instance the cattle-breeder produces hides, the tanner makes the hides into leather, and the shoemaker, the leather into boots. Here the thing produced by each of them is but a step towards the final form, which is the product of all their labours combined. There are, besides, all the various industries that supply the cattle-breeder, the tanner, and the shoemaker with the means of production. Now it is quite possible to imagine, with Adam Smith, that the difference between the above social division of labour, and the division in manufacture, is merely subjective, exists merely for the observer, who, in a manufacture, can see with one glance, all the numerous operations being performed on one spot, while in the instance given above, the spreading out of the work over great areas, and the great number of people employed in each branch of labour, obscure the connexion. But what is it that forms the bond between the independent labours of the cattle-breeder, the tanner, and the shoemaker? It is the fact that their respective products are commodities. What, on the other hand, characterises division of labour in manufactures? The fact that the detail labourer produces no commodities. It is only the common product of all the detail labourers that becomes a commodity. Division of labour in society is brought about by the purchase and sale of the products of different branches of industry, while the connexion between the detail operations in a workshop, is due to the sale of the labour-power of several workmen to one capitalist, who applies it as combined labour-power.' Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1867], pp. 474–5.

of labour into a social division of labour. Commercial suppliers diminished the need for apprentices to complete this work for the 'master' and therefore consolidated the academic system of education for painting and sculpture, which consists of a social division of labour between the artist and the art teacher, thereby separating the studio from the art school.

The social division of artistic labour at the threshold of capitalism redefined the artist as distinct from the artisan by the innovation of specialist mediators between the producers of artworks and their collectors. Today, we think of the art dealer or gallerist as an agent who funnels the artist in the direction of the art market, but historically the introduction of the specialist seller of works of art took the task of sales away from the producers themselves and acted, therefore, as a kind of buffer between the artist and the direct encounter with paying customers. Conventions of courtly patronage had long suppressed the economic transaction between patrons and painters, but guild painters selling paintings from their workshop had no choice but to sell their products to the market. These distinctions were seized on by the founders of the academy system.

### **The ban on commerce**

The academy distinguished itself from the guild, secured the distinction of its members from artisans and asserted the distinction of its students from apprentices, which recast the painter and sculptor as the product of scholarship rather than handicraft. Symptomatic of the entire project is an episode in 1648 (and again in 1777) when the Académie Royale issued a statute proclaiming those who 'wish to open a shop and trade in pictures, drawings, and sculptures by other hands, sell colors, gilding, and other accessories of the arts of painting and sculpture ... shall be required to seek admission to the Community

[Guild] of Painter-Sculptors'.<sup>25</sup> This statute is not the ultimate source of the idea that art is antagonistic to commerce but it was essential to the consolidation of that idea within new social institutions that upheld it. It is this statute, and the debates and practices that corresponded to it, both within the French academy and wherever its model was reiterated abroad, that converted the nobility of disparaging commerce as a matter of individual character into the basis of a definition of art as distinct from handicraft, industry and business.

Since the freemen of the guilds held the exclusive right to own a shop, the statute forbidding academicians from opening a shop can be read as a victory of the guilds and the admission that the academy could not award such a right to its members. In fact, the historical transition from the workshop to the academy, which recast the fine artist as a scholarly individual, blocked the breadth of activities that continued to be practised by artisans. In some sense, then, it constituted a palpable reduction of freedom and agency for the painter and sculptor. Nevertheless, the ban on commerce in the seventeenth-century academy was the precondition for the inauguration of the salons – opportunities for its members to exhibit to the public and advertise themselves to patrons and collectors without opening a shop – and the rise of art dealers, which sealed off the scholarly practitioner of the fine arts from direct economic transactions. So, even when the statute itself had no power to prohibit artists from opening shops, they did not on the whole do so, but followed academic precedent in staging exhibitions for the public and selling works via dealers and galleries. In other words, the consequences of the academic ban on commerce defined art's mode of production as antagonistic to the market in objective social terms that provided material grounds for the command to be perpetuated as an abstract norm.

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25. Quoted in Michel, *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, p. 112.

The standard narrative of the emergence of the category of the artist out of a longer history of handicraft production stresses the campaign to elevate an elite minority above the mediocre mass of jobbing artisans. Whether it is argued that the great painters, sculptors and architects of the Renaissance were in fact artists, or whether the word itself is saved for later generations after the eighteenth century that used the word 'artist' in the modern sense, the story is the same: the artist emerges historically through a process of distinction from the artisan. Yet the differentiation of the artist from the artisan has never been absolute or asserted with certainty. This contrasts sharply with the differentiation of the artisan from all other workers during the long period of the guild system. Guilds operated with absolute distinctions that they regulated and enforced. For instance, the difference between an individual who had served an apprenticeship and another who had not was palpable. Evidence and testimony could be presented to determine the facts and resolve disputes about the status of a particular individual.

The status of the artist, on the contrary, and the elevation of the fine arts above handicraft, was always relative rather than absolute. This new relative differentiation of quality and status was achieved through a discursive campaign against artisan painters and sculptors by associating them with nothing more than mechanical techniques and menial preparatory tasks, capable of copying but not inventing, skilled but not talented, and so forth. An example may show how these nuanced vague differences were articulated. In the early years of the Académie Royale a principled debate arose over the question of whether to privilege colour or drawing in academic painting. 'Colour was associated with the manual task of grinding pigments and staining cloths', therefore debates on colour and line were a coded discourse on the relationship between the fine arts and handicraft. Colour, as a substance, was the province of the artisan, and therefore

the academician appeared to have two methods available for marking a separation from handicraft with regard to colour. Either colour could be relegated to a low status below drawing and line, or colour could be assigned a new intellectual significance that it did not have for the guilds. Colour was negated by elimination or metaphysical elevation.<sup>26</sup>

Predictably, the quarrel of colour versus drawing was never settled one way or the other, but the pattern was set: the fine arts (and subsequently art in general) would be elevated above handicraft, and the artist above the artisan, not on the basis of palpable evidence or absolute distinctions but through judgements of immeasurable qualities, comparisons guided by unsecured hierarchies, uncertain border controls of unmapped boundaries, the incalculable measurements of incorporeal properties and the lawless policing of relative differentiations. This is also reflected in the replacement of the numerous specific freedoms enjoyed by the guild (the freedom to trade within the city limits, the freedom to open a shop, the freedom to take on apprentices, and so on) with the unspecified abstract freedom of the fine arts (and later art in general).

The relative lack of determinacy of art's difference from craft and industry is evident in its contested elevation above them. This is why art is a category that triggers the demystifying and debunking critique of it, and why, at times, it has appeared as if the word 'art' is an empty signifier and a euphemism for elitism and entitlement. At the same time, however, this indeterminacy is at the heart of why art is cherished as irreducible to instrumental reason, why artistic activity is taken to be anathema to alienated labour, and why the artwork is seen to exceed the commodity-form. In my analysis, the indeterminacy of the category of art is a necessary consequence of the social processes

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26. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, *Art in Theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 17.

by which art elevated itself above handicraft, including the misrepresentation of the artisan, exaggerations of the freedom and originality of the artist, suppressions of the contribution of paid and unpaid workers to the production of art, and, crucially, the proliferation of intermediary agencies between the artist and the market.

Though not quite converting the relative distinction of the fine arts from handicraft into an absolute difference, the taboo on commerce in art was one of the ways in which the distinction between the artist and artisan was lived out, and became an objective correlate of that distinction when it was concretized in art's institutions, economies and pedagogy. The relationship between artists and their assistants, fabricators, technicians and interns – which has been raised recently within a politics of artistic labour – testifies to the continuation of the withdrawal from handicraft that was the founding gesture of the academy system. It survives in both the perennial anxiety about the presence of handicraft in art and the persistent question mark over the relationship between the artist and a supporting cast of direct and indirect assistants.

In the history of ideas, 'the art question' arises out of the failure to determine the shared principles or common features of the various fine arts. In social history, this question is marked by the long campaign by the academy to undermine handicraft and elevate scholarly painters and sculptors above artisans. The campaign to lift painting and sculpture out of the mechanical arts did not succeed in lodging them firmly within the liberal arts. In the face of this failure a new category was coined, the fine arts, which classified a small number of specific arts in some unspecified place between the mechanical and liberal arts within the feudal regime of the arts. When the feudal mode of production was superseded by the capitalist mode of production, the elevation of art above handicraft survived by reconstituting

art's noble antagonism to commerce (a pre-capitalist version of anti-capitalism) as the production of original works indifferent to market demand, often expressed from the nineteenth century onwards as an opposition to the bourgeoisie, the public, fashion and the taste of the wealthy.

Focus on the hostility of art to commerce may thus act as a challenge to the standard narrative of the transition from the guild to *laissez-faire* or, in art history, from patronage to the art market. There is an overstatement of processes of commodification in accounts of art's passage from feudalism to capitalism. When considering the specificity of art, rather than focusing on the nature of art objects or processes of canonization, more attention must be paid to the social relations of artistic production. The hostility to commerce in art, which often appears to be ideological or romantic or a taboo, is the real historical precondition for the formation of art's characteristic category of labour distinct from wage-labour, handicraft, trade and industry.

## 4

# Art, life and labour: Carla Lonzi's existential feminist critique

GIOVANNA ZAPPERI

Any attempt to give an account of the histories of feminism and art in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century inevitably stumbles upon the figure of Carla Lonzi (1931–1982), a renowned art critic throughout the 1960s, who would later become the most emblematic figure of Italian feminism. Lonzi's intellectual and political trajectory is marked by her withdrawal from the art world in 1970, as she founded the radical feminist group *Rivolta Femminile* (Feminine Revolt) with Italian artist Carla Accardi and African-Italian journalist Elvira Banotti. Her feminism is therefore defined by a radical negativity, which expresses itself in her refusal of the profession she had successfully carried out for over a decade, as well as in her search for alternative ways of writing and living in which patriarchal institutions, such as art, could be challenged. In both her writings and her political practice, the undoing of 'woman' and the critique of the affective labour traditionally performed by women became crucial aspects of the collective transformative process she promoted.

During the 1970s Lonzi elaborated the political and existential terms of her withdrawal from the art world and her profession as an art critic. *Rivolta Femminile* was one of the very first feminist groups in Italy whose practice was based on separatism and



*autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising). Between 1970 and 1972 Lonzi wrote a number of texts that marked a turning point for the Italian women's liberation movement on account of their unprecedented ability to address issues of sexuality and revolutionary politics, and that called for a cultural revolution based on woman's becoming a subject.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the radicalism of her 1970 pamphlet *Sputiamo su Hegel* (*We Spit on Hegel*), with its daring title and provocative deconstruction of Hegelian master–slave dialectics, was crucial in establishing Lonzi as the most prominent feminist thinker of her generation in Italy.

From 1970 on, the critique of art's patriarchal structures became the basis upon which Lonzi develops a feminist practice of withdrawal from the roles and expectations structuring her life. In particular, her continuous search for valuable forms of disobedience against the patriarchal organization of life was based upon the refusal to comply with the male mechanisms of reputation and success. Lonzi's desire to establish non-hierarchical relations and communities explicitly countered the patriarchal emphasis on the idea that social roles define one's subjectivity, instead positioning the subject within a network of relations.

In addressing Lonzi's positions, my aim is to emphasize the entwinement between her critique of art as ideology and the anti-work politics that her withdrawal implied. Lonzi's understanding of the relation between art and life is one of the fundamental issues she raised throughout her writings, and more poignantly in her late work. In *Vai Pure* (*Now You Can Go*), her excruciating 1980 dialogue with her lifelong partner, the artist Pietro Consagra, Lonzi elaborated a feminist critique of art considered as a sum of institutions, power relations, forms of sociability and labour that structurally oppress women. Throughout her writings, the

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1. See Carla Lonzi, 'Sputiamo su Hegel' (1970), in *Sputiamo su Hegel, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974, pp. 19–61; 'Let's Spit on Hegel', trans. G. Bellesia and E. Maclachlan, in P. Jagentowicz Mills, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of G.F.W. Hegel*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1996.

relation between art, life and professional activity is developed through personal relationships, in a way that directly connects life and politics. Lonzi's existential feminism is rooted in the crucial significance of lived relationships for her political practice, as much as her perspective on art always takes into account personal history, intimacy and emotions.

Lonzi's writings from the late 1960s until 1980 provide a unique perspective on the political intensity of the conflicts that are played out in the private sphere. The awareness of the seizure of personal relations within art (and work), upon which social interactions are organized, becomes the primary ground for her struggle for recognition and social transformation. Her various interactions with artists demonstrate art's structural link with male prerogatives and woman's oppression in a way that precludes any possible redemption. Whereas by the end of the 1960s Lonzi wanted to emphasize the difference between artists and workers, as these two figures eventually coincided, she constantly appears to be claiming autonomy for herself. One of the most striking aspects of her dialogue with Consagra is the ways in which the artist seems to be literally confined within the values of the art world, while Lonzi embodies a desire for a life beyond pre-established rules, habits and systems of value.

### **The art–life problem**

Carla Lonzi's shift from art criticism to feminism might appear unexpected, if one did not take into account Lonzi's complex process of disengagement from and unravelling of her professional identification as an art critic. Her art criticism was marked by a self-reflexive position that led her to challenge art criticism's institutional framework and languages. Lonzi objected that art criticism had become a patronizing and authoritarian activity, and tried to devise innovative ways to write about art, in which she

could feel closer to the creative process. Throughout the 1960s she tried to experiment with a form of relational writing by turning to the artists: she promoted dialogues and increasingly avoided discussing the art work via formal analysis and aesthetic judgement. In 1969 she published *Autoritratto* (Self-portrait), a book based on the principle of montage, consisting of a series of tape-recorded conversations with fourteen artists, which she had transcribed and then stitched together in a way that ruptures the continuum of each dialogue.<sup>2</sup> The result is three hundred pages of aleatory conversations, interspersed with a number of photographic images taken from the participants' private albums. Lonzi herself participates in the conversation, but she poses barely any questions; nor does she explain the artists' artworks. She rather speaks for herself, in her own voice. *Autoritratto* is based on the idea that the work of art criticism is relational and therefore challenges the modernist fiction of a disinterested and neutral aesthetic judgement. Personal history and intersubjective encounters replace the social and epistemic structures defining art criticism, as these were based on the critic's detachment and observation.

*Autoritratto* already foreshadows Lonzi's impending withdrawal from the role and profession in which she had been involved since graduating from the University of Florence in 1956. The dialogic format adopted in the book was a way for her to escape the alienation she experienced in the role of the passive yet authoritative observer, which was inevitably located outside of the creative process. As a matter of fact, art criticism's repressive function concerned not just the artists, but also the critic herself, whose subjectivity and desire had to be contained within the fiction of an institutional role:

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2. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, Bari: De Donato, 1969. The artists' names are also mentioned on the book's cover: Accardi, Alviani, Castellani, Consagra, Fabro, Fontana, Kounellis, Nigro, Paolini, Pascali, Rotella, Scarpitta, Turcato, Twombly. On the process of assembling *Autoritratto*, see Laura Iamurri, *Un margine che sfugge. Carla Lonzi e l'arte in Italia, 1955-1968*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016, pp. 167-213.

Instead of being the one who is available and in need, the critic becomes a judge and creates therefore a whole hierarchy. And throughout this activity that he ends up developing, he actually repeals the starting point from which he had started, thus becoming a completely phony person.<sup>3</sup>

Lonzi's understanding of art criticism's activity as deceptive recalls the fiction of an unmarked universal perspective, even though at the time she didn't clearly identify it in terms of gender. One of the main issues emerging from the book is precisely how the dismantling of the function of art criticism allowed the opportunity to rethink art beyond the institutional framework in which its meaning was secured. As opposed to a profession based on the production of 'futile commentaries', Lonzi is interested in the relation between the art work and the 'gestures of life', or, to put it differently, the possibility 'to live one's life in a creative manner, instead of obediently comply to the models proposed by society'.<sup>4</sup> The focus on relationality thus became a way for her to connect the creative process to the facts of life, as if art could exist outside of the institutional chain of roles, habits and obligations.

The critic's own alienation with respect to both profession and life thus becomes the crux of Lonzi's argument throughout the book. While discussing her own estrangement from art criticism, she turned to the artists who became a sort of counter-model for the liberation she was seeking for herself. During the 1960s, while she was assembling *Autoritratto*, Lonzi had endorsed the artist's autonomy and freedom in opposition to the institutional role of the critic. In line with modernist ideas about art's autonomy, she considered the artist as an exemplary figure of a life beyond work. At the time, Lonzi believed that art

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3. Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, pp. 47–8. Lonzi always uses the male person when discussing the figure of the art critic. All subsequent quotations from Lonzi's texts are translated by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

was the only viable escape from the alienating forces organizing human life, and that the artist's ability to evade identification with a role, category or profession was a decisive aspect in her understanding of art's autonomy. The ability to connect directly with life rather than with an institutionalized role paradoxically posits the artist in antagonism towards the art critic's 'repressive control over art and artists'. For these reasons, the artist had nothing in common with the worker, an idea that Lonzi translates via the notion of the artist's 'authenticity', as opposed to the critic's 'phony profession' and coercive function.<sup>5</sup>

Art institutions, including art criticism, try to contain and neutralize the artist's freedom; for this reason artists need to move away from the institutions in which their activity is distorted, and rather address life as such, as Lonzi claims in a passage from *Autoritratto*:

The art problem is always a life problem; it's not a cultural problem. Do you see what I mean? It doesn't concern the university. People are tired of playing the public or the apprentice; they want to enter the thing, or rather, they feel like they are already in.<sup>6</sup>

This notion of art as an activity encompassing all aspects of life, and the ensuing refusal of art's allocated spaces (the museum, the gallery, the collector's private homes) was a crucial aspect in the contestation of the modernist legacy in the late 1960s. It was within this framework that Lonzi also condemned the mechanisms of the selection and evaluation of art, considering them to be excessively compromised owing to their association with the institution.

In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi's relational practice was the ground upon which she accomplished the process of undoing her own

5. Ibid., pp. 7, 44. On Lonzi's notion of authenticity in relation to art and feminism, see Giovanna Zapperi, 'The Making of a Feminist Subject: Autonomy, Authenticity and Withdrawal', in Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi, eds, *Art and Feminism in Post-war Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, London: Bloomsbury 2020, pp. 89–110.

6. Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, pp. 203–4.

role as a critic, a process that ultimately propelled her to the centre of the political turmoil of the time. Yet, the book also became a source of disappointment as the artists themselves were not ready to follow the same path. In most cases, they failed to engage in the various forms of politicized practices and radicalism that had blossomed in the wake of 1968, and refused to challenge their own artistic vocabulary, which was, broadly speaking, very much based on a variety of strategies that aimed at destabilizing the modernist legacy from within.<sup>7</sup> According to Lonzi, the disappointing nature of her undertaking with the artists concerned their unwillingness to address their (male) privilege in society, with the accompanying consequence that they proved incapable of examining their own alienation, namely the fact that their lives revolved around the art world's mechanisms of reputation and success.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 1970s Lonzi had become aware of this divide: 'The artist', she writes in her diary, 'is far too loaded with myth.'<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, during the 1970s Lonzi's understanding of her relation with artists underwent a dramatic overhaul: she felt she had been betrayed and victimized by the artists' imposture, while the artist's freedom at this point had proved to be far too

7. See Alex Potts's discussion of Arte Povera artists' ambivalent strategy towards the modernist notion of art's autonomy and the art-life relation, in Alex Potts, 'Disencumbered Objects', *October* 124, Spring 2008, pp. 169–89; and Alex Potts, 'Autonomy in Post-War Art: Quasi-heroic and Casual', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53–7.

8. All the artists involved in *Autoritratto* are male with the exception of Carla Accardi, with whom Lonzi discovered and embraced the feminist movement in a process that is chronicled via Accardi's interventions in the book. A founding member of Rivolta Femminile, Accardi was instrumental in Lonzi's becoming a feminist, as she would later recount in her diary: 'Rivolta Femminile was born out of two persons, [Carla] and I, who had questioned male subjectivity precisely because we had positioned ourselves as subjects: [Carla] as an artist, and myself as a consciousness of a different identity.' Carla Lonzi, '14 August 1972', in *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, Milan: Scritti di Rivolta femminile 1978, p. 40. However, contrary to Lonzi, Accardi did not step out of the art world and refused to give up her identification as an artist, which ultimately caused the end of their friendship in 1973.

9. Lonzi, '12 May 1973', in *Taci, anzi parla*, p. 378. For a discussion of Lonzi's use of the term 'myth' and its reference to Roland Barthes's writings, see Francesco Ventrella, 'Carla Lonzi e la disfatta della critica d'arte: registrazione, scrittura e risonanza', *Studi Culturali*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2015), pp. 83–100.

compromised in its entanglement with ideology and became therefore politically unacceptable. Lonzi's feminism is in many ways based on her changing ideas about the artist, which precipitated her withdrawal from both the institutional position she had occupied as an art critic and the arena of art as such, which, during the 1970s, she came to equate with the quintessence of a social structure based on male privilege and woman's structural exclusion. Hence, upon her return to these issues in the 1970s and early 1980s, the artist has become first and foremost an alienated worker.

### **The sexual division of artistic labour**

Lonzi's ambition to redefine art criticism as a practice informed by the facts of life turned out to be an inadequate response to the transformations that were affecting Italian society by the end of the 1960s, and she ultimately decided to opt out. And yet *Autoritratto* foregrounds her specific understanding of politics as identified with the existential space of the relations that form the fabric of life. During the 1970s she constantly returned to some of the issues addressed in the book, most notably to the questions of art, life and work. This is perhaps the central subject of Lonzi's last book, *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra* (*Now You Can Go: A Dialogue with Pietro Consagra*), which also marks a return to the conversation format, this time as a one-to-one dialogue with her partner, the artist Pietro Consagra. The book, published in 1980, comprises the transcription of a tape-recorded dialogue, which records the crisis of the long-term relationship between Lonzi and Consagra.<sup>10</sup> The conversation

10. Carla Lonzi, *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra*, Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980; Milan: et al., 2011. All subsequent quotations refer to the 2011 edition. Carla Lonzi and Pietro Consagra met in the early 1960s and had lived as a couple for almost twenty years. Pietro Consagra (1920–2005) counts among the most significant Italian artists of his generation, mostly known for his abstract sculptures, his closeness to the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and his engagement in post-World War II formalist

took place in Lonzi's Rome apartment and is carried out over four days, between late April and early May 1980.

The discussion revolves around issues of art, work and love. Lonzi and Consagra painfully scrutinize how they relate to each other and examine, albeit in radically different directions, the political significance of what happens in the personal sphere. They address topics such as the difference between creative and reproductive labour, the male artist's subjectivity and woman's attempt to be recognized as an autonomous subject. The point of contention concerns the divergent manner in which each of them understands the terms of their relationship. On one side, Consagra seems to be content with his own circumstances, with their range of established habits, privileges and obligations, which constitute his life and relationship. Lonzi, on the contrary, tries to tackle the structural violence of a situation in which she feels trapped and disempowered. As she states in the introduction, the book intends to break the secrecy surrounding the heterosexual couple: the decision to disseminate the conversation was therefore a form of disclosure.

During the dialogue, Lonzi returns to the meaning of her withdrawal from art, and underlines her precarious situation in comparison to Consagra's privileged position as a successfully established artist: 'Well, I just want you to realize this condition of ours: of you as a cultural figure, and of myself, living at the mercy of a world without control, which is the private...'<sup>11</sup> While her activity accords with her life, thus remaining unnoticed, Consagra's circumstances are entirely registered by the mechanisms of social and cultural approval. For Lonzi, these are consistent with patriarchal structures – such as individualism and competition between men – from which women are excluded.

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aesthetics in Italy, most notably as part of the artist collective *Forma 1*, which considered itself both Marxist and formalist.

11. Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 81.



The discussion revolves around Consagra's identification as an artist – and how this determines every single aspect of his life – as opposed to Lonzi's search for a strategy of disidentification from the roles that organize human activity. According to Lonzi, an artist's life is regulated by creative labour in a way that blurs the distinction between life and work: one is an artist twenty-four hours a day. Artists thus embody the paradigm of the individual whose life – relations, affects, time and sexuality – is entirely at the service of the affirmation of their creative personality.

*Vai pure* is reminiscent of Lonzi's past disillusion with the artists and the experience of *Autoritratto*. As opposed to what she had maintained in the 1960s, now Lonzi clarifies that the artist's autonomy can only exist at the expense of woman's freedom, since it needs to dismiss the relational dimension of life and repress it into the private sphere. In analysing the conflict between art and life, Lonzi opposes the male artist, as the unique protagonist, to the woman's desire to be recognized as an autonomous subject. *Vai pure* opens up with the deadlock between Consagra's identification as an artist and Lonzi's refusal to fulfil the accompanying tasks required by the creative personality: the affective labour traditionally performed by the artist's wife or lover. Lonzi had withdrawn from all the tasks that, in her everyday life, involved her role as an artist's partner, such as attending exhibition openings and other events that punctuate the art world's social calendar. This was a source of frustration for Consagra, who affirms his desire for assistance:

I missed someone by my side during my social life as well, in my work, in my worries. ... I couldn't stand the loneliness while I was with a woman who didn't help me when I desperately needed help: company and encouragement when I felt lonely, or when I was travelling for my exhibitions, or in my studio.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Ibid., p. 13.

No wonder that Consagra explicitly qualifies a woman's role in the creative process as subordinate.<sup>13</sup> What he considers as his legitimate needs are in fact the male prerogatives against which Lonzi is struggling, as in her view the artist's autonomy is now based on women's exclusion and confinement to the role of the caring other.

According to Lonzi, 'the limited space'<sup>14</sup> of art is where relations are rendered invisible in favour of the artist's 'protagonism': the myth of his originality and coherence, according to which artworks can be considered as mere expressions of an absolute self. Interestingly, in confronting the power structures in which her relationship is entwined, Lonzi constantly refers to the modernist ideology of the artist as a cultural hero, as well as to the structures of male narcissism that entail women's exclusion.<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps the reason why, in *Autoritratto*, Lonzi assembled a number of dialogues that were originally recorded separately in a way that creates the fiction of an ongoing, collective exchange, as if the artists were actually talking to each other. In doing so, Lonzi demonstrates that she no longer believed that art is an individual and solitary endeavour, as much as she opposed the critic's exclusive entitlement to assess the art work. The book emphasizes instead the idea that the creative process is entangled in a multiplicity of relations.

In keeping with this line of reasoning, *Vai pure* takes as its starting point Lonzi's awareness of the relational labour she performs, as a woman and the partner of an artist, and how her activity participates in a creative process from which she is virtually excluded. In a way, it can be said that in *Autoritratto* Lonzi sought to reinvent art criticism precisely by turning the

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

15. See Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's concomitant deconstruction of the artist's masculinity and privilege in Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London: Pandora, 1981; London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

critic's authoritative function into relational labour. This move ultimately allowed her to connect with the artists outside of the institutional role she wanted to challenge, while at the same time producing a network of encounters and dialogues. In the 1960s she believed that her endeavour had somehow also allowed her to claim creativity for herself – via the relations she was able to generate – while by the time of *Vai pure* she had come to realize that, in the field of art, a woman has no other choices than remaining silent or speaking a language of self-negation. At best, a woman can occupy the role of the listening other, art critic or lover, both spectators of someone else's accomplishments. Lonzi draws on her personal experience while suggesting a parallel between her role as an art critic and as the artist's partner, as in both cases woman facilitates the creative process thanks to her assistance, understanding and support. Alternatively, a woman can also try to become an artist herself, therefore having to confront the inadequacy of the existing criteria and systems of validation. Women artists inevitably stumble upon their need for approval from male institutions and artists; therefore they end up being trapped in their own alienation as they endorse a social role that ultimately oppresses them.<sup>16</sup>

While discussing the artist's demand for an unequal relation, Lonzi points at the existential dilemma she is facing between the contradictory desires for love and for autonomy:

I don't know where this way of feeling is taking me, but I cannot overturn the priorities between our needs. ... because what I want is love for my autonomy, which is not love of my dependence and of my service.<sup>17</sup>

16. Lonzi, '3 December 1975', *Taci anzi parla*, p. 1174.

17. Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 9. On the dilemma between love and autonomy in Carla Lonzi's *Vai pure*, see Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile. La pratica dell'inconscio nel movimento delle donne degli anni settanta*, Rome: Franco Angeli, 2000, pp. 43–50.

Even if the dialogue with Consagra might at times convey the kind of recriminations one would expect from a couple on the edge of a break-up, its significance lies in its ability to expose the constitutive power differential within the heterosexual couple, as well as the cultural structures involved in the conflict between art and life. Lonzi contests that the relationship is subsumed within the creative process, as Consagra only acts for himself, or rather for the art work, which literally ‘dictates the agenda.’<sup>18</sup> The artist’s masculinity wraps itself with the distinction connected to his privileged status over women, which entails the fact that the personal sphere is appropriated and sublimated in the creative process. In other terms, art is inseparable from what Lonzi calls ‘male protagonism’, which generates the power imbalance she is fighting against. In the modern tradition, this imbalance could typically be translated as the division of labour within the artist’s studio, as exemplified in the eroticized relation between the artist and his model. Sublimation rhymes with domination, Lonzi seems to suggest when she underlines that this configuration of the creative process turns women’s work into a symbolic function, another way of excluding them from the sphere of subjectivity.

Here, significantly, Lonzi refers to the case of Zelda Fitzgerald as an emblematic example of this pernicious apparatus’s destructive consequences. Zelda Fitzgerald found herself at the mercy of a man who instrumentalized their relationship for the sake of his own literary production, a fact that eventually culminated in her mental distress. Zelda lost her mind because she was isolated, disempowered and unable to find the support she would have needed for herself, as ‘there were no feminist groups’<sup>19</sup> at the time. On the contrary, Lonzi can avoid collapsing because feminism provides her with the necessary strength to resist the

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18. Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 10.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

self-annihilation required by the creative personality. The artist's protagonism requires that women disavow themselves in the private sphere, while in the public domain they are expected to perform their own sacrifice by acting as muses, sources of inspiration and supporting partners, which Lonzi refuses to do. Hence she tries to dismantle the function of art as an ideology, while at the same time finding herself in the position of having to struggle against art's destructive effects on her life.

### **A life beyond work**

Lonzi's refusal of the affective labour requested by her artist partner is predicated upon a practice of 'deculturation', a term she coined in the early 1970s, as she was trying to conceptualize her own withdrawal from her professional activity as a form of disidentification.<sup>20</sup> This the core of Lonzi's idea of liberation and refers to the process of undoing the roles that determine women's existence. In order to engage with her own desire for transformation, womanhood must be collectively undone starting from the roles, stereotypes, gestures and all the categories that both oppress and define 'woman'. In this respect, a practice of deculturation corresponds with a process in which women dare to abandon what they thought they knew about themselves. Refusing the role of 'woman' opens up the possibility of imagining a different becoming, which is no longer based on man's approval. Deculturation is therefore key to Lonzi's notion of the subject as it emerges from a process of unravelling oneself in a sort of radical negativity, or, in other words, in the refusal to be or to become a woman.<sup>21</sup> One of her crucial contributions

20. See Lonzi, 'Let's Spit on Hegel', p. 288. In the English version the Italian *deculturizzazione* is translated as 'shedding of culture'. Cf. *Sputiamo su Hegel*, p. 47.

21. Following this line of reasoning, Lonzi's writings could be productively addressed within the framework of what Jack (Judith) Haberstam has called a 'shadow feminism', or an alternative feminist project whose genealogy may be traced back to the 1970s with

has consisted precisely in undoing 'woman', as both a political endeavour and a lived experience.

The figure of the 'clitoral woman' that Lonzi envisions in the early 1970s suggests precisely the revolt against 'woman' as an already-available product, which is, in Lonzi's vocabulary, the 'vaginal woman', whose sexuality is entirely captured within the mechanisms of social reproduction.<sup>22</sup> These two opposing figures need to be understood as political fictions indicating a path towards the affirmation of a 'non-conformist sexual identity',<sup>23</sup> as the clitoral woman allows for the establishment of a link between the refusal of reproductive labour and a radical critique of patriarchal institutions such as the heterosexual couple, romantic love, the nuclear family, and so on.<sup>24</sup> Lonzi identifies these social structures as 'culture'.

Throughout the 1970s Lonzi would keep on unravelling the threads that interweave womanhood with a number of roles and tasks encompassing the social as well as the intimate sphere. In doing so, she always took her lived experience and the relations in which her life was enmeshed as the main concern of her political endeavour. The notion of *rapporto* (relationship) therefore emerges as a crucial and recurring keyword in her writings. *Rapporto* can be considered as the nucleus of Lonzi's feminist practice as it foregrounds the relational dimension of subjectivity and the political necessity to transform the way we relate to one another, especially within the personal sphere.<sup>25</sup> In promoting dialogues and relationality, Lonzi sought to generate a process

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figures such as Monique Wittig and Valerie Solanas. See Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 4, 123–45.

22. See Carla Lonzi, 'La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale' (1971), in *Sputiamo su Hegel*, pp. 102–3.

23. Carla Lonzi, 'Itinerario di riflessioni', in M.G. Chinese, C. Lonzi, M. Lonzi and A. Jaquinta, *È già politica*, Milano: Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1977, p. 22.

24. Liliana Ellena, 'Carla Lonzi e il neo-femminismo degli anni '70: disfare la cultura, disfare la politica', in L. Conte, V. Fiorino and V. Martini, eds, *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità*, Pisa: ETS, 2011, pp. 136–7.

25. Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'io in rivolta. Pensiero e vissuto in Carla Lonzi*, Milano: La Tartaruga, 1990, p. 119.

of mutual recognition in which a new subjectivity can unfold, as opposed to the notion of the subject as an autonomous and universal individual inherited from the modernist tradition. In opposition to a life based on the artist's distinction and privilege, Lonzi proposes the radical alternative of a non-instrumental relationship, where being together can be something like a 'means without an end'.<sup>26</sup>

Lonzi's conversation with Consagra is an attempt to change the relations that perpetuate the roles oppressing women. Against the patriarchal organization and seizure of life, Lonzi counters her desire for a society based on a collective and participatory being together, liberated from the conditioning of social approval. This is a central aspect in the conflict opposing her to Consagra, as what she is striving for is not a mere egalitarian utopia. In Lonzi's terms, the meaning of *rapporto* refers to the very possibility of living otherwise, of a life that is able to resist the mechanism of valorization and capture typical of the artist's existence.

The problem of the irreconcilable conflict between *rapporto* and art is the main issue addressed in the fourth and last day of the dialogue comprising *Vai pure*. Lonzi and Consagra meet again after two weeks have passed since their last recording. The general tone of the discussion has now shifted from the polemical mood that had prevailed in the previous chapters, towards a certain fatigue prompted by the shared feeling that the couple have now reached a point of no return. Consagra is willing to admit, for example, that yes, in his view, 'human relations are only possible if they are connected to this commitment to the object', whereas Lonzi reaffirms her perception that his identification as an artist and his work in general hinder the relation.<sup>27</sup> Consagra, in turn, now acknowledges that 'work is a bit against

26. Claire Fontaine, 'We are all Clitoridian Women: Some Notes on Carla Lonzi's Legacy', *e-flux journal* 47, September 2013.

27. Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 115.

human relations', and that 'art is the symbol of a type of work that requires us to participate in a myth.'<sup>28</sup> While recapitulating the reasons for their crisis, he says: 'Our disagreement arises from the pleasure that you want to have in a relation – because you create a relation that tends to this, and everyone enjoys it – and what I propose in exchange, which is not pleasant to you.'<sup>29</sup> However, for Lonzi, Consagra's proposal is not just unpleasant, it is 'unliveable', precisely because she seeks to live a life that is something different from work, which her partner is unable to understand. For Lonzi 'art grows and disseminates to the detriment of human relations',<sup>30</sup> inasmuch as these are inevitably instrumentalized within the logic of the artwork. Lonzi laments the fact that their relationship is predicated upon the primacy of Consagra's work in a way that invades all aspects of their life as a couple, as she argues in the book's final pages:

You must understand that our whole life is structured by work, all of it, that we are never together for ourselves. It's just a pause, a rest from work. The vital, conscious and active moment, the promised land is work... You don't have a schedule, you don't have a job, you don't have obligations, but you create a more constraining situation than if you had a job and a boss.<sup>31</sup>

*Vai pure* ends with a farewell that gives the book its title ('you can go' is Lonzi's concluding remark addressed to Consagra) and with the unresolved dilemma of life and work, a dilemma that had occupied Lonzi's thinking ever since she had started to contest her role as an art critic. The book's final passage shows the extent to which life's subordination to the logic of work has emptied the relationship of any independent meaning, whereas Lonzi strives for a relation that can exist beyond the obligations and habits that make an artist's life. Her disagreement indicates

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28. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 131.



the possibility of living a life where relations are not disciplined within the logic of work, which implicitly, and inevitably, suggests capitalist productivity.

In this respect, *Vai pure* also returns not just to some of the issues she had raised as an art critic, but also to her early feminist writings, in particular the first *Manifesto of Rivolta Femminile*, written in the spring of 1970. Several passages of the manifesto discuss the critique of reproductive labour within the framework of an anti-work politics that emphasize women's hidden and under-recognized labour, while at the same time claiming unproductivity's independent value. For Rivolta Femminile, the refusal of work<sup>32</sup> translates a political strategy of withdrawal from social expectations:

We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and state capitalism to survive. ... We detest the mechanism of competitiveness and the blackmail exercised in the work by the hegemony of efficiency. We want to put our working capacity at the disposal of a society that is immune to this. ... Attributing value to 'unproductive' moments is an extension of life proposed by woman.<sup>33</sup>

These paragraphs resonate with the transnational 'wages against housework' campaign, which gained momentum in Italy in the early 1970s, thanks to the writings and activism of a number of women who articulated a feminist discourse that was otherwise very remote from Rivolta Femminile's positions.<sup>34</sup> Rivolta Femminile's and Lonzi's ideas can therefore be discussed

32. The expression 'refusal of work', especially in the Italian context, might refer to the autonomous Marxist tradition of *Operaismo* (or Workerism). However, Carla Lonzi, who was a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) during her youth, was vocal in criticizing Marxist politics. On Carla Lonzi's formative years, see lamurri, *Un margine che sfugge*, pp. 26–34. On Italian *Operaismo* and its legacy, see Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London: Pluto, 2017; Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds, *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*, New York: Semiotexte, 2007.

33. Rivolta Femminile, 'Manifesto of Rivolta Femminile' (1970), in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, eds, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 39.

34. See Maud Anne Bracke, 'Between the Transnational and the Local: Mapping the Trajectories and Contexts of the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1970s Italian Feminism', *Women's History Review*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2013, pp. 625–42.

in the wider framework of the refusal of what Silvia Federici called the 'labour of love', namely the relational and affective labour women perform in their everyday lives.<sup>35</sup> According to Federici, wages against housework are the first step of the struggle against woman's social role, and thus against work itself.<sup>36</sup> The demand for wages renders reproductive labour visible, which is the condition to start struggling against it. In denying housework the status of labour, capitalism has transformed it into an act of love and has identified women with the tasks they have to accomplish. Federici challenges woman's assimilation with reproductive labour, as well as the very notion that love can be nothing else than work. In a similar way, Lonzi also counters the idea that woman's work is unproductive and at the same time opposes the perspective of a life reduced to work. However, contrary to Federici, she is not interested in analysing woman's subjection within the Marxist framework of class relations, because in her view identifying women with class would put them back within a structure that actively operates towards their exclusion.<sup>37</sup>

In keeping with her existential understanding of woman's oppression, Lonzi rather aims at overturning woman's association with unproductivity and transforming it into a political programme. Throughout *Vai pure*, the manifesto's critique of reproductive labour and its anti-work politics becomes the crux of Lonzi's argument against Consagra's exclusive focus on the artwork. Hence, the artist emerges as an alienated individual whose existence is based on the perfect coincidence between what he is and what he does, thus becoming a paradigmatic

35. See Silvia Federici, 'Wages against Housework' (1975), in S. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2012, pp. 15–22. On the feminist refusal of work from a Marxist-feminist perspective in Italy, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminist, Marxism, Anti-work Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

36. Federici, 'Wages against Housework', p. 19.

37. This is one of the main points addressed in 'Let's Spit on Hegel', where Lonzi deconstructs the Marxist–Hegelian understanding of revolutionary politics.

figure of contemporary labour, self-absorbed and competitive. Lonzi's desire to be loved for her autonomy instead of her service offers instead a radical alternative to the idea that relationships operate within the logics of production.

Lonzi's ideas about the artist's masculinity and the function of art as ideology can be productively addressed within the broader critique of art that has been at the centre of much of feminist art history and criticism since the 1970s. Feminist art historians of her generation in the Anglo-American context – such as Linda Nochlin or Carol Duncan – pointed out the material conditions that have excluded women from artistic production, indicating within the sexual division of artistic labour a crucial aspect of art's ideological apparatus.<sup>38</sup> However, what differentiates Lonzi's position is not just the fact that she abandoned art (i.e. she never became a 'feminist art critic', as did, for instance, Lucy Lippard), but also that her critique is the result of a mediation with her lived experience and, more importantly, with the kind of transformative relations with which she tried to experiment, be it in the art world, in the feminist group or in the intimacy of a love relationship. While reflecting upon the political significance of women's relational labour, Lonzi was particularly interested in stressing the performative role women play within the theatre of male culture. This aspect is crucial to my understanding of Lonzi's positioning against art as the basis upon which she imagines and embodies a new feminist subjectivity.

The dialogue with Consagra remains somehow held in suspension, as there is no possible resolution of the dilemma between art and life that had occupied Lonzi ever since assembling *Autoritratto*. Lonzi's trajectory and radical search for

38. See Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 145–78; Carol Duncan, 'Virility and Domination in Early 20th Century Vanguard Painting', *Artforum*, December 1973, pp. 30–39.

alternative modes of living leave us with a set of open questions with no easy answers. Her political and existential project is certainly fated to remain utopian, as it appears entangled in a number of contradictions. Needless to say, Lonzi's anti-work politics was made possible by her relative privilege of being able to avoid work, even though this made the conflict between dependence and autonomy even more inextricable. One could also wonder how the conflicts that are played out within the heterosexual bourgeois couple, no matter how exemplary of a cultural structure, can be transposed to society at large. However, in opposing life to art, and thus to work, Carla Lonzi expresses a desire for a life liberated from the power relations that organize social interactions. Her ability to correlate life and politics can still be relevant today, as the barriers between the personal and the productive spheres are increasingly dissolving, and feminist movements around the globe keep on experimenting and imagining new ways of living and being together.

## 5

# Night cleaning at the bank: Sanja Iveković's screen tests for invisible women

KLARA KEMP-WELCH

In 2016, Erste Group Bank AG opened a new headquarters – Erste Campus – in the Quartier Belvedere District in Vienna, designed by Henke Schreieck architects. CEO Andreas Treichl (named Euromoney's 'Banker of the Year' 2019) has explained that he had wanted to do away with conventional office spaces and to move everyone into a single building to make everything very 'open'. Erste Campus was to be a space 'to feel good about'; a space for 'team building' where 'staff, customers and everyone who wishes to shape the future with us can come together' to produce an 'inspiring and exhilarating workplace, promoting communication between individuals and teams and strengthening team cohesion'. The bank's website describes the Campus as 'a new working environment for banking': an 'office concept of new corporate culture'.<sup>1</sup> The upbeat tone of this blurb is in line with the wider vision for the Quartier Belvedere itself. As the Erste Group site explains:

investors in this district will be providing a way of living and working here never experienced before: workers in the firms

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I am very grateful to Sanja Iveković for kindly sharing with me a copy of the film and some of the documentation associated with its making, as well as for permitting me to reproduce the stills included here.

1. 'Office concept for a new corporate culture'. See [www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus](http://www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus).

establishing themselves in this district will not immediately head for home at the end of the working day, but will stay on in the Quartier Belvedere together with their colleagues, with residents and with travellers and bring the day to a positive close.<sup>2</sup>

Both the new district and Erste Campus, then, champion a new approach to the corporate workplace, symptomatic of the drive to deliver new working environments supporting greater ‘flexibility’, increasing worker commitment, productivity and profits; a Euro-banking experiment in learning from the successes of Googleplex, Santa Clara.

The insistence on glass throughout the Erste Campus is symptomatic of corporate architecture’s conceptual attachment to transparency. In interview, Michael Werner (head of Real Estate Investment and Operations, Erste Group AG) describes transparency as ‘one of our core values: when you look into the process, you know what happens’. He explains:

the promise of transparency should also be exemplified by the office building; so it’s important that you can look into the interior from the outside. We don’t hide from the client; financial services providers handling money always seem to be doing something in secret or underground, where nobody has access. Here you can look directly into the building.

Nevertheless, such a working environment brings challenges:

Transparency is not an easy topic; sometimes it is very difficult for people. Working in an open space with a clean desk means full transparency ... we need a specific working environment in order to be really efficient or creative.

Asked about why he had felt the need to produce a ‘mood book’ for the project, Werner explains:

The process of developing corporate headquarters does not imply translating the corporate identity of the company into physical space. Instead, it is to understand the brand attitude and to

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2. ‘Erste Campus Surroundings’. See [www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus](http://www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus).

transform it into a brand atmosphere. Ideally, the brand should not be too visible to the user or a visitor to the Campus – instead, they should feel it.

He goes on:

we wanted to convey how Erste thinks about certain issues, how we see things, how we want clients to see us and our work. This is related to our advisor work and how we treat both customers and employees, and how we want to conduct ourselves in daily business.<sup>3</sup>

The Erste Group is ‘among the largest financial service providers in Central and Eastern Europe’,<sup>4</sup> with 47,000 employees, and core markets in Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia, as well as secondary markets in Bosnia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Slovenia.<sup>5</sup> Boris Marte, head of the company’s Innovation Centre (Erste HUB) stresses the particular relevance of the historic site for the location of the headquarters:

We constructed our venue on the former site of the ‘Südbahnhof’, the city’s southern railway station... In the 1960s and 70s, hundreds of thousands of people from communist Eastern Europe arrived at this train station to look for something like freedom ... in the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union also arrived here and then travelled on to Israel ... the Südbahnhof had its history as an important hub at a time when the iron curtain still existed. This was the only train station where people moved back and forth between the East and the Southeast. Building a company that is strongly represented in those countries in that very place carries a certain message.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘message’ is presumably intended to be a reminder of Vienna’s role as a way station for its former socialist neighbours, but the demolition of the massive structure and the construction

3. ‘Who’s cleaning all this? Interviews by Sanja Iveković’, in Pierre Bal-Blanc and Kathrin Rhomberg, eds, *The Canaletto View*, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2020, p. 94.

4. [www.erstegroup.com/en/home](http://www.erstegroup.com/en/home).

5. See ‘Our Markets’, *ibid.*

6. ‘Who’s cleaning all this?’, p. 94.



of the new business district also mark a significant shift in priorities. If the site once orchestrated the flow of people across borders, it is now primarily designed in as a hub for the flow of capital.

The bank's commitment to 'giving back' to the former East is better evidenced by its philanthropic wing, the ERSTE Foundation, which has been the main plug for the funding gap left in the region's emerging contemporary art world after George Soros pulled his money out of the 1990s' network of Centres for Contemporary Art. The Foundation is devoted to three core areas: 'social innovation, European cohesion and democracy and contemporary culture' and has engaged in a wide range of cultural initiatives: the founding of the Kontakt Collection – the Erste Group and ERSTE Foundation art collection – dedicated to modern and contemporary art from the region; the funding of the Tranzit – a 'network of autonomous initiatives in contemporary art in Austria, Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary'; and the sponsoring of the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory, among others.<sup>7</sup> The Foundation also publishes online interviews and stories on topics such as the education of Roma children and segregation in Slovak schools, pharma pollution in Croatia, Bosnia's failure to house its displaced, Poland's collision course with the EU, the plight of refugees in

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7. Other initiatives include the 2019 'Tipping Point' talks (the first of which was by Francis Fukuyama, another by Felvine Sarr on 'How Can We Realise a Holistic Concept of Prosperity for the Many and Not the Few?'), and funding an annual lecture in Judenplatz in Vienna on Europe Day 2019, kicking off with Timothy Snyder.





camps on the Bosnian–Croatian border, the youth of Kosovo, and the emptying of Bulgaria’s Vidin, ‘the world capital of population decline’.<sup>8</sup> The Foundation, then, is committed to engaging with a wide range of human rights and equality issues relevant to the post-socialist context.

When Erste Group came to consider how they would deploy art as part of the Campus, they were keen to avoid using it as a generic form of corporate interior design (large format, abstract painting, global photography). The Campus ‘Mood Book’ explicitly makes the point that ‘there is no law stating that the walls of corporate headquarters have to be adorned with art. We only display art where we believe it has relevance and can be an inspiration for all Erste Campus users and visitors.’ In commissioning artwork for its new campus, the Group opted for new work by artists from central and eastern Europe which ‘required the artists not only to take into account the context of the geopolitical area in which Erste Group operates, but also to make reference in the projects to the character and location of the Erste Campus building on the former site of the Südbahnhof railway station’.<sup>9</sup> ‘Art in Architecture’, as the project came to be called, was a collaboration with Kathrin Rhomberg, head of the Kontakt collection. The curator and co-commissioner, Pierre

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8. See Angel Petrov, ‘Where did everyone go?’, 11 May 2020, [www.erstestiftung.org/en/where-did-everyone-go](http://www.erstestiftung.org/en/where-did-everyone-go).

9. ‘Art in Architecture’. See [www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus](http://www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus).

Bal-Blanc, explained that the project was about ‘rethinking the relationship between art and capital, and examining the compromises imposed when the viewpoints of users, bankers and employers who cross paths at the site of this financial enterprise converge or contradict one another’. He added that ‘Any initiative developed on private terrain has its blind spot, a repressed consciousness that reveals itself once the exhibit is finished ... exposing the vitality of contradictions that revitalize this bank.’<sup>10</sup>

Many of the statements by Erste representatives cited in this brief introduction to the Campus and its ambitions were gathered by Croatian artist Sanja Iveković as part of her ‘field research’ for a film piece entitled *The Invisible Women of the Erste Campus*, which she wrote and directed, and installed on Campus as part of the ‘Art in Architecture’ commission. The floor area of Erste Campus is vast, standing at 165,000 m<sup>2</sup>. When Iveković asked Marte how many cleaners he thought there are on Campus, he replied: ‘I guess between 100 and 150’. Iveković countered gently: ‘That’s what I thought, too, but there are only 58.’ She explained: ‘As a feminist I’m interested in the situation and the conditions under which women are working here. When I was invited to do a project and saw the big building, the first question that came to my mind was, who’s cleaning all this? Thus, my project is about the cleaning ladies.’<sup>11</sup> With reference to the nature of the ‘feeling’ Erste representatives wanted to convey through the Campus design, Iveković noted: ‘you stressed you wanted to see everybody and also everybody to be seen, to be able to talk to everyone and communicate with them. The project I’m working on – talking about communication and

10. Pierre Bal-Blanc, ‘Private Foundations, Innovating Conformity’, Switch on Paper International, trans. Maya Dalinsky, 2019, [www.switchonpaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Private-foundations-Innovating-Conformity.pdf](http://www.switchonpaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Private-foundations-Innovating-Conformity.pdf).

11. Andreas Treichl comments: ‘I thought they would be less invisible than they are. They are not invisible to me because I start to work very early in the morning.’ ‘Who’s cleaning all this? Interviews by Sanja Iveković’, p. 94.



everybody who is employed here – is pursuing the same goal.<sup>12</sup> *The Invisible Women of the Erste Campus* set out to test the Group's corporate commitment to 'transparency' by making sure that the women who clean the building were made visible to everyone in the building. The film, made collaboratively with the cleaners, is an ode to their invisible labour. It is played on a series of monitors in the Elevator areas of Levels 0–9 in Building A–F.<sup>13</sup>

The film opens in the dark; there is light drizzle and the roar of traffic as the camera pans around a series of curved, glass-fronted office blocks, their lights dimmed. The view shifts to the entrance to one of the blocks, and we hear early-morning bird song. It is still dark outside, when women in jeans and jackets begin to walk through the large glass doors and into the lobby. As they enter, we hear a rollcall of names: Angela, Angelika, Zolti, Elvira, Marijana, Sofia, Gordana, Dragana, Milka, Balta, Lidia, Migreta, and more. The camera jumps to a long service corridor with red pipes overhead and then to an empty locker room, with narrow benches and neat rows of practical shoes and trainers; their owners have changed into uniforms and are beginning their shifts. Women in white T-shirts and navy-and-white striped aprons are in a store-room, loading grey plastic trays with colour-coded cloths. They go about this work silently, each focused on the routine. Having loaded up with cleaning supplies, they stack the grey plastic trays and attach carry straps before heading back up the corridor. As the cleaning team heads out, a team of kitchen staff pass by, wearing plastic hair coverings and wheeling metal trolleys ranged with trays and catering equipment.

The screen fades to a blinding white and a middle-aged woman with pleasant features and dark hair tucked behind her ears is

12. Kathrin Rhomberg and Pierre Bal-Blanc, 'Sanja Iveković, 'The Invisible Women of Erste Campus'', 2016, 'Film Project, Elevator areas, Level 0–9, Building A–F', [www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus/sanja-ivekovic](http://www.erstegroup.com/en/about-us/erste-campus/sanja-ivekovic).

13. It now also exists as a single channel film installation, and it is this version of the film to which I have had access, and on which my essay focuses.



shown close up against a plain background, smiling lightly. Unexpectedly, she recites three lines of a poem in her native language. The shot of her face fades out and we read the English intertitle: 'I came from the South / Wherever I go / the moss keeps following me'. In the background, the sound of objects clattering about continues like a chorus of labour. Another woman takes her turn, and says her piece: she is also middle-aged, this time blonde, with earrings, smiling, in a deep Slavonic accent, slightly perspiring. She wears the same uniform. The intertitle conveys a pleasurable state of rest: 'When Sunday comes / I lie down in the shade / Of my family tree', though this is tinged with melancholy and a sense of isolation in the final line, which reads: 'I am the branch that broke off'. As we try to appreciate the poetry, though, there is a deafening drone of hovering, unpleasantly insistent and in stark contrast with the state of calm conveyed by the poem.

An exterior view of the building reveals uniformed cleaners working on every floor, as the sunrise is reflected in the glass stories of the curved complex. There are hundreds of work-stations in the open-plan design, each with its own cleaning challenges. The cleaning is full body work and the women perform a wide range of tasks: wheeling trolleys, hoovering, dusting. They reach across round tables to wipe them; lean down to clean underneath desks, pulling out chairs with one hand and directing the hoover with the other; wipe down every imaginable surface – tables, chairs, backs of chairs, cupboards coffee tables,

photocopiers, toilets (seats, backs of seats, under the rims, around the pedestals), sinks, taps, mirrors; unload dishwashers, stack crockery on shelves; change bin-liners. Women in white T-shirts in blue plastic disposable aprons and black gloves work on a conveyer belt in the kitchens of the canteen, sorting plates, trays, cups, scraping remains of food into bins; it is a hive of relentless activity. On the other side of the dishwasher, more women sort clean crockery into piles and take it away. The work is monotonous and made relentless by the fact it is a conveyer belt that just keeps going. Some men in orange aprons work in the adjacent space, perhaps as kitchen porters. Many of the spaces being cleaned are hybrid and auxiliary spaces rather than workspaces per se: common rooms for the white-collar workers, resting places with low tables and newspapers. Tables are set up for the morning's meetings, coffee cups and bottled waters at the ready, comfortable tasteful office chairs as inviting as the view of the city in the morning sunshine beyond. The women wield all manner of swivel-mops and products, from pink cleaning fluid to surgical gloves. They wipe with sweeping movements to and fro, round and round, polishing until everything gleams. Time sheets are filled out to show that the toilets have been cleaned. As the cleaning progresses, the sun rises and it is daytime: the white collar workers and clients begin to arrive. As they do, the cleaning women polish the glass turn-style doors.

The camera plays silent witness to this mass of strip-lit activity. Waste and dirt are glimpsed only fleetingly, in the process of being disappeared. The camera angles focus on the manual dexterity of the women and the minutiae of their expert movements. Their often graceful, dance-like movements appear choreographed to flow with the architecture: scenes are shot from below as they make their way down the generous staircases, mopping as they go. The micro-Niemeyerian curves of the white lobby are complemented by the aerodynamic metal swathe of a welcome desk,



adorned with a series of vases of fresh red gladioli. Other spaces are also dotted with potted plants and ostentatious corporate flower arrangements (doubtless procured through a series of subcontractors). A plethora of internal design features and lighting fixtures vie for our attention: the ceilings are dotted with a galaxy of LED lights, there are columns, circular floating walls, and the passage between the similar but different spaces seems endless. The camera seems to mock all these efforts at taste, more interested in the masses of surfaces to be cleaned. At one point in the film a woman is shown hoovering a characteristically expansive space (Executive Meeting Area, Level 12). In the background we see a projected photo of a tall, naked, balding man – Zagreb artist Tomislav Gotovac, in his video piece *Watch on the Rhine* (1994), made during the Yugoslav wars, which involved him spending hours looking across the city of Zagreb, standing sentry as a ‘mosque guard’ on the roof of the Croatian Association of Artists (once used as a mosque by the Muslim community in the 1940s). The contemporary cleaner goes about her work as though the image were not there, ignoring the naked man looking past her, his gaze directed above and away, to the city beyond. The passage of the camera through the building is accompanied by a percussion of swish-swashing and clicking as mops make endless loops of polished concrete floors, while hoovers drone and dishes clatter, all pervaded by a quiet electronic buzz. It is an entirely artificial working environment and much of the cleaners’ labour takes place

in windowless concrete and metal service areas, in contrast to the abundance of wood and glass in the office spaces. At the end of their shift, Iveković's subjects put their cleaning cloths into two large washer dryers: pink and yellow cloths on the right, blue and green cloths on the left. Presumably the different cloths are for different jobs, though one senses Iveković may also be drawing an artistic analogy here too: their labour, like hers, is involved with aesthetic choices, though in very different ways. The loading of the machines reminds us of those that will come on in the next shift, and begin by unloading these same, washed cloths, to restart the whole daily cycle once more.

The workers are paid to invisibly erase the traces of other workers and to make a prestigious glass-fronted building look as good as new. The situation echoes that staged so well in Jeff Wall's photograph *Morning Cleaning Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999), in which a person of colour is seen mopping the floor of the iconic glass building, while a classical nude sculpture flaunts its idealized white form in the courtyard behind. Symptomatically, perhaps, the Tate website's interpretation of the piece initially focuses on the formal composition of the images and appears to shrink from the term 'cleaner', referring to the worker, instead, as first an 'attendant' and then as a 'custodian':

The minimally-furnished space is seen in the bright light of early morning. In the foreground, a gleaming steel pillar divides the composition vertically almost in half. Beyond the pillar, across an expanse of dark carpet, an attendant is in the process of cleaning a glass-panelled wall. The morning sun illuminates the clear and crisp lines of the building's architecture, while producing pronounced shadows on a deeply veined onyx wall to the left. On the panels the custodian has prepared for cleaning, streaming water adds a random design onto the surface of the symmetrically-patterned glass, which partially obscures a courtyard where a sculpture of a female nude by Georg Kolbe (1877–1947) stands by a pond.<sup>14</sup>

14. See Alice Sanger, 'Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona,





Whilst the Mies building's formal rigour conveys a sense of simplicity and luxuriates in the purity of materials, the cleaner's labour points to the effort entailed in maintaining an illusion of 'less' as 'more'. Wall has noted that 'Cleaning is mysterious ... since it is the labour that erases itself if it is successful.' He observes: '[These] buildings require an especially scrupulous level of maintenance. In more traditional spaces a little dirt and grime is not such a shocking contrast to the whole concept. It can even become patina, but these Miesian buildings resist patina as much as they can.'<sup>15</sup>

Throughout Iveković's film, the scenes of labour are interrupted by close-up shots of the women. The camera lingers on their faces for up to a minute, producing an effect reminiscent of Andy Warhol's famous series of 'screen tests'. Warhol famously claimed that 'screen magnetism is something secret. If you could figure out what it is and how you make it, you'd have a really good product to sell. But you can't even tell if someone has it until you actually see them up there on the screen. You have to give screen tests to find out.'<sup>16</sup> Many, if not all, of the Erste Campus cleaning

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1999', 2010, [www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wall-morning-cleaning-mies-van-der-rohe-foundation-barcelona-t12294](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wall-morning-cleaning-mies-van-der-rohe-foundation-barcelona-t12294).

15. Ibid. Wall explained: 'The man in the picture is the real cleaner. The picture is documentary in the sense that that's exactly what he would be doing at that moment of the day. It's what I call "near documentary". Although I arranged the picture and worked in collaboration with the cleaner, the picture resembles very closely what a snapshot made at that moment would show'. Cited in Sanger, after Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, p. 90.

16. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, New

women seem magnetic to me. As we watch them subject themselves to the scrutiny of the camera under bright white light, their faces demonstrate a diversity of central, eastern and southern European 'types', from blonde and blue-eyed with wide faces and high cheekbones to others with darker complexions and glossy black hair. Some are young, some are older, likely already grandmothers. We wonder whether the younger ones will spend their whole working lives in similar roles. If Warhol claimed 'I only wanted to find great people and let them be themselves ... and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie',<sup>17</sup> Iveković's individual women come together to form a chorus, rallying around the words of a feminist poet.

For Iveković's women are not silent like Warhol's sitters, though neither are the words they speak entirely their own. They speak the words of another but in their own languages, and they have chosen their own lines to recite, selected from the poetry of Aida Bagić, translated from Croatian into their native tongues, a few lines each. Listening, one is struck by the different qualities of their voices and the diversity of sounds that make up the various languages. We may recognize some as Slavonic; others may feel less familiar. The group of women Iveković worked with were Bosnian, Croatian, Kosovan, Polish, Romanian, Serbian and Turkish. Some of them recite like schoolgirls, some like budding actresses; some of the women recite clearly and confidently, others are more shy, a little embarrassed and not used to the attention of the camera, but they all get through their lines and look relieved and perhaps even a little proud. All seem pleased to come to the end of their lines, and many smile. Their selections of text seem highly personal and make the viewer wonder about their life stories and how it came to be that they are working

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York: Harvest Books, 1975, cited in [www.openculture.com/2018/09/watch-andy-warhols-screen-tests-of-three-female-muses.html](http://www.openculture.com/2018/09/watch-andy-warhols-screen-tests-of-three-female-muses.html).

17. Warhol, cited in GERALYN HUXLEY, 'About Andy Warhol's Screen Texts', [www.warholscreentest.com/about.php?renter=](http://www.warholscreentest.com/about.php?renter=).



at cleaning the bank, in Vienna. Each has been encouraged to choose lines to which she felt connected to in some way.

Some of the lines of poetry seem to hark back to harder times: 'Loss of memory is not a disorder / It is a remedy / Against memories of the moment / when everything started to go downhill / If I cannot remember it'. Many are day-to-day, yet somehow indicative of small satisfactions, and a sense that things are in order: 'I leave the house before dawn / The city is quiet / the bread is baked'; 'I get up at half past four / trams are not crowded / so I sleep in the warm'; 'I have a small garden / Weeding takes my full attention / Each blade of grass is unique'; 'I get up before dawn / And I watch clouds people and / bottled messages go by / Then I look at the palm of / my hand and I see / It will be alright'. They offer practical advice for getting by: 'My mother tells me / Don't spent that much time / inside your head / You're better off outside. In the fresh air / My mother is a wise woman'. The irony of this advice, in view of the indoor chemical nature of the cleaning work is clear. Several lines address the nature of female labour: 'A woman's work is / never done / As soon as I finish / it feels as if I haven't even started'; 'They say a woman holds / three corners of the house / But I clean all four'; perhaps in the voice of a man - 'Women can do it / I can do it too / I can do all kinds of things / But I don't have to, so I won't'. Others refer to the experience of waiting for the mail: 'I wave to the postmen / But they do not know me / Because I am not

from here / I am from there / I came with the wind / And with wind I will go'; 'I've been waiting for a letter / for months now / The postman later said to me / I didn't know it was you'. The last line cited is 'I didn't know it was you', perhaps echoing the sense in which the women themselves are not known, not recognized, 'invisible' as Iveković's title implies.

Distance from home is a key theme: 'My life would be so easy / If I had rain in one hand / and the sun in the other / Then I wouldn't need to go anywhere'.<sup>18</sup> A number of core lines are repeated like a refrain, having been selected more than once. Notably these are those that relate to the experience of displacement: 'I am not from here / I am from there / I came with the wind / With the wind I will go', as well as to an ethic of perseverance. Several of the women, particularly those who are older, their eyes sadder, more browbeaten than their younger, more optimistic colleagues, repeat the lines 'Fall down, get up. / Fall down again. / Get up. / Fall down. / Falling comes easy if you / practice every day'. The younger women tend to be the ones who chose the more romantic lines; the older ones those more melancholic, though the question of falling down, getting up and falling down again, might also be a call to action, along the lines of Samuel Beckett's mantra 'No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better' from *Worstward Ho!* It is a topic Iveković has addressed herself in the past, notably in a video performance entitled *Practice Makes a Master* (1982). Here, a woman in a black evening dress is shown standing rather stiffly on the stage before the camera, hooded with a white plastic bag. Suddenly her body jolts and she collapses to the ground. Some time passes. She lies immobile. Then, she gets up, and stands on

18. 'Then we wouldn't need to go anywhere' echoes a line from Adam Chodzko's film *The Pickers* (2009) in which Romanian strawberry pickers in Kent speculate what would happen if the British economy collapsed and if the British had to come to Romania to make a living: 'Then we wouldn't need to go anywhere.' 'I would like that', said one of the pickers, wistfully, 'Yes... then they would know what it is to be away from home.' See Klara Kemp-Welch, "'The Romanians are Coming': Labour Migration and the Politics of the Observational Documentary', *Third Text*, 2020. doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2020.1765601.



the stage again. Her body jolts as though she had been shot dead, and she collapses again. The action is repeated, on a loop. Women fall, pick themselves up, fall again, get up again. In another major collaborative work, *Women's House* (2009), Iveković worked with women from a shelter, who had left violent relationships to rebuild their lives, and made plaster casts of their faces, which were later transformed into an austere mausoleum in a circle of cast faces, installed on plinths. Its owner's stories were recorded beneath each mask. The stories of these women and their children make sad reading. While every story is different, the dynamics of the violent relationships described in each are fundamentally the same, and it is clear that domestic violence afflicts all nationalities and age groups: Maria, 51, Portuguese, married, one child; Renee, 35, Luxembourger, married, three children; Fatima, 24, Cap Verdese, married... the list goes on. As Maria Hlavajova has argued, Iveković's embrace of new forms of collaborative practice like these seeks, as the artist has herself put it, 'not just to illustrate the political thesis, thus making it clear to those who already know it, but to include art into the political praxis, form new ideas and spread them into society'.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, as Manuela Bojadzijeve and Serhat Karakayali have argued, it is essential to be mindful of the degree to which, 'particularly among leftists ... expressions of solidarity with

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19. Maria Hlavajova, 'In Short: Thoughts behind the Exhibition', in *Sanja Iveković. Urgent Matters*, exh. cat., Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum; Utrecht: BAK, 2009, p. 12.

the mostly migrant “others” not only leave one’s “own” position unquestioned, but also victimise the “poor others” and deny them their own capacity for political action’.<sup>20</sup> And questions should therefore be posed by ‘all those who’, like them, ‘no longer believe the struggles of migration to be a sideshow of history’: ‘if and when migrants cross borders ... they ... are already (and then, in a new way) a part of national and global social relations, which they also themselves transform’. They insist that ‘the subjectivity of migrants is not reducible to their role as labour-power’.<sup>21</sup> This, it seems to me, is what Iveković strives to demonstrate when she invites the cleaners to select and recite poetry, crucially, translated into their own languages; rather than reduce her collaborators to vital statistics, as was, perhaps inevitably, in part the case in the documentary afterlife of the *Woman House* project. While the lines of poetry may be relatable, in some cases, to the women’s experience of labour, to cleaning, they are not reducible in this sense: they also allude to the past and future, to longing, to dreams, and to the shared experience of migration, which remains so central to the nature and experience of European reality today, both irrespective of and yet also precisely because of the changed circumstances and new economic and social inequalities accelerated by 1989 and the ‘transition’ to post-socialism.

Even before Covid-19, Françoise Vergès had written that we lived in ‘an age in which concerns are growing for clean art, clean water, clean houses, clean bodies, clean minds and green space’. This was, she argued, ‘an extension of New Age ideology of the 1970s’ and of a market whose ‘aim is personal efficiency and a maximization of physical and mental power’. She wrote of ‘new borders that have been drawn between cleanliness and dirtiness’, explaining how the

20. Isabell Lorey, ‘Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting’, *e-flux journal* 17, June–August 2010, pp. 4–5.

21. Manuela Bojadžijev and Serhat Karakayali, ‘Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism: The Autonomy of Migration Today’, *e-flux journal* 17, June–August 2010, pp. 3–4.

performing body of the neoliberal white male was fundamentally undergirded by the ‘invisible body ... female and a person of color’, whose exhaustion, in turn, remains ‘the consequence of the historical logic of extractivism that built primitive accumulation and capital – extracting labor from racialised bodies’; concluding that ‘invisibility of the cleaning jobs of women of color creates the visibility of clean homes and public spaces’. Thus, she argues, cleaning, today, is part of a longer, historical ‘*economy of exhaustion*’. Cleaning women, she noted, ‘speak of the very little time they sleep ... of the long hours devoted to their commutes, and of the work they have to do once they return home’.<sup>22</sup> The very same point was already made explicit in the 1975 film *Night Cleaners (Part 1, 90 mins)* by the Berwick Street Film Collective, devoted to raising recognition of the labour of cleaners and documenting the campaign for their unionization, in which a series of women are memorably asked ‘Do you get any sleep?’, and recount, in matter-of-fact tones, as though surprised that anyone is even interested to know, how they try to snatch an average of an hour and a half per night, between putting their babies to bed and heading out for their night shifts. As Siona Wilson, among others, has outlined, the night cleaners’ campaign ‘challenged a deeper set of expulsions within the organized left’ and ‘sought to define a feminist politics that went beyond the confines of middle-class women’s experience to include working-class and immigrant women’.<sup>23</sup>

Iveković follows in the footsteps of this earlier feminist project, when she invites a representative from the trade union VIDA, part of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (Ursula Woditscha) to speak with the cleaning women at Erste Campus and to explain Austrian laws about workers’ council’s with them. The notes from the conversation record that the women earned the minimum

22. Françoise Vergès, ‘Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender’, *e-flux journal* 100, May 2019, p. 10.

23. Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, ch. 1 n8.

rate of €8.36 and that they had been working in the new building since it opened approximately some five months before. Woditscha explained to the women why a work council is important, explaining: 'If everyone gets together and gets organized, you can improve things.' She says: 'people like you who tell us where the problems lie, what worries you, which fears you have and which help you need.'<sup>24</sup> She tells them that 'the council can help raise all sorts of issues with the bosses', ranging from the quality of cleaning products or the efficiency of machines, to trying to negotiate more suitable working hours for staff with childcare responsibilities, to ensuring that if the boss wants to reduce the number of staff the council can help decide who is best placed to find a new job and to be laid off, and so on. She explains that a council can be formed in around two months and talks about the procedure and membership rules, discussing issues around self-organization and how to select and elect a representative. She lingers for a while on the importance of issues around language and communication in an organization like hers. It is important, she says, that those sent to negotiate on the cleaners' behalf with the bosses speak good German, otherwise they will not be taken seriously. Her union, she says, is committed to communicating with the cleaners and to trying to understand their concerns, to overcome the inevitable language barriers faced by a time-poor group of women speaking many different home languages with differing levels of German proficiency.

When the women were invited to ask questions, one asked about access to healthcare, explaining that they had been told that they had access to Erste healthcare but had not met any representatives about it: 'Somewhere it is written that we have a doctor at the Erste Group, but we have never seen this person.'

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24. Ursula Woditschka, in 'Meeting Ursula Woditschka, VIDA with the Cleaning Ladies, Fri. May 20th', unpublished transcript of meeting kindly shared with me by the artist. Sanja Iveković archive, ref. Cleao317.



Woditscha points out that as the cleaning is subcontracted, the women are technically employees of another company, in this case one called Mundo, rather than Erste directly, and that this may have implications for their access to healthcare. While there are around 4,500 Erste employees working on campus, cleaning has of course been contracted out, part of a massive commercial cleaning service market, which sees employers take less risk, employees take lower wages, and middlemen take the lion's share of the benefits. As Helma Lutz has argued: 'Employers like to see their domestic workers as service providers; it is largely a form of exculpatory rhetoric which conveniently diverts the debate away from relations of power and dependence, since the (academically) educated upper-middle class clients will usually know that they are not party to a legally safeguarded service-provider contract.'<sup>25</sup> One of the outcomes of Iveković's field research into the workers' conditions was a direct result of the Q&A between the union representative and the cleaners. On conclusion of the project, the women gained access to the health centre on the Erste campus, despite their status as indirect employees.<sup>26</sup>

In filming cleaners on a campus that set out to make itself a model for a new form of 'corporate culture', Iveković highlighted the interdependence of so-called 'immaterial' and 'material' workers, foregrounding ongoing modes of taking the latter for granted. Keti Chukhrov observes that the 'class gap within the "class" of immaterial workers is enormous' as 'the bulk of immaterial labour workers make no use whatsoever of their higher education and are working outside their specialization'. Moreover, she argues compellingly against the contemporary art-world myth that "revolutionary" vocabulary and "proletarian" poetics are predominantly employed in the discourse of contemporary

25. Helma Lutz, *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy*, London: Zed Books, 2011, cited in Françoise Vergès, 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender', *e-flux journal* 100, May 2019, p. 8.

26. 'Who's cleaning all this? Interviews by Sanja Iveković', p. 94.

criticism and the creative industries, and rarely emerge in the realm of unprestigious material labour'. In view of these and other problematic assumptions, she notes that

it is interesting that the work of Western artists investigating the routine industrial, poorly paid labour is always conspicuously marked by the impossibility of a shared cultural space constructed by a pan-European middle class that includes material labour workers and representatives of non-prestigious professions.

She continues:

In the social space of developed countries, physical labour is invisible; and if it comes into view, it is seen as something hovering between the exotic and the obscene. ... Material labour testifies to the fatal division between routine, mechanical labour, and the intellectual-creative and cultural space of middle-class life and activity.

Chukhrov argues for the need to continue to retain a sense of the possibility of non-exploitation and non-commodification, of the 'potential of the general without a segregation between material and immaterial labour – without an anthropological division of people into two races of producers'.<sup>27</sup>

Iveković attempts to overcome such a division in the final scene of her film, building a common bridge with the subjects of her documentary, on the platform of their shared experience as post-socialist women. After the cleaners have finished their working day, the camera shows a heavy steel door gently closing, perhaps in reference to the iconic cinematic moment of the factory doors opening and the workers flooding out. Then, unexpectedly, a music box starts up. It plays a tinny version of 'The Internationale' and the camera tracks a tall young blonde woman melancholically walking down a service corridor winding it up as she goes, as she

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27. Keti Chukhrov, 'Towards the Space of the General: On Labor beyond Materiality and Immateriality', trans. Ainsley Morse, *e-flux journal* 20, November 2010, pp. 4, 7.

walks slowly down a corridor.<sup>28</sup> The camera shifts to a close-up of an older woman's face. She wears pearl earrings and a far-away look in her eye. Her look suggests that she remembers all too well. Other women's faces, of all ages, gathered in the room, together with the artist, listening to the tune together, are scrutinized, in turn, some together, some along. Everyone looks deadly serious and no one is laughing. They clearly get the point being made here. Almost all are from former socialist countries, like the artist herself. Some begin to nod along, others look upset, even on the verge of tears, their tough exteriors threatening to crumble. There is clearly an irony in their collective situation; they are living the failure of the dream. The screen goes black. The music box music gets slower and slower. The camera pans back to the empty corridor, its red pipes beginning to look suspiciously like involuntary monuments to the promise of the socialist past. Suddenly red seems to be everywhere: one of the floors is painted red in its entirety. Above ground, though, the camera returns to the flashy neoliberal present. All the signage is in English, despite the bank's headquarters being in Vienna, and the pompously named 'Grand Hall' is beginning to fill up. The city symphony, or at least its campus microcosm, is starting over. The cleaning is done, the white collar staff are arriving to take over, and it is time for the invisible cleaners to disappear back to their invisible lives. The next part of the day on campus is not about them. As the section of the website introducing the merits of 'Erste Group as an Employer' proclaims: 'Earning money can have a deeper meaning' – though, technically, the cleaners are not Erste group employees.

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28. I am grateful to Beata Hock for pointing out that the piece is a reprise of a work by the Hungarian artist Laszlo Lakner, who had made an experimental video of himself playing 'The Internationale' on a wind-up music box, bought from a flea market while on a DAAD scholarship in 1974 in West Berlin (entitled *Memory 3*). Lakner went on to repeat the work in colour in 2004, this time calling it *Was It a Dream?* Both films – *Memory 3*, b/w, digitalized 16 mm film, 52 sec.; *Was It a Dream? (Memory 3)*, colour, digitalized video, 57 sec. – were included in the 2018 exhibition *Left Performance Histories: Recollecting Artistic Practices in Eastern Europe* at the Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin.



# **INSTABILITIES OF FORM**



# 6

## Arting philosophy

LUDGER SCHWARTE

In what follows, I want to argue that philosophy is a necessary part of artistic practice.<sup>1</sup> I will concentrate on an analysis of artistic practice, because I am at odds with the dominant aesthetic tradition which takes the appearance of a product, the aesthetic object, for granted, and concentrates on the aesthetic experience. Instead I want to turn attention to an analysis of artistic practice as such. I want to show that artistic practice is neither a form of production, nor of work – if you allow Hannah Arendt's distinctions – nor is it a kind of performance. And I would like to distinguish *artistic* practice from other forms of practice, notably *aesthetic* practice, with which it is often meshed, especially in praxeological approaches.

Almost every form of practice contains some aesthetic element, but art is more than that. It is not only that we need a better explanation for the specificity of artistic practice in general – because it is a research lacuna. The main reason to concentrate on what artistic practice is, or can be, when reconsidered, is a political one: artistic practice has a political significance, independent of its potential products or traces, for it

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1. This essay is based on my book, *Notate for eine künftige Kunst*, Berlin: Merve, 2016.

is an experimental field of self-determination, a training ground for autonomy.

My title might suggest that I want to conquer all philosophy with art. This is not what is meant. I am talking of an aspect of the philosophy of art. And my aim is not to argue for an aestheticization of philosophy (as some have read Adorno's title, *Aesthetic Theory*), but to show that philosophy – the engineering of concepts, as Gilles Deleuze once defined it – needs to become part of artistic practice in order to save art from a particular contemporary paradigm, which, to my eyes, reduces art to applied art history or aestheticized sociology. The aim is also, in turn, to change the practice of philosophy (of art and aesthetics).

The verb 'arting' here needs explanation. In German, and I think in English, too, a verb form is missing for the noun 'art'/*Kunst*. We sometimes speak of 'practising' or 'making' or 'producing' art. I was dissatisfied with this and coined in German the verb *kunsten*. In English, this would be 'to art': the practice of arting, the infinitive becoming of art. Alexander García Düttmann has translated Adorno's expression *Entkunstung* not as 'de-aestheticization' but as 'de-arting'.<sup>2</sup> So, just as there is *Entkunstung* – de-arting – a moving out of the realm of art, there can be the contrary movement – *Kunsten*, arting. Arting means to transform something outside the art world into something artistic. Now, what is artistic?

Three philosophical approaches have tried to explain such a movement. Dickie's institutional theory would say that something becomes a work of art once it is in art institutions. But chairs, toilets and people are in there, and they are not artworks. Danto's approach is to say that it is an object plus interpretation. And Adorno utters the requirement that something aesthetic becomes an artwork through interpretation, comment and criticism.

2. Alexander García Düttmann, 'De-arting', in Peter Osborne, ed., *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2000, pp. 71–87.



### **Aesthetic versus artistic practice**

But all of these focus on the reception of an aesthetic object, on aesthetic experience, and neglect the productive aspect. How do you give an account for what artists do? What do they do? At first glance, things seem simple: when an artist works, she produces a work of art. But is it really work? Hannah Arendt says: work is reproduction. But is it production? Is the core of what artists do the production of aesthetic objects – comparable to jewellery, interior design or fine cooking? Is it a manufactory production of investment products? Products destined for consumption? Or for aesthetic contemplation?

It is necessary to differentiate here between *aesthetic* and *artistic* practices. Aesthetics is concerned with the reflection on modes of perception, including objects, representations and aesthetic judgements. What are aesthetic practices? It is not just the practices of receiving – of seeing, listening, experiencing, interpreting a work, a meal, a view.

Aesthetic practices are all those where attention is paid to the way we perceive things. They form a reflection on perceptual processes and prepare aesthetic judgements (judgements of taste). However, aesthetic practices are not concerned primarily with these judgements, but first and foremost with evoking and experiencing aesthetic qualities.

Baking cakes, tasting wine, visiting places of interest, designing gardens, cutting hair, applying make-up and making coffee – these are all aesthetic practices. They are not necessarily professional activities, such as designing fashion, decorating houses, erecting graves, making tattoos. Their purpose, as an aesthetic activity, is not to make money or to gain social esteem. All aesthetic activities, amateur and professional, be it painting and music or pottery and gardening, are not primarily intended for reception. It is not about feeling pleasure or gaining social distinction. One performs an aesthetic practice not to achieve

such an effect, because it is not replaceable by other practices that will have the same effect (as by taking drugs or by immersive illusion). But it is an end in itself: to focus attention on modes of perception.

For most aesthetic practices, this quest – to focus attention on modes of perception – is the decisive element. We play piano in order to play piano, not to listen to the sound produced by the piano. I cook because I love to cook, not just to feed myself. I paint because I like to paint, not to stir interpretation. Aesthetic activities are carried out to bring out aesthetic qualities on an object or in a situation. The goal of the practice is the activity itself, in which the spontaneous element of the activity becomes manifest: to carry it out. Bringing out a floral arrangement with style, impressive harmony, beautiful form, these are spontaneous aesthetic achievements. It is attributable to me, precisely because I didn't know exactly what it would be like, but I had to reflect on how to do it.

Aesthetic practices are related to a specific vision of the dependence of aesthetic factors on the production of non-aesthetic qualities. Aesthetic effects are triggered by qualities that are not *in themselves* aesthetic (in the sense of carrying a certain type of perceptual judgement): shape, colour, sound, volume. Now, even if spontaneity is at the centre, there are two ways of 'carrying out': one based on know-how, the other on trying something out. The arrangement of flowers or the interpretation of a musical composition aims at the repetition and variation of already known combinations of non-aesthetic qualities (flowers, notes). Many aesthetic practices are sufficient in this repetition-variation, also cooking.

Artistic practice (also the art of cooking), however, goes beyond repeated production, based on know-how, on imitation and exercise, in so far as it is characterized by the vision of an initially hypothetical aesthetic effect that could be triggered by a

combination of new, possible and feasible types of non-aesthetic qualities. In other words, artistic practice is based on the project of a hypothetical combination of non-aesthetic qualities. It is based on trying-out, on experimental approaches.

Nick Zangwill calls this an 'aesthetic insight'.<sup>3</sup> It is true that all works of art contain, in whatever dose, aesthetic qualities, and are therefore also based on such aesthetic insights. But the same goes for creative processes in design, in Hollywood and Bollywood film. Aesthetic insights keep the culture industry alive. They are not specific to arting.

Therefore it is important to draw a sharp distinction. Aesthetic qualities (beautiful, elegant, ugly) are not the only – or perhaps even the decisive – qualities of works of art. In contrast to everyday objects, which are formally finished and shaped to be functional, works of art are assessed as 'daring, impudent, irreverent, witty and intelligent' (these are the expressions with which Danto marks out the qualities by which Duchamp's Fountain differs from a urinal).<sup>4</sup> These attributions of qualities address a vision of possibilities and not actual aesthetic quality. Artistic and aesthetic criteria are therefore not identical. Aesthetic quality is a (more or less) directly perceptible quality of a work of art: a successful form, a shocking colour, a dissonant sound. On the other hand, artistic quality, such as wit and originality, is a relational quality and implies a comparison with other events. Aesthetic qualities are perceptible. Artistic qualities are not directly perceptible.

The qualification of something as 'daring, impudent, irreverent, witty and intelligent' distinguishes the understanding that precedes the realization, that which guides the project, by means

3. Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 (2007), pp. 42–3.

4. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 93–4. Cf. Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, p. 66.

of epithets of epistemic knowledge. *Artistic* criteria are epistemic; they single something out in relation to a conceptual set. Artistic doing is therefore not exhausted in the production of aesthetic qualities. The kind of understanding that is needed to ‘make art’ is not only the kind of understanding on which possible new ways of encouraging aesthetic qualities are based. An ‘aesthetic insight’ is then just not enough. Rather, what is sought, one might say, is an *artistic vision*. In an artistic vision, aesthetic insight is a necessary but certainly not sufficient condition, since works of art cannot be distinguished from other things, or at least not exclusively, by aesthetic qualities. From Duchamp and Warhol to Appropriation Art and Institutional Critique, this has been fully demonstrated.

An artistic realization is only indirectly dependent on the organization of our senses. Just because I draw, paint, make a film, rhyme, write a book, dance or play the piano does not mean that I ‘make’ art. Nor is it because I conjugate or combine material in a reflexive constellation that I make art.<sup>5</sup> Because the same activities also appear in contexts that have nothing artistic about them (waste separation plants, documentaries, video games, television news). Activities of this kind, in the sense of a combination of the material and the organization of the senses for *de novo*-produced non-aesthetic arrangements, can certainly be involved in the creation of art, but they are not, or no longer, the hallmarks of an artistic activity. Artist activity has emancipated itself from aesthetic practices.

What is artistic is how something is made, not how something is something, and above all it is the transformation of the practice. But the ‘transformation of practice’ is not in itself a characterization of art, because, firstly, this transformation must convince us that it brings about an ambitious qualitative

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5. This is how Dieter Mersch defines artistic practice. Dieter Mersch, *Epistemologien des Ästhetischen*, Zürich: Diaphanes 2015, p. 171.

renovation (mere whim – for example, the decision to no longer paint with hands, but with feet – is not enough), and secondly, the artistic transformation of practice is closely linked to the transformation of public space, which is always characterized by the presence of random, uninvolved people. The transformation of a practice in public space would be a suitable qualification for artistic activity if it also aims at a transformation of the public space. Art is not the business of a community of conspirators; nor of an institution from the path of which nothing can deviate. On the contrary, it engages in free reception, in experimenting with the possibilities of judgement: only the possibility of judging through an (anonymous) public potentially confers the status of art on an event. Whether on the basis of a connoisseur's knowledge, or on the basis of aesthetic experience, or on the basis of non-aesthetic reception (shock, intuition), or as a spontaneous expression of pleasure and desire: there is art only in the public space, in the confrontation with a given public, as the creation of a public debate about something, as the reconfiguration of the space of appearance. This is why it is right to stress that the passage between an aesthetic object and a work of art is marked by representation or exhibition.

Juliane Rebentisch takes an opposing view.<sup>6</sup> For her, a work of art is essentially the reflexive transformation of an object through an experience. This transformation is uncontrollable, according to her, notably because experience refers to appearance, and therefore to the independence of works with regard to their performers. In appearance, objects open themselves to the process of transformation into art and give rise to all kinds of interpretative and imaginative acts by subjects. These are performed as aesthetic judgements.<sup>7</sup>

6. Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2013, p. 49.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 55.

But it is not only thanks to the institution, nor only thanks to experience or interpretation, that works of art exist in the first place (be it only as ‘candidates for appreciation’). Art’s objects or situations are not simply given, but are mostly formed and need to be reinvented. The experience of artworks is not directed at the same set of open objects every Sunday, yet again, but needs to expose itself to something that has no name yet.

### Arting

Is art, then, the production of things we can’t identify, as Adorno once proposed? ‘To make art’, we said, is to accomplish an artistic activity. But is it really a ‘doing’ or ‘making’? Does the accomplishment imply that I then produce art or that I produce an artwork? No, strictly speaking the making itself does not characterize the artistic activity, because studio assistants or production technicians can be entrusted with the task without them becoming artists for all that. As long as they only produce what others have imagined, the work is not attributed to them, even if they are ultimately admired for the qualities they have added to it. On closer inspection, an artist is not the one who makes art. No one becomes an artist by perfectly copying. Even the perfect execution of the unique, such as can be achieved by highly skilled assistants or technicians, does not make anyone an artist. The public, the spectators, are often part of the production of the artwork – in interactive or relational aesthetic formats or conceptual art, for instance. What elevates an artist above the group of performers and manufacturers is her idea of something to be made, coupled with the development of a new *way* of making it. It is not just a new way with regard to another artwork, but to art.

What is aimed at in *arting* is above all a spontaneous realization, a new mode of becoming. To art does not mean to make or produce anything. It means to carry out a reinvention of itself.

Art has a specific history, not identical with cultural history, because it is constantly reinventing itself. Art must therefore be sought outside its conceptual and social institutions. It is a dynamic of negation; and for this very reason there is art, but not 'the art' – only plural and agonal approaches. The quarrel about what art will become is at the centre of the concept of art.

The originality of their conceptual approach to art seems therefore to be a requirement for artistic practices. Originality is a relative criterion. It is a sufficient, but perhaps not the only, condition for works of art. I don't want to be misunderstood on this point. Furthermore, originality here does not mean 'same but different'. Artistic creativity gives rise to ideas or objects or events of a new kind.<sup>8</sup> Artistically relevant originality is genre novelty: it goes beyond the mere novelty of an aspect or numerical difference and ultimately aims at a conceptual shift. For only what could not have emerged *until now* within an artistic field, and in accordance with the generative rules in force there, can be considered original from an artistic point of view: another way of speaking, and not just a new phrase. It will be something that will surprise, or even surpass, all those who are familiar with the generative rules in force, or who have sufficient information about contemporary art.<sup>9</sup>

The decisive element is a conceptual leap that elevates what is sought, or what ought to be done, out of its concept and opens a gap for what was hitherto excluded from a categorical point of view. With the conceptual leap, artistic processes should be analysed as the objectified negations of their constitutive rules, norms and conventions, of the institutions that frame them and of the purposes that serve as a point of reference. Every

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8. For an act or process to be considered creative, it must not be the accidental or mechanical production of a result. See Berys Gaut, 'Creativity and Imagination', in Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 151.

9. Cf. Margaret A. Boden, 'What is Creativity?', in *Dimensions of Creativity*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1996, p. 76.

minuscule negation contributes to the transformation of the concept of the artwork, and ultimately the concept of art.

Such conceptual leaps stem from philosophical experimentation. They offer the possibility of apprehending something singular in contrast to a scheme of perception whose inadequacy is proven. If art is above all oriented towards the novelty of the genre, it is not because it celebrates novelty, but because the originary, the new genre is singular, unique – because what is (still) unique today is, at the same time, of the future.<sup>10</sup>

If the main point of orientation of artistic activity is not contemporaneity, but initiality, inexistence, futurity, then philosophical experimentation needs to be part of it. Philosophy of art should no longer be directed towards finished works of art that are open to interpretation – as is the case under the dominant theories of aesthetic experience – but towards activities that make a difference in their claim to originality; that is, to the exercise of art. This becoming of art – arting – must be separated from work, from making, from action, but also from performance and interpretation, in so far as these are strictly subject to rules, institutions and result.

Compared with the maxims of economic innovation, the radically new is the negation or metamorphosis of the constituent rules. The radically new is not a new element in a class; it is new as a conglomerate without classes. As a conceptual leap, it relates to what it stands out from, and moreover it does so by testing new bases, rules and modes of implementation that are non-deductible from what was known as valid before. It is in the process, not in the product, that radical imagination is revealed.

Arting as a process refers to the (self-)creative action that can be delimited in relation to the systematic 'findings' of the

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10. 'Die Form und der Gehalt jedes Kunstwerkes ist, denn man sie in höchster Genauigkeit faßt, stets etwas Einmaliges und Erstmaliges.' Walter Benjamin, 'Zur Ästhetik: Fragmente vermischten Inhalts', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. 1968, p. 125.



researcher, the invention of the engineer, to natural evolution, to the professional creativity of designers, hairdressers and cooks. It is not an act which one knows firmly how to perform, but always a trial-and-error approach in the field of the unknown. Arting does not comply with external prescriptions, not even the imperative of productivity, because it is a confrontation with the possibility of failure and the condition of this possibility, with the risk of the realization. Arting differs from pictorial, plastic or musical practice, from repetition or improvisation because, like play, it is completed in accomplishment. It differs from play in that it does not suppose or implement concrete rules, but always begins by establishing them. Of the other forms of professional creativity in which one seeks the relatively new (from virtuoso performance, fashion for the new season, the engineer's inventions), arting is distinguished by the absence of any requirement of adequacy.

Aesthetic practices that have to satisfy claims of adequacy for their inventions limit themselves to the comprehensible transformation of a few rules in order to remain recognizable and attributable. Art is not subject to this in the same way. For what is new in art goes off the rails of established concepts, patterns of perception and forms of action. Art therefore also requires a suspension of self-understanding. This suspension can result in reality becoming alien, in something other than reality affecting the senses, or in something happening and manifesting itself below the threshold of attention and even perception. The negation of the subject's techniques, the change of form of the real and the metamorphosis of the constitutive rules can be conceived as intrinsic artistic acts.

Arting, then, is not the sum of or generic term for painting, sculpture, dance, music, theatre, writing and video-making. There is not only individual arts and individual art objects, but also arting as an art form.

### **Futurity and autonomy**

Thought in more global terms, artistic realization – by isolating, mobilizing and modularizing the qualities of events – makes something act that does not yet count in the order of reality. At the same time as it probes the possibilities of a becoming reality, it probes the presuppositions of irreality. For arting, an art collective must engage in a process of derealization and probe the presuppositions and the influenceability of events. The art-specific testing of temporal possibilities begins with the process of detachment with regard to belonging, with regard to fixed structures of cause and effect, with regard to devices of attention, with regard to fields of occurrence that extend or contract a present.

*Arting thus detaches itself from its subjectivity, from its culture, from its tradition, from its place in time.* Artistic disidentifications dissolve the fixations of relationships that obsessively make us see something as something, something in something, sequences of aspects, sequences of meaning. Ways of arting are originary when they allow, collectively, a new imaginary; that is to say, when they invent effects beyond reality. The realization of art is arting: the exhibition of a realization, an outreach toward futurity.

As Cornelius Castoriadis has shown, reality only exists on the basis of a radical imagination that brings out patterns, figures and concepts.<sup>11</sup> This does not happen precisely in the neo-feudal temples of art and their fixation on the global now.<sup>12</sup> It is by

11. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society: Creativity and Autonomy in the Socio-Historical World*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997 (1975).

12. Contemporary art, according to Peter Osborne, is post-conceptual, transcategorical, intermedial; it finds its identity through international art spaces. International exhibitions such as biennials subject works of art to a narrative of globalism. Osborne is optimistic about the potential of resistance in contemporary art and its relation to futurity: 'At its best, contemporary art models experimental practices of negation that puncture horizons of expectation.' Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2013, p. 211.

freeing arting from its intertwining with the strategies of the media-technological present, or even with the contemporary defining contemporary art, that we arrive at future art. What is needed is therefore a philosophical critique of contemporaneity. This step from contemporary to future art requires arting philosophy.

Autonomous thought, action and perception can only exist in connection with the unreal from which the real arises. Consequently, arting also implies a process of empowerment immanent to art: a critique of the foundations and rules of the art practised so far, based on the unconditional creation of figures/forms/images, in the name of a future of art. This process of arting, immanent to art, is an element of a more global work of autonomization.

Art is a free realization. A philosophy of art that achieves this is therefore an integral part of artistic practice.

# 7

## The situational diagram: on rendering the de/recomposition of context and form in contemporary art

JALEH MANSOOR

The smooth switching of surpluses of capital and labour from one region to another create[s] a pattern of compensatory oscillations within the whole.

David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*<sup>1</sup>

Line can no more escape the present tense of its entry into the world than it can escape into oil paint's secret hiding place of erasure and concealment. This fundamental condition can bring it, therefore, much closer to the viewer's own situation than can the image.

Norman Bryson<sup>2</sup>

What does 'context' mean for art history, a discipline founded in the nationalisms of the nineteenth century, wherein place, time and style have triangulated to form a coherent heuristic frame at different historical moments: after 1945, after 1973 and again now? And how do we find the terms to describe prevailing tendencies in contemporary art among the numerous scattered and apparently unrelated trends encountered at art fairs and biennials, and in established museums and institutions of the bourgeois public sphere, as Jürgen Habermas called it, although

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1. David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, p. 428.

2. Norman Bryson, 'A Walk for a Walk's Sake', in Catherine de Zegher and Avis Newman, eds, *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act, Gesture and Art. Selected from the Tate Collection*, London: Tate Gallery and New York: Drawing Center, 2003, pp. 149–58.

what 'bourgeois' means under global capital is shifting as rapidly as the term 'context'? These two questions appear unrelated until a pattern begins to emerge suggesting the dependence of one question on the other. The diagram is one (aesthetic) operation within which the questions converge, or are shown to be already entwined. Already operative in the historical avant-gardes of the interwar period (Brancusi, Duchamp, Picabia), this modality of graphic practice has risen to dominance over the last sixty years: Piero Manzoni, Vincenzo Agnetti, Barry Flanagan, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Dorothea Rockburne, Richard Hamilton, Agnes Denes, Nancy Holt, Lee Lozano, Anna Maria Maiolino, Richard Tuttle, Mark Lombardi, Gabriel Orozco, Ellen Gallagher, William Kentridge, Kara Walker, Cristobal Lehyt, Julie Mehretu, Daniel Zeller and Nobuya Hoki.<sup>3</sup>

Running more fundamentally, perhaps, than even the question of art-historical 'method', the question of context presses on criticism given that art practices have shown the degree to which the 'de-' and 'reterritorialization' of the world have affected the basic availability of forms of representation, such as drawing, to cohere and to make sense – to show and to tell about this 'world'.<sup>4</sup> And so one sees the rise of the diagram or indexical functions of line. Line is tasked to convey data, information, rather than to establish contour, divide a figure from ground, and present the rudiments of representation, its historical function. That the basic tools of representation are shown to fail in the wake of world changes that exceed their own representability

3. See Pamela Lee, 'Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art', in *After Image: Drawing Through Process*, organized by Cornelia H. Butler for an exhibit at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, April–August 1999, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1999; Jordan Kantor and Igor Zabel, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, London: Phaidon, 2005; de Zegher and Newman, *The Stage of Drawing*; Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism*, New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004.

4. For a discussion of the 'deterritorialization' or disarticulation and reorganization of space and time in relation to the specific configuration of capitalist integration, see David Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, and *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

by the old forms as we recognize them is already an extreme symptom of the need for new forms and new terms. Art and rarified cultural production presciently symptomatize the yet inarticulable seismic shifts that occur first in the economic sphere, then begin to resonate throughout the social field. It does so by means of appropriating/reappropriating the very devices, such as of the diagram, which traditionally belong to forms of rationalization foundational to what was once known as the 'base' in relation to a 'superstructure'.<sup>5</sup> Circular as the description of this process may seem, artistic production is one place along a circuit of cause and effect to locate an aetiology of the real movement of time and the metabolic exchange with resources, value and social reproduction.

The diagram is often appropriated as a form of cognitive mapping. It displaces drawing as it had been understood in the history of European art. Drawing had been the cornerstone of representation, breaking the visual plenum into figure and ground, then guaranteeing the integrity of a depicted body against the envelope of space. Long understood to be a cornerstone of skill, the capacity to produce and manipulate linear form had also by the opening of the twentieth century come to be a vehicle of expressive capacity, notably in the Viennese and central European context with its debt to Romanticism. As Molly Nesbit convincingly argues in *Their Common Sense*, the Duchampian readymade – Krauss's 'theoretical object' – is a function of industrial design.<sup>6</sup> Nesbit notes that Duchamp's gen-

5. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street' and 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 444–88, and *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 101–34,.

6. Molly Nesbit, *Their Common Sense*, London: Black Dog, 2000. See also Molly Nesbit, 'The Language of Industry', in *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1992. For an example of how this diagrammatic operation establishes itself in twentieth-century art practices and comes

eration was the first to be taught mandatory drawing-for-design in the French public-school system, ostensibly to train engineers and factory workers alike. Be that as it may, the diagram's special affordance doubly reintroduced the difficult relation between the metabolic of production and the libidinal economy of art.<sup>7</sup> Its capacity to express the singular dialectic of movement among terms on both a diachronic register, or that of historicity, and the stasis structuring and determining the process by which any subjective grasp on the totality of modernity could be made. It maps the process of subjectivization. More to the point, it maps the process of subjectivization as one bound up with, but not identical to, reification, anticipating Rancière's claims in *Reading Capital* about the subject's circuitous and mediated relation to production, to its object the commodity, and ultimately to the value form and abstraction of the market.

The avant-gardes of the early twentieth century demonstrate no shortage of clairvoyance, not least with relation to the deterritorialization of 'context', once the bedrock of 'art history', and the shift to the boundless and borderless economy of the diagram. Futurism, Dada and the assorted hybrids generated of their mutual encounters seem to have acted as a form of dialectical research and development for the era post-dating them, which is to say our current moment. Another way to formulate the thought would be to borrow a term from Jeremy Gilbert's preface to Maurizio Lazzarato's analysis of the Duchampian readymade as avatar to non-value productive managerial labour and say that they, the avant-gardes, have *pre-cognized* it their future and our present.<sup>8</sup>

to be paradigmatic in late-twentieth-century art of the so-called 'social turn', see Jaleh Mansoor, 'Cristóbal Lehyt's Concrete Abstraction: Un-Mapping the "Global South"', in Cristóbal Lehyt, *America's Society*, New York, Spring 2014.

7. This usage of the term 'affordance' and 'affords' comes from Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

8. Jeremy Gilbert, 'Experimental Politics: Its Background and Some Implications', Preface to Maurizio Lazzarato, *Experimental Politics: Work, Welfare, and Creativity in the Neoliberal Age*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017, p. xxxv.

From the 1960s on, that the chart and diagram increasingly overtake the image in many contemporary practices is a strong symptom of seismic changes on the register of the real. Art, especially when it is most autonomous, prefigures and symptomatizes changes in the field of the real before they are symbolized and formalized in discourse.

However, diagrammatic thinking was mobilized in art well before the 1960s. It has long been noted with reference to constructivism and other practices of the early twentieth century that while ‘the diagrammatic line is drawn from the realm of science and technical drawing ... the final work has elements of notation. The works do not “represent the world” if that is taken to be the model used in figurative art, but they contain allusions to the world in which they were produced by the currency of associations, materials, methods.’<sup>9</sup> Less elaborated, perhaps, is the degree to which the shift reverberates through the century and, replacing figuration, renders perceptible otherwise unfigurable and invisible shifts in the mediation between the real and its reception, or between the base and the superstructure. The key here is the shift in the register within which line is expected to deliver meaning. Replacing contour and mimesis with notation, this transition at the heart of basic visual practice signals a more profound relation to the de- and recomposition of content and meaning at a fundamental level, perhaps not unlike the transition the image underwent in the wake of technological reproducibility, as famously described by Benjamin. It is the gambit of this essay that the in/coherence of context rides in on the question of the diagram in late capitalist modernity.

The single factor binding these avant-gardes was their obsessive preoccupation with the mass subject, with the everyman and

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9. Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 108. On the dominance of industrial design and commercial drawing as the matrix of the French and American avant-gardes, most notably Duchamp’s practice, see Nesbit, ‘The Language of Industry’.



'his' entry qua mass subject onto the arena of history, consciously or otherwise. Hal Foster concludes this aetiology with a question that I have returned to since reading his *Prosthetic Gods* in 2008, at the beginning of the last major round of capitalist crisis: 'could it be that Futurism is not as aberrant as it appears? Could it be that the very stake of high modernism at this time involves wagers with reification and death?'<sup>10</sup> Might this wager take the form and operational mode of a diagram? My claim here is that Picabia, before even Duchamp – although I am not interested in origin myths or property claims to originality – displaces both icon and symbol, both picture and word (the cornerstones of mimesis in pictorial representation and poetics respectively), for the movement of the diagram as it charts relations of desire and inscribes a social dynamic.

### **Picabia and Duchamp**

The diagram is an index of the movements of an economy articulated and thwarted by a libidinal economy coursing like a river below words and pictures, in Francis Picabia's *Universal Prostitution* (1916–17) and Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918). Duchamp was at this time working closely with Picabia, whose *Girl Born without a Mother* (1917) and his and Marcel Duchamp's respective *L.H.O.O.Q.s* (both completed in 1919), and finally Picabia's *Jeune Fille (Mécanomorph)* of 1920 – together, a handful works – constitute a point of entry into the constellation of terms: reification, subjectivization, abstraction-by-value-form. Duchamp's *Tu m'* showcases a range of the artist's experiments with the readymade and related strategies of contingency presented indexically through cast shadows of well-known readymades such as the bicycle wheel.

*Girl Born without a Mother* of 1917 and *Jeune Fille (Mécanomorph)* of 1920 would seem on the face of things to literalize the

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10. Hal Foster, 'Prosthetic Gods', *Prosthetic Gods*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, p. 149.

condition of being a subject within capitalism as occluded subjugation to capital at the molecular level of the constitution of the self. The first represents machine parts against an undifferentiated gold ground. Switching out figure and ground relations in a way suggestive of mechanisms theorized by psychoanalysis under the rubric of displacement, the ground of the image denotes money. Gold, from the early Renaissance to the early modern period of Western art, had been a way to reflect the wealth of the patron. Money, then, is the matrix of the 'figure' against it, the machine or 'girl' born 'without a mother', of non-biological origins where the maternal body is replaced by the metonymic cipher of the factory floor. Automata and the inhuman have prevailed. *Jeune Fille*, in support of *Girl*, is a portrait in so far as the object figured fills the frame in a genre convention set by Raphael in his *Portrait of Baldissare Castiglione* of 1510. A generic industrial representation of machine parts fills the frame, rising vertically to the wall and picture plane to summon the reflexivity of the pictorial work. But the thing shown is just that, a random thing. Under it, the words 'For-Ever' float as though to guarantee the presence of this strange portrait-thing, but of course, having learned the lessons of language from cubism, the words anchor only the flatness of the picture place and the unreality of the thing. And yet that thing figures forth the modern individual and its strangely evacuated promissory note of being present to itself, which it can never rise to meet.<sup>11</sup> A diagram connecting visual information as well as things, words, textures and concepts, Picabia's other great work, purchased by Marcel Duchamp and bequeathed to Yale University Art Gallery, *Universal Prostitution*, repeats those machine part forms. One stands left of field, depicted in perfect modelling and chiaroscuro; others are strewn over the visual surface. Words issue from the machine

11. See Giorgio Agamben, *Man Without Content*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

and cross like goods on the factory belt, sliding horizontally in tension against the iconography of a machine part that echoes the vertical rise of the frame. What appears to be a chord or wire stretches from the main machine part to the other. While the parts are represented in three dimensions, as though capable of occupying three-dimensional space, they do so in a vacuum, against a flat and undifferentiated void. Its flatness is once again ratified by the words that cross the surface.

Picabia's strange diagram, in other words, might be understood more as a demonstration of the social relations redistributing the meaning of identity and property in modernity, namely reification, than the machine parts – objects – fetishized by Russian and Italian Futurisms in the latter's performance of the total calcification of the senses under the regime of equivalence and the value form.

Building on the work of Althusser and others who interrogate capitalism's autonomy from and indifference to human interest in their rereading of *Capital*, Rancière offers a theory of the subject within capitalism as both a vehicle to capital's structural self-replication and an interruption to a social structure necessary to capitalism: 'what determines the relation between the effects is the cause (social relations of production) insofar as it is *absent*.' Here, Rancière gives the requisite nod to the 'hidden abode of production' as Marx called it. Here, however, he introduces it as absent cause. This absent cause is not labour as a subject as such. Rather, it is the non-identity of abstract labour in relationship to concrete labour. 'This absent cause is not labour as a subject, it is the identity of abstract labour and concrete labour inasmuch as its generalization expresses the structure of a certain mode of production, the capitalist mode of production.'<sup>12</sup>

12. Jacques Rancière, 'Critique and Science in *Capital*', in Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, London and New York: Verso, 2016, p. 108.

In other words, there is no object of analysis. Rather, there is only a set of relations among the worker, his or her capacity for work and the work expressed in products he or she is part of making. There is no particular site or identity in the capitalist mode of production from which capital is generated; surplus capital is a function of relations. There is no empirically verifiable positive identity.

*Capital itself is a diagrammatic function. Capitalism is a relationship among movements and transitions.*

This gap, between the labourer as a person, his or her labour-power, and the labour time expended in the commodity, operates as the site of generalization of labour. It is a kind of glitch structured around absence which generates social relations organized in relation to it. As such it expresses the capitalist mode of production as a structure of absence and difference, of social relations organized around a gap between concrete and abstract labour. This absent cause is not work, but the way in which labour-power, objectified and metricized and anonymous, the key to profit, enters the social field disguised as the individual, presented socially in an anthropomorphic register that conflates the bearer of concrete labour with her or his labour-bearing capacity (the source of value). The social field misses the fact that the abstract measure of labour and its point of sale on the market – where it becomes at once abstracted and realized – is not the same thing as the labourer, situated as s/he is in a daily life determined by relations with others. The labour abstracted and exchanged/realized suspends the personal and collective experience of the bearer of labour-power, replacing it with a ‘second nature’ naturalized thus by the process of exchange itself, in which the experiential is evacuated in the interest of deriving value.<sup>13</sup> Rancière explains this glitch in the perception of labour-

13. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, ‘The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature’, *Selva*, <https://selvajournal.org/the-formal-characteristics-of-second-nature>.

power, caught in an interval where the person or bearer of labour-power becomes equated with the profit-bearing capacity of labour-power to the occlusion of the other qualities and trajectory of the human: ‘The inversion of the inner structural determinations appears as a fundamental characteristic of the process. It is this law that determines the development of its forms.’<sup>14</sup> In short, Rancière here provides a theory of reification that nuances that of Georg Lukács.

Picabia picks up the diagram as a formal device in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a dialogic response to Duchamp’s base materialist work of the same title in the same year, in which a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* is decorated with a beard and goatee, the letters of the title crossing the lower register, to be spoken swiftly to generate what would sound, in French, like ‘she has a hot ass’ – interrupting its sanctity in the pantheon of Western art with crass humour and a whiff of denigrated and denigrating desire, mostly to shock the middles class. Picabia’s version is exponentially more disturbing, and radical. It imagines the figure as a diagram or a kind of map: the words *bas*, *haut*, *fragile* and *à domicile* establish four points of reference or coordinates, while the thick curvilinear form comprising this semblance of and refusal of a figure bends, winds and twists from among them over the surface. It resembles a diagram of movement of the kind Jacques Lacan would draw to figure the subject as a function of an opaque movement among moments or stations, which he called the real, imaginary and symbolic.

The list of artistic practices that mobilize the turn from contour to diagram crosses the century, from 1915 to 2016. We could tendentiously situate these practices as so many cultural instances marking the elaboration and development of the purely aesthetic appropriation of the diagram as a heuristic device.

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14. Rancière, ‘Critique and Science in *Capital*’, p. 126.

But this unfolding of a cultural development, in turn, could be shown to track a parallel, double movement of culture nested in and against the movement brought about by the disintegration of the capitalist mode of production and the reintegration of global resources and demographics. While it would be impossible to map the one (the internal *telos* of the diagram) onto the other (the historicity of capitalist subsumption), a pattern nonetheless emerges. In the absence of any causal correlation, the transformation of line nevertheless marks the progress of capitalist immiseration and the transitional points between moments of progress. It is as though the deterritorialization of line somehow recorded, indexically, the de- and recomposition of cognitive mapping 'in line' with 'globalization', itself another name for capitalism. In what follows, I isolate one such practice and attempt to read it as an index of real abstraction.

### **Manzoni: reiteration and elaboration of the avant-garde**

In the mid-twentieth century, Manzoni's *Linea* (1959) radicalized the modernist preoccupation – from Duchamp to Adorno to Cage – with the ascetic reduction of artistic process, particularly the transformation of drawing, formerly conceived and practised as a means to demonstrate skill, into other modalities of agency. Each presentation of 'line' consists of a cardboard tube, a scroll of paper with a black line drawn down it, and a simple printed and autographed label, which contains a brief description of the work: the artist's name, the date it was created and its length. This work about the very possibility of line thinks through the vanishing conditions of mark-making within predetermined systems enforced by disciplinary everyday life in mimetic inscription to value-productive labour on the factory floor. In other words, the work of art demonstrates the way in which disciplinary labour comes inevitably to limit historically established

forms of culture believed to transcend lowly matters of economic determination. *Linea* dialectically, and negatively, foregrounds the problem from the point of view of the artist, who, while far from the worker in terms of class identification, was expected to deliver consciousness within and against the dictatorial determinations managed by the capitalist logic of value. Manufacture and authorship alike came to be reticulated exclusively to the same form of general equivalence, irrespective of the numerous qualitative differences among types of workers. The *Linee* posit 'self-reflexivity' – that linchpin of modernism – in terms of manufacture, and the vanishing possibility of artistic agency in an era accelerated in the interest of abstracted value.

As ever, Adorno is adept at translating the issue of subsumption back into cultural terms; hegemonic liberal culture mediates the same processes, legitimating them. 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry.'<sup>15</sup> And yet the social relations generated of the extraction of surplus value, itself the effect of a chain structured by the process of value extraction, is itself already a multiplicity, a complex that cannot be resolved into any empirically stable terms. Already in 1929, writing for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Siegfried Kracauer observed the way in which the operations of the modern factory cannot be pinned down other than through a diagram: 'The commercial director of a modern factory explains business to me before my tour of the inspection.... He points to diagrams whose colourful lines illustrate the whole operation.' And yet this whole operation moves along a pivotal absence: 'Thanks to the intellectual labour invested in the equipment, its handmaidens are spared

15. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 4.

the possession of knowledge; if attendance at commercial college were not compulsory, they would need to know nothing at all. The mysteries of the firm are a closed book to them.<sup>16</sup> It is not simply that workers do not know the totality of the process in which they are implicated, from inception to profit; it is as though they must not know.

Mimicking these relational conditions structured by the capitalist mode of production in which value has no certain content or origin outside of a network of relations, Manzoni 'made' the *Linea* on an assembly line in a factory in Milan. He sat on a conveyor belt holding an ink-stained brush while a mechanical wheel fed a scroll of paper touching his brush to produce a line. His passive mark, vacated of any kind of skilled or emotive presence, folds deskilled manual labour into the privileged space of presence: the artist's mark. The line's foreclosure of any expressive, sensual, libidinal content (the role of line from surrealism through expressionism, having been lately liberated from its instrumental role in mimetic representation), set into tension with exaggerated packaging, implies the work's embedded dependence on an anonymous subject, the worker/maker whose substantive trace generates the parameters of the very product that doubles back to cancel that presence. Indeed, *something is missing*. We could call this an object lesson in the preconditions of the commodity fetish that makes things of people and ascribes agency to things, but there's a little more and a little less to it than this. The resulting work emerges in the gap among the machine, the artist-worker, the packaging that offers for sale this *hidden* labour and the market that affirms it as an artwork through the function of a signature.

The agent's (artist, standing for worker) trace is recorded and enables the accumulation of canisters and cans, of labels and

16. Siegfried Kracauer, 'Short Break for Ventilation' (1929), in *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, London: Verso, 1998, pp. 40–42.



the many frames of the market. One is confronted with cascading frames, *en abyme*: label, can, pedestal, museum, so many containers, so many forms, but the content seems to withdraw as though by a negative will of its own. This use of modernist hermetic withdrawal nevertheless yields to a frustrated acknowledgement of the active erasure, rather than ontological withdrawal, of both content and agency. Manzoni shifts register from Heidegger back to Marx: not *this*, but *other* than this, entangled *in* this, constituting it and composed of it is a function of particular labour conditions, specifically a relationship to skill that makes of the grapheme an empty placeholder for value. The *Linee* doubly withhold the corporeal trace: by folding into the industrial procedure and through its packaging. It thus paradoxically shores up the corporeal trace, designating its absence as absence, marking it as *other*.

### Abstraction

Rancière notes that within the contingent social relations structured around absence, or a glitch between the labourer and labour-power, and between abstract labour in general and concrete labour expressed finally expressed in surplus value, reality becomes 'speculative'.<sup>17</sup> It becomes a function of the movement of the contingent relations among social agents and objects that might be charted along a diagram. Returning now to the larger problem of abstraction and the diagram, what is 'real abstraction' if not just another term for reification, signalled by the ontological shifts in everyday life brought about by the triumvirate of wage, anonymous labour and the commodity?<sup>18</sup> How do these ontological shifts move in time? The terms 'financialization',

17. Rancière, 'Critique and Science in *Capital*', p. 112.

18. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1968.

'post-Fordism', even 'post-modernism' suggest a sequence, however accurate or erroneous each may be. They describe a succession of developments in the political-economic reality felt and suffered by workers, masses and multitudes all over the world, one by any other name, one that generates a condition frequently evoked as 'neoliberalism'. What is neoliberalism? In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey argues that the term describes the result of a succession of events in the consolidation of the relationship between the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, the WTO (World Trade Organization) and Wall Street.

The process of neoliberalization has entailed much creative destruction not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of heart.<sup>19</sup>

Against the narrative according to which a succession of state and institutional alliances policed the globe into so-called 'neoliberalism', many note that the far reach of capitalism is structurally inevitable, the logical outcome of capitalism's cycles of accumulation necessitating greater territories to be mined for labour and resources. Recent theories (which return to older theories such as those of Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukács and others) of crisis capitalism challenge Harvey's account by pointing to the basic structural condition of capitalism, namely the need to keep ahead of its inherent tendency of falling profits.<sup>20</sup> And this very tendency is at the heart of the immiseration necessary for generating profits, *unless* capital can absorb resources and sources of labour into its machinery to abet its own

19. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 3.

20. Anwar Shaikh, *Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crisis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

structural entropy, thereby returning to accounts of capitalism at odds with Harvey's approach to causality. Paul Mattick's thesis in *Business as Usual*, for instance, acts as a corrective to Harvey in its insistence on structure over the unfolding of secondary political negotiations among global bodies of governance and regulation. But the question is not what Marxian luminary is better than the other, but rather the lacunae that open up in how each tries to describe and periodize emergent conditions *impossible to figure*.

The problem is posed on the largest scale of a historical grand narrative. With Jameson's 'Always totalize!' in mind, I am relying as much on the work of David Harvey as on Giovanni Arrighi, Robert Brenner and others, who have proposed ways of thinking historical causality after the complications wrought by the forces of globalization and, above all, financialization, which have come to determine communications networks and to reshape what we mean by time, place and cause.<sup>21</sup> For Harvey, Arrighi, Brenner and others (despite numerous differences), the oil crisis of 1973 was a signal moment for strategies on the part of First World nations to keep profits high, strategies that we now refer to in the unexamined shorthand of 'globalization': cheap labour in the underdeveloped world, moving from Fordist to post-Fordist production techniques, emphasizing supply chains over production on the factory floor in the interest of exacting profits more efficiently (to bear the expense of labour less), not to mention new rounds of primitive accumulation exacted by the IMF during the new economy of the Thatcher-Reagan years in the wake of stagnating growth caused by the crisis. We need to describe and trace – through the aetiology provided by cultural production – this hornet's nest of complex determinations wrought by capitalist forms of valorization predicated on the

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21. As detailed in the introduction to my *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

mass movement of people across the planet. What Harvey would call 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization' – enforced by the creative destruction and reconsolidation of everyday life under the dictates of advanced capital – change the very notions of context and causality.

Enter 'the post-medium condition'.<sup>22</sup>

The recurrence of the question of displacement may beg the question of the very meaning of placement. It might be said that in an institutional and professional order, itself born of the cold war, in which specialization is prized, art practices become the last underdetermined (or, in contrast, over-coded) space to enable the exploration of problem sets saturating so many aspects of everyday life as to be otherwise impossible to contain in a circumscribed field of study. From Adorno to Said, the structural condition of diaspora is frequently understood to be, however violent, one of the given processes of collective transformation born of modernity. And yet within the historicity of modernity, it might be noted that forms of violent displacement are accelerating in intensity and frequency. Diaspora is a form of mass social reorganization across nation-states and continents necessitated by the acceleration of capitalism's creative destruction, as it periodically restructures in the interest of resource mining, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, ever more efficient ways of extracting surplus value from labour.

The shifting relationship between labour and capital, required by capitalism's peripatetic need for pools of surplus labour, has redrawn the coordinates of time and space for much of the world's population. 1945 and 1973 are both crucial dates that mark fundamental changes in the basic meanings of context, origin and causality. Changing empirical and historical

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22. Rosalind Krauss, *Voyage on the North Sea: Essays on the Postmedium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000. See also Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

conditions begin to demand scholarly inquiry, including the humanities, to explore the basic coordinates that subtend classical forms of analysis, of which context, understood as a stable place and time, is fundamental.

The paradox, or dialectical involution, here is that while context (defined as the time and place in which a work is produced) continues to be one of social history of art's most basic certainties, it also becomes one of its primary questions. What constitutes a stable time and place – that is, a context – in the wake of the deracination and reconstitution of its perception necessarily governed by networked communication, intimately bound up with financialization, which has made 'the bank' (a set of operations) across the globe more causally active in a life than s/he who is experiencing this 'life'? Agency and the formation of subjectivity have been pressing matters of concern over the last several decades in the wake of theories critical of determination (post-structuralism) and yet context has remained a stable category.

Context itself, the basic matrix of time and space fundamental to cultural coherence, must be redefined, given the fact that it has been already restructured by capitalism, thereby restructuring lines of causality.<sup>23</sup> The urgent need to find coherence again in response to the movement of history wherein capital has redrawn the lines of time and space rides in on the diagram because of its singular capacity to respond to both real abstraction and reification in late modernity.

The number of works that turn away from representational logic and expressive drives toward the operational capacity of the diagram – by Duchamp and Picabia but also within Russian/Soviet and Italian Futurism – mark 1915–20 as a generative

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23. See David Harvey on the relationship between deterritorialization brought about by financialization and the problem of causality: <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2015/04/02/david-harvey-on-monocausus-multicauses-and-metaphors>.

time in rethinking the very parameters of articulation through linearity. We could tendentially situate these practices as so many cultural instances marking the elaboration and development of the purely aesthetic appropriation of the diagram as a heuristic device. But this unfolding of a cultural development, in turn, could be shown to track a parallel, double movement where the capitalist mode of production integrates itself into forms of aesthetic praxis but, reciprocally, these new forms in turn afford ways of describing the radical reordering of the world by capital. While it would be impossible to map the one (the genealogy of the diagram) onto the other (the historicity of capitalist reintegration of global markets), a pattern common to both inquiries (aesthetics and the social field) nonetheless emerges. In the absence of any causal correlation, the transformation of line nevertheless marks the progress of capitalist immiseration and the transitional points between moments of progress.

# 8

## Notes on form

PETER OSBORNE

'How are we to understand the concept of artistic form today?' and 'What are its relations to social form?'<sup>1</sup> In particular, if we understand social form to be immanent to artistic form, how is this immanence to be reflectively constructed, expressed and interpreted at this particular historical moment? And if it is 'the unresolved antagonisms of reality' that 'return in artworks as immanent problems of their form',<sup>2</sup> what do the problems of form in contemporary art have to tell us about the unresolved antagonisms of our reality today?

### **The movement of contemporary art**

In approaching these questions, a fundamental difficulty appears at the outset: in contemporary art the very category of form appears problematic.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the concept of form marks one of

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1. An earlier version of parts of this text was presented as a public lecture at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London (12 January 2017), to the conference 'Crisis as Form: Revisions to the History of the Present', University of Applied Arts Vienna (27 January 2017) and at Yale University School of Art (2 October 2017). I am grateful to Helmut Draxler for the invitation to the Vienna conference.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997 (1970), p. 6.

3. Contemporary art, that is, in the critical historical sense which that phrase has come to acquire over the last twenty-five years or so, which may be projected back, interpretatively, broadly speaking, to artistic transformations of the late 1950s. See Peter

the main difficulties of contemporary art practice and criticism alike: namely, how to give general social and historical significance (and hence, in the classical terminology, ‘universality’) to increasingly ‘individual’ – highly individuated – works? The difficulty is twofold. It derives from the fact that contemporary art is a field of generically artistic practices that developed via its Euro–North American heartlands in reaction against both (i) the formal critical norms of medium-specific modernisms and their transformative reproduction and extension of the old, Renaissance ‘system of the arts’, and (ii) the residual cultural authority of all other received aesthetic forms and universals – residual, that is, from the standpoint of the thesis of the tendentially increasing nominalism or individuality of works of art in liberal (now neoliberal) capitalist societies.<sup>4</sup> This nominalism – inherent in the social logic of autonomous art, and exacerbated in artistic resistance to the reduction of form to the cultural technology of ‘formats’<sup>5</sup> – has been intensified, or raised to a higher power, by the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts. In reaction, the countervailing forces of new, increasingly socialized artistic forms, characteristic of the last three decades, have been provoked.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the field of contemporary art as a field of generically artistic practices exhibits a double and contradictory movement of the *attempted dissolution* and the *reflective, expanded restitution* of artistic form. The problemat�city of form, then,

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Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2013, pp. 18–22.

4. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 42, 199–202, 219–22. This tendency has now, of course, been geopolitically generalized via the ‘globalization’ of the Western art system, irrespective of the particular ‘varieties’ of capitalist societies into which this system of institutions intrudes. This is the respect in which transnational art institutions are at the vanguard of the geopolitical spread of ‘neoliberalized’ forms of capitalism, irrespective of the ideological content of the particular works they exhibit.

5. See David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. Joselit treats this reduction positivistically, rather than critically, thereby exiting the field of art criticism.

6. These successive social, political and activist ‘turns’ since the 1990s repeat the structures of various anti-institutional artistic practices that can be traced back to the 1960s. The difference primarily lies in the more general, institutionally recognized prevalence of the more recent variants.



manifests itself historically, primarily, as an attempted dissolution and reflective expansion of artistic form itself.

This double movement re-enacts the problematic character of social form in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century capitalism that is a product of the contradictory structure of capitalistic individuality as such, in both its *promise* (the freedom of the individual as a 'self-possessing' subject of exchange relations – call it consumer sovereignty) and its *reality* (the lack of self-possession, or dispossession, manifest in the asocial sameness of the indifference of the system of exchange to the individuals who make it up – call it alienation and the debt society). In this respect, we might say, contemporary art is a mimesis of the broken 'promise of happiness' not merely of art but of capitalism itself.<sup>7</sup> *Art is the agent of the secret discontent of capitalist societies with their own rules*, we might say.<sup>8</sup> In its contradictory dissolution and reflective expansion of artistic form, contemporary art reflects the contradictory structure of capitalistic sociality as a mediated dissolution – a constant dissolution and transformed reinstatement – of the social itself. This is a reinstatement of the social at the level of form alone – commodity form, money, capital and the state – alienated from its constitutive relations between individuals. This is the Polanyian dimension of capitalism, recently analytically revived by the German sociologist and critical theorist Wolfgang Streeck: a cannibalistic capitalism that erodes its own anthropological and social conditions by eroding the living sociality of the social as such. It is a contradictory structure that has been intensified by the political-economic strategies of neoliberalism since the end of the 1970s, in which Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* belatedly prevailed over Polanyi's *The*

7. On art's breaking of what Stendhal saw as its 'promise of happiness', see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 311.

8. Cf. Benjamin on Baudelaire as the 'agent of a secret discontent of his class with its own rule', in Walter Benjamin, Addendum to 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, p. 104.

*Great Transformation*; although that hegemony currently appears to be crumbling, at least to some extent.<sup>9</sup>

In the Euro–North American context, which dominated international artworld debates at the time, at the height of the reaction against Greenberg’s modernist formalism in the second half of the 1960s, the double movement of the attempted dissolution and the reflective expansion of artistic form, constituting the field of contemporary art more widely, went under the general heading of ‘post-formalism’. This was not just a reaction in the field of criticism, and of art practices tied directly to it, but involved a wider sense of what, in his 1967 book *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, Jack Burnham called ‘form exhaustion’.<sup>10</sup> Burnham attributed this to the effect on art of science and technology, but it was equally the effect of the social power of the individualism that drove the cultural transformations of the 1960s in those ‘consumer societies’ that benefited from the post-World War II boom. Robert Smithson diagnosed the paradoxical reaction of galleries and museums to this situation in terms of an ‘avalanche’ of new (yet merely nominal) categories.<sup>11</sup> This categorial nominalism produced ‘curation’ in its contemporary sense, as a practice of temporary sense-making via exhibition-making, rather than the care of a collection over a prolonged period of

9. Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*, London and New York: Verso, 2016; F.A. Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001 (1944); Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2002 (1944). Intriguingly, recent disputes over neoliberalism and the meaning of contemporary capitalism have defaulted to a replay of a dispute between two Austrian economic historians of the 1940s, on the cusp of the post-war reconstruction of Western capitalist societies. For the revival of Polanyian analyses, see Nancy Fraser, ‘Marketization, Social Protection, Emancipation: Toward a Neo-Polanyian Conception of Capitalist Crisis’, in Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derlugian, eds, *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, New York: NYU Press, 2011, pp. 137–58, and ‘A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi’, *New Left Review* 81 (May–June 2013), pp. 119–32.

10. Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, New York: George Braziller, 1967, pp. 167–81.

11. Robert Smithson, ‘What is a Museum? A Conversation between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson’ (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 40. Cf. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, ch. 4.

time. 'Curation' in this sense has become central to art institutions since it gives partial and temporary social and historical meaning to highly individualized works via new relational configurations.

'Form exhaustion', Burnham argued, had led to 'The Rise of Phenomenalism' and a consequent critical transition from 'pure form' to what he called 'pure experience'. This corresponded to a shift of focus, at the level of the work, away from form towards a preoccupation with materials (and their often industrially produced technical properties), along with an opening of works onto their own incompletions – often through serialism, but more generally through any means for introducing time into the constitution of the work, especially performance, along with a growing sense of the constitutive role of context. This led to a certain *immaterialism*, associated with the conceptual dimension of works and a corresponding uncertainty as to how to locate the boundaries or limits of individual works. This was summed up in 1969 by Victor Burgin in the concept of 'situational aesthetics', in an article published in the same issue of *Studio International* as the first part of Joseph Kosuth's more notorious 'Art and Philosophy' – thereby inaugurating the double trajectory of anglophone conceptual art: relational and linguistic (post-formalist and neo-formalist).<sup>12</sup> The former led to the contextual and relational art of the 1980s and 1990s; the latter to various conceptual formalisms, including the mimetic neo-conceptualisms of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>13</sup>

However, as a merely abstract negation, unable to connect itself immanently to the multiple determinacies of its proliferating objects, post-formalism did not last long as a critical

12. Victor Burgin, 'Situational Aesthetics', *Studio International*, vol. 178, no. 915 (October 1969), pp. 118–21; Joseph Kosuth, 'Art and Philosophy: Part 1', *ibid.*, pp. 134–7.

13. These historicist neo-conceptualisms (of, for example, in the UK, Simon Paterson, Gavin Turk, Martin Creed and, most reductively, Jonathan Monk) should be distinguished, in principle, from the most general postconceptual character of contemporary art.

category; less time even than its successor, postmodernism. Nonetheless, the impulse of post-formalism acquired a more enduring, more determinate legacy (different from the critical pluralism that had morphed into the early Hal Foster's 'critical postmodernism') through the idea of the 'expansion of art': the expansion of art to infinity, through the expansion to infinity of the field of possible artistic materials.<sup>14</sup> This idea should be distinguished in principle from Rosalind Krauss's concept of the 'expanded field', with which it is often conflated, in which Krauss exchanged Greenberg's aesthetic formalism for the theoretical formalism (or theoreticism) of a general semiotics applied directly to the artistic field.<sup>15</sup> For the expansion of the 'field' – understood by Krauss in a restricted semiotic manner, as the expansion of the field of significant differences through which artistic meaning is produced – was actually more fundamentally the breaking down – and thereby expansion to infinity – of the borders of the work itself, through the inclusion of new materials: not simply by breaking down the borders between the different arts, but more fundamentally the borders between art and non-art, or what, with slightly more paradoxical ontological nuance, Adorno called the borders between art and 'the empirical' (*der Empirie*).

However, rather than consummating the dissolution of form, the 'expansion of art' found its critical and curatorial correlate in the motif of 'becoming form', emblematically in the phrase 'When Attitudes Become Form', from the opening to the subtitle of Harald Szeeman's famous exhibition (its main title was *Live*

14. In Western Europe in the late 1960s this idea was mainly associated with Joseph Beuys and a group of artists centred on the triangle Vienna–Cologne–Düsseldorf, promoted by the journal *Interfunktionen*. See Friedrich W. Heubach, 'Interfunktionen, 1968–1975', in Gloria Moure, ed., *Behind the Facts: Interfunktionen, 1968–1975*, Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2004, pp. 48–59. For the Eastern European story, see Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Block: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2018.

15. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276–90.

*in Your Head*) at the Kunsthalle, Berne, 1969. Symptomatically, this was the phrase by which the exhibition subsequently became generally known. (The full subtitle was ‘When Attitudes Become Form [Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information]’, and that list is obviously important in giving the exhibition some critical determinacy.) In the wake of the recent revisionist historiography of the exhibitions of the 1960s, this motif of ‘becoming form’ has been revived and repeated anew in ever more expansive critical contexts.<sup>16</sup> In the last twenty years, ‘latitudes’ have become form, along with ‘history’ and even ‘living’ itself.<sup>17</sup> More prosaically, in 2013 Elena Filipovic suggested that with the rise of the artist-curator, ‘Exhibitions Become Form’ – borrowing her title from a review of the Venice remake of *Attitudes* – although of course exhibitions don’t need an *artist-curator* to do that; and they have in any case been ‘form’ from the outset of the contemporary conception of curation.<sup>18</sup>

The basic movement of contemporary art, then, has involved an expansion of the concept of art through its dissolution into and reflective absorption of fields of – not just previously, but enduringly – non-art materials and practices. This correspondingly expanded the extension of ‘artistic form’, while requiring the work’s simultaneous preservation of the non-art status of

16. It is significant that when Szeeman’s show was restaged at the Prada Foundation in Venice in 2013, not only had the main title of the original disappeared (*Live in Your Head* was too counterculturally 1960s perhaps), but the rest of the subtitle has disappeared too, thereby eliminating the extremes of the conceptual constellation across which the exhibition had been constructed, and which provided it with its internal dynamism.

17. *How Latitudes Become Form: Art in a Global Age* (2003) was an exhibition in the Walker Center, Minneapolis, held in the wake of the 2000 Global Conceptualism show; *History Becomes Form* (2010) sums up Boris Groys’s analysis of Moscow Conceptualism; Nato Thompson’s *Living as Form* (2012) is the slogan of an art activism of the everyday.

18. *When Exhibitions Become Form: The Rise of the Artist-Curator* is now a series edited by Filipovic for *Mousse Magazine*. This ‘curator-artist’-centric conception of form-production appears as a disavowal of the critical recognition that the location of the principle of form-determination cannot be found in the subjectivity of the artist, but is rather distributed across the process of artistic production as a whole and condensed into the structural logic or coherence of the work itself. Transposing the old myth of the artist as the subjective origin of creative form onto the curator appears here as a doubly reactionary move. For a broader approach to exhibitions, see the Exhibition Histories series of books published by the journal *Afterall*, 2010–20.

certain of its new elements within their formal integration. For the criticality of this integration depends on the *ontological double-coding* of these elements, as at once inside and outside the work, in a manner paradigmatically exemplified by collage. It is this kind of double-coding constituting the critical status of the work, their contradictory structure, and the developmental dynamic they impart to the concept of art that suggests dialectical logic as a philosophical key to the comprehension of the concept of artistic form.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, a new question arises: namely, what, if anything, *delimits* this expansion of the concept of artistic form, at the level of the individual work, if the range of possible artistic materials is in principle infinite?

Before we consider this, though, we need to backtrack a little to the traditional, 'hylomorphic' concept of form, which the self-expansion of art since the 1960s effectively destroyed as a viable model for the philosophical comprehension of art, in both its objective (Aristotelian) and subjective (Kantian) variants; along with the Simondonian nominalist alternative that is taken by some as the best option for their replacement as a philosophical account of the process of artistic creation.

### **Hylomorphism and its nominalist critique**

Derived etymologically from the Greek *hylé* (wood or matter) and *morphé* (shape or form), but coined only in the nineteenth century, the term 'hylomorphism' indicates that it is matter to which form is opposed in the traditional Aristotelean conception, in a manner derived via generalizing abstraction from the

19. 'Objective logic', Hegel argued, 'most directly replaces ontology', although 'it comprises within itself also the rest of metaphysics'. Subjective logic, on the other hand, the logic of the concept, takes up the determinations presented in the objective logic 'in themselves according to their particular content', and expounds them as 'something subjective, freely self-subsisting, self-determining'. Thus was ontology transformed by Hegel's dialectical logic into the first historical ontology: a historical ontology of spirit (*Geist*). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 42.

sculptural activity of shaping wood. Hylomorphism is the philosophical theory that being is a combination of form and matter within which matter is *potential* (indeterminate, unchanging and infinite) and form is *actual* and substantial: giving determinacy to matter, in each instance. Hence the ontological prioritization of form over 'mere' matter. Matter is denigrated as homogeneous and shapeless; form is lauded as meaning-giving. In particular, on this familiar conception, matter is essentially indifferent to the forms by which it is shaped.<sup>20</sup>

The problem with this view, as now-canonically pointed out in Gilbert Simondon's critique of hylomorphism (crudely put) is that it is an inadequate account of *individuation*, since it reduces individuals to no more than particular instances of general forms, or particulars, rather than individuating them ontologically. In Simondon's well-known example, the pouring of concrete into a mould, form is hylomorphically understood to reside exclusively in the mould, and to be imposed externally upon an indifferent matter. In contrast, Simondon sought an account of individuation (physical, biological, psychic and collective) as a monistic process of the emergence of individuals out of 'pre-individual' processes of being, which leave their mark within individuals in a residual *transindividuality*. Hence the idea that all individuals are transindividuals. Yet only individuals are actual; this a nominalist ontology. Matter is thus understood as an active material agent with no need of an external form to impose itself from without.<sup>21</sup> As presented by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Simondon exposes the technological insufficiency of the matter-form model, in that it assumes a fixed form and a matter deemed homogeneous. It is the idea of the law that assures the model's

20. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; *Physics*, Book II, ch. 7. The debates regarding the ontological consistency, or otherwise, of the definitions of form in Aristotle's metaphysics and physics do not bear on the basic hylomorphic structure of the concept.

21. See Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuel et sa genèse physico-biologique*, Paris: PUF, 1964, ch. 1; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2013.

coherence, since laws are what submit matter to this or that form, and conversely, realize in matter a given property deduced from the form. ... Simondon demonstrates that the *hylomorphic* model leaves many things, active and affective, by the wayside. On the one hand, to the formed or formable matter we must add an entire energetic materiality in movement, carrying *singularities* or *haecceities* that are already like implicit forms that are topological, rather than geometrical, and that combine with processes of deformation. ... On the other hand, to the essential properties of the matter [deriving from the formal essences] we must add variable intensive affects, now resulting from the operation, now on the contrary making it possible... At any rate, it is a question of surrendering ... [to the material], following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form upon a matter: what one addresses is less a matter submitted to the laws than a materiality possessing a *nomos* [law]. ...

In short, what Simondon criticizes the hylomorphic model for is taking form and matter to be two terms defined separately, like the end of two half-chains whose connection can no longer be seen, like a simple relation of moulding behind which there is a perpetually variable, continuous modulation that it is no longer possible to grasp. The critique of the hylomorphic schema is based on 'the existence, between form and matter, of a zone of medium and intermediary dimension', of energetic, molecular dimension – a space unto itself that deploys its materiality through matter, a number unto itself that propels its traits through form.<sup>22</sup>

It is easy to see the appeal of such an ontology of individuation as a philosophical foundation for the nominalism of a contemporary art in which each work is imagined as individual to the point of singularity. Matter replaces form as the active principle. It only requires the additional equation of activity with agency to arrive at the monistic premiss of 'new materialism'. But is such a 'flat' naturalist ontology sufficiently differentiated to comprehend anything as deeply social and historical, as well as formally intricate, as works of contemporary art? The

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22. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 408–9.



problem lies in the unreflected character of the opposition between form and matter shared by hylomorphism and its critics alike. For Hegel, on the other hand, while form is central to the comprehension of any process of determination, and as such it is a general condition of intelligibility, it is not simply opposed to matter, but more importantly also to ‘content’. Indeed, the latter appears as the result of conceptual reflection of the dialectics of the form–matter relation.

### A dialectical philosophy of form

In Hegel’s *Science of Logic* the concept of form is developed, from its most general meaning to more concrete ones, through a series of three dialectical oppositions – form and non-form (form as essence); form and matter; and form and content – while also bringing a range of other logical concepts into play along the way.

#### 1. *Form as essence, or, form and non-form*

To form belongs in general everything *determinate*; it is a form determination in so far as it is something posited and consequently distinct from *that of which* it is the form...

... the form determinations of essence, as determinatenesses of reflection, are, in their more precise determinateness ... identity and difference. The latter partly as diversity, partly as opposition.<sup>23</sup>

In this respect, the concept of form does indeed gain its initial determinacy through its difference from something formless (‘that of which it is the form’). However, equally, the formlessness of its opposite is only *determined* as formless through its corresponding reflective opposition to form. At that point, it has become determined as ‘matter’.

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23. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 448–9.

## 2. *Form and matter*

'Matter [does not "precede" form, but rather] is determined as formless identity', Hegel argues; that is, it is 'determined as undetermined' by its relation to form. As the first name for 'that of which the form is the form', we could say that matter is a kind of *negative* form. 'Matter is a sheer *abstraction*',<sup>24</sup> as is the concept of form itself in its hylomorphic understanding. However, in this abstract identity with form, in having been formed (through its opposition to form), matter becomes *content*.

## 3. *Form and content*

Content, for Hegel, is the name for the unity of form and matter: 'the identical element in form and matter'; 'content is [therefore] determinate in its own self'.<sup>25</sup> There is, then, a reproduction of form's opposition to matter, within content, such that the determinateness of form is 'indifference of content'. Dialectically, there is thus a doubling of each concept here: form and content.

## 4. *Dialectical doubling of form*

Regarding the antithesis of form and content it is essential to remember that the content is not formless, but that it has the *form within itself* just as much as the form is *something external* to it. We have here the doubling of form: on the one hand, as inwardly reflected, it is the content; on the other hand, as not reflected inwardly, it is the external existence, that is indifferent to the content. What is here present *in-itself* is the absolute relationship of form and content, i.e. the reciprocal overturning [*Umschlagen*] of one into the other, so that 'content' is nothing but the reciprocal *overturning of form* into content, and 'form' nothing but *overturning of content* into form.<sup>26</sup>

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 447–50.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 455.

26. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hacking, 1991, # 133, p. 202. For form as a reflection determination of content, cf. Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, trans. David Fernbach, London: Merlin Press, 1978, pp. 93–4.

There is thus a primacy of ‘content’ over ‘matter’ in the dialectical determination of form. Content is developed form. Furthermore, where content is historical, it relies on a historically given state not of matter in general, but of determinate *materials*.

5. *Dialectical doubling of content as developed, self-moving form*

[The] content is the developed form, i.e. both the externality and *opposition* of independent existences, and their identical relation, within which alone these distinct existences are what they are.

‘Developed’ form is thus a *self-moving form*:

self-movement of the form is *activity* [*Tätigkeit*], activation [*Betätigung*] of the thing [*Sache*] as the *real* ground, which sublates itself into actuality, and the activation of the contingent actuality, i.e. of the conditions: their inward reflection and their self-sublation into ... the actuality of the thing/*matter* [*Sache*].<sup>27</sup>

We thus end up with a concept of form as the self-moving activity of things (*Sachen*), sublating the content of ‘developed form’. Or, as Adorno put it in *Aesthetic Theory* with regard to the historical character of art: ‘the law of movement is the law of form’.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas in Hegel the concept of form is dialectically multifaceted, being constructed in a development running through a series of reflected oppositional pairings, in the critique of hylomorphism associated with Simondon and propounded by Deleuze and Guattari it is the simple Aristotelian concept of form that is the target, constructed exclusively through its opposition to ‘matter’, without reference to content. Thus when Deleuze and Guattari write of ‘less a matter submitted to the laws than a materiality *possessing a nomos/law*’, they appear not to be escaping ‘form’, but rather to be implicitly invoking

27. Hegel, *ibid.*, # 147, p. 220.

28. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 3.

the dialectical concept of content, as the unity of form and matter, through which a higher-level opposition to form is then reproduced. And when they write of 'the existence, *between* form and matter, of a zone of medium and intermediary dimension', they appear themselves to be precisely 'taking form and matter to be two terms defined separately' – the main problem with the hylomorphic model.

In this regard, Hegel does not just move beyond the abstract opposition of form and matter in the hylomorphic model, but dialectically incorporates the undialectical critique of hylomorphism into his concept of form. This is not to suggest that there are no conceptual problems remaining here, posed by the historical development of artistic form, but it does relocate the philosophical terrain on which they are to be pursued. This is the terrain of Adorno's immanent critique of the dialectical shortcomings of Hegel's own philosophy of art, in which a particular idealist metaphysics undialectically overdetermines the notion of artistic content.<sup>29</sup> For in Hegel's concept of art as the sensuous semblance of the idea, a predetermined metaphysical 'content' drives the deduction of its sensuous forms of appearance, despite their dialectical difference from it. However, with regard to social form, it is precisely the metaphysical idealism of this depiction of the process of form-determination that makes Hegel's logic appropriate for the presentation of the social form of value, in Marx's *Capital*, wherein social universality appears, precisely, *only* in 'alienated' and illusorily self-sufficient, ideal forms: commodity, money, capital. It is this *illusorily self-sufficient ideality* that makes capitalistic social form structurally homologous to the ontological status of the autonomous artwork.

However, if Hegel's (broadly thematic) conception of artistic content betrays the deeper dialectical character of the

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29. See *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 352ff.

form–content distinction in his logic, Adorno's own presentation of artistic form is itself betrayed by a lingering aestheticism, marked by his widespread use of the phrase 'aesthetic form' (*ästhetische Form*), when the philosophical context of his own text demands rather the continued use of his phrase 'artistic form' (*kunsterlich Form*) – and this, despite Adorno's recognition of the fact that 'Kant's aesthetics had no emphatic concept of the artwork and relegated it to the level of a sublimated means of pleasure', a 'castrated hedonism, desire without desire'.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, it is the lingering confusion spread by the use of the term 'aesthetic' as synonymous to 'art' (first noted but then disavowed by Hegel at the outset of the Introduction to his *Lectures on Beautiful Art*) that vitiates a number of formulations in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In Adorno, Hegel thus comes to act as a Trojan Horse for the maintenance of a residual Kantian aestheticism that is nonetheless formally disavowed. This is a consequence of the conflation of the enduring importance of the subjective mediation of the artwork with a Kantian use of the term 'aesthetic'.

The philosophical moves required to update the Hegel–Adorno problematic are thus (i) the replacement of Hegel's understanding of the 'content' of art with Adorno's more concretely historical conception of content as a relationship between *artistic materials* and *techniques*, within a more fully dialecticized account of form–content relations;<sup>31</sup> (ii) the de-aestheticization or conceptual expansion of Adorno's conception of artistic form, rendering it consistent with his own concepts of technique and artistic materials; and hence (iii) a greater sense of the ways in which the artwork internally mediates *art-institutional* forms, as well as the most general social forms of commodity, money,

30. *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 253, 11.

31. Cf. Walter Benjamin's remark that technique is 'the point at which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed'. 'The Author as Producer' (1934), in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 777.

capital and the state, along with other historically received and contested cultural forms, such as gender, race and sexuality.

In Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, following one line of thought in Nietzsche, the problematic of form is displaced altogether, in favour of a discourse on *forces* that appears in a historicized manner in relation to art, as follows:

If there is a modern age ... [t]he essential relation is no longer matter-forms (or substances-attributes); neither is it the continuous development of form and the continuous variation of matter. It is now a direct relation *material-forces*. A material is a molecularized matter, which must accordingly 'harness' forces of the Cosmos. There is no longer a matter that finds its corresponding principle of intelligibility. It is now a question of elaborating a material charged with harnessing forces of a different order: the visible material must capture nonvisible forces. ... The forces to be captured are ... the forces of an immaterial, nonformal and energetic Cosmos. ... This is the postromantic turning point: the essential thing is no longer forms and matters, or themes, but forces, densities and intensities. ... The problem is ... now a problem of consistency or consolidation: how to consolidate the material, make it consistent, so that it can harness unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces?<sup>32</sup>

Consistency is indeed the problem – but neither the Nietzschean nor the Simondonian framework can offer more than a positivistic response to this issue. For this generalized cosmology of forces is indifferent to the immanent art/non-art relation, which is at the centre of the 'life' of contemporary art in its negotiation of the problem of form. The problematically differentiating, self-enclosing function of artistic form is instead replaced by Deleuze and Guattari by general concepts of *capture* and *territorialization*. Yet in a specifically artistic context, the problem of 'consistency or consolidation' – which for them

32. *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 342–3. For a recent Simondonian development of this trajectory, with reference to musical performance, see Paulo de Assis, 'Transduction and Ensembles of Transducers: Relaying Flows of Intensities', in Michael Schwab, ed., *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*, Leuven: Orpheus Institute, Ghent/Leuven University Press, 2018, pp. 245–65.

replaces the problem of form, as a variant of the problem of unity – appears from an alternative perspective to be, once again, precisely the problem of form itself, in the guise of the problem of the organization of a work into coherence.

### **Articulation, organization and coherence, or, the self-limiting self-suspension of the real**

Alongside ‘articulation’, ‘coherence’ (*Stimmigkeit*) is the main category of form in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. ‘Coherence’ names the problem of form from the standpoint of the consistency of the whole.<sup>33</sup> ‘Articulation’ (*Artikulation*) is the name of the same problem viewed from the practical standpoint of organizing the elements of the work into a unity. Organization (*Organisation*), ‘the relation of elements to each other’ is what ‘constitutes form’. Form may thus be summarized as ‘the quintessence of all elements of logicity, or more broadly, coherence [*Stimmigkeit*] in artworks’.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that for Adorno, art is form.

As little as art is to be defined by any other element, it is simply identical with form. Every other element can be negated in the concept of form...

[Form is thus] the distinguishing aspect of art... [it is] that in artworks by which they become artworks.

Art has precisely the same chance of survival as does form, no better.<sup>35</sup>

The reason for this is that it is through the artefact’s form or coherence that ‘each and every successful work *separates itself* from the merely existing’. In separating itself from the merely

33. *Stimmigkeit* was rendered as ‘consistency’ in the first English translation of *Aesthetic Theory*; ‘coherence’ in the second. Coherence one might say, following Quine, is simply consistency at the level of the whole.

34. *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 143, 140.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 144, 141.

existing, 'art opposes the empirical [*der Empirie*] through the element [*Moment*] of form' and thereby constitutes its 'autonomy' at the level of the work itself. In so doing form appears as 'the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom'.<sup>36</sup>

However, this separation/opposition/transfiguration is *not* understood to be the act of some transcendental aesthetic subjectivity, but is rather an 'objective' quality of the work. And it is with reference to this objective quality that Adorno uses the term 'aesthetic'. In this regard, in form, the work is said to 'free itself from being simply a product of subjectivity'. 'In artworks, form is aesthetic essentially insofar as it is an objective determination [*objective Bestimmung*].' Appearance, though, remains ineliminable from the reference to aesthetic:

aesthetic form is the objective organization within each artwork of what appears as *bindingly eloquent*.<sup>37</sup>

So, how does the relationship between the expansion of materials and formal limitation appear, in that 'law of movement' or self-development of art that is for Adorno, at the highest level, art's 'law of form'? In the first place:

Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. ... the artistic labour of forming is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form...<sup>38</sup>

This is what leads to the vitalist reaction against form. In this respect, 'the expansion of available materials' (which Adorno believed had 'been *much overestimated* by those external to it') 'is offset by the renunciation demanded of the artist by ... the condition of the [particular] material' selected.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 5, 143, emphases added.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-3.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 144.



Every innovative expansion of the material into the unknown, going beyond the material's given condition, is to a large extent a function of the material and its critique, which is defined by the material itself.<sup>39</sup>

Selection of artistic materials is thus the determining factor here. In accordance with 'the Hegelian argument against Kant': 'The moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed.' Conversely, as a 'posited unity', form 'constantly suspends itself [*suspendiert sie*] as such: essential to it is that it *interrupts itself through its other* [its materials] just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not [ultimately] cohere'.<sup>40</sup> Otherwise it would as reconciled to, and hence become affirmative of, actuality.

The question of the delimitation of the expansion of the concept of artistic form is thus not, after all, a question of the *extent* of the expansion of artistic materials, or the existence of some *a priori limit* to the extent of that expansion. The expansion is in principle infinite for art as such, already, but not of course for any particular individual work. The question is rather that of the *modes of the self-limiting suspension* of the 'empirical reality' of a portion of what exists, performed by individual works, closing this portion off from its functional context, organizing or reorganizing it, and positing it as an object of artistic reflection; then, in part, suspending that suspension. This is a self-limiting suspension which – in so far as 'the mediation of form and content demands that we recognize aesthetic [=artistic] form as sedimented [*sedimentierter*] content'<sup>41</sup> – requires social form as its immanent 'content'. Here, at the level of social form, the expansion to infinity of possible artistic materials, which makes every selection of artistic materials into an act of freedom, mimics the

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39. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 143, emphasis added.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

self-positing structure of infinity of the accumulation of capital (infinite productivity). Just as the subject-like quality of the autonomous artwork as a self-determining form (an object that presents itself as behaving like a subject) mimics both the fantasy of the freedom of the self-possessing bourgeois individual and the actuality of the 'automatic subject' of capital alike. And it does so, not directly, or immediately, but, in each case, via the alienated form of its own mediated objectivity; mimicking the alienated universality of the objective structures of the social forms of value and culture – commodity, money, capital, state, gender, race, sexuality...

In so far as sociality appears as form, it has only an alienated objectivity.

The issue here is thus less the 'sociological' one of the internality of autonomous art to the structures of capitalist societies, via its commodity form (the contradictory art commodity); still less any relationship of artistic representation to capitalism, at a thematic level; and far more the internality of the structures and processes of capitalist societies to autonomous art, *qua autonomus*; that is, not in its dependent or heteronomous dimension (as is usually supposed), but in its very autonomy itself.

### **Crisis as form**

It is within this structural historical immanence that 'crisis' appears as form: as a particular historical instantiation of the contradictory social form of art's autonomy, pushed to the point of a seemingly irresolvable antagonism or antinomy. For crisis, in so far as it is becoming 'permanent', is a new form of capitalistic sociality as such. It is part of the core of the concept of crisis, as a moment of decision within a transitional process (at its limit, in its medical origin, a transitional process within illness from life to death), that it cannot be permanent. What is increasingly

referred to as 'permanent crisis', then, is no longer technically a crisis, but a new and terrible form of social reproduction – a form of social reproduction grounded in the temporality of systemic disjunction that is part of the temporal form of historical contemporaneity produced by the 'globalization' of capital.<sup>42</sup> Capitalist crisis is always a crisis in the consistency or coherence of the social itself. Contemporary art, in the critical sense of that term, is the art of such a situation.

In brief, then, crisis is a new general form of the social. It is expressed by that crisis of art that takes the form of a crisis of form. Crisis of form is the primary form-determination of contemporary art. Each individual work participates in that expression to the extent to which it enacts, or mediates, the problem of form as the problem of the self-limiting suspension of the real.

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42. Cf. Peter Osborne, 'A Sudden Topicality: Marx, Nietzsche and the Politics of Crisis', *Radical Philosophy* 160 (March/April 2010), pp. 19–26.



**SOCIAL ECOLOGIES,  
INTIMATIONS  
OF CATASTROPHE**



# 9

## Black Atlantis: the plantationocene

AYESHA HAMEED

This is my first evening at Walker's, once a sugar plantation and now a dairy. It is dusk.<sup>1</sup>

I step outside of the flat, climb the slightly mossy stairs and turn right into the purpling light. To my left are horse stables, behind me is the house and in front of me are fields of grass.



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*For Mark Fisher*

1. Research for this work was made possible by a travel grant awarded by the Canada Council for the Arts to attend residencies at Alice Yard (Trinidad) and Fresh Milk (Barbados).

The sound of the frogs begins at dusk and it gets louder. The paved drive I am walking on ends at the field, and I turn right onto a dirt path. The grass is long on either side of the path. When I reach a lone tree to my left, the path dips down a small hill and continues to a line of trees in the distance. To the right is the South and there are some twinkling lights in the distance. A small bat swoops over my head.

Underneath the alien and screechy whir of the frogs there is a silence. A black dog runs up to me from the big house and then turns around and goes back, looking back at me as if trying to get me to follow it. I walk away from it and into the long grass and listen.

The frogs get louder. The sky turns black.

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Another beginning: it is half past two and I've been waiting in the parking lot outside Harrison's Cave for about thirty minutes. Tour buses and hired taxis efficiently pull in and out of the parking spaces, loading and unloading their American passengers.

Two men are chatting beside me, one of them offers the other one a lift and they walk over to a brightly painted bus. I figure I have twenty minutes more to wait.

I hear a loud noise and look up from my book to see a diesel-powered minibus hurtling through the lot like a getaway car for a heist. It abruptly stops at a hasty angle near the bus stop where I am sitting. The sign on the bus just says 'City'. People climb out quickly with the diesel engine rumbling.

As I climb the stairs the bus speeds up again so fast I trip onto a seat. I pull myself up holding out my two Barbadian dollars to the driver with an apologetic 'excuse me' and the man in the passenger seat waves impatiently at me to sit down.

I look out of the window as the bus hurtles down dirt roads hewn through fields of cane speckled with sun and dust. We screech to another stop and the engine grumbles and roars.



Outside are the fields of cane, and men and women waiting on the side of the road.

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What is the relationship between climate change and plantation economies? This is an exploration of many things – the beginnings of a fourth chapter of an ongoing performance called *Black Atlantis*, visiting the heartland of one of the three stops of the triangular trade, and taking seriously Donna Haraway's and Anna Tsing's use of the term 'Plantationocene', which connects the development of a plantation form of production to the beginning of the geological era that we are currently in.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Plantationocene' is a placeholder for the relationship between agriculture and this era, called the Anthropocene. But the kind of agriculture they are thinking about is the violent replacement of diverse farming tactics, of forests and of pastures, by the factory-like extractive structure of plantations – the cultivation of single crops like sugar and cotton for export, produced by enslaved and indentured labouring bodies forcibly transported across vast distances. Plantations eradicate the diversity of what is cultivated, devastating the land, violently exploiting and expropriating the bodies working on the land and destroying any possible autonomy for self-sustenance for those living in these areas.

[we use the term] Plantationocene for the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor... Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit – the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated

2. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'A Feminist Approach to the Anthropocene: Earth Stalked by Man', Barnard Center for Research on Women Videos, [vimeo.com/149475243](https://vimeo.com/149475243).

plants, animals, and people – is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together.<sup>3</sup>

The Plantationocene suggests that the geological force of humans on the planet's ecosystem had its roots in plantation slavery, its instrumentalization of the soil for a singular kind of production and its violent enslavement of bodies to be used as machines to cultivate and harvest the cane, and to ideally reproduce and sustain itself. As Anna Tsing says, the Plantationocene is formed of 'machines of replication' or 'simplified ecologies, such as plantations, in which life worlds are remade as future assets' – in other words it highlights the aftermath of a radical and violent incursion and its effects on lifeworlds that intertwine the human and the natural.

It is an almost impossible endeavour to read a history of over three hundred years of plantations and their continually evolving social relations in the wake of the oldest instance of plantation slavery, and in the continued presence of descendants of slaves and plantation owners and overseers, against the slow temporal swings that mark climate change. Reading a still living and present history against a slowly unravelling future of increasing frequencies of natural disaster, the warming of the ocean, the jeopardization of sea life is incommensurable and probably pointless as they operate in such different registers, and the possibility of finding common ground at ground level is nearly nil.

### **Atlantis**

After day after day after day of sun in the morning, sun in the afternoon, rain sliced through the sky in a gash. The rainy season has just ended and at the margins there is still the threat of water. This has taken centre stage, today of all days. The

3. Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6, 2015, p. 162; [www.environmentalhumanities.org](http://www.environmentalhumanities.org).

taxi drives up to the house. The rain is so fat and plummy that it is impossible to sprint up the steps to the car door without getting wet.

The taxi approaches the outskirts of the city with the wipers barely clearing the view. Each stroke of the blades makes a grating sound. We drive past the terminal where all the ocean liners anchor, their bulky bodies indistinct in the distance with the thickness of the pelting water. And then we arrive at the Atlantis office. It is brightly coloured and full of tourist memorabilia: rum and beaches, coasters and keychains. There is some free fruit punch in the corner. On the wall is a mural, a window painted and encrusted to look like a coral wall. There is a television on each side of the room – one with a looping documentary promo on the submarine, the other tuned into CNN, an endless loop of Trump winning the Electoral College vote in late December.

We wait.

Two overwhelmed parents try to keep their identically dressed daughters calm on what appears to be their birthday. Busloads of tourists arrive and they watch these two children indulgently, or look at CNN. We all sit on purple leather benches. Outside the rain lashes at the windows.

Finally the door opens and we are ushered out to walk the 100 metres to the waiting boat. It is raining so hard that we are instructed to share the umbrellas they hand out to us. Still, I am drenched by the time I get to the boat. After a safety demonstration, and lots of loud music, we head off. The water is grey and the sky is also grey. The rain falls so thick on the window that the seascape falls into blurry pixels. Finally we arrive at a point in the middle of the water where a small metal structure protrudes from underwater. We've arrived at the Atlantis Submarine.



In the early twentieth century John Ernest Williamson, son of an English sea captain, was fuelled by the stories about lost Atlantises and the sinking of pirate towns like Port Royal in Jamaica. With his brother George he designed and built a structure he called the photosphere, an underwater chamber with a glass panel, which was connected to a boat on the surface of the water by a tube made of concentric rings.

Williamson moved to the Bahamas to build his photosphere as the surrounding waters are shallow, and the coral sand is sparkling and white. The sea is largely free of clouding phytoplankton, so the water is clear. The photosphere was used for a number of purposes, as a chamber to film the first underwater moving images, as a tourist novelty, where visitors could send postcards from the bottom of the sea through an underwater post office, and reportedly to salvage ships underwater. It is here that the 1916 film of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was filmed, the figures ghostly still. So was the film made in 1954.

Krista A. Thompson describes how these early immersions into the photosphere were dreamlike, but that the vista of the underwater was also perceived to be menacing. This was

reflected in Williamson's own thinking as he travelled to present his work on the sea in a lecture titled 'Beauty and Tragedy'. Bahamian land was not remarkably fertile but its marine life was blooming and rich and multiplying.

In the late nineteenth century underwater life as a kind of spectacle flourished as an elite pastime. Young black men would dive to the bottom of the sea to grab mementos for genteel women waiting on boats, who peered into the sea through 'tropical lognons'. The submarine world was seen as an underwater garden, a landscape or a forest.

Hutchinson ... re-envisioned coral sponges as 'welcoming palms,' fish as 'hummingbirds,' and coral as 'great trees' and 'stately forests'... Charles Ives also contended that the seascape bore similarity to 'the vast and magnificent tropical forests, clothed in perennial green, adorned with graceful vines, teeming with flowers of every hue, and vocal with countless birds of the most varied and of the richest plumage, bear to a lady's little but luxurious boudoir, with its evergreen branches, climbing vines and captive birds in their small but gilded cages.'<sup>4</sup>

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Jessica Lehman describes the sinking of the Dutch slave ship *Leusden* in Atlantic waters off the coast of Suriname in 1738. The captain nailed shut the hatches to the hold of the ship which held 680 women, men and children. Although well documented, the wreck has not been found. In thinking of the ocean depths as archive, she writes:

If the ocean has concealed some of slavery's ruins, it has not so readily hidden all of the more recent traces of capitalist imperialism. In July 1964, during one episode in a long history of marine toxic dumping, the British merchant vessel *Halciencie* began to discard packages of radioactive waste from several state-operated sites into the Bay of Biscay.<sup>5</sup>

4. Krista J. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 170–71.

5. Jessica Lehman, 'Blue History', *The New Inquiry*, 6 February 2017, [thenewinquiry.com/essays/blue-history](http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/blue-history).

The items of radioactive waste, gloves and bottles left more of a trace, and yet even in 1964 were preceded by a substantial history of toxic dumping. This she sees as connected to the slaves buried in the *Leusden* hull, the ocean a repository and archive defined by ruin. The radioactive bottles float on the surface, and, following Edouard Glissant's telling, their counterparts are the Atlantic's under-sea currents, 'signposted by "scarcely corroded" balls and chains'.<sup>6</sup>

And then there are the corroded currents themselves, waves laced with oil after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 where 210 gallons of oil and natural gas slicked down the continental slope into deep water. This Atlantis is not an archive of the dead, the radioactive, the oil slicked and the corroded. It is all these things. This is its tragedy and maybe its beauty.

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### **Coasts**

I meet Aaron after twelve years when he picks me up for a drive around the island. We decide to go to the Atlantic coast, the first of two trips. It seems like a set of journeys of attrition as during the first trip we drive to a village called Bathsheba, and the second time to another part of the coast called Bath. I'm convinced that had we made a third trip it would have conjured a third stretch called Ba. But this kind of bad humour can't hold.

The Atlantic coast is the wild coast of the island. The water here is choppy, the settlements more sporadic and the roads more intermittent and winding. As we drive through a sunny road we see a woman waiting patiently at the side. Aaron stops and offers her a lift to where she works, which turns out to be a restaurant called the Roundhouse on the water, which apparently serves great cocktails. How were you planning to get there? he

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6. Ibid.



asks her, and she points to a tiny path that disappears in the long grass. Not a great idea, he says, as we drive to the restaurant and she agrees. The next cocktail is on me, she calls, as she climbs out of the car and waves.

The first time I jump in the Atlantic I feel the water pull and push against my skin. It is warm and swirling. The sand below my feet is rocky and rough. The beach is empty. Behind me in the sand are stumps of wood periodically placed, remnants of a railway track used to transport sugar along the coast. The coast has receded since then and the stumps which once circled dry land are now half underwater.

I look to the east, across the water and see that there is no land in sight. Following my gaze, Aaron tells me that the next land mass is the Senegalese coast. I keep staring east.

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On 29 April 2006 a twenty-foot boat was spotted off Ragged Point on the south-eastern coast of Barbados. On board eleven bodies were found by the coastguards, preserved and desiccated by the sun and salt water. This was a ghost ship adrift for four months on the Atlantic Ocean. It set sail on Christmas Day in Praia in the Cape Verde Islands full of migrants from Senegal,

Guinea Bissau and Gambia en route to the Canary Islands. Each of these people paid £890 for their place on the boat.

The boat ran into trouble at Nouadhibou, a Mauritian port, and was towed for a time by another ship. An article in the *Guardian* conjectures that the line was possibly severed by being hacked by a machete. Once adrift the boat began its slow movement across the Atlantic, buffeted by the winds and rain, and pulled westward by the ocean's currents. By January all the passengers had died; many of their bodies were jettisoned into the sea or washed overboard. This ghost ship then travelled the 2,800 miles to Barbados.

A note written by one of the men who died on board and a ticket for a Senagalese Airlines flight found on the boat provided the first pieces of the puzzle. According to the *Guardian*, these two notes were also found on board:

'I would like to send to my family in Bassada [a town in the interior of Senegal] a sum of money. Please excuse me and goodbye. This is the end of my life in this big Moroccan sea,' the note said, according to a Barbados paper, the *Daily Nation*.

'I am from Senegal but have been living in Cape Verde for a year. Things are bad. I don't think I will come out of this alive. I need whoever finds me to send this money to my family. Please telephone my friend Ibrahima Drame.

Signed Diaw Sounkar Diemi.'

*El Pais's* account of note found on boat<sup>7</sup>

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In the morning hours, radiation from the sun warms the land faster than it warms the sea. The hotter, lighter air of the land pulls the wind from sea to land. So, as the sun rises, the island is surrounded on all sides by winds that blow inland from the sea.

7. Giles Tremlett, 'After four months at sea, ghost ship with 11 petrified corpses washes up in Barbados', *Guardian*, 29 May 2006, [www.theguardian.com/world/2006/may/29/gilestremlett.mainsection](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/may/29/gilestremlett.mainsection).



Barbados has only two species of plants that are unique to the island, 'a common gully shrub *Phyllanthus andersonii* sometimes called broom, and a rare slender climber, *Metastelma barbadense*, which has no common name'.<sup>8</sup> The rest of the nearly three thousand varieties of plants came from across the water – some borne on ships from across the ocean and violently cultivated, and others carried by forces of nature – by birds flying across the water and by the wind.

[In Barbados] flora reach the shores on winds and ocean currents and with the help of birds. In addition many of our wild plants are deliberate introductions which have since become self-seeding and naturalised. It is often said that many of the wild plants of Barbados are exotic weeds.<sup>9</sup>

Plants grown from seeds blown across the Antilles were replaced by annihilating fields of sugar cane. These decimated plants, blown by wind and carried by ocean currents and birds, now grow thickly across dirt-hewn paths, on fields grown for grazing, and in gullies carved through coral caves.

A stronger system of winds travels from farther away. Trade winds blow across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean Sea, carrying the weather, and for centuries the sails of ships from East to West. Dust from the Sahara Desert blows across the Atlantic, moving grain by grain the matter of one continent onto a line of islands on the other side of the ocean. Barbados is the first coast that these particles of dust touch, and for spring, summer and autumn the air is full of matter of the Sahel, and the earth is carpeted with its phosphorescence.

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8. Sean Carrington, *Wild Plants of Barbados*, Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2007, p. 1.

9. *Ibid.*

# 10

## **Strangers at home: from referential to compositional artworking**

CHRISTIAN NYAMPETA

At the beginning of December 2019 I was returning to New York, where I live. My flight from Casablanca landed on time at JFK Airport, but because I am in the process of changing my temporary visa to a permanent one re-entry into the United States currently involves undergoing a secondary clearance process by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). Homeland Security of course scrutinize all visitors to the USA in a way, except that this secondary processing takes place in an office to which one is escorted by armed guard. Once in that brightly lit room, it becomes a matter of waiting for approval, alongside others who, like myself, rather comically do everything that they can to avoid eye contact and hide their mix of embarrassment, exhaustion and desperation.

I was used to this experience, having gone through it a number of times already, but this occasion was different in that I was called into a *third* office. 'Mr Christian', a commanding voice said, 'please follow me this way.' The person behind the voice was in civvies, but I assumed the bulge on his right hip was a concealed handgun. I followed him in complete silence deeper and deeper into the circuitous interiors of the airport, each step causing my anxiety to increase, until we reached our destination.

The immigration officer firmly shook my tired hand. He confirmed my full name and date of birth, refrained from introducing himself, and instructed me to sit at his desk in a chair opposite his own. He took his own seat, placed my passport and immigration card down next to him, hit a few keys on his keyboard, but then immediately abandoned his computer, picked up a notebook, turned over the page to reveal a blank one and told me that I had been called in so that he could get to know me better. I had nothing to worry about; all I had to do was answer *all* his questions and I *should be* out of there in no time. I muttered something in acquiescence, shuffling awkwardly in my chair.

This anecdote was the beginning of a presentation that was initially announced as an audiovisual presentation commencing with a set of unadorned questions: How come my name is Christian? How to build a memory of present-day limits of living? How to layer the memories that are sometimes contradictory, even though they are all true? How to reconcile the singular national and official memory with the multiple individual, collective memories, and perhaps even the geographical, geological and ecological ones?

The idea was to address these questions through sonic and visual fragments from a collaborative and open-ended film, *People Who Think Together Dance Together*. The film constructs social ecologies through 'audiosocial' structures in the form of a playlist that draws from artistic assemblies, philosophical conferences, social gatherings, pedagogical convenings and spiritual conversations, within and beyond spaces and knowledges that come out of historical ruptures, discontinuities, disjointed continuities and other such modes of thinking. Indeed, *People Who Think Together Dance Together* is the name of collective parties and sonic gatherings initiated by the artist and librarian Rangoato Hlasane as an integral component of the symposiums of Another Roadmap for Arts Education Africa Cluster, a

research project on the history of arts education undertaken within a network of educators, artists and researchers working in four continents, initiated at the Institute for Art Education at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

### From ‘*what is art?*’ to ‘*when is it art?*’

But, as it is almost obsolete to mention, the moment of January 2020 in which the above announcement was made looks and feels very different from the month of May 2020 in which I write.<sup>1</sup> As has been the case in most parts of the world, in New York museums are closed and so are all spaces of display. Instead, some of the exhibitions, talks, screenings and performances have migrated online. Previously, before the onset of the current convergence of crises, the question of *what* contemporary art is could have been addressed by looking at *when* contemporary art is accessible: contemporary art had been artworks that wider publics and audiences scarcely encounter before noon and rarely past 6 pm (9 pm on select days of the week). In other words, the contemporary art preserved, mandated and conserved by the gallery and the museum is barely lived with. I was already fascinated by something akin to the sociology of the quotidian of such artwork that is not lived with. And now, with the nationwide mandatory sheltering directives that are currently in effect in order to minimize the spread of the virus, this new restriction of mobility reminds me of my personal encounter with the immigration officer. The following is a reflection on how this paradox of ‘artworks that are not lived with’ gives shape to artworkers as strangers in their own home. In order to do this, I return to my encounter with the HSI immigration officer.

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1. I had prepared this presentation as an address to the CRMEP-ICA *Thinking Art* conference in London at the end of February 2020. However, I had to cancel my travel in anticipation of the global lockdowns now in effect in response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and did not attend the conference.

'Basically', the officer explained to me as I sat in what felt like a *detentio* in his office, 'you were flagged up in our system because you are travelling from Mali.' He paused and looked directly at me. 'What do you do for work? What were you doing in Mali? How long were you there for? Where did you stay? Who were you in contact with? What places did you visit?' I was taken a little aback by the rapid questioning and mumbled that I had attended the Bamako Biennale held across a number of cultural institutions in Bamako, the capital of Mali. I had stayed at Hôtel l'Amitié and my entire journey had been organized by the Office of the Malian Minister of Culture on whose invitation I was, in fact, travelling. I showed the officer a press release, my invitation letter, and the badge and tote bag I had received at the Biennale. I even produced a picture of Salif Keita, which I had taken at one of the opening ceremonies at the National Museum of Mali. I had also taken a photograph of the president himself, but, I said, I was more pleased with my picture of N'Diaye Ramatoulaye Diallo, the minister of culture, because I had found her opening speech nothing short of electrifying.

'What is a biennale?', the officer asked. He was hard to read. I was not sure if this was a genuine question. He also asked who Salif Keita was and repeated his earlier question: 'What do you do for work?' 'I am an artist', I finally responded, hesitantly. 'A visual artist', I quickly clarified. I was myself starting to question what that actually meant and whether that was actually what I was. The officer unhurriedly took some notes. He must have felt my piercing eyes on his hand because he stopped to tell me that the object of the interview, as he called it, was for him to build a comprehensive profile of me, so that, assuming the interview was successful, next time my name was inadvertently flagged, the 'system' would automatically dismiss my case. I would then be admitted into the USA without the need for this HSI third-degree processing.

I momentarily relaxed until the officer asked again: ‘What is art?’ I took another close look at his face but could not determine a single emotion. I concluded he was deadly serious. Startled, the officer’s question – ‘what is art?’ – became ‘what does art do?’ I remembered that it was in my greatest interest to speak at the readiness of my listener, as artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan would say. My listener could very well be unsympathetic to my enthusiasm and I had to be very mindful of what I said. However, despite my best intentions, the question distilled itself into ‘what does artworking not do?’, and from there my mind tricked me into moving to ‘what does artworking undo?’

### **What does artworking not do?**

As I sat opposite the immigration officer trying my best to answer his questions to his satisfaction, my mind was computing a hypothesis that an artwork is an index of the artist’s actions, whereby artists are social figures with free agency, capable of interpreting and transforming their senses, actions, movements and other matter – as well as those of whom they represent – into works of cultural value. As I was in self-preservation mode, my thinking engines inverted this axiom and an artwork started to reveal what the artworker does *not* do.

Here, an artwork seemed to appear as a depository of what I saw as the ‘non-actions’ of the artworker. Non-actions are not inactions. Artworking is rarely doing nothing; there is always an expenditure of energy and labour involved in its production. It is always a material reality, though sometimes formless. Thus this non-activity is indeed an expenditure of energy and this energy is *undoing* something. This is because an artwork sets itself against the background from which it emerges, this emergence being a process of social, cultural and sometimes, when ‘successful’, economic detachment. In turn, this detachment is

what distinguishes an artwork from other artworks, but also from 'work' in general. This emergence from the background is essentially a reference.

I am not sure if the officer understood what I was saying, or, if he did, I am not sure he agreed with me. He might be right to question my hypothesis because, paradoxically, it follows from *refusing* the foreground to the reference from which the artwork emerges. In fact, an artwork *claims* the foreground; it sets a new front and it detaches the artwork from its background. In other words, an artwork *undoes* the foreground of its reference, its 'previousness'.

By this time, the officer was asking me where I was born. I do not always welcome this question, precisely because, as an artworker, where I was born is sometimes part of my previousness that I may strive to undo, for surely one cannot be an artist and still have a nationality... Effectively, I thought, the attraction to an artwork, its success and its acceptance reside in the resolution of this tension: despite the artist's non-action, the artwork emerges and distinguishes itself from the background, and materializes itself as work of cultural value. I pointed out, gently, that my place of birth was stated on my passport.

### **Artworking and the 'generative' erasure of reality**

I continued to diligently answer the immigration officer's questions, but my mind was on its own runaway train of thought. A work becomes an artwork through 'sculpting'. The emergence of an artwork is both a removal and a shaping of matter, effected in order to transform the perception of 'reality'. This is an equally paradoxical phenomenon of 'generative' erasure. Even when performing, dancing or painting, artworking *removes* reality, shaping one form of reality into another, by landscaping perception.

By now the officer was examining the stamps in my (Dutch) passport. This made me think of ‘landscape’ or *landschap* in Dutch, which originates from shaping the land. I thought about how this ‘scaping’ could be observed in most artistic fields whereby reality is sourced as raw material to be shaped. One can think of history as the source of reality, society as the source of reality, technology as the source of reality, discipline as the source of reality, popular culture as the source of reality, genealogy as the source of reality, language as the source of reality, and so on.

### **Sources of reality and their manifestation in artworking**

Reflecting on these sources of reality pointed me to the artistic forms that result from the ‘scaping’ of these sources. For example, I thought how certain artworks take technology as their historical referent and suggest what the future might look like if this technology became the societal norm. Similarly, archives and their contents emerge as artworks that source history. The artworker’s role therein tends to include interventional acts, editorial reordering, museological presentations and polemical or corrective propositions for or against a historical account contained in the source material. Alongside other obvious benefits, the agency of such archival interactions serves to validate the commissioning institution, even where the work is critical of it.

Next I thought about how artworking institutions are modelled after the preservative imperative of the museum. This is, of course, also the case for institutions that do not sell or collect artworks. I remembered an expression I had read somewhere: in terms of ‘differential inclusion’, an artworking institution will always benefit from the benevolence – and the antagonism – of an artwork. I then landed on socially engaged artwork, which is the way my own practice is regularly categorized. I heard whispers in my inner ear. Socially engaged artwork tends to be undertaken



through sourcing reality from the community, drawing from the human, social, historical and cultural resources of community groups in the expanded neighbourhood, network or cluster of the commissioning institution. The outcomes of these interactions are preceded by workshops where an expert is invited to lead a programme of learning that benefits the artist and the participants or contributors and sometimes also the institution. From these workshops, artworks may emerge. They might be recordings of the workshops, new events hosted by or including members of the community, as well as craft-based objects produced through some kind of transferable skills workshop. The collectively produced objects could be redistributed as exhibitions, or distributed across the community to the stakeholders involved. At times, the artworks are 'useful', as in the case of public artworks, for instance: beyond their symbolic aspect, these also have a functional purpose inside or outside the commissioning institution.

I continued to indulge in thinking about how artworks that emerge from the background of genealogy are developed through the archetypes of education. Many of them are described as research-based projects, curatorial research or artistic research, and their substance and their outcome are material, even when the focus is a theme, a theorem, a thesis or a theory that may be rewarded in the form of an academic degree, a fellowship or an associate position at an artworking institution. These activities may be presented as survey exhibitions that overview regional, national or transnational thematics; as biennales and their satellite appendixes; or as stagings within research exhibitions and vice versa. The exhibited works may include archives, films, partial or complete libraries and settings or scenes that function as pedagogical hubs or working stations. Accompanying volumes or catalogues are published. What is crucial here is not the singularity of the work but the argumentative ability of each work towards one thematic, curatorial subject or position.

The same genealogical background can be sourced from the categories of the 'body', whereby the anatomical body, the social body, the cultural body, the public body, the historical body or the political body all serve as a source of reality to be reshaped. A reshaping of the perception of reality is at play and the artwork that sources the manifestations of the body partakes in this reshaping. The processes through which these artworks are produced tend to involve 'performance', which is a category as narrow and as broad as the concept of art itself.

The objective of a performance is to do something or to achieve something. In financial and managerial idioms, performance is an indicator of the properties and the attributes of an actor; for example, an asset, a resource or a product. A sales agent, for instance, performs well if they meet or exceed their sales target. A website or an app performs well if it attracts readership, downloads or airtime. In other words, performance is linked to labour and, because wherever there is labour there is exploitation, performance indicates how such exploitation can be minimized – or maximized. The yield of this exploitation is sometimes expressed through a salary, a bonus, a profit or a loss, but its measure, albeit arbitrary, is how well or how badly the actor or agency in question has performed.

But how was *I* performing? Was I going to be allowed back into the country? Maybe I did not really care at this point, continuing to explain what art 'undoes' to the officer. Performance is a compelling category for examining an artwork as a depository of non-actions, being unlike other categories of artworking that are rooted in the tradition of an artist studio and/or its contemporary equivalent working spaces that are usually inaccessible to the viewing public. A performance may of course require the use of a studio to research, rehearse and develop the performance, but the delivery and the experience rely on the presence of an audience while the artworkers (re)produce

the work – while labouring. The double presence of the artworkers and the public is thus the actual product of a performance; it is a prerequisite, and sometimes even the object and motivation behind the production of the work. A performance seems to say: I exist. This body exists. This somebody exists. There is virtue, value, validity or urgency to my experience and to the existence that produces it.

Even when an artist appears either pre-recorded or live on a screen via a remote appearance infrastructure, or when the artist enlists deputies, participants or collaborators that carry out the performance on the artist's behalf, what matters is the presence, the biography, the existence, the problem, the body of the artist or what/who they represent. Performance is the production of body matters, and the social and cultural conditions in which such a body can exist. It is a process of affirmation of the matters of the body and its lives. The cultural valuation, circulation and distribution of performance in spaces of display depend on the public attendance of commissioned or self-initiated events. For this, performance seems to necessitate a public and a stage on which a performance takes place, and unfolds, corrects, redresses or addresses a given history, problem, memory or future. Furthermore, it is the object of a performance to 'produce' a public and a stage. It can be an institutional aim to stage events, workshops and performances in order to produce new policies and new publics. As such, even when the performance is transgressive, this serves to accumulate further social standing for the performing artist and the commissioning cause or institution.

In this sense, performance seems to fuel every form of artworking. But what is artworking performing and why – to achieve what? What is the finality of the performance and what does it *not* do? In other words, in what way does an artworker's performance shape and reshape reality? How can the presence of the artist reveal what they have undone? In what ways can

an artist's performance reveal their non-actions? The presence of the artist in any given space of display, be it domestic, public or privately owned, is framed as a 'belonging' in the centre or in the margin. In effect, belonging is the object of performance. Performance and artworking in general are a process of affirming belonging, and the contention resides in the recognition of what the centres are and what the margins are.

### **Fine artworking and the gold standard of all artworking**

I went on to think about how *fine art*, at least in English, is art for art's sake, in the sense that the finality of artworking is art itself, but I also thought that the denomination of fine art might be a specific financial categorization of artworking. Fine art might even be the symbolic immortalization of the class that such art represents. In other words, fine art's claim to be unbothered by the political is a veiled claim to conserve the social reference from which it emerges.

Indeed, sometimes artworking supposes detachment from reality, but (fine) art, in fact, draws from (art) history as the primary source of reality from which it shapes itself, but this time without unshaping or undoing such background. An artwork may also offer a commentary on another artwork. It can, of course, also offer a commentary on a work from popular culture or a non-fine artwork. There is great merit to these mutual commentaries. For instance, a fine artwork can speak against the absence of fine artworks in previous histories: an artwork can be produced by a member of an under-represented community.

This under-representation means under-collected and this generally culminates in finally fitting into a world that has thus far rejected some of its members. To fit in may impute adjusting to or accepting injustice, and this could mean that those

injustices will continue. However ambiguous this gesture of differential inclusion may appear, speaking against deliberate absences can be crucial and urgent, because a fine artwork, virtually or actually collected by a museum, is the gold standard of all artistic productions.

The comments artist and researcher Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa came to mind here: the museum should not only be understood as a building ‘in the sense of a place to go and look at art’; a museum should also be understood in ‘its function within the context of fine art’s discursive field’. This is because, at least ‘within Western fine art discourses, the “museum” essentially functions as a gold standard – a guarantor of value. Even though you may never go to a museum, let alone have your work collected by one, belief in the merits of its existence and a relative consensus regarding its position and function means that pretty much everything that exists and occurs within art’s discursive field somehow happens in relation to it – even when that relation is antagonistic.’<sup>2</sup>

In that sense ‘fine’ art or the art inside the actual or virtual museums is the art that evaluates and therefore immortalizes all other artistic expressions.

### **Online and offline centres and margins**

The reader might be pleased to learn that I was admitted back into the country without further complications. In fact, I am writing this at my desk in New York, surrounded by all the comforts that a cherished home can bring. However, once again, as any reader will be aware, the world of early December 2019 differs greatly from the present moment of May 2020:

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2. Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, in conversation with Aicha Diallo, *Contemporary And*, 1 October 2014, [www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/a-lot-has-changed-in-the-four-years-since-i-started-visiting-kampala](http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/a-lot-has-changed-in-the-four-years-since-i-started-visiting-kampala) (accessed 20 November 2015).

the outbreak of Covid-19 has forced all public life to grind to an abrupt halt and to proceed mostly from private homes, for those who can afford them. I still think about the encounter with the immigration officer, who asked me how I earn a living. Good question. I avoided the question by explaining vaguely how the finality of an artwork indeed resides in its ability to be transacted. This transaction is of course financial, but it defines the transcultural transactions across the orbital system of the museum and funding institutions alike, and the infrastructures in between, including the commercial gallery, and its network of philanthropists, dealers, art fairs, not-for-profit institutions and art schools. 'Why would The Mondriaan Fund want to support projects outside the Netherlands?', the officer asked me.

In a way, the answer to this question is a reflection on the double and simultaneous movements of belonging that an artwork makes, from margins to the centres, and vice versa. The Mondriaan Fund is a virtual type of museum, and any museum is the imagined finality of artworking, the conscious or inadvertent guarantor of keeping the body that matters culturally, of staging justice in the form of recognition and (re)distribution. But in this financialized, transactional ecosystem, the body that really matters is that of *Homo economicus* of some sort, a trader.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the museum is a living sarcophagus, a public sepulchre of *Homo economicus*. It is nearly obsolete to repeat them here, but at that moment the words of André Bazin came rushing through my brain:

at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defence against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To

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3. Sylvia Wynter, 'Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man', in Jane Givanni, ed., *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*, London: British Film Institute, 2000.

preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural, therefore, to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone.<sup>4</sup>

### **Universal variability of artworking**

In fact, in order to convince the immigration officer that I was not 'a bad guy', I told him that I had received the European Union Art Prize at the Bamako Biennale. This made me think of the announcements of artist prizes in general, which tend to be accompanied by brief quotations from the awarding jury panel members, who preoccupy themselves with this question: in what way has the artist 'preserved' and at the same time 'advanced' their field of knowledge? The assumption here is that the winning artwork is shaped from a reality sourced from a given, verifiable and quantifiable phenomenon, but in a novel and distinct way that reflects the time, space, culture, society and historical moment in which the artwork is produced. In other words, the artwork has to be similar in many respects to the existing artworks from art history, but the new artwork also has to be distinguishable in one or more significant ways. If this is the case, then the shaping of reality proceeds by way of *sampling* reality.

During my encounter with the immigration officer, my mind really was unsparing, and paradoxes piled up, born of artworking's imperative to not only preserve culture or reality, but also transform this mortal and transitory reality into something immortal and intransigent. Artworking is not only the performance of 'I exist', but especially of 'I shall exist'. Paradoxically, fine artworking also proclaims 'I have always existed'. This imagined pre-existence of artworking transforms the individual 'I' into a universal 'I', into a subjecthood that institutes a universal

4. André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 (1967), pp. 9–16, p. 9.

variable. The institution of this universal variability of artworking aims at transforming and preserving subjects, cultures and realities beyond their physical existence and manifestations. Inevitably, this need to preserve culture by representing it in the future is bound to clash with opposing visions of what the past, the present and therefore the future of reality should be.

If the object of such sampling of reality is to produce a universal variable, this same sampling of reality can also produce cultural, social and political margins: it is the nature of artists to perceive their reality as marginal, even where they themselves are or represent the centre. A prize, an award or even a commission is an example of such contradiction, whereby the centre is perceived as the margin. I felt that this paradox only became heightened at this moment of the museum closures.

### **From referential to compositional artworking?**

'Social Ecologies/Presenting Catastrophe' is the title of the panel to which I would have contributed at the 'Thinking Art' conference at the ICA in London. I am not sure if I have addressed this theme here, but I have learnt that, although paradoxes are not problems as such, I am compelled to conclude that the current situation of physical distancing has forced the museum to rethink the obviousness of its own body. In effect, since bodily proximity to most of the material substances that constitute the memorial practice inherent to the museum is currently impossible, art institutions have rushed to render their content digitally, beyond their normal opening hours, in much the same way that artists work and operate. Computers and the Internet are obviously quite material, but differently so from the structures that give shape to painting and sculpture – the ancestral ghosts of artworking. But in this process, the more the museum has a collection, the more unconvincing their online presence



has become: the more institutional an institution, the more it suffers from a principled infirmity to respond meaningfully to the urgency. This awkward illiteracy might be explained by their mandate to 'conserve', as opposed to intervene. In a way, this objective could also help to explain why artworking produces strangers at home: it is, to paraphrase an email from artist and theorist Kodwo Eshun, because a catastrophe – a pandemic, in the current case – exaggerates all anti-conservative, hyper-conservative and post-conservative tendencies at the same time.

In the guise of a conclusion, it makes sense to return to the 'reality' about which I have deliberately spoken without questioning or problematizing it, because of the lack of space. In the words of philosopher and educator Emmanuel Banywesize, it is a condition whose present history has embarked on a future course driven by the control of knowledge and digital technologies, enforced and dominated by a totalitarian capitalism which accommodates political authoritarianisms. Far from being predictable, this future is unstable and uncertain. It harbours multiple crises and deadly threats, barbarities, enmities, as shown by the multiple decisions to close borders, by the withdrawal into nationalistic exceptionalisms, and by the persistence of discourses informed by the enduring temptation to inflict death on layers of fellow humans whose members are still perceived as inferior and transformable into guinea pigs for 'scientific' progress and the affirmation of power. Beyond the celebration of the digital revolution, and in the face of planetary viral threats, the present manifests itself in 'the crisis of humanity which cannot manage to constitute its own humanity, and therefore, the crisis of the globe still incapable of becoming a world, and the crisis of humans still unable to accomplish their humanity'.<sup>5</sup> This crisis constitutes a challenge to bodies, feelings,

5. Edgar Morin, *Pour sortir du XXe siècle*, Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1981, p. 345, my translation, cited in Emmanuel Banywesize Mukambilwa, 'L'humanisme comme pilier de

emotions, intelligence and more. In particular, it challenges the educational, representational and conservational institution as a space for the production and transmission of knowledge and relations. The challenge consists in rebuilding new spaces for the imaginary, drawing from the knowledge practised by all forms of life, toward a new thought capable of apprehending, unambiguously, the co-belonging of all humans – and in fact also all non-humans, and the non-human humans – to a common life. In so doing, artworking could move from the estranging referential mode to a compositional praxis, as a movement that heightens the responsibility of all, in the face of a shared vulnerability.

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la Politique pour la vie. Réflexion sur le Covid-19', April 2020, published in Centre d'art Waza 2.0, a WhatsApp group initiated by the Lubumbashi-based art institution of the same name.

# Image credits

## INTRODUCTION

*Structura Concept*, Belgrade, 2019

## MATERIALISMS

*Digital Deineka*, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2015

*(At the Construction of New Workshops, 1926)*

## ART & LABOUR

*Maintenance Work*, Fundacion NMAC, Vejer de la Frontera, Andalusia, 2018

## INSTABILITIES OF FORM

*Picture Window*, Basel, 2019

## SOCIAL ECOLOGIES, INTIMATIONS OF CATASTROPHE

*Die-In*, University of Paris-8, Saint-Denis, 2019

All photographs © Peter Osborne

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# Index

- Accardi, Carla 80  
Adorno, Theodor 128, 134, 150, 151,  
156, 164, 171–3, 175, 176  
Agnetti, Vincenzo 141  
Anderson, Chris 23  
Arendt, Hannah 127, 129  
Aristotle 56, 166  
Arrighi, Giovanni 155
- Bagić, Aida 114  
Bal-Blanc, Pierre 105  
Banotti, Elvira 80  
Banywesize Mukambilwa, Emmanuel  
209  
Barad, Karen 14, 15, 18  
Batteux, Charles 62  
Bazin, André 206  
Beckett, Samuel 116  
Benjamin, Walter 14, 144  
Bennett, Jane 19, 20, 52, 56  
Bojadzijeve, Manuela 117  
Braidotti, Rosi 12, 18, 45, 54, 56  
Brancusi, Constantin 141  
Brenner, Robert 155  
Broodthaers, Marcel 141  
Bryson, Norman 140  
Burgin, Victor 163  
Burnham, Jack 162, 163
- Cage, John 150  
Castoriadis, Cornelius 138  
Cheah, Pheng 31, 51, 52  
Chow, Rey 51, 52  
Chukhrov, Keti 121–2  
Chun, Wendy 23  
Cixous, Hélène 3, 5, 16–18, 28  
Clark, T.J. 64, 65, 66  
Colebrook, Claire 26  
Consagra, Pietro 81, 82, 87–90, 92,  
95, 96, 98, 99  
Coole, Diana 45, 51  
Crogan, Patrick 16
- Danto, Arthur C. 128, 131  
Deleuze, Gilles 18, 55, 128, 167, 171, 174  
Democritus 53  
Denes, Agnes 141  
Derrida, Jacques 30, 52, 53  
Diallo, N'Diaye Ramatoulaye 197  
Dickie, John 128  
Dietzgen, Joseph 32–8, 46, 49–51, 53,  
57  
Drucker, Joanna 13, 25  
Duchamp, Marcel 131, 132, 141, 142,  
143, 145, 146, 149, 150, 157  
Duncan, Carol 99  
Düttmann, Alexander García 128

- Engels, Friedrich 32, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 46  
 Ernst, Wolfgang 21, 22, 24, 25  
 Eshun, Kodwo 209
- Federici, Silvia 98  
 Feuerbach, Ludwig 48  
 Filipovic, Elena 165  
 Fisher, Mark 8  
 Fitzgerald, Zelda 92  
 Flanagan, Barry 141  
 Foster, Hal 145, 164  
 Fraser, Andrea 65, 66  
 Frost, Samantha 45, 51
- Gallagher, Ellen 141  
 Galloway, Alex 17, 19  
 Galt, Rosalind 26  
 Gilbert, Jeremy 143  
 Glissant, Edouard 190  
 Gotovac, Tomislav 111  
 Greenberg, Clement 162, 164  
 Guattari, Félix 167, 171, 174
- Haacke, Hans 141  
 Habermas, Jürgen 140  
 Hamdan, Lawrence Abu 198  
 Hamilton, Richard 141  
 Haraway, Donna 28, 185  
 Harman, Graham 18  
 Hartsock, Nancy 35  
 Harvey, David 140, 154, 155  
 Hayek, Friedrich 161  
 Hegel, G.W.F. 42, 48, 57, 169, 170–73  
 Hlasane, Rangoato 195  
 Hoki Nobuya 141  
 Holt, Nancy 141
- Iveković, Sanja 101, 106, 112–22
- Jameson, Fredric 155  
 Judd, Donald 61
- Kant, Immanuel 46, 166, 173, 177  
 Karakayali, Serhat 117  
 Keita, Salif 197
- Kember, Sarah 12  
 Kentridge, William 141  
 Kirchoff, Gustav 39, 40  
 Kittler, Friedrich 21, 22  
 Kosuth, Joseph 163  
 Kracauer, Siegfried 151  
 Krauss, Rosalind 142, 164
- Lacan, Jacques 149  
 Lash, Scott 11  
 Lazzarato, Maurizio 143  
 Lehman, Jessica 189  
 Lehyt, Cristobal 141  
 Lenin, V.I. 32, 55  
 Lippard, Lucy 99  
 Lombardi, Mark 141  
 Lonzi, Carla 80–100  
 Lozano, Lee 141  
 Lukács, Georg 149, 154  
 Lutz, Helma 121  
 Luxemburg, Rosa 32, 154
- McLuhan, Marshall 5, 11  
 Maiolino, Anna Maria 141  
 Manzoni, Piero 141, 150, 152, 153  
 Marcuse, Herbert 61  
 Marte, Boris 103, 106  
 Marx, Karl 32, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 48, 49, 51, 53, 56, 57, 147, 172  
 Mattick, Paul 155  
 Mehretu, Julie 141  
 Mercier de la Rivière, Pierre-Paul Le 42, 43  
 Michel, Christian 70  
 Moretti, Franco 14
- Nesbit, Molly 142  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 55, 174  
 Nochlin, Linda 99
- Orozco, Gabriel 141  
 O’Riordan, Kate 12, 23
- Parikka, Jussi 19, 22, 25  
 Picabia, Francis 141, 145–7, 149, 157  
 Plekhanov, Georgy 32, 37



- Polanyi, Karl 161, 162  
Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph 47
- Raine, Craig 31  
Rancière, Jacques 143, 147, 148, 153  
Rebentisch, Juliane 133  
Reynolds, Sir Joshua 71  
Rhomberg, Kathrin 105  
Ricardo, David 42, 57  
Rockburne, Dorothea 141
- Said, Edward 156  
Simondon 166, 167, 168, 171, 174  
Smithson, Robert 162  
Steyerl, Hito 13  
Streeck, Wolfgang 161  
Sutherland, Keston 18  
Szeeman, Harald 164, 165
- Thompson, Krista A. 188  
Treichel, Andreas 101
- Tsing, Anna 185, 186  
Tuttle, Richard 141
- Vasari, Giorgio 62  
Vergès, Françoise 118
- Walker, Kara 141  
Wall, Jeff 112, 113  
Warhol, Andy 113, 114, 132  
Weinstein, Matthew 26, 27  
Werner, Michael 102  
White, Cynthia and Harrison 69–71  
Williamson, John Ernest 188, 189  
Wilson, Siona 119  
Woditscha, Ursula 119, 120  
Wolukau-Wanambwa, Emma 205  
Wood, Ellen Meiksins 8
- Zangwill, Nick 131  
Zeller, Daniel 141





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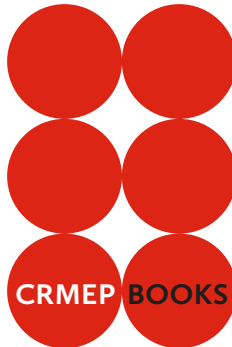
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