

AN INCOMPLETE  
READER FOR THE  
ONGOING PROJECT,  
"ONE DAY,  
EVERYTHING  
WILL BE FREE..."

Alexandru Balasescu  
Regine Basha  
Michel Bauwens  
Federica Bueti  
Céline Condorelli  
Burak Delier  
Annika Eriksson  
İsmail Ertürk  
David Graeber  
Lawrence Liang  
Matteo Pasquinelli  
Elizabeth A. Povinelli  
Joseph Redwood-Martinez  
Dieter Roelstraete  
Katya Sander  
Joshua Simon  
Carey Young  
Slavoj Žižek

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n.b.

*An Incomplete Reader for the Ongoing Project*, “One day, everything will be free...” is perhaps better understood as approximating software rather than a book or an exhibition catalog. Just as with software releases—where version 0.0.1 is followed indefinitely with sporadic updates, bug-fixes, and complete revisions—the publication is, and will always be, necessarily incomplete and unfinished. Changes will be made to reflect critique and response from audiences and interlocutors, adjustments in trajectory for the overall program, and the addition of interventions or proposals from artists, writers, and possibly a few uninvited outsiders. Ongoing releases will be distributed in the form of a free pdf and occasionally in an inexpensively-bound hard copy. A recent print edition of the reader can also be found at SALT Research.





*“One day, everything will be free...”*  
SALTonline.org, SALT Galata, SALT Beyoğlu

The seemingly indispensable tools we use daily for social networking and online communication are all increasingly provided to us for free. In fact, as our way of life is becoming dependent on these and other gifted resources, many of the largest and most influential companies in the world are beginning to profit more from giving certain things away than from charging for them. Perhaps this growing flood of gifted goods implies that one day, everything will be free. But in any case, it becomes increasingly obvious: we’re not paying for it because we’re not the customer, we’re the product being sold.

Critical engagement with gift economies, open culture, intellectual property, and immaterial exploitation is not so new or unfamiliar, but the very real effects of these concepts are changing the way cultural practice is structured and how the once paying audience is now being enticed to remain involved, to keep giving, or to pay in other ways.

But how are these new economic structures and their fundamental contradictions understood by cultural producers and social activists? How to engage with and situate oneself in relation to systems that facilitate the free exchange of information and ideas, yet simultaneously operate as structures of subjectification or mechanisms of corporatized social responsibility? Perhaps this could just start with a question a little closer to home: SALT is free, but at what or whose cost?

*“One day, everything will be free...”* is a long-term research project aimed at opening up questions about the economics of cultural institutional practice that in part stem from SALT being privately funded initiative partially located in the former Ottoman Bank. In order to encourage conversations about support structures for contemporary cultural production in Turkey, and to engage with cultural producers and audiences as they respond to and understand these structures, the dispersed research project will develop indefinitely with and through the participation of diverse publics and interlocutors.





Aiming to learn from and point toward the range of projects and proposals that have already set this line of inquiry into motion, this project began and will continue through a series of conversations with a group of collaborators who are already doing work in and around this topic. Initial conversations with Regine Basha, Celine Condorelli, Burak Delier, Elmas Deniz, Annika Eriksson, İsmail Ertürk, Goldin+Senneby, Katya Sander, and Carey Young shaped the structure for the research project—several of these conversations have been transcribed and published on SALTonline.org—and throughout 2012, these and other interlocutors will be invited to give lectures, research presentations, or produce new work within this framework.

Matteo Pasquinelli, Laurel Ptak, Özgür Uçkan, Caleb Waldorf, and Eva Weinmayr have been invited to give lectures and research presentations for a program titled FUTURES AND OPTIONS, scheduled for March 15th and 16th at SALT Beyoğlu. These presentations will allow us to hear from a range of protagonists who have variously engaged with the topics under consideration in this project. This program will also provide a setting to invite the range of responses that will carry this project forward.

Taking the form of a curated video program accompanied by a text layering historical, cultural, and personal narratives addressing escape, withdrawal, strategic separatism, and the human strike, a program titled HERE AND ELSEWHERE will develop daily from March 20 to March 25 in the Walk-In Cinema at SALT Beyoğlu. This project will provide a platform for considering cultural obsessions with the possibility of an outside in relation to the implications of these scenarios where the price of everything effectively drops to zero—where crowdsourcing is the new outsourcing and everywhere is elsewhere.

Situated throughout SALTonline.org, SALT Galata, and SALT Beyoğlu, *“One day, everything will be free...”* consists of a series of projects that will continue to look at the varied and conflicting legacies and implications of free economies, the recent turn within the field of cultural production toward reengaging with dormant economic imaginaries, and the changing relationships between what is privately owned and publicly shared in society.

*“One day, everything will be free...”* is organized by guest researcher Joseph Redwood-Martinez in collaboration with SALT Research & Programs.



**March 15th – 16th**

**FUTURES AND OPTIONS**

SALT Beyoğlu, Walk-In Cinema

Situated throughout SALToonline.org, SALT Galata, and SALT Beyoğlu, *“One day, everything will be free...”* consists of a series of projects that engage with the promises of free economies, contemporary finance, and the cultural institution. This much is known: the task at hand is to implicate the relationship between SALT and the funding institution. But in order to do this, the project begins with a detour, a direct detour, directly into that which is made to disappear from view: associative histories and certain technical aspects of the job; knowledge economies, cultural piracy, class relations, and structural contradictions.

Matteo Pasquinelli, Laurel Ptak, Özgür Uçkan, Caleb Waldorf, and Eva Weinmayr have been invited to give lectures and research presentations for a program titled **FUTURES AND OPTIONS**, scheduled for March 15th and 16th at SALT Beyoğlu. This series of talks will allow us to hear from a range of protagonists who have variously engaged with the topics under consideration in the long-term research project, *“One day, everything will be free...”* This program will also provide a setting to invite the range of responses that will carry this project forward, or perhaps derail it entirely.



**March 15. 18:00****Eva Weinmayr, *The Piracy Project***

*The Piracy Project*, run by artists Andrea Francke and Eva Weinmayr, is an international publishing and exhibition project exploring the philosophical, legal, and practical implications of cultural piracy and creative modes of reproduction. Building from an open call to establish a collection of pirated book projects, the project aims to develop a critical and creative platform for issues raised by acts of cultural piracy.

Eva Weinmayr will be in residence throughout the month of March and *The Piracy Project* will come to İstanbul in the form of a temporary reading room at SALT Research. In her presentation, Weinmayr will reflect on her residency thus far and discuss unauthorized approaches to the re-contextualization of cultural works—focusing not only on artists and writers, but also on publishers, programmers, academics, and business people who are challenging existing structures and authorities as well as ways of producing and redistributing cultural products and values.

Eva Weinmayr, who has exhibited internationally at Zacheta National Art Gallery Warsaw, Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin, Kunstverein Wolfsburg, and Rodeo, İstanbul, is also the co-director of AND, a platform for experimental publishing.

**March 15. 19:15****Laurel Ptak, *Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question***

Now is a moment when the distribution between what is privately owned and publicly shared in society is being fundamentally scrutinized, questioned, and protested in many parts of the world. It is a basic thread that connects Occupy Movements, the Arab Spring, the Chilean Winter, the European Debt Crisis, and numerous other sites of struggle. As such, it is clear—it is time to ask and collectively rethink what notions of property, ownership, exchange, and value mean to us.

To what extent can the context of art provide us with space to propose, discuss, or test new models and theories around such terms? After all, what is the relationship between public and private that the art world itself proposes? How does it construct narratives of property, ownership, exchange, and value inside its mechanisms? What might be a more ideal scenario?

As part of **FUTURES AND OPTIONS**, Laurel Ptak will share her curatorial observations, strategies, research, and projects, which attempt to navigate the difficult terrain between artistic practice, knowledge economies, class relations, intellectual property, and open culture in various ways.

Laurel Ptak is curator at Tensta konsthall in Stockholm where her current projects look at questions of intellectual property, art's relationship to labor, and the possibilities and limits of online space as a deterritorialized form of public space.

**March 16. 16:30****Özgür Uçkan, *Wikileaks: Welcome to the New World Order***

In his recent book, *Wikileaks: Welcome to the New World Order*, Özgür Uçkan describes the confrontation and continuous battle between Big Brother (i.e., governments and corporations) and the little brothers. He looks specifically at those groups and individuals who disseminate dissident information by using and adapting the technologies of the very organizations they seek to disrupt. Uçkan will present this subject in relation to the war between the global surveillance industry and lurker communities behind hi-tech “invisible internet projects.”

Özgür Uçkan teaches, publishes, and consults on subjects relating to knowledge economy, network economy, innovation economy, creative industries, urban economics, information design and management, and communication design

**March 16. 18:00****Caleb Waldorf, *Interface and Labor***

Caleb Waldorf will examine the contemporary relationship between interface and labor, with a particular focus on the role of current social networking systems in facilitating a “free” exchange of information, ideas, and affects, while simultaneously acting as structures of subjectivization and self-management under the guise of our contemporary form of capitalism. Through looking at projects such as The Public School and *Occupy Everything*, Waldorf will discuss other strategies and tactics to deal with the inherent contractions in the tools we use and mobilize as instruments of resistance.

Caleb Waldorf is an artist currently living in Berlin. In 2007, he co-founded and is currently the creative director of *Triple Canopy*, an online magazine, workspace, and platform for editorial and curatorial activities. Since 2008, he has served on the committee for The Public School, an open framework for pedagogy started in Los Angeles by Telic Arts Exchange. He is also an active contributor to *Occupy Everything*, an anti-capitalist platform dedicated to militant research, critical pedagogy, and public practices.

**March 16. 19:00****Matteo Pasquinelli, *Surplus and the Common***

The February 2010 issue of *The Economist* reported that digital information is growing out of measure, out of the storage and computing capacity of the current network infrastructure. The article appeared to be very optimistic and comfortable about new business opportunities of such a trend, but some data provided by the report itself point to a structural contradiction. The question for us is whether the technological limits of the Turing universe will unveil a political limit: if the excess of social cooperation and communication feeding the mediasphere may turn into a sort of political Singularity. Indeed, the current debate on network economy and new immaterial commons appears to have obliterated any notion of surplus or excess and to be dominated by metaphors of horizontal, linear, and symmetrical cooperation. Moving from the critique of the Marxian law of value advanced by Hardt and Negri in *Commonwealth*, Pasquinelli will discuss the political models that are employed to describe the notion of surplus and how this should affect any politics of the commons.

Matteo Pasquinelli ([www.matteopasquinelli.com](http://www.matteopasquinelli.com)) is a writer and theorist. He wrote *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (2008) and edited the collections *Media Activism* (2002) and *C'Lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader* (2007). Together with Wietske Maas, he developed the art project *Urbanibalism* ([www.urbanibalism.org](http://www.urbanibalism.org)) and he is a member of the international collective Uninomade ([www.uninomade.org](http://www.uninomade.org)).





**March 20 - 25**

**HERE AND ELSEWHERE**

SALT Beyoglu, Walk-in Cinema

Possibilities of escape. The construction of outsides. That which cannot be seen.

Taking the form of a curated video program accompanied by introductory presentations, **HERE AND ELSEWHERE** will develop daily from March 20 to March 25 in the Walk-In Cinema at SALT Beyoğlu.

Including videos by Öyvind Fahlström, Medium(h)avare, Lutz Dammbeck, Jean-Luc Godard, Allan Sekula and Noel Burch, and the filmmaking collective Ahooha, the selection of works variously engage with the legacies of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, open-source culture, cybernetics, neo-luddism, passive resistance efforts, and community living projects.

In an attempt to stage two things together without an explicit goal to reconcile or compare them, Annika Eriksson, Caleb Waldorf, and Joseph Redwood-Martinez will stage introductions to each video by way of short presentations layering historical, cultural, and personal narratives addressing escape, withdrawal, strategic separatism, and the human strike.

Along these two registers, **HERE AND ELSEWHERE** will provide a platform in the Walk-In Cinema for considering cultural obsessions with the possibility of an outside in relation to the implications of these scenarios where the price of everything effectively drops to zero—where crowdsourcing is the new outsourcing and everywhere is elsewhere.



### March 20

Öyvind Fahlström, *Du Gamla, Du Fria*, 1971. 100”  
Swedish with English subtitles

Introduced by Annika Eriksson

A street theatre company wants to change the Swedish social democratic system. They want to reach the public through action-based theater performances that are set up at a number of work places. After a while, however, the members of the group realize that these “political actions” have no effect or relevance, so they then turn against their own lifestyle and establish a “community living” project in the countryside. It soon becomes apparent that this is not a great success either...

In the wake of tactics of withdrawal and anonymity being reconsidered within the realm of social activism—in favor of deliberately undetermined and open-ended modes that insist, instead, upon occupation as a mode of address—it would be timely to consider what is at stake in maintaining the position that in the face of seemingly incontestable forces, the only thing left to do is to do nothing at all.

Examining life within and against the rapid transformation of urban spaces under neoliberalism, artist Annika Eriksson has produced a range of photographic and video work that engage with this question of passivity as a legitimate form of political resistance. By way of an introduction to Öyvind Fahlström’s *Du Gamla, Du Fria*, Eriksson will give a short artist talk and show excerpts from *Wir sind wieder da* (2011) and *Wir bleiben/The Last Tenants* (2011), two projects recently shown in İstanbul.

Annika Eriksson is a Swedish artist living in Berlin. Recent exhibitions in 2011 include *Scenarios about Europe*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Leipzig, *Public Folklore*, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz and *Gallery NON*, İstanbul. Upcoming shows in 2012 include solo exhibitions at *Kunsterhaus Stuttgart* and *Gallery Krome*, Berlin. She will participate in the *Kiev Biennale* and in “When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes” at *Wattis Institute*, San Francisco.



INTRODUCTION TO DU GAMLA, DU FRIA  
BY ANNIKA ERIKSSON  
/ JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Annika Eriksson was unable to travel from Sweden to do a site visit at SALT and introduce *Du Gamla, Du Fria*. In her absence, Joseph Redwood-Martinez read a short text on one of Eriksson's recent exhibitions in Istanbul:



In her first solo presentation at NON, Annika Eriksson continued her observations of life within and against the rapid transformation of urban spaces under neoliberalism. *Wir bleiben / The Last Tenants* (2011), a four-channel video installation with a narrative soundtrack, portrays the last remaining tenants in a building in the middle of Berlin where the artist once lived. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the neighbourhood's rapid commercialization and the resulting increase in rent has forced the building's inhabitants to relocate. The subjects of Eriksson's work, however, have resolved to remain where they are. In the central screen of the installation, one of the tenants, Oliver, appearing like an exhausted flâneur, explains how rapidly the area changed around him. Gentrification, it seems now, is a process that cannot be contested. The only way an individual can resist these changes is by doing nothing at all.

As Oliver and the other tenants loiter in the apartment, sharing their stories of the neighbourhood's transformation, various meditative scenes of the building's interior and exterior played on the surrounding screens. A looped shot of the façade shows what appears to be a bed sheet hanging out the window, with the words 'WIR BLEIBEN' (we're staying) scrawled in red paint across the fabric – literally and desperately occupying that presumed border between public and private space. Flags or wall paintings with these words are increasingly scarce in Berlin as resistance to gentrification is beginning to seem nostalgic, but when Eriksson asked the last tenants if she could hang the banner outside their window, they were more than happy to oblige. The artist's action, however, does not come across as a petty redeployment of a trope from the 1990s for its own sake; rather, the desperate and impromptu handling of the banner points to an awareness of its anachronism coupled with the desire to understand what this temporal spasm might suggest.

Eriksson's interest in claims to political resistance through passivity was also taken up in *Wir sind wieder da* (We're Back, 2011), a video showing a group of punks hanging out in an empty lot in Berlin. The large scale of the video projection created a one-to-one relationship between the viewers in the gallery space and the punks smoking and drinking as their dogs bark and run around this non-site. Yet, even as their presence is amplified, a resolute distance is maintained; the punks turn their backs to Eriksson's camera, acting as if they are not being filmed at all. The video operates as a portrait that has refused itself, but it is also a temporal extension of an autonomous space claimed by the tenuous act of fighting acquiescence with passive aggression.

As a looped video, Eriksson's work implies that the punks will always be there, in the sense that their occupation contains no terms for its abatement; but also in the sense that their actions will never amount to any change. On the one hand, this infinitely extends the moment of potentiality, but on the other, it traps the gesture in a hermetic loop that sustains itself on its own amnesia – soon forgetting where it started or how it might amount to anything but an impotent display of opposition. And it is this tension between the two implications of indefinite occupation of space and time – the being-eternal and the melancholia of timelessness – that mark Eriksson's project as especially apposite within the context of social activism today, but also, more specifically, within the rapidly changing urban environment of Istanbul.

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### March 21

Medium(h)avare, *Brunnenstrasse 183*, 2010. 67"  
German with English subtitles

Introduced by Caleb Waldorf

A free-style documentary on life in the final days of the last squat in Berlin. Before everyone in this illegal community living project was evicted by the police in 2009, Medium(h)avare assembled this video, allowing us a frenetic glimpse at the day-to-day happenings that constituted this form of passive resistance typical of Berlin in the 90s.

Caleb Waldorf is an artist currently living in Berlin. In 2007, he co-founded and is currently the creative director of *Triple Canopy*, an online magazine, workspace, and platform for editorial and curatorial activities. Since 2008, he has served on the committee for The Public School, an open framework for pedagogy started in Los Angeles by Telic Arts Exchange. He is also an active contributor to *Occupy Everything*, an anti-capitalist platform dedicated to militant research, critical pedagogy, and public practices.





## INTRODUCTION TO BRUNNENSTRASSE 183 BY CALEB WALDORF

By way of an introduction to *Brunnenstrasse 183*, artist Caleb Waldorf read a selection of excerpts from the reader for “There is nothing less passive than the act of fleeing...” a thirteen-day seminar he organized in 2010 at The Public School in collaboration with Fiona Whitton and Sean Dockray.



### THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

[The Public School Website](#)  
[Telic Website](#)

[Map of activities](#)  
[Contact](#)

Organized by Sean Dockray,  
Caleb Waldorf and Fiona  
Whitton

#### There is nothing less passive than the act of fleeing...

Deadlock: perpetual war, failing economies, the crumbling of education, capitalist realism, our environment in ruin, hostility everywhere.

Resistance? Confrontation? Insurrection?

Exodus: silence, autonomy, occupation, withdrawal, invisibility, friendship.

The Public School is organizing a 13-day seminar, meeting each day at a different location in Berlin. This seminar takes the form of an open reading group, where the texts discussed each day resonate with the site selected. On 18 July The Public School and The Office will host an event to be held at Salon Populaire. The day will unfold as a series of participatory conversations and workshops.

Please join us in Berlin or at The Public School to sketch, scheme and build new imaginaries. ([Los Angeles](#), [Philadelphia](#), [New York](#), [Brussels](#), [Paris](#), [San Juan](#), [Helsinki](#))

Please sign up to our mailing list [here](#) to receive information on the events and to follow the conversation.

Space will be limited for the reading group and the event on the 18th. Please let us know if you plan on attending. In the event that too many people want to participate, we will adjust our program to accommodate as many as possible. Those who can attend the entire seminar will get priority. Please let us know by filling out the form below. All locations shown are tentative and will be confirmed by email to the people who have signed up below.

#### Day 1

4 July

[INTRODUCTION TO CIVIL WAR \[EXCERPTS\]](#)  
[TIQQUN](#)

[INSEL DER JUGEND IN TREPTOWER PARK](#)  
17H

#### Day 2

5 July

[SPECULATIONS ON THE STATIONARY STATE](#)  
[GOPAL BALAKRISHNAN](#)

[LEIPZIGER PLATZ](#)  
18H

#### Day 3

6 July

[THE FRIEND](#)  
[GEORGIO AGAMBEN](#)

[EMAIL TO FIND OUT LOCATION](#)  
18H

#### Day 4

7 July

[SUPPORT, PARTICIPATION, AND RELATIONSHIPS TO EQUITY](#)  
[CELINE CONDORELLI + EYAL WEIZMAN](#)

[THEORY OF THE QUASI-OBJECT](#)  
[MICHEL SERRES](#)

[TRAFFIC ISLAND AT TU ON ERNST REUTER PLATZ](#)  
17H

#### Day 5

8 July

[POLITICS OF THE COMMON](#)  
[MICHAEL HARDT](#)

[LIFE IN LIMBO](#)  
[TURBULENCE EDITORS](#)

[TEMPELHOF AIRPORT](#)  
18:30H

#### Day 6

9 July

[ANIMAL SPIRITS: A BESTIARY OF THE COMMONS \[EXCERPT\]](#)  
[MATTEO PASQUINELLI](#)

[FUNKHAUS NALEPASTRASSE](#)  
17H

#### Day 7

10 July

[COMMUNIQUE FROM AN ABSENT FUTURE](#)  
[RESEARCH AND DESTROY](#)

[PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE PHILOSOPHY](#)  
NATHAN BROWN, MARIJA CETINIĆ, GOPAL BALAKRISHNAN, AARON BENANAV, JASPER BERNES, CHRIS CHEN, JOSHUA CLOVER, MAYA GONZALEZ, TIMOTHY KREINER, LAURA MARTIN, JASON SMITH, EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS

[INTELLECTUALS AND POWER](#)  
MICHEL FOUCAULT + GILLES DELUEZE

## Industrial Society and its Future

### INTRODUCTION

1. The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in "advanced" countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. The continued development of technology will worsen the situation. It will certainly subject human beings to greater indignities and inflict greater damage on the natural world, it will probably lead to greater social disruption and psychological suffering, and it may lead to

### March 22

Lutz Dammbeck, *Das Netz The Unabomber. LSD and the Internet*, 2003. 120"  
German with English subtitles

Introduced by Joseph Redwood-Martinez

*Das Netz - The Unabomber, LSD and the Internet* is a documentary film exploring the life story of neo-luddite Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, using it as a prism to engage with the often unexamined history of the Internet. Director Lutz Dammbeck takes an unorthodox approach to the material, speculating about the darker side of technological innovation and touching on the connections between subjects as diverse as Marshall McLuhan and Nam June Paik, hippy idealists Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey, counterculturalists John Brockman and Stewart Brand, and cyberneticists Robert W. Taylor and Heinz von Foerster.





## INTRODUCTION TO DAS NETZ BY JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

a catastrophic event  
always distant, at something of a remove,  
on our computer screen or repressed by our psychic coping  
mechanisms.

but also always here—variously present

absolutely central to Western thought, where  
it has worked its ravage throughout the millennia,  
uniquely able to refresh its appearance  
to meet the needs of each new era.

but in recent years, catastrophe has also been  
put to preemptive use. we no longer need a  
catastrophic event to be subjected to the logic  
of catastrophe. as such, its operational terrain  
has expanded to the entirety of time and space

catastrophe has become the condition  
of contemporary life

•

Dear Federica,

I've been reading over your text on catastrophe and escaping the rhetoric of crisis. I'll need to organize my thoughts before I can send you a response to the current draft of the text, but you wrote something in your last letter that I'm trying to make an effort to understand. You said: "Sometimes it is so difficult to put such disparate ideas on the table and give them a meaningful form, but honestly, I don't think is a matter of language. What we're doing is more about being able to further complicate the complexity of reality by finding a way to articulate it."

But I find myself asking: What compels you to further complicate a situation that is fragmented and complex? In what ways do you feel this approach will allow you to make a meaningful contribution to this field? Where are you receiving this idea that there is a need for actors to not provide clarity but to produce further complexities and complications? Would it be possible, instead, to not just describe, but to perform a discursive shift wherein that which is produced is no longer capable of being perpetually reinscribed into and sustained by the very conditions which it presumes to critique?

As part of an ex situ residency in relation to this project I've been organizing at SALT, in Istanbul, I'm staying right now at a community associated with the Center for Sustainable Farming, in Southern India. Drawing from natural farming and common-sense practices from traditional agriculture, the whole place was deliberately designed around simple systems that require for minimum inputs and maintenance. Five days a week, we wake up around sunrise and everyone begins work together at 6:15 am. We plant seeds in the nursery, weed the vegetable beds, make compost, mulch the cashew and mango trees, harvest fruits and vegetables, and so on. Nothing we do is terribly demanding, and there is no need to use machines or expensive tools. Our work, which is more of a meditation than anything else, lasts until 9:00 am, when we all gather for breakfast on the veranda of the main hut. Once breakfast is served, everyone is free to decide how they will use the rest of the day--some stay around to read a book or jump in the mud pool, others go immediately into town to meet with friends or help someone with a project. It's rather simple, really, and I've taken to this way of life much more than I had anticipated. The way things are structured here gives people the time to really observe their surroundings, to develop a meaningful understanding of the processes within which they play a part, and to which they contribute with their daily actions.



In trying to grasp the constellation of factors that account for this place existing in the first place, I've been spending most of my time learning about sustainable agriculture from Vivek, one of the permanent residents of this community.

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About six years ago, Vivek was working on a PhD in biology, conducting research on hybrid plants and preparing to write his dissertation. He was in an extremely academic environment where people were always trying to think of "more sophisticated" ways of doing agriculture with the assistance of technological innovations. In India, at least, this leads to a situation where many graduate students are working in university labs funded by biotech companies, or funded by seed companies owned by chemical companies owned by pharmaceutical companies. They work on a very specific project, usually unaware of how it exactly will be implemented or whose interests it serves, but they are always told, and believe, that through their lab work, they are making a meaningful and necessary contribution toward more sophisticated, intelligent agriculture and health care systems. The research topic could be related to pest control, crop failure, loss of soil quality--there is a range of typical subjects--but the solution, in these contexts, is always presumed to be found

in further innovation. Whatever the problem is, with enough research funding and lab work, these students come to really believe that some type of fix can be developed to treat all of the symptoms. Or at least bring them into a manageable level.

But this scenario where we are driven not by addressing the root of the problem and instead only toward more sophisticated, complex, and complicated ways of working--this scenario is never questioned. But this is obvious--that those in a position to actually make a decision are precisely the ones who can't afford to question this premise. And this is simply because they know very well that it would threaten their job prospects, social status, and very way of life if the solutions they are calling for were to be found in simple, clear, and intuitive methods that can easily be practiced and taught. So, instead, they come to depend on--and perpetuate--complexity, hierarchy, and scarcity.

There are research grants, expensive labs, field stations, and tenure positions established. Ambition and prestige become a motivating factor and people are soon willing to work completely isolated, on a single project, just for the opportunity to get published, or even reasonably recognized in their sub-field. This results in a situation where very few people have an idea of the overall picture--they know what they are working

on, but it is never clear what they are working toward. And of course, this is paradigmatic of the root problem of everything we're dealing with right now—from the collapse of the financial system to the degradation of biodiversity—the root problem has to do with a complete failure of holistic thinking in a world of increasingly complex, fragmented, and ubiquitous information.

When Vivek started to investigate the larger context around his work, he learned that his research—and entire university department—was being supported by a seed company owned by a chemical company (and this was all owned by a pharmaceutical company). The coffee seeds he was working to hybridize were given away for free to farmers in East Africa. But since the hybrid varieties were highly dependent on chemical fertilizers in order to germinate, develop, and provide fruit, this gift obliged the farmer to later buy massive amounts of fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, and so on. The seed Vivek was producing was highly efficient in the first generation, but the companies he was working for understood very well that the hybrid varieties would devastate the soil and require the permanent management of the system—the gifted seeds initiated a cycle wherein the East African farmers became completely dependent on the chemical companies. And, ultimately, the conditions are made ripe for the pharmaceutical companies to move in.

The moment Vivek put together this whole picture—that in the name of complexity and sophistication he was actually working to guarantee dependency on a seed company backed by a chemical company backed by a pharmaceutical company—he left his position at the lab. He walked in thinking that he would be working toward some type of viable solution—some better way of working—but he left when he realized that his work was essentially developing the problems that would keep the next generation of bioengineers busy. Sustaining crisis. Always distant, at something of a remove—on our computer screen or repressed by our psychic coping mechanisms—but also always here, variously present.

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I've been thinking about how this applies to what has characterized my general approach these last few years. I've maintained that the task at hand is to make a meaningful contribution to the discourse. But this is always predicated on the assumption that we need more sophisticated, complex ways of thinking and working. We find ourselves at lecture series and panel discussions, or editing critical journals that we don't even have the time to read because we're just barely making our deadlines. We've become as odd and obvious as vulnerable: always already aware that our work in this capacity depends on a sustained complacency in relation to that very thing toward which we're supposedly critical. Complacent, because you don't bite the hand that feeds you. You take the money and run. But the press conference becomes too painful. It catches up with you, anyway, this rhetoric of distraction and appeasement.

We used to think that it was just a funding problem: an uncomfortable structural contradiction that within the context of art, the most apparently democratic discourse was supported by the most un-democratic forces in society. But this issue with the support structures goes at least one step further. We've internalized our complacency to the point of perpetuating it on an affective register. We're participating in what has become a niche discursive industry out of criticizing dependency and pitiful working conditions—but the tools we use to make our efforts recognizable simultaneously act as structures of subjectivization and self-management consistent with our contemporary form of capitalism. Continuous interest. Perpetual noise. We're working too much; we're constantly distracted. We don't have time to think. I thought we were doing something that wasn't supposed to get reinscribed back into the system, but at the end of the day, it just follows the status quo of what capitalism has set up for us and how it expects us to perform as a subject. We are ready and able, exactly up to the point of having to really actualize critique. Because right at that point, we would no longer recognize ourselves.

The task at hand is to imagine that which does not exist, in order to bring to nothing that which is. But at the same time, the task at hand is to grasp the significance of what is, to perform—on a bodily and discursive level—a shift away from the rhetoric of distraction and appeasement.

To make our current way of life obsolete. On its way out, so to speak, together with the system that made it possible.

But what if we just abandoned this compulsion toward complexity and, instead, revisited this effort to live simply within systems we understand.

The root problem of everything we're dealing with right now has to do with a complete failure of holistic thinking in a world of increasingly complex, fragmented, and ubiquitous information. Furthermore, we have lost the capacity to take something seriously as a solution unless it, too, is complex.

We've entirely missed the point of critique if we manage to convince ourselves that the solution lies in the substitution of one ideology for another. One complexity or obfuscation with another. Or even worse, to think we can innovate our way out of the crises we've gotten ourselves into.

A this is precisely where Vivek had arrived when he left his position at the research lab. The highly complex agricultural systems he was working to develop were structurally incomplete, required constant maintenance, and, in the long run, effectively destroyed the social and natural environment in which they operated. In order to complete the research required for his dissertation, Vivek opted instead to set up his own initiative. In this way, his work at what became the Center for Sustainable Farming can be seen as a response—an attempt at working

with extremely simple systems to meet our needs through a collaboration instead of competition with ecological processes.

I know that nothing I've said here is particularly new. We've already heard this, many times. But what did we really understand? Perhaps all this amounts to is a proposal that we try very precisely to take account for the position of the body whenever we make claims. To maintain an awareness of how our thinking can shift as we shift from context to context.

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It's rather simple, really, and I've taken to this way of life much more than I had anticipated. The way things are structured here gives people the time to really observe their surroundings, to develop a meaningful understanding of the processes within which they play a part, and to which they contribute with their daily actions.

I'll have to end here. I look forward to hearing from you -

All the best,  
Joseph

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January 2012





### March 23

Jean-Luc Godard, *Film Socialisme*, 2010. 102"  
French with English subtitles

Introduced by Joseph Redwood-Martinez

A video in three parts. Part one, *Des choses comme ça* ("Such things") is set on a cruise ship and features numerous conversations among a selection of passengers, all of whom are on holiday. Characters include an aging war criminal, a former United Nations official, a Russian detective, and a brief cameo appearance by American singer Patti Smith. In the second part, *Notre Europe* ("Our Europe"), a girl and her younger brother summon their parents to appear before the "tribunal of their childhood," demanding serious explanations of the themes of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The final movement, *Nos humanités* ("Our humanities"), visits six legendary sites of true or false myths: Egypt, Palestine, Odessa, Hellas, Naples, and Barcelona.



## INTRODUCTION TO FILM SOCIALISME BY JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

“To imagine those things that do not yet exist, in order to bring to nothing the things that are.”

But is it possible to have an image of something that does not yet exist?

And what do we grasp when we look at images?

A tentative answer could be that images are what remain to be seen—that is, images are both what is yet to be seen and that which is left over. Images are, by virtue of their very existence, indicators of that which has already been, and that which was fleeting. Yet at the same time, it is in their embeddedness in a concrete discourse that images yield a clear semantic meaning and as such indicate what has already been while simultaneously function to point toward that which is yet to be.

“Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming, and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us.”

I would like to propose that it is through sustaining this tension between the anticipatory and recollective that we can abandon this nagging and impossible question of “what” and ask ourselves, instead, “how is it to be done?”

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How to organize for the anti-capitalist transition?  
(September 2011)

What does a radical, vital subjectivity look like?

What constitutes a sign of life? What does its projection consist of?

This brings our consideration back to our physicality—our vital organs in relation to the subjectivities we cultivate through the functioning of our discourse. The task at hand is to imagine new ways of being together in the world—but we have become so obsessed with the seeming impossibility of this task that those who are actually involved in living and working within these visualizations cannot even be recognized by the functioning of our discourse.

The task at hand is to reconfigure ourselves as critical corporealities: there are other ways of being in the world. The project is not about restoring dignity to a peripheral subject, it is about image-ing the multitude of collective efforts that contribute daily to the politics of an anti-capitalist transition. It is a series of images. “The elaboration of modes of life that are also modes of struggle.” A series of images in which the subjects are not the victims of inexplicable forces, but the minor characters that do, and must, play a part toward their modification and reform.

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that which remains to be seen.



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Dear Professor Harvey,

In March of 2010, I was at a lecture you gave at a small college in upstate New York. In your presentation, you emphasized that increasingly, governments in Western Europe and the United States have demonstrated a vested interest in perpetuating crises. The logic here, of course, was that by running up the debt, they could justify sweeping austerity measures. Speaking from the perspective of March 2010, at least, you argued that the crisis we find ourselves in is not an economic crisis, it is a political crisis. You concluded by proposing that we again take up Lenin’s question, “What is to be done?” but instead ask “how.” Urgently needed was a serious consideration of how to organize for the anti-capitalist transition.

I’m not taking issue with the way in which you used this comment as a conclusion instead of as a point of departure—this lecture was, after all, well before any of us could have anticipated the discursive and tactical shifts that would accompany the Occupy protests. Of more interest to me is the way in which your lecture, and especially the conclusion, was completely unaccompanied by images. Perhaps there is “nothing more convenient than a text.” Ironically enough, however, you were standing directly in front of an idling projector throughout your entire presentation. But what really strikes me is the way in which it would seem impossible for your lecture to have been accompanied by images—that image-making has taken leave of, has been pardoned from, this charge.

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How to organize for the anti-capitalist transition?  
(March 2010)

In many ways, this is indicative of a complete crisis on the Left where we have developed such a deep-rooted suspicion of images—their production, their circulation—that we have seemingly lost the capacity to believe in them at all. So, we arrive at a point where a discourse emancipates itself from the image world, but like a snake eating its own tail comes back again and again upon this conclusion that the task at hand is to imagine, to project:

other languages  
other modalities  
within flexible, temporary, unstable configurations  
unrestricted by measurable outcomes or predetermined expectations threatened by budget cuts.

efforts to grasp and locate, to actualize and inhabit this ongoing process in which we are all immersed. turning.

to bring together and extend a series of projects and interactions taking place between

a constant process by which concepts acquire extensions

that which remains to be seen.

All the best,  
Joseph Redwood-Martinez

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January 2012



March 24

Allan Sekula and Noel Burch, *The Forgotten Space*, 2010. 112”  
English without subtitles

Introduced by Joseph Redwood-Martinez

Based on Sekula's text- and image-based project *Fish Story* (1989-1995)—which sought to understand and describe the contemporary maritime world in relation to the complex symbolic legacy of the sea— *The Forgotten Space* follows container cargo aboard ships, barges, trains, and trucks, listening to workers, engineers, planners, politicians, and those marginalized by the global transport system. The filmmakers visit displaced farmers and villagers in Holland and Belgium, underpaid truck drivers in Los Angeles, seafarers aboard mega-ships shuttling between Asia and Europe, and factory workers in China, whose low wages are the fragile key to the whole puzzle. And in Bilbao, the filmmakers find the most sophisticated expression of the belief that the maritime economy, and the sea itself, is somehow obsolete.





INTRODUCTION TO THE FORGOTTEN SPACE  
BY JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

joseph redwood-martinez  
joseph redwood-martinez  
joseph redwood-martinez

1. Lukács + Critical Realism

structure. Lukács draws upon Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) to argue  
Critical Realism

that only when we are in the presence of narration do we become, as readers, properly involved in the  
detail that reveals the inner workings of a society. Each section of a portrayed totality is placed in a  
The Hungarian Marxist political theorist and literary critic Georg Lukács, whose thinking on the subject of  
action taking place. In this short essay, Lukács examines a similar horse race scene in both novels and to  
reality spanned over fifty years, developed the aesthetic concept of critical realism that has been taken  
contends that whereas Zola's description is characterized by passive observations, Tolstoy's narration and artistic  
definition of critical realism, which he defines as a "totality" that is not just a collection of parts but a  
up variously by several theorists, most notably Benjamin Buchloh and Hideaki van Gelder, as a point of

enables a more active engagement with the social world. In Zola's *Nana*, the horse race is depicted from that what seriously  
own which Lukács draws upon Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to argue that what seriously  
entry into the work of a painter is the social reality of the horse race, not the horse race itself. In the  
the standpoint of a painter, the horse race is not just a social reality, it is a social reality that is being  
concrete social reality. In the case of the horse race, the social reality is the horse race itself, not the single image  
thinking on the subject of the social reality of the horse race, the social reality is the horse race itself, not the single image  
the essay, however, is devoted to the social reality of the horse race, not the single image  
understanding. Lukács argues that the social reality of the horse race is not just a social reality, it is a social reality

Lukács' study is rooted in the Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
ins far as it is rooted in the Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
Narrate or Describe? Reality and the Unreality of the Social World. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
keeps the readers aware of the social reality of the horse race, not the single image  
independent point of view of the social reality of the horse race, not the single image

ultimately a literary and artistic practice that is rooted in the Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
In 1923, Lukács published a series of essays in the journal *Praxis* in which he argued that the social world is not  
spiritual. Lukács' study is rooted in the Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
the title *History and Class Consciousness* and a general sense of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
societal functions such as the function of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
*Philosophy* (1923/1993), and from the mid-1990s onward this term has appeared

– 1995), and from the mid-1990s onward this term has appeared  
a school of thought which  
and presents us instead of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
with the Hegelian and Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
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Lukács stated objectively of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
appropriated by art critics and historians to describe the photograph and its social reality. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
movement in the minds of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not

working in an entirely different cultural climate. In 2004, Sekula was  
readers' eyes. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
Marxism an emphasis on the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
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of society, and the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
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1970s to the present. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not

term is often loosely deployed to describe the artist's work in a  
Eastern bloc. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
unmoored from its relationship with Georg Lukács' thinking and, social  
Before looking at Lukács' thinking, it is important to understand the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
into uncertain waters. This paper is an attempt to take stock of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
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of detail such as the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
imperatives of critical realism. Once this ground is set, I will look at the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
In the latter, a Marxist tradition of critical realism, which provides a framework for understanding  
1970s to make notes of the way in which he draws on Lukács and other relevant influences. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
repressive conditions of the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not

conclude with a consideration of the way in which Sekula's critical realist project culminates, for the time  
of modification or reform. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
work risks missing the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
the state of the art that stands for the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
that new, powerful, the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
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labor's fundamental condition of negation. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not  
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these resistances with the social world. In this essay, Lukács argues that the social world is not

critical realism  
in and around  
the work of  
allan sekula

0. Abstract

Allan Sekula's photographic practice has often been discussed  
Benjamin Buchloh initiated this discussion in a catalogue essay  
– 1995), and from the mid-1990s onward this term has appeared  
artist's creative output. With apparent ease, a term developed by  
literary critic to make the case against both descriptive literary  
appropriated by art critics and historians to describe the photograph  
working in an entirely different cultural climate. In 2004, Sekula was  
"Critical Realism in Contemporary Art, Around Allan Sekula's Photo  
Sekula's work even functions as a case study for a larger tendency  
term is often loosely deployed to describe the artist's work in a  
unmoored from its relationship with Georg Lukács' thinking and,  
into uncertain waters. This paper is an attempt to take stock of the  
stronger connection between this concept and Sekula's praxis.  
I will begin with an outline of the historical development of Lukács  
realism; from there, I will consider the specific problems posed by  
imperatives of critical realism. Once this ground is set, I will look  
1970s to make notes of the way in which he draws on Lukács and other relevant influences  
conclude with a consideration of the way in which Sekula's critical realist project culminates,  
being, in *Fish Story*.





and I survive. But I can't do that if I have money.



### March 25

Ahooha, *Freedom Ahead*, 2011. 76"  
English without subtitles

Introduced by Joseph Redwood-Martinez

The grassroots filmmaking collective behind Freedom Ahead travelled between Thailand and India to gather narratives and insights from groups of people who are regaining control over their lives by being independent and living self-sufficiently. By leaving their former ways of life behind, the protagonists of this video are shown to obtain the highest valued asset of all time: real freedom. But unlike autonomist and separatist groups from the past, this collection of committed individuals does not constitute a movement—it is widely dispersed and fiercely independent; it is taking shape in universities, elementary schools, farms, and communities—a global humanitarian movement rising from the bottom up. Freedom Ahead surveys a number of projects and practices, including seed-saving initiatives, permaculture communities, and natural building projects, capturing these instinctive responses to contemporary global crises.



Dear Professor Davison,

I'm back in Istanbul again, working a project called "*One day, everything will be free...*" As part of an ex situ residency self-organized in relation to this project, I had spent the past few months at Sadhana Forest, a volunteer community in Southern India.

But this word "volunteer" is tricky in this context, and I wanted to write to you about a moment where people in the community came together to reflect on the constitutive meanings of what we were doing at the community in relation to this term. It might be helpful, however, to first provide some background information:

Sadhana Forest was established eight years ago as an ecological restoration project aimed at reestablishing the indigenous Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest that was clear cut 150 years ago throughout that entire region. Under French colonial policies, builders were encouraged to source the timber needed to build the city of Pondicherry from the surrounding areas—but there was no regulation on how they sourced this material or how much they were allowed to take. This resulted in complete deforestation that effectively destroyed the way of life for the rural populations—in many cases, as their crops failed and the top soil completely eroded into the nearby ocean, the villagers were forced to move into the nearby peripheral city slums. It's a

familiar narrative. Needless to say, by the early 2000s, the land in this area was considered to be absolutely useless.

But eight years ago, a small family was given a section of this land—about 200 acres—on the condition that they would act as the stewards of the property. They would not own the land—they were not interested in owning land, they were interested in making this their home, establishing a small community, and restoring the indigenous tropical dry evergreen forest. The thing is, they didn't really know anything about forestry, ecological restoration, conservation biology, or even the back to the land movement for that matter. And this is precisely what they attribute to their success—the fact that they knew and were honest about their not knowing anything.

•

And this approach turned out to hold a certain appeal. People began expressing interest in helping the family and they soon established a community, by the name of Sadhana Forest, along the lines of four basic principles:

1. Since deforestation is happening mainly because of animal husbandry (for example, the Amazon is being cut to grow soy—and 85% of that soy goes directly toward feeding animals for human consumption), they have decided to be completely vegan. Their decision is not dogmatic, but affirms their commitment to there being integrity and consistency in every aspect of their project such that all of their actions point in the same direction.

2. Looking beyond exchange economies, they have decided to run the whole project off of what they consider to be a gift economy. They are not really interested in philosophies of money, theories of the gift, or indebtedness in relation to free economies. The belief here is simply that when people have an inner feeling of abundance, they enjoy giving; when people don't feel abundance inside, they keep. There is no money used at Sadhana—no real money, fake money, alternative currency, or time notes. But there is also no barter or exchange system in place either. All work is unpaid, the meals are free of charge and open to anyone, and any events, screenings, or workshops are always available for free to the public. You do not need to show a card or fill out a form to participate in anything at Sadhana. As long as you are there, they will commit to taking care of your needs. This approach is not motivated so much by a critique of the capitalist system as it primarily has to do with finding a way to be consistent with the third point.

3. Everyone who wants to be at Sadhana can be at Sadhana. It is not a community formed through exclusion and discrimination. Anyone can stay there, and all events, meals, workshops, and meetings are completely open. As in nature: monocultures are weak, biodiversity creates resilience. Maintain diversity, and you will maintain resilience.

4. The community actively pursues practical, technical sustainable living. This includes growing organic food, using composting toilets, running entirely off the grid, and buying only local materials and supplies when needed.

Guided by these ethics, the community began intensive rainwater harvesting and tree planting in 2003. The main issue faced by this group eight years ago was the challenge of how to keep the water on the land—how to keep it from washing away during the monsoon season and carrying with it anything that could have developed into top soil. Through a combination of gabions, check dams, swales, edges, bunds, and contours, they were able to keep enough water on the land to plant a pioneer species of Acacia trees. Their first few attempts completely failed, but after a few years, their planting methods for tropical dry evergreen trees improved from a 40% to a 90% survival rate. But in order to do this, Sadhana Forest has grown from three people to a community of 20 permanent residents and about 1,000 short-term residents each year. Some people come for just a few weeks, others plan to stay for a month but finally get around to leaving after a few years have gone by. It's easy to get sucked in; life is simple there. Five days a week, you get up at sunrise with the rest of the community. At 6:15 am, everyone meets in front of the main hut for "morning circle." Here, people decide what they will be doing during what is called "first work." Some people water the swales or the vegetable gardens, others prepare for breakfast, but most of the community heads out into "the forest" to continue the work of planting trees. This lasts until 8:30am, when everybody meets up again at the main hut for breakfast. At 9:25, everyone gathers again for second work, typically, but not necessarily, doing something different from what they volunteered to do during first work—it's their decision. Lunch is at noon, and from then on, the day is yours to decide. Usually, there are workshops or projects throughout the afternoon. Nothing is mandatory, everything is open. Dinner is at 6pm.

•

Not long after I got to the community, a discussion started on whether what we were doing Monday through Friday during first and second work should actually be considered and referred to as work. Several people, myself included, started expressing concern over our use of the words "work" and "volunteer" to describe what was going on at Sadhana Forest.

We were watering the vegetable gardens and preparing breakfast, maintaining compost toilets and planting trees, but we recognized that in this context, the constitutive meanings behind these gestures had nothing to do with the word "work" as we knew it.

In *The Human Condition*, from 1958, Hannah Arendt draws a distinction between the three human activities of labor, work, and action. Labor, which is distinguished by its never-ending



character and creates nothing that endures, was the slave's occupation. Work corresponds to the fabrication of artificial things and was for the craftsman. Action, however, was for the free citizen: "Action [is] the only activity that goes on directly between men... [and] corresponds to the human condition of plurality.... While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition ... of all political life." And by extension, this corresponds with her definition of power as the human capacity to act in concert.

Nevertheless, when we came together to discuss alternatives to the word "work," using the word "action" in light of this characterization just didn't seem appropriate. For some, Paulo Virno's critique of Arnedt's distinctions made it impossible to borrow these terms, for others, it just seemed unlikely that these ideas had any real purchase on the circumstances at Sadhana, in southern India. In any case, it was obvious that what was needed was for the introduction of another term that would allow us to break out of this tripartite characterization of labor–work–action.

Someone suggested that we use the word "seva." In Sanskrit, "seva" corresponds with the concept of selfless service done without any expectation of a result or award for the person performing it. In most Indian religions, seva is seen as an essential

devotional practice. But with the explication of this associative meaning, some people felt uncomfortable drawing a connection between religious terminology and the characterization of the actions performed at Sadhana. Furthermore, many people felt uncomfortable using a word from a language most of us did not understand in order to semantically recharacterize an activity that presumably did not require translation to understand. Unable to find our way out of this dilemma, we eventually concluded to replace "work" with "seva." Importantly, this came down to an interest in the way in which the word *seva* replaced not only the word "work" but also the entire respective sentence structure and conceptual framework: you "work for" or "work with" or "work less" but *seva* is never said with a preposition. You would never say that you *seva* for someone or that tomorrow there will be less *seva*.

By now, we've lost interest in the idea of work entirely. All of those discussions about working more, working too much, finding ways to work less—they didn't get us anywhere. What is needed now is something that will allow us to move beyond these known distinctions and characterize, instead, engagement in activities with a sense of collective reverence and individual meaning.

After we decided to use "seva," someone in the group walked up to the chalkboard with the daily schedule, erased the word

"work" in "1st work" and "2nd work," and replaced it twice with the word "seva." The following day, we performed the same activities of the day prior—watering the vegetable gardens and preparing breakfast, maintaining compost toilets and planting trees—but this was no longer characterized as work and no longer carried this associative meaning. Same action, entirely different meaning. The vague yet precise, collectively held constitutive meaning of this activity found its articulation, instead, in the word "seva."

I'm coming to New York in May—let me know if you will be holding office hours any time after the 1st. And let me know if there is anything in Istanbul that I can pick up for you.

My best,  
Joseph

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January 2012





**March 6 - March 30**

**THE PIRACY PROJECT**

SALT Research, SALT Galata

*The Piracy Project*, run by artists Andrea Francke and Eva Weinmayr as part of the research program at AND Publishing, is an international publishing and exhibition project exploring the philosophical, legal, and practical implications of cultural piracy and creative modes of reproduction. Building from an open call to establish a collection of pirated book projects, the project aims to develop a critical and creative platform for issues raised by acts of cultural piracy.

Throughout the month of March, Eva Weinmayr will be in residence and bring *The Piracy Project* to İstanbul in the form of a temporary reading room at SALT Research. Through the residency, parallel events, and reading room, Weinmayr will develop a platform to discuss unauthorized approaches to the recontextualization of cultural works—focusing not only on artists and writers, but also on publishers, programmers, academics, and business people who are challenging existing structures and authorities as well as ways of producing and redistributing cultural products and values.

If you would like to make a contribution to *The Piracy Project*, please contact Eva Weinmayr at [and.publishing@csm.arts.ac.uk](mailto:and.publishing@csm.arts.ac.uk).

Eva Weinmayr, who has exhibited internationally at Zacheta National Art Gallery Warsaw, Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin, Kunstverein Wolfsburg, and Rodeo, İstanbul, is also the co-director of AND, a platform for experimental publishing based in London.



**April 11 + April 12**

**ABSORBING SURPLUS**

SALT Beyoğlu + SALT Galata

April 11 - SALT Beyoğlu, Walk-In Cinema

18:30 Ismail Ertürk, *Vortex of Meta-Finance*

19:00 Katya Sander, *Seeing What Power Sees*

19:30 Alexandru Balasescu, *Some Things About EVE*

April 12 - SALT Galata, Workshop I

6:30 Seminar with Ismail Ertürk

Following from the responses to **FUTURES AND OPTIONS** in March, **ABSORBING SURPLUS** is the second series of lectures within the context of the ongoing project, “*One day, everything will be free...*” This time, an expert on banking, an artist, and an anthropologist have been invited to elaborate on their attempts at grasping—or escaping—the elusive realism implied by the financialization of life.



**April 11, 18:30**

**Ismail Ertürk, *Vortex of Meta-Finance***

By way of introduction, Ismail Ertürk asks: “In the wake of the constant innovation of crisis, how do we make sense of and respond to the sound and fury of the financial vortex that feeds its own abyss as a solution?” Recently, Ertürk has been developing a conceptual framework of “meta-finance” to explain the dilemma of there being “no exit” from the current financial crisis. Increasingly evident are the economic and social implications of the 2008 financial crisis and its continuation as the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis. But epistemological, moral, and political responses to the financial crisis and the problems posed by present-day finance are vague and weak. There seems to be “no exit” from the status quo in both main-stream and radical academic and political thinking. Movements like “Occupy Wall Street,” for example, have found themselves drawn into an analytical cul-de-sac—1% versus 99% is an irrelevant realism in an age of meta-finance. In his presentation, and as a point of departure, Ertürk will examine how self-referential finance occupies a space larger than real economy in present-day capitalism.

Ismail Ertürk studied economics at Middle East Technical University, Ankara and New York University. In 1987, he joined the Manchester Business School as a Fellow in Banking. His recent research and teaching interests are on financialization, cultural economy, financial innovation, and the banking crisis. In 2011, he started collaborating with artists Goldin+Senneby within the framework of a project titled *The Nordenskiöld Model - An experiment in theatrical finance*.

**April 11, 19:00**

**Katya Sander, *Seeing What Power Sees***

Drawing from her recent works on capitalism, global financing, monetary systems, and the politics of everyday language, artist Katya Sander will talk about issues and questions that arise from wanting to “represent capital.” Katya Sander will talk about her operations with language, text, and voice in her films and interventions that aim at deconstructing the presumed naturalness of the reality presented to us by certain economic systems.

Katya Sander is an artist who investigates and tells stories about how certain notions take shape and circulate in our everyday language—and thereby also our social imaginary, i.e., what we imagine as possible and how we imagine it possible.

**April 11, 19:30**

**Alexandru Balasescu, *Some Things About EVE***

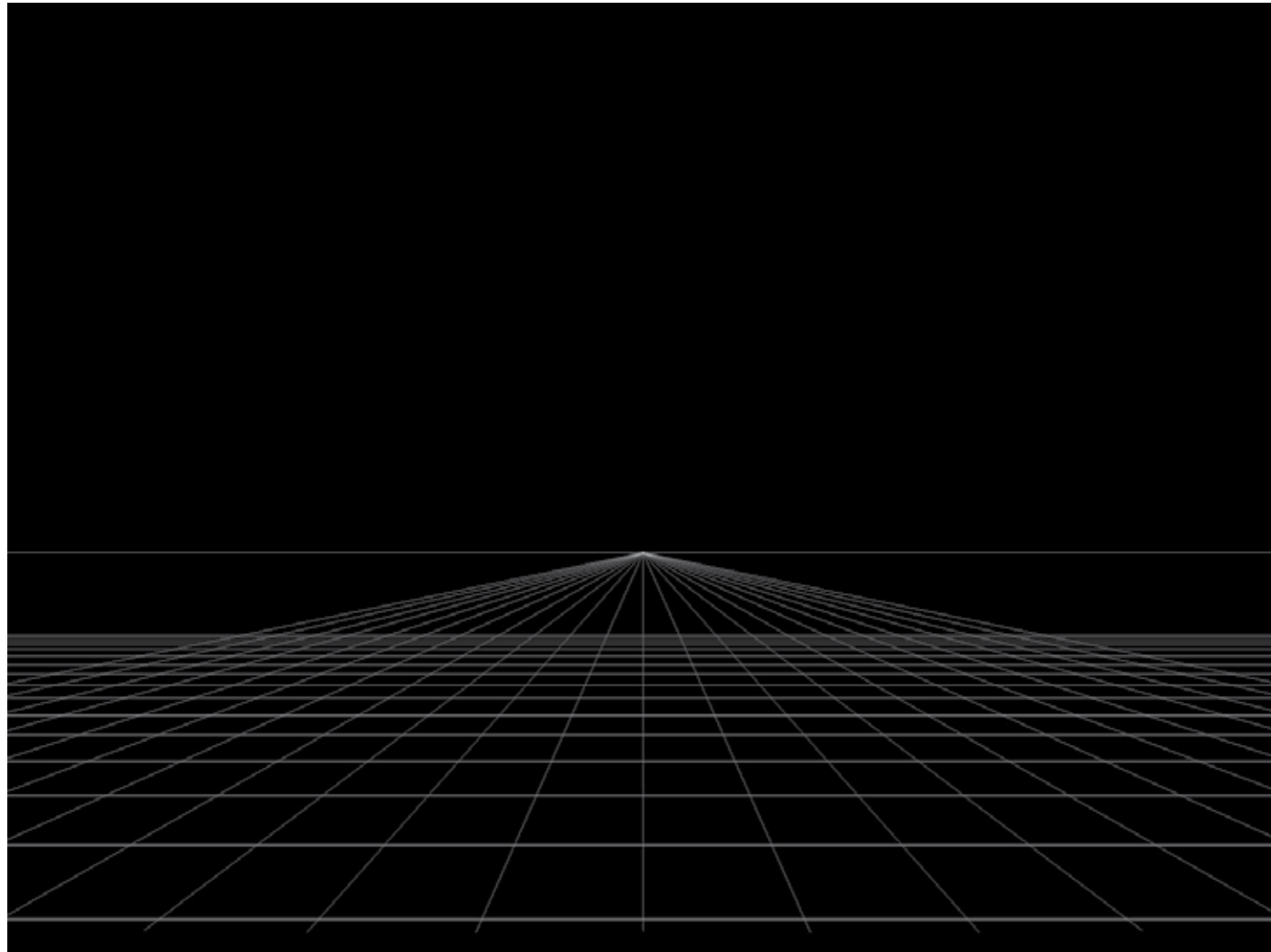
In a world of plenitude, humans generated a political economy of scarcity powered by a finite form of energy—the fossil fuel. An illusion of linear, limitless growth is maintained by the interplay between the excess of production and scarcity as a means of consumption. The hyper-mobile subject of this political economy is constantly produced in its interaction with the fetish object of mobility. By reflecting upon the car and its possibly imminent transformation brought by the electric engine, Balasescu will attempt to optimistically conclude by pointing to an option for a different type of economy, one based on abundance and cyclicity—not the illusion of scarcity.

Alexandru Balasescu is a researcher and author, currently practicing X-Anthropology (a hybrid approach to perceived reality). He currently lives in Istanbul and works at the Romanian Cultural Institute.

**April 12, 18:30**

**Seminar with Ismail Ertürk**

In an casual seminar setting, Ismail Ertürk will lead a discussion on themes from his presentation, “The Vortex of Meta-Finance.” This event is open to the public but seating is limited. Please RSVP to [redwood.martinez@gmail.com](mailto:redwood.martinez@gmail.com)



**Tuesday, April 17**

**NOTHING**

SALT Beyoğlu, Walk-In Cinema

18:30

“The introduction of zero in Europe coincided with that of the banknote in finance and the perspective point in drawing. So, from a European perspective, the signifier of nothingness is also the reference point of the origin of everything. But on a more mundane note, this also allowed for the financial system as we know it (and still rely on) today: without zero, positive and negative balances would not be possible.” - An interlocutor of the *“One day, everything will be free...”* project

Somewhere between an unguided tour and yoga nidra for the cultural institution, an exploration in nothingness will bring to the forefront the infinite possibilities encapsulated in nothing. This event will not consist of lectures, artist presentations, or video screenings. Nobody is planning to organize a question and answer period. It might just be an opportunity—collectively, individually, or somewhere in-between—to grasp the significance of nothing.





**Friday, April 27**

**FREE READER GIVEAWAY**

SALT Beyoğlu, Garden

18:30

The latest printed version of *An Incomplete Reader for the Ongoing Project, "One day, everything will be free..."* will be distributed for free in the Garden on the fourth floor of SALT Beyoğlu on April 27.

This update to version 0.1.6 of the reader includes the addition of interviews with artists Carey Young and Annika Eriksson, texts by Alexandru Balasescu and Federica Bueti, and an artist project by Burak Delier.

During this reader giveaway, there will be an open conversation on the trajectory and future possibilities for the *"One day, everything will be free..."* project.

# IN CONVERSATION: CÉLINE CONDORELLI AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ



**Céline Condorelli:** The residency I had at Platform Garanti in 2008-9 was largely to produce this book called *Support Structures*. With respect to the “*One day, everything will be free...*” project, the idea of a free economy, but mostly the idea of the “gift,” is something I can speak about in relationship to what I call “support.” The investigation into support structures was about trying to inhabit a territory for art production that would be in relation to those things that are generally overlooked: display devices such as frames or plinths—those things that are usually behind, underneath, or next to what is considered art production. There is, of course, a political dimension in forms of display that actually disappears from current discourses.

**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** What discourse does this term, “support structure,” belong to?

**CC:** In architectural terms, the idea of a support structure might be something like a scaffolding. In art terms, it might be a framing device. In cultural terms, it might be funding mechanisms. Support structures are the things that are supporting but somehow in the background, in the shadow of what is being produced, yet fundamentally condition what is being produced. And, more importantly, how it is being produced.

**JRM:** How is this related to the idea of the gift?

**CC:** These things are very related to Derrida’s notion of the supplement from the “Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, which is, by extension, related to the idea of the “gift.” The supplement is that which comes with—what is somehow exterior to the work but conditions the work itself. Specifically, there is one article in the *Support Structures* book that was written by Andrea Philips, which was in support of democracy. She talks about the idea of generosity and the idea of gifts and how they condition the politics of something. Mark Cousins, in another essay of the same book, talks about potlatch societies, where the gift is used as a strategy for power, for domination—it creates a condition of indebtedness which therefore has to be repaid, but it also creates confusion. It is not an innocent gesture at all.

**JRM:** Perhaps not.

**CC:** So, I’m interested in this indebtedness in relation to forms of support. And this is very relevant to SALT as an organization because Garanti is supporting this formation of culture, or this cultural formation, institution, whatever you might want to call it, as well as being supported by a Bank Organization and complex system of private and public funding around the world for projects, etc... And we know that there is a transaction there. We just don’t know what the transaction exactly is; there are different political agendas.

**JRM:** What does this mean, in terms of your artistic practice?

**CC:** At a micro scale, I’m interested in investigating the literal, physical objects that this type of relationship takes shape through, and how it has to do with the politics of place. The *Support Structures* book was really laying out the discourse for what kind of a practice that is, and *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* (2011), the project I’m doing for “Scramble for the Past,” is totally inscribed into this. By creating the display devices, or support structures, for the exhibition, whatever happens in the exhibition is happening within the conditions that I create. And I’m trying to reclaim these conditions of exhibition design, of display, but also, simultaneously of sculptural object making, as a site for an artistic practice. On one level, the project simply asks: As an artist, can you make a series of display devices that host an exhibition but are artworks in their own right? What type of relationships between objects and context does this create?

**JRM:** And what does this claiming of space produce?

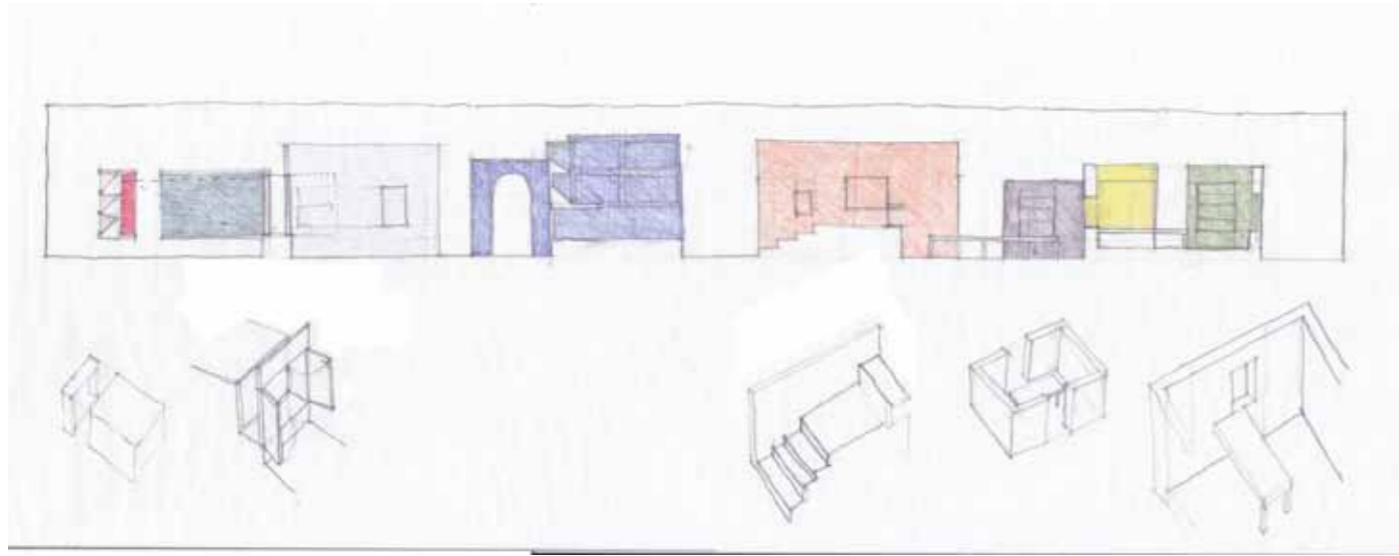
**CC:** It is a tricky thing to do because you possibly fall into what is considered the architecture, and therefore the assumed context, or you become too present. There is definitely a complex level of negotiations with, for example, the Archeological Museum, about why these objects are not just placed into a “neutral” vitrine. What I am saying, of course, is that there is no such

thing as a neutral vitrine. Objects on display are always sited within a context that is political, conceptual, cultural—this is why museums are constantly changing. The way we displayed objects two hundred years ago is very different from how we display objects now.

We may sometimes think that the white cube is neutral but, of course, it is not. If you go to the archeological museum here in Istanbul you can practically see the history of museology. From the first galleries made in the 18th century to the galleries made now. *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* is a display structure for “Scramble for the Past,” it is a support structure, and it is trying to address some of these issues. In this particular example and in a very formal way. I’m using historical studies and historical display devices to bring them to the foreground. So that is, perhaps, quite relevant to your question.

**JRM:** As you’ve designed them, these support structures appear to be quotations from historical moments—even if we don’t recognize the specific reference—but they are constructed out of MDF board and, as such, operate in a register that is uniformly “out of time” to their respective, even if elusive, reference. As a support structure, *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* in some ways operates as a parallax—as the viewer shifts his or her position, those things that are closer appear to move faster than the things that are further away.





**CC:** There is something of that, also in terms of things not appearing as what they are. You think you know what it is, but then you lose it. Because it is also something else. Or, it is not doing what it says in the box.

**JRM:** Right. And I think it has something to do with the apparent speed of the object, in relation to the viewer shifting his or her position.

**CC:** Yes, also in terms of the objects being very expedient. But, you know, I think that is an interesting question: What do you do within the site of, for example, a biennial, where everything is contemporary art, and there is obvious value invested in the objects being presented. How does the operation change once the object is put next to something that is so obviously much older and much more precious than anything you could ever make? It is a tricky thing, because it is not a question of competition—I think you have to somehow state the differences clearly and then address what those differences are made of. The difference in value, the difference in age, in form. And this idea of speed is perhaps one way of dealing with that.

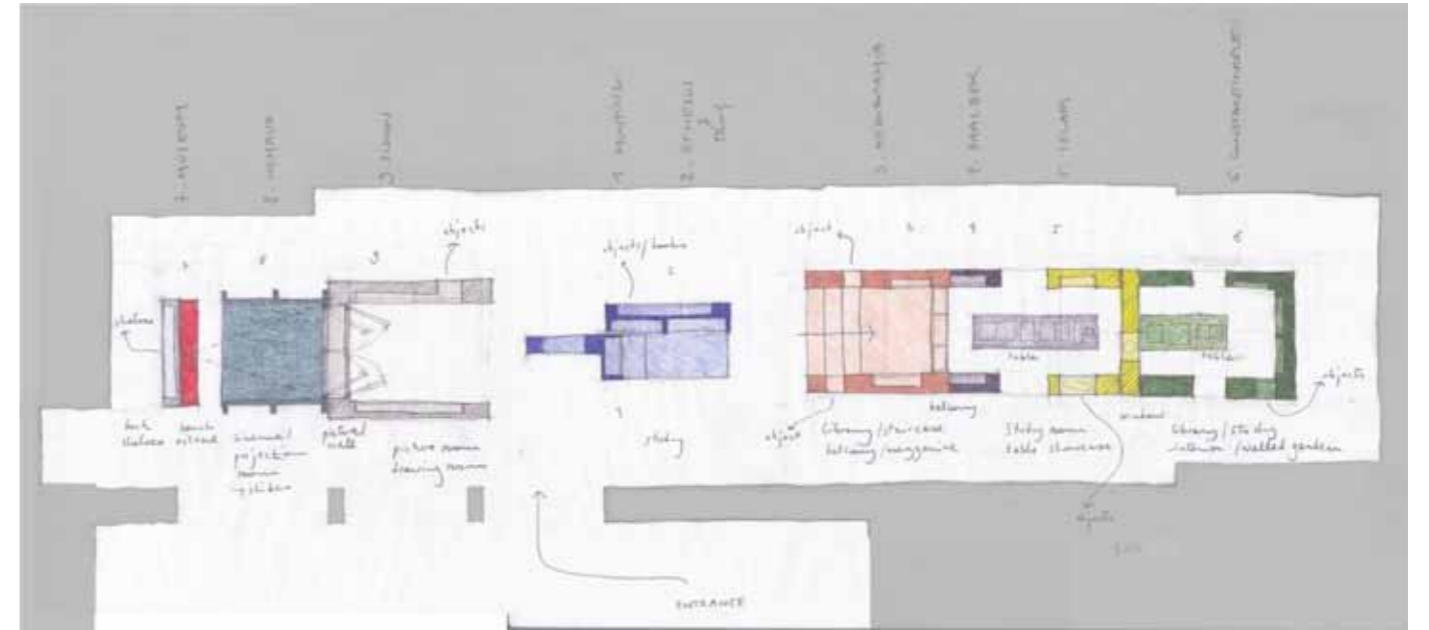
With respect to the support structures in “Scramble for the Past,” I was actually very specific that those things should be built kind of poorly. They are built a little too well for my taste to be honest. Making a really precious plinth for a really precious object would be completely uninteresting. But, on

the other hand, asking carpenters to make something not as they would do “properly” actually turns out to be a complete conundrum. They just can’t get their head around it. They don’t think it is possible that that is what you are asking. You must be asking something else.

**JRM:** You’re speaking through a translator as well, right?

**CC:** Yes. So we are constantly lost in translation in terms of Turkish-English, and we’re lost in translation in terms of what I want things to be and what they think things should look like. Sometimes having these things in total conflict actually works, sometimes it really doesn’t, and usually it is a combination of both. It is quite interesting, but also exhausting as a process. But, like most process-based work, you always end up with something you didn’t anticipate. And that’s great.

But there is also this added dimension that after the “Scramble for the Past” exhibition at SALT Galata: these support structures are actually going to be relocated to the Forum at SALT Beyoğlu. And through this displacement, where the support structures are invested with an added value and gradually become objects of sorts, they perhaps stop being displays. This recycling is actually quite interesting for me. I’m interested in investing the objects with a new function, recycling the material, but quite bluntly: cutting them apart, turning them around, and getting them to be “useful” for the Forum space at SALT Beyoğlu.



**JRM:** I’m curious to know more about what you think of the Forum space. I was talking to someone outside of SALT the other day who said, “I don’t think SALT knows what it is. I mean, just look at the Forum.” I said, “But SALT knows that it doesn’t know what it is. And the somewhat undetermined nature of the forum space is actually quite important in that respect.” So, as you are displacing these objects into that space, I’m curious to see how you think they might specifically operate within this somewhat complicated and very public context.

**CC:** As far as I can tell, they’ve tried what they could to integrate the Forum into the public space of the street, to get the street to come in. Which is why they decided not to use it as a gallery—so that it would not have the problem of a gallery. And as far as a test goes, it didn’t work. Nobody actually walks in. But what is funny is that before, when Platform was there, that was the main gallery space, and it was rammed, there were constantly people from İstiklal wandering in and out. So, weirdly enough, they had it, and then in order to have more of it, they lost it.

**JRM:** It doesn’t work.

**CC:** But SALT knows it doesn’t work. And I think it is interesting to have an institution like that with a big open question, and to say: Okay, we open, and maybe it takes us a year to figure it out. But that’s fine. Maybe it takes us two years, we try something else, and that is fine too.

It is like this idea of constant evolution, but it only works if SALT doesn’t know what it is. Because if SALT knows what it is by the time it opens, then in a way, the process is not so interesting, because you just execute.

So, working on something like the Forum, for me, is pure potential. The galleries are galleries. The Forum, for me, is the real moment of potential, in spatial terms. It is an interesting challenge to think about whether we can use something like the support structures to encourage the Forum to operate as a public, or at least permeable, space. I would think that the structures could probably not do this on their own. But I would use the support structures and reconfigure them toward new functions. Then it can be a hosting device. At the moment the forum is completely empty, and I would oversubscribe to the hosting. Hosting too many things is what I would be interested in doing.

**JRM:** I lived in Fort Greene, Brooklyn for a while, and there are these large banquet halls in the neighboring South Williamsburg that are really remarkable. Complete architectural oddities, but the spaces are always incredibly activated. I started to dream about opening up an event hall in the middle of nowhere that would be completely free to use. There would be no charge to hold an event at the space. The only catch is that the banquet hall could only be used if at least two or three events were going on at the same time. So you could have a quinceañera, a



wedding anniversary celebration, and a retirement party going on all at once in the same space.

**CC:** I really think space needs to be activated. And maybe over-activated. It's cumulative, then.

I have one big question at the moment. One strategy that I use is the idea of cumulative space. I find that we are so preconditioned by what we already know that if I ask you to imagine a space, and to put something in it, you can only come up with what you already know. And one way of exceeding our own knowledge and expectation of what space can do is by adding work on top of work. So, I know what I do, and you know what you do, but if your work is on top of mine, and then we ask someone else to put their work on top of that, it becomes something else, that none of us understands exactly, and does things beyond what we already know.

**JRM:** How would you situate that spatially?

**CC:** One of the support structure phases is a gallery space in Birmingham, which I co-founded with a group of directors. This strategy of accumulation means that we invite people to make exhibitions, but we ask them to make work that can also stay. The work stays and it becomes the gallery for the next person to work in. We call this "existing conditions." Sometimes it becomes uncomfortable, but it means that the

level of complexity you reach is much greater than anyone could imagine. So, work on top of work on top of work—this is a strategy. But it comes with a big question for me: I wonder if there is some kind of exhaustion in this endless reinvention and transformation. Exhaustion both on a conceptual level and on a pragmatic level—I don't know if it is a sustainable practice. This is a really big question for me, about complexity and cumulative approaches; you could also say cumulative knowledge, or knowledge formation.

**JRM:** To go back to your previously stated interest in those things that are hidden but operate so as to fundamentally condition the given object or situation—I'm curious to know more about what led you into this line of inquiry. You mentioned Derrida's book *The Truth in Painting*, but is that where you started?

**CC:** I started from an interest in processes of making space. One of the manifestations of this was my interest in building sites and scaffolding. When you start looking at building sites and scaffolding there is something you find out almost immediately—they have no history. What I mean by that, is that they are not documented through the history of architecture. Buildings are, architects are, but the workers of architecture don't have a history written about them. Neither do the structures used throughout the process of construction. This is the only way to explain that people are still trying to figure out how the pyramids were built—nobody actually knows how things were



built before quite recently because these things were just thought of as being unimportant. As such, they were not documented. In architecture, this analogy is rather straightforward but you find the same thing in the context of fine art: there is no history of modes of display, such as gallery colors, framing, plinths, framers, and so on. But I've been interested in precisely those things, those are the kind of things I've wanted to make. In a way, it was an open question: What happens if you dedicate your practice to those things that are normally not meant to be valuable? What does it make? What do you create out of this? What kind of practice does it create?

It is funny, because I think these building sites are very visible. You see construction happening all about the city, but the sites themselves are made invisible through their lack of value, or their perceived lack of value, because the building site is always the process toward something else. It is never the end in its own right. Since it is meant to be a passage to, it ends up being entirely overlooked.

**JRM:** What you are interested in is not so much the materiality of the scaffolding but the way in which the implication of process becomes constitutive of the very thing itself—the context of cultural production being a case in point.

**CC:** Exactly. In this way, you can only understand the city if you understand how the city is built. And you only understand

how a city is built if you know the construction techniques, but also the cultural, social, political and economic context of a particular time. But this is true of every field. For example, the funding system in Scandinavia really sheds light on the type of art production occurring there, and its relationship to social ideologies. If you understand that artists have a particular position in society then you can understand how their work operates within that society. Like in revolutionary Russia: when you learn that artists were actually paid by the state—because they were deemed to be important workers of the state—then suddenly you start to understand constructivism and what it was trying to do. So, grasping those conditions of production is absolutely essential if we want to understand what is being produced. But this is often the one thing that is missing.

**JRM:** Right, and this happens when we think about the production process as preceding the assignation of meaning. Which, of course, it doesn't. Last winter I was in Ecuador and noticed something that has kept me thinking about this. Driving from Quito to Baños you pass through a series of towns where the ground floors of all of the structures are well-maintained and brightly painted—blue, green, red, orange—auto mechanic shops, bakeries, private homes, schools, and so on. But almost none of the structures appear to be finished, per se. The level above the ground floor typically consists of plain grey cinderblocks arranged into half-built rooms and walls. Rusted rebar protrudes from these partially built forms.



So, the first thing you notice when you go through these towns is the visual friction between the landscape, the brightly painted ground floors of the buildings, and the mute greyness of the first floor hanging just above the horizon. But I'm drawn to the paradoxical way these architectural elements simultaneously suggest optimism, abandonment, relentlessness, assurance, and a complex relationship to the temporal aspects of occupation and experimentation.

My friends who were with me at the moment were already familiar with this—they told me it is somewhat ubiquitous in parts of Greece and Italy. But I had not seen it discussed much at all within architectural discourse. In fact, very little attention has been given to the cultural, social, and aesthetic significance behind residential building techniques that favor long-term construction projects realized over the course of many years, such that inhabited structures appear to be always under construction. Lately, however, I've become really interested in this indeterminacy and incompleteness in the built landscape.

I've heard conflicting accounts for why this approach to building exists. I've heard that it is a way of avoiding taxation because, without proper roofs, the structures are technically incomplete; other people have told me that this perpetual building happens because the occupants do not have the money to complete the structure and building a proper roof can be prohibitively expensive; other people tell me that the occupants are just waiting for the money so that they can add another floor to their home or business; and then other people have told me it has to do with the family structure, that people build extra floors as their families and businesses expand. But as much as all of these accounts seem to easily add up, they also start to contradict themselves.

**CC:** It makes sense all at the same time as well as it contradicts itself.

**JRM:** Yes. You have all of these seemingly related but contradictory elements that can't be disassociated from one another. And in a way, it seems very much related to what you've said about cumulative space and Surrounded by the Uninhabitable. And in some respect, it would appear that this perpetual building practice, characterized by exposed rebar and unpainted cinderblocks, actually becomes constitutive of a worldview that is contradictory and very complex, completely indeterminate.

**CC:** But it looks like shit. You know, that's the—

**JRM:** —but it looks beautiful. I mean, that contrast between the carefully maintained ground floors and the rebar protruding from the roof—

**CC:** —you just have to live with the fact that the rest of it looks like shit.

**JRM:** Yeah.

**CC:** The was someone who called it “The Poles of Hope.” And this might be an interesting way to think about it. So, very violent, but actually the poles of hope, because it means that potentially, there might be more.

**JRM:** Potentially. But there might never be. In some respects, it displays a sort of relentlessness. But it also—

**CC:** —it also displays an enormous fragility. You think there is something wrong with the building. It's not finished; it's not meant to be like this.

**JRM:** And, of course, it both is and it isn't.

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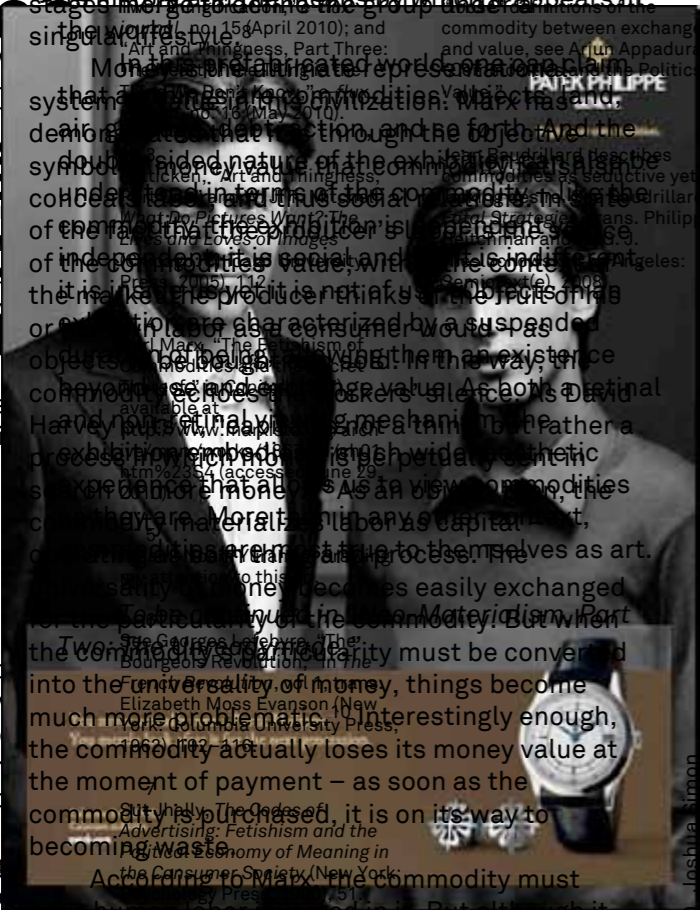
October 2011





language involves materials, colors, shapes, scale, and composition, and that the objects themselves have become the primary and basic category, later, to fetishism, or, rather, to the fetishism of the commodity. The commodity is a material thing, but it is a material thing that has been produced through social relations of production. The commodity is a material thing that has been produced through social relations of production. The commodity is a material thing that has been produced through social relations of production.

Joshua Simon



It is perfectly understandable that the dandy, the man who is never ill at ease, would be the ideal of a society that had begun to experience a bad conscience with respect to objects. What compelled the noblest names of England, and the regent himself, to hang on every word that fell from Beau Brummell's lips was the fact that he presented himself as the master of science that they could not do without. To men who had lost their self-possession, the dandy, who makes of elegance and the superfluous his *raison d'être*, teaches the possibility of a new relation to things, which goes beyond both the enjoyment of their use-value and the accumulation of their exchange value. He is the redeemer of things, the one who wipes out, with his elegance, their original sin: the commodity.

– Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, in addition to critiques of the market and of the cycles of exploitation enacted by commodity exchange, a new set of sensibilities has been introduced in critical contemporary art, dealing with the ways in which the commodity and its surrounding economy activate us. One can say that the commodity is only really true to itself as art, and thus the exhibition becomes a format that enables us to see the commodity as it is. In order to understand objects, we must first acknowledge that every artwork is first and foremost a commodity.

In his three-part essay “Art and Thingness,” Sven Lütticken examines the art object as a transient object subjected to commodification through a series of processes.<sup>2</sup> Among the many virtues of the text is how Lütticken points out a shift in the object right from the start: “‘Things’ are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood.”<sup>3</sup> To my mind, however, this impressive survey neglects to examine the commodity as an entity prior to the art object, as the thing that precedes any object, including art objects.

Following the Marxian analysis of the commodity, my essay will focus on contemporary art objects within the framework of the exhibition – a form of seeing that allows an encounter with the art object as commodity. Even when artists, curators, critics, and spectators opt for an intimate, narrative, symbolic, critical, or any other understanding of objects, in an exhibition objects nevertheless converse in the language of commodities. While formalistic analysis reveals that this non-literal

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Joshua Simon  
Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition

01/07  
e-flux journal #20 — november 2010  
Joshua Simon  
Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition

It is perfectly understandable that the dandy, the man who is never ill at ease, would be the ideal of a society that had begun to experience a bad conscience with respect to objects. What compelled the noblest names of England, and the regent himself, to hang on every word that fell from Beau Brummell's lips was the fact that he presented himself as the master of science that they could not do without. To men who had lost their self-possession, the dandy, who makes of elegance and the superfluous his *raison d'être*, teaches the possibility of a new relation to things, which goes beyond both the enjoyment of their use-value and the accumulation of their exchange value. He is the redeemer of things, the one who wipes out, with his elegance, their original sin: the commodity.

– Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, in addition to critiques of the market and of the cycles of exploitation enacted by commodity exchange, a new set of sensibilities has been introduced in critical contemporary art, dealing with the ways in which the commodity and its surrounding economy activate us. One can say that the commodity is only really true to itself as art, and thus the exhibition becomes a format that enables us to see the commodity as it is. In order to understand objects, we must first acknowledge that every artwork is first and foremost a commodity.

In his three-part essay “Art and Thingness,” Sven Lütticken examines the art object as a transient object subjected to commodification through a series of processes.<sup>2</sup> Among the many virtues of the text is how Lütticken points out a shift in the object right from the start: “‘Things’ are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood.”<sup>3</sup> To my mind, however, this impressive survey neglects to examine the commodity as an entity prior to the art object, as the thing that precedes any object, including art objects.

Following the Marxian analysis of the commodity, my essay will focus on contemporary art objects within the framework of the exhibition – a form of seeing that allows an encounter with the art object as commodity. Even when artists, curators, critics, and spectators opt for an intimate, narrative, symbolic, critical, or any other understanding of objects, in an exhibition objects nevertheless converse in the language of commodities. While formalistic analysis reveals that this non-literal

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language involves materials, colors, shapes, scale, and composition, what is it exactly that the objects say?

In the section of *Capital* titled “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” Marx demonstrates that the commodity is a materialization of our social relations:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noon-day that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was.<sup>4</sup>

According to Marx, the commodity is comprised of two values: use value and exchange value. But there is a third, intrinsic value that stems from exchange value, and it is here that the total and unconditional interdependency between commodities is found. The commodity is the thing that always feels at home. Whereas man suffers from a folkloristic and identity-dependent conception of foreignness, acquaintance, history, tradition, and alienation, and plants and animals have difficulty acclimatizing, the commodity is a mode of being that is free of all these. It is first and foremost a presence.

#### Their World, Not Ours

Maybe the time when we will be able to discuss this civilization of private property in the past tense is just around the corner, but for now it is still present in all its extremes. Private property remains the cornerstone of an all-encompassing liberal concept of our civilization, and it is the key to understanding our relations with each other and with objects, as well as between objects. It is a conceptual framework based on

negation, on exclusion – something can be mine only if it excludes others who might otherwise own it. Yet the logic of ownership that has guided our understanding of the world of things no longer answers to the challenge. Most commodities live longer than their creators and consumers alike – for even a simple plastic bag will outlive us all many, many times over. As commodities ourselves, even our bodily organs can outlive us. Therefore, as all objects that enter into this world are commodities, we must realize that this is not our world, but rather theirs. We dwell in the world of commodities.

In Michael Bay’s blockbuster film *Transformers* (2007), beings from another planet fight for control of Earth. As the mythology in the film has it, these beings arrived on Earth in search of a new planet to settle; upon arrival, considering how to properly disguise themselves, the aliens concluded that cars and weapons comprised the main forms of existence on the planet, and they proceeded to assume those forms. While on one level this can be taken as a mere fiction, the number of cars in the world now approaches two billion, and countries such as Germany produce more cars in a year than newborn babies. Can anyone blame the *Transformers* for seeing Earth as a planet of cars, and not of humans?

Guy Ben-Ner’s video *Stealing Beauty* (2008), shot without permission in IKEA stores across the world, focuses on private property’s relation to the family. In the video, Ben-Ner, his wife, and his two children inhabit IKEA’s various domestic settings as if they were in their own home. While shoppers pass through the frame, a series of domestic scenarios play out. The son is caught stealing in school and the father (who masturbates compulsively) offers the son a lesson in moral conduct by explaining the concepts of private property, family, and value. While Ben-Ner’s son washes dishes in a display sink with invisible (but audible) water, his daughter reads from Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*:

So, the original meaning of the word family, first coined in Ancient Rome, did not have the sentimental and domestic meaning we attach to it today. For the Romans the word “family” did not even refer to the married pair and their children, but to the slaves. “Famulus” means a domestic slave. “Familia” means the total number of slaves belonging to one man. This was the new Roman social organism whose head, the father, ruled over wife, kids, and slaves. And thus, transition into full private property was accomplished parallel with transition to monogamy. The single family

became the economic unit of society. Sentimentality and love came only later, to seal the deal.

The liberal view of the tension between commodification and family is not the point, of course. Following Marx and Engels, Ben-Ner sees private property as the very basis of the family. For him, the family feels no aversion to living in an IKEA store; rather, it is already there. Standardized consumption outlets such as IKEA answer to the same ancient logic from which the family originates. Richard Hamilton’s sarcastic question, “Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?” is answered by Ben-Ner, who states that our homes are not ours to begin with – we inhabit the world of another. IKEA’s objects do not furnish our world, we dwell in theirs.

Guy Ben-Ner’s interest in objects and their function has appeared and reappeared throughout his work. Video works such as *Berkeley’s Island* (1999), *Moby Dick* (2000), *Household* (2001), *Elia* (2003), *Treehouse Kit* (2005), *I’d Give It To You But I Borrowed It* (2007) include, among other things, a kitchen that becomes the deck of a ship and a desert island, a fridge that becomes a book, a crib that

transforms into a prison, a table that changes into a chair, a man that becomes an ostrich, objects that become a bicycle, IKEA furniture that turns into a tree. These are turns from the linguistic to the economic that require a change in the position of the subject: it is no longer humans that conduct things; rather, humans are conducted within them. *Stealing Beauty* ends with the two children addressing the camera directly with the following speech:

Children of the world, unite. Release the future from the shackles of the past. My peers, it is our time to steal. Not in order to gain property but in order to lose respect for it. Property is like a ghost. You cannot possess it without being possessed by it. Steal and let others steal. Let property move freely from place to place so it will not haunt your home. Steal from the local supermarket. Steal from the city! Steal from the state! Steal from your parents! And above all, don’t accept inheritance – steal it. Rob your parents and rid yourself of promises you will have to keep. Children of the world, unite. Release the future from the shackles of the past.

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Guy Ben-Ner, *Stealing Beauty*, 2007. Screen capture single channel video, color with sound, dvd 17' 40", courtesy of Postmasters gallery, New York.

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Private property is the basic category of civilization, and it is through inheritance that private property is passed on, thus creating its own history of civilization. Freedom from property and inheritance can free us from this history and present the prospect of a new civilization, with the relation to, and between, objects remaining a primary anchor. For the purposes of tracing our understanding of objects today, however, it is important to understand the category of private property to be an insufficient one.

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Patek Philippe ad.

A well-known advertisement by luxury wristwatch-maker Patek Philippe seems to suggest a way into the paradox of ownership and inheritance by identifying the explicit tension between the existence of the object and the ownership of it:

You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation.<sup>5</sup>

By consecrating inheritance, the advertisement asserts that nothing can be owned – only looked after. Not only can we no longer believe in the myth of ownership, but we also require a new ethics for using objects – for taking care, looking

after, and watching over them.

If we examine historical events in relation to the commodity, they can reveal an alternate history. For example, we find that the French Revolution, as a revolutionary demand for private property to answer the bourgeois call *Laissez passer! Laissez faire!*, was also a demand for the free passage of commodities through trade. In the spirit of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), in which private property is a sanctified right (according to article XVII in the declaration), commodities blow with the wind, and every place is their home.<sup>6</sup> And unlike people, commodities such as cars, trains, and airplanes are allowed smoother, and quicker, passage.

Another example can be found in the European Union, which we usually regard as dating back to the European Economic Community. But if we look again at the events during and following World War II, we find that, contrary to the common belief that the unification of Europe started with the Treaties of Rome in 1957 – signed by the leaders of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg as a result of the scars of World War II – the union was born, from the perspective of the commodity, in the Vichy government's collaboration with the Nazis in June 1940, when France and Germany worked together for the first time after generations of hostility. Customs regulations were softened, since part of France was occupied by the Nazis and another part was collaborating with them. With the termination of World War II, the relationship simply continued. Thus the commodity teaches us history – the provocative truth it tells us is that the European Union is also a continuation of the collaboration between the Nazis and the Fascists. And insofar as people now have free passage, they are sentenced to be led only as commodities: right of passage is given to them either as members of a workforce or as tourists. The familiar question “business or pleasure?” comes to stand for the limited categories through which movement in the world is allowed.

Everything that comes into this world does so as a commodity. The world belongs to the commodity, not to us. And today it would be hard to deny that we have more intimate relations with commodities than we do with each other. On a social level, the commodity can be considered part of a networked economy of exploitation: from design and creation, through marketing and distribution, to consumption and waste. According to Marxian tradition, the fetishism of commodities empties them of meaning, hiding the real social relations invested in them through human labor. This allows the imaginary, ideological, and symbolic social relations to be,

in Sut Jhally's terms, “injected into the construction of meaning.”<sup>7</sup> Jhally maps the new meanings advertising produces through commodity fetishism in four successive religious stages: 1) utility/idolatry, in which commodities are freed from being merely utilitarian things; 2) symbolization/iconology, in which commodities serve as abstract representations of social values; 3) personification/narcissism, in which they are intimately connected with the world of interpersonal relations; and 4) lifestyle/totemism, in which the first three stages merge to define the group under a singular lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

Money is the ultimate representational system of value in this civilization. Marx has demonstrated that it is through the objective symbol of money value that commodity fetishism conceals labor, and thus social relations. In spite of the fact that the producer's labor is the source of the commodities' value, within the context of the market the producer thinks of the fruit of his or her own labor as a consumer would – as objects to be bought and sold. In this way, the commodity echoes the workers' silence. As David Harvey puts it, “capital is not a thing, but rather a process in which money is perpetually sent in search of more money.”<sup>9</sup> As an object, then, the commodity materializes labor as capital – operating as both thing and process. The universality of money becomes easily exchanged for the particularity of the commodity. But when the commodity's particularity must be converted into the universality of money, things become much more problematic.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, the commodity actually loses its money value at the moment of payment – as soon as the commodity is purchased, it is on its way to becoming waste.

According to Marx, the commodity must have human labor invested in it. But although it is the result – and the reflection – of social relations, the commodity, be it goods or services, fetishizes itself through the equivalence of money value, presenting itself as a relation between objects – kicking men out of the equation, so to speak. But in a consumer economy in which cause and effect can no longer be traced – for example, when there are more commodities than human beings – we can no longer believe that commodities are mere materializations of our social relations. While they may still be this, they also have a social life of their own that has included us in it.<sup>11</sup> Marx's quote above seems to suggest that we are actually a materialization of *their* relations. Consider our bodies – blood sugar levels, kidney stones, cholesterol levels, or cancerous pollution. In our relations with commodities, we no longer have the ability to decide between

production or consumption, improvisation or function, profit or loss. It is in this way that, as part of the social relations that materialize within it, the commodity gains a life of its own – beyond even the means of its invention: design, manufacturing, production, marketing, shipment, disposal, and evacuation.

### The Exhibition

In his seminal 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried recognized the Minimalist (“literalist,” according to Fried) object's tendency towards anthropomorphism. It is an art object that aspires to be a subject associated with the viewer's space, that has a presence equal to that of man in the space:

literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not indeed as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, it is the critical tools used by formalists (and those leaning towards mysticism in all things) that allow for an entry point into the language of things. It is taken for granted that art objects speak – with us and amongst themselves. Neo-materialist formal languages center on questions of material, shape, volume, scale, composition, and authorship only through the commodity character of objects. But at the end of the day, literalist/minimalist attempts maintain the logic of cause and effect, the duality of object and subject. They tell us that the artist created an object aspiring to a presence equal to that of the viewer. Whereas Minimalism is anthropocentric, commodities exist prior to the viewer and to the artist.

Beyond being a narrative and an event, the exhibition is a form of exiting. As soon as you enter an exhibition, you walk through it as if you were on your way out. In this sense, the exhibition and the commodity share an allegorical relation. When we wish to describe what is being exhibited, we usually use the words “object,” “piece,” “artifact,” “thing,” “product,” and even “commodity.” One's preference depends on the discourse to which the description belongs. “Object” is used commonly in contemporary art, as it is regarded as intrinsically constitutive of subjects. “Object” is an interesting word, for in Hebrew it means “will” (*chefetz* – similar to “having an objective” in English). “Piece” is also common in this context, as it introduces a maker, a master of that piece, suggesting the thing to be passive and transparent, a mere projection of its maker's intention. “Thing” is used mainly in relation to a

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mute presence that calls for contextualization. “Product” refers to a process of creation, bringing with it an impression of finality, a *fait accompli*. And “artifact” relates to an outcome or a residue. “Commodity” is used primarily in the context of a critique of the market, but I believe that this term should include all of the terms mentioned above.<sup>13</sup> In a world where everything is already a commodity, “object” and “thing” are in this respect terms that attempt to cleanse the commodity of the chains of its birth, thus hiding its history and the means by which it appears in the world.

In this prefabricated world, one can claim that all things are commodities: objects, land, air, garbage, debt, action, and so forth. And the double-sided nature of the exhibition can also be understood in terms of the commodity – like the commodity, the exhibition is dependent yet independent, it is social and yet it is indifferent, it is inside us yet it is not of us.<sup>14</sup> Objects in an exhibition are characterized by a suspended duration of being, allowing them an existence beyond use and exchange value. As both a retinal and non-retinal viewing mechanism, the exhibition embodies a much wider aesthetic experience that allows us to view commodities as they are. More than in any other context, commodities are most true to themselves as art.

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To be continued in “Neo-Materialism, Part Two: *The Unreadymade*.”

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Joshua Simon is a curator and writer based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. The three-part essay published on e-flux journal is a section from his upcoming book on Neo-Materialism. Simon is co-founding editor of *Maayan Magazine* and *The New&Bad Art Magazine* and he is the editor of *Maarvon (Western) – New Film Magazine* all based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the Curatorial/Knowledge program at the Visual Cultures department, Goldsmiths college, University of London. He is the editor of *United States of Israel-Palestine* forthcoming in the *Solution* series by Sternberg Press. Among his poetry projects are *Red: Anthology of Hebrew and Arabic Class Poetry* (May Day 2007), and *Out! Against the Attack on Gaza* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Beirut and Cairo, 2008-2009). He is the co-editor of the book of censored exhibition *The Aesthetics of Terror* (Charta Art Books, 2009). Select curatorial projects include: *Sharon* (Tel Aviv 2004), *Blanks* (CCA, Tel Aviv 2005), *The Rear – the first Herzliya Biennial of Contemporary Art* (2007), *Come to Israel, It's Hot and Wet and We Have The Humus!* (Storefront for Art and Architecture, NYC 2008), *Internazionale!* (The Left Bank – Israeli Communist Party Culture Club, 2008) *The Invisible Hand* (Sommer Contemporary Art, 2009). His latest curatorial project *The Unreadymade* opens at FormContent, London UK on December 3rd 2010.

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1  
Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 48.

2  
See Sven Lütticken, “Art and Thingness, Part One: Breton’s Ball and Duchamp’s Carrot,” *e-flux journal*, no. 13 (February 2010); “Art and Thingness, Part Two: Thingification,” *e-flux journal*, no. 15 (April 2010); and “Art and Thingness, Part Three: The Heart of the Thing is the Thing We Don’t Know,” *e-flux journal*, no. 16 (May 2010).

3  
Lütticken, “Art and Thingness, Part One” and W. J. T. Mitchell *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 112.

4  
Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” in *Capital* (1867), available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm%23S4> (accessed June 29, 2010).

5  
I thank Noam Yuran for drawing my attention to this ad.

6  
See Georges Lefebvre, “The Bourgeois Revolution,” in *The French Revolution*, vol 1, trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 102–116.

7  
Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Psychology Press, 1990), 51.

8  
*Ibid.*, 201–202.

9  
David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40.

10  
Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 106.

11  
See for example Arjun Appadurai’s notion of the anthropology of things in “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–64

12  
Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 151.

13  
My aim here is to preserve the

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Marxian notion that to some extent, the commodity has a mind of its own, and that this “mind” is actually what we see in the exhibition. For a critical analysis of use value and exchange value, and fetishism in relation to labor, see the chapter “Fetishism and Ideology” in Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos, 1981), 88–101. For a discussion of various “pure” and “loose” definitions of the commodity between exchange and value, see Arjun Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value.”

14  
Jean Baudrillard describes commodities as seductive yet lacking desire. See Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philippe Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

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**Neo-  
 Materialism,  
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 Unreadymade**

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→ Continued from “Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition” in issue 20.

**Readymade and Unreadymade**

Traditionally, by employing a series of strategies incorporating appropriation, composition, abstraction, re-contextualization, and de-contextualization of different commodities, modern art tried to see an entity beyond the ever-present commodity. In an art context, the commodity, this omnipresent “other entity” with which we are engaged in a network of intimacies (we eat, drink, wear, sit on, sleep in, and touch it), has been central to Dada, the Surrealists, the Constructivists, and Pop. Investigations into the commodity on both linguistic and conceptual grounds had already begun with the shift from Picasso’s *objets trouvés*, which he incorporated in his paintings and sculptures, to Duchamp’s readymades.<sup>1</sup> The examination of the relationships between humans in the world of commodities has likewise been focused upon in cinema – in romantic comedies, for example, where humans struggle to couple through different rituals of consumption.<sup>2</sup>

One could argue that some commodities are art objects, but all art objects are commodities. The commodity precedes the artwork. It is the material that inhabits all materials. It is the basic technique of every technique, the fundamental medium of all mediums. Even if, as has been the case for the past 150 years, the paint tubes, canvas, color pigment, wooden frame, and image (even that of an abstract painting) are all commodities, then an examination of the commodity as a pre-existing presence that precedes also the commodification of artworks in the art market, is long overdue. Thierry de Duve describes Duchamp’s readymades as having emerged from the industrial paint tube of the American portrait painter and paint manufacturer John Rand, quoting Duchamp:

Since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are “readymades aided” and also works of assemblage.<sup>3</sup>

De Duve later quotes Duchamp saying:

A readymade is a work of art without an artist to make it, if I may simplify the definition. A tube of paint that an artist uses is not made by the artist; it is made by the manufacturer that makes paints. So the painter really is making a readymade when he paints with a manufactured object that

is called paints.<sup>4</sup>

The readymade emphasized the artist’s ability to select an object and identify it as an artwork. That way, we accept that Duchamp’s urinal relates more to Botticelli or Titian than to a bathtub. With the notion of the readymade, Duchamp was able to render the validity of this claim. But when Brussels-based Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri shows a waterproof roofing roll folded under the weight of two 10-liter cans of olives (*Vacío Olivia*, 2007) or when Gedi Sibony shows the leftovers of a wall-to-wall carpet hung on the wall (*Untitled*, 2007), can we still call these readymades?

In a world overburdened with stuff, these objects give an object’s account of what it means to be in the world. They suggest an understanding on the part of the commodity, rather than of humans, as a historical subject. This is no longer an object that the artist renders as art (i.e. readymade), but rather it is the exhibition format – as both the narrative display of artifacts and the institutional contract of that which is called art – that allows us to see these commodities as they truly are.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, this may seem like a kind of hipster, lazy art. I mean, what can be more

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resigned than an assemblage of a few bought or found consumer products? But insofar as every artwork starts with some mode of consumption, every art object begins with shopping, whether by the artist or by someone else. In an admiring and detailed description dating from 1965, Robert Smithson recalled Donald Judd shopping before a new work:

He may go to Long Island City and have the Bernstein Brothers, Tinsmiths put “Pittsburgh” seams into some (Bethcon) iron boxes, or he might go to Allied Plastics in Lower Manhattan and have cut-to-size some Rohm-Haas “glowing” pink plexiglas. Judd is always on the lookout for new finishes, like Lavax Wrinkle Finish, which a company pamphlet says, “combines beauty and great durability.” ... Or maybe he will travel to Hackensack, New Jersey to investigate a lead he got on a new kind of zinc based paint called Galvanox, which is comparable to “hot-dip” galvanizing.<sup>6</sup>

Both Smithson and Judd, however, show an interest in materials and finishes, but without much concern for their history or for materialist analysis. As artists, they obtain their authority

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Efrat Kedem, Herzel & Frankel  
*St. corner*, 2007, cardboard,  
 table and door handle.



through picking and choosing.

Meanwhile, art is doing something else today: packing, shelving, and customs bureaucracy. It is essentially the work of import/export businesses, whether dealing in commodities in general or those of the art world. Here a notion of the “unreadymade” could prove useful for distinguishing from the readymade by focusing on display rather than discourse, on commodities that are actualized through display. Sven Lütticken has used the term “altered readymades,” writing:

These would be inverted ready-mades that are no longer content to create artistic surplus-value, but rather investigate the conditions for a different type of thing, one that is no longer taken as a quasi-natural “matter of fact,” but as a political “matter of concern” – to use terms by Bruno Latour that are rather closer to Marxism than their author likes to acknowledge.<sup>7</sup>

France-based Italian-American artist Francesco Finizio’s work has been focusing on the relations between humans in a world of commodities. Finizio’s installation *Contact Club* (2004–2008) presents twenty-four images documenting himself in a room in his house designed especially for an experiment: with the help of a number of purchased aids (sweetened juices, teddy bears, funnels, buckets, masks, tape, and aluminum foil), he relieves himself into a bucket while watching a television playing footage of various horrors and disasters, such as the September 11 attacks and an atomic mushroom. The experiment includes an attempt to “read” his excrement as an expression of an interaction with the images of disasters. The project concludes with a series of photographs of babies in diapers holding remote controls, posted on the internet by proud parents. Finizio’s experiment, which up to that moment seemed ridiculous, was actually a reenactment of the daily experiences of babies around the world, who interact and communicate with commodities as they constitute their consciousness.<sup>8</sup> In late 2008, just before the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Finizio produced a project entitled *In & Out of Business*, in which he held a weeklong performance at ACDC Gallery in Bordeaux, opening and closing ten different businesses in the gallery space: a café, a funeral home, a hotel, a peepshow, a mini-golf course, a reading hall, a skateboard parking lot, a prayer hall, a laundromat, and an art gallery. For all these different settings, Finizio used and reused the same objects, and when the exhibition opened to the public, the documentation of the weeklong performance was screened in the gallery space,

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Francesco Finizio, *In & Out of Business*, 2008, installation view.

The undoing of the readymade in Finizio’s work actualizes the commodity by using objects as collaborators. Finizio’s strategy of the unreadymade provides us with tools for rethinking the relations between commodities – that is, between people. The idea is not to leave the exhibition with a gaze that can see art in everything, but to use the exhibition to see commodities as they are, as imbued with their own language, interests, and will. When we think of Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, or Jessica Stockholder, for example, we accept their authorship over the different found objects they have assembled. They own their piece through linguistic, psychological, or cultural positioning and deliberation. Yet, unlike the appropriative drive of the readymade, the unreadymade is a form of dispossession – it can take many different approaches, yet all recognize, on some level, the inability to master the object. By actualizing its birth as a commodity and its unruly subjectivity, the unreadymade functions as a split-object shifting between subjugation and subjectification.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, the artist appears to be a hunter-gatherer roaming a much more advanced civilization of commodities. According to Francesco Finizio, in our relations with objects, we are actually in medieval times, with our households resembling those of serfs.<sup>10</sup> The fact that we live under the regime of a neo-feudal

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Michael Edward Smith, *Untitled*, 2008, cellphone, glass jar and painted styrofoam. Courtesy Koch Oberhuber Wolff and the artist. Photo: Michael E. Smith

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debt economy of credit cards and mortgages, along with our domestic practices, renders our daily lives all the more similar to those of medieval sharecroppers. Our modem, phone, blow-dryer, television set, laptop, and boiler – the different appliances by which we make our living in the post-Fordist economy – are the equivalent of the sheep, donkey, goat, chicken, and hog in the Middle Ages. And like the tenant farmer and his domestic animals, our lives are dependent on them to the extent that they become part of the household and the family. Like the vassal, Finizio says, we need to care for these appliances and see that they are healthy and well.

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Elisheva Levy, *Moon Walking*, 2008, fabric and Acrilan.

see that the neo-materialistic economy is one in which symbols behave like materials (for Yuran, brands are actually commodities made of money). This helps us to understand how brands and labels are regarded as material objects (the criteria of “real” and “fake” in brands, for example) or how labor has shifted from production to consumption (tourism, shopping, entertainment, watching television, advertisements, and social networks). In addition, the role of price has changed in many sectors from one that depicts our social relations through commodities (supply and demand) to become an inherent characteristic of the commodity (“it is expensive because it is expensive” as opposed to “it is expensive because it is valuable”). We are faced with the materiality of the symbol. As Yuran notes, the Nike is first and foremost a Nike and only later a shoe, with the symbol on the shoe becoming the material substance from which it is actually made. In artist Elisheva Levy’s *Moon Walking* (2008) – a shoe-pillow made from fabric and Acrilan – first, we recognize the three stripes of Adidas and only after a second look we realize it is actually a shoe. This work, along with others by Levy, attempts to address commodity fetishism while suspending it without it being burdened by use value. This white Adidas cloud is without a pair of shoes to make it usable. Despite the fact that it is a shoe, it does not need a foot.

### The Death of the Object and the Birth of Commodity

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc saw the fall of the economy of productive labor and the rise of asset and commodity markets. The “trickle-down” economy promised by Reagan, Bush, and later Clinton, did not result in renewed investment in production, but rather in assets: the stock exchange, real estate, and the art markets booms.<sup>13</sup> From Berlin to Baghdad, from Perestroika to the New World Order, it seemed that there was only one way of life available in the unipolar world forged by the events of 1989–1991, and it circles around the commodity as its axis.

As cultural theorist Sylvère Lotringer put it, art has finally fulfilled the program of Dada “with a vengeance,” embedding art into life. “Today,” he said in an interview for *frieze* magazine, “it is difficult to imagine anything that could be excluded from art.”<sup>14</sup> Its field has expanded exponentially to include the entire society. Along the way, it grabbed anything that could be used for its own purpose – recycling garbage, forging communities, investigating political issues, tampering with biology, and so forth – simultaneously appearing and disappearing with an ambiguous promiscuity. This process took

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### Neo-Materialism

Lucy Lippard’s book *Six Years*, which promoted the idea of dematerialization in the New York art scene of the late sixties and early seventies, was first published in 1973, corresponding with the Nixon Shock, a culmination of a series of measures that unilaterally canceled the direct convertibility of the US dollar to gold.<sup>11</sup> At the time, this was perceived as a way of liberating foreign currency exchange rates from the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, which tied them to the value of gold. In this reality of unfixed exchange rates, it was claimed that capital itself was dematerialized. Yet, in fact, through the annulment of the Bretton Woods system, a symbol (money) itself became the material. And thus, from dematerialization we actually moved to a materialization of a symbol, arriving at neo-materialism. In an art context, an evident example can be found in the 2007–2008 retrospective of Lawrence Weiner at the Whitney Museum, where next to each of the artist’s sentences and slogans one could find a light-colored label with the name of the collector who allowed the work (the art object) to be shown.<sup>12</sup>

Following the insights of Noam Yuran, we

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place while the market and scene for contemporary art was spreading to more varied geographies and assimilating what was once referred to as the periphery of the art world (i.e. the former Soviet Bloc, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East). Under these inclusive conditions, neo-materialistic sensibilities came to enable a reevaluation of our relations with things and objects, with the realm of art-making in the world of commodities transformed into a mode of being in uncertainties, of negative capacity.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, an increasing number of artists today exhibit the commodity as it is, in forms of waste and garbage – recent examples of this new objecthood could be seen in the 2007/2008 inaugural exhibition of the reopened New Museum in New York, “Unmonumental: The Object in the Twenty First Century,” which included objects, collages, and sound works. The density of works in the exhibition returned all of its exhibits, graceful as they may have been, to their basic form: trash. Of course, I say this not to be derogatory, but rather as an attempt at finding meaning in this form of clutter-as-display. As a survey show concerned with the move away from installations in the twenty-first century, returning to an interest in sculpture-objects, “Unmonumental” became a exhibition-cum-document of this new objecthood.<sup>16</sup>

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Shay-Lee Uziel, *High Heels*, 2004, vinyl and glue.

The artist Lior Waterman has described the need for this kind of sensibility in his “The Object Manifesto,” characterizing the relations between art and trash, particularly with regard to the variety of objects made in China and sold at 99-cent stores:

We all know plastic is a byproduct of oil (the thick bubbling blood of the world drained from the earth, a shaman would say). We all know also that oil is a precious raw material over which wars are fought. And yet the

plastics industry manages to become ever more efficient and cut prices to a minimum. How is it done? If oil utilization for the plastic industry yields so cheap a raw material, it would follow that plastic in effect contains *aminuscule* amount of real matter. Like a spoon of sugar blown into a cloud of cotton candy, a single drop of oil can be blown into shelves upon shelves of plastic artifacts.<sup>17</sup>

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To be continued in “Neo-Materialism, Part Three: The Language of Commodities.”

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Joshua Simon is a curator and writer based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. The three-part essay published on e-flux journal is a section from his upcoming book on Neo-Materialism. Simon is co-founding editor of *Maayan Magazine* and *The New&Bad Art Magazine* and he is the editor of *Maarvon (Western) – New Film Magazine*, all based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the Curatorial/Knowledge program at the Visual Cultures Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the editor of *United States of Israel-Palestine*, forthcoming in the *Solutions* series by Sternberg Press. Among his poetry projects are *Red: Anthology of Hebrew and Arabic Class Poetry* (May Day 2007), and *Out! Against the Attack on Gaza* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Beirut and Cairo, 2008-2009). Recent curatorial projects include: "Internazionale!" (The Left Bank - Israeli Communist Party Culture Club, 2008); "The Invisible Hand" (Sommer Contemporary Art, 2009); and "The Unreadymade" (FormContent, London, 2010-2011). His new curatorial project "ReCoCo – Life Under Representational Regimes" (co-curated with Siri Peyer), is showing throughout 2011-2012 in Zurich, Vienna and Holon, Israel, opening next at Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna, May 11, 2011. See the project's blog at <http://recoco.tumblr.com>.

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1  
See Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 147–196.

2  
Parallel to the "simple truth" television advertisements present us with by making commodities their main characters (notice the screen time humans receive versus objects in TV ads), contemporary romantic comedies focus on humans' struggle to couple in a world of commodities, in which courting has transformed into a ritual of consumption structured by dating, status symbols, and lifestyle accessories.

3  
Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," 163.

4  
Ibid.

5  
The comparative display of cars in an automobile fair is an exhibition, too, and yet it is full of use- and exchange-value unlike that of the art exhibition. In the automobile fair, the commodity does not reveal itself as in an art exhibit. I thank Julia Moritz for stressing this point.

6  
Robert Smithson, "Donald Judd," in Robert Smithson, *Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 4–7.

7  
Sven Lütticken, "Attending to Abstract Things," *New Left Review* 54 (November–December 2008): 120.

8  
Following Freud's speculation on the psychic equivalence of money with feces, Noam Yuran has made a beautiful and useful elaboration of this comparison with the help of Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Sándor Ferenczi. In a conference titled "Money and Soul" at the Freud Museum in Vienna in October 2010, Yuran addressed the notion of money as repression, using psychoanalysis and heterodox economics. While feces are the first social object, according to Freud, the money object embodies the social as absent from the sphere of experience, Yuran says. "The infant gives shit to his parents because of his love. With socialization we give money to people to make them strangers," he concludes. Adding to Yuran, in the traditional psychoanalytic structure of ontogenetic and philogenesis, one can say that today the child moves from shit through an evolution of objects, but not to coins as Ferenczi suggested, but rather beyond them to a new baby accessory called Taggies – a blanket with labels that can be rubbed. The

texture of the Taggies is the texture of brands; see [http://www.taggies.com/home\\_us.html](http://www.taggies.com/home_us.html).

9  
Andrea Philips, Julia Moritz and Luigi Fassi helped develop these notions in their presentations at "The Language of Things," a discussion organized by Caterina Riva and FormContent at The Showroom in London (December 4, 2010). I thank them for their insights, and also Grant Watson for his remarks during the discussion.

10  
From a conversation with the artist.

11  
Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

12  
Joe Scanlan describes Weiner's strategies in: Joe Scanlan, "Modest Proposals" *Artforum*, vol. 46 no. 8 (April 2008): 312–319; see <http://www.thingsthatfall.com/zencapitalism.php>. In his text, Scanlan quotes Lucy Lippard reevaluating the notion of dematerialization in the 1978 MoMA exhibition of Sol Lewitt: "Some of the blame for this situation must fall on those who, like myself, had exaggerated illusions about the ability of a 'dematerialization of the art object' to subvert the commodity status and political uses to which successful American art has been subjected since the late 1950s. It has become obvious over the last few years that temporary, cheap, invisible or reproducible art has made little difference in the way art and artists are economically and ideologically exploited and that it can hardly be distinguished in that sense from Corten steel sculptures and twenty-foot canvases."

13  
See David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 21.

14  
"Intelligence Agency: Sylvère Lotringer interviewed by Nina Power," *frieze* 125 (September 2009): 104–107.

15  
One can suggest a taxonomy of strategies, for example, the new objecthood and unreadymades of Rashawn Griffin, Mitzi Pederson, Ruri O'Connell, Gabriel Kuri, Gedi Sibony, and Michael Edward Smith; One can add the living (and dead) artist as an agent of commodification in the works of Rainer Ganahl, Christopher Williams, Roee Rosen, Francesco Finizio, and Josephine Meckseper; the site of work and labor in art in the works of Mierle Laderman

Ukeles, Hito Steyerl and David Hammons; IKEA art and IKEA-hacking by artists as diverse as Maayan Strauss, Andrea Zittel, Jason Rhoades, Clay Ketter, Guy Ben Ner, and Joe Scanlan; ventriloquism and questions of authentic experience in the work of Keren Cyter, Trisha Donnelly, Tino Seghal, and Ohad Meromi; autism and the encounter with commodities as living forms in the works of Igor Krenz and Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys.

16  
David Harvey remarks in relation to the built environment: "Even in the shanty towns of self-built housing, the corrugated iron, the packing boxes and the tarpaulins were first produced as commodities." David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, 147.

17  
See Lior Waterman, "The Object Manifesto," in *The New & Bad Art Magazine* (Winter 2010–2011): 56–59 (in Hebrew). For an earlier English version see "One Dollar Store," in *The End of Cordova*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: CCA, September–November 2006), no pagination. In this context it is worth mentioning the cinematic link between oil and dinosaurs, for example in the *Jurassic Park* series (Steven Spielberg, 1993, 1997), which came out following the First Gulf War, with the assertion of a new world order based on direct American control over fossil fuels in the Middle East, when American dinosaur obsession grew to unprecedented proportions (after all, the history of America is the pre-history of its nature).

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Continued from “Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade” in issue 23.

Yet what is here already very plainly expressed is the idea of the future conversion of political rule over men into an administration of things ...

– Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880)

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Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter, *Untitled, (No. 2)*, 2009. Black and white photograph mounted on MDF.

In his 1898 “The Beginnings of Ownership,” Thorstein Veblen explains how we have arrived at the notion of property through our understanding of its subjectivity. Veblen presents a concept that the savage’s individuality covered a pretty wide fringe of facts and objects, which commonly included his shadow, his reflection, his name, his peculiar tattoo marks, his glance and breath, the print of his hand and foot, his voice, representations of his person, parings of his nails, pieces of his hair, his clothes, his weapons, and other “remote things which may or may not be included in the quasi-personal fringe.”<sup>1</sup> These were part of him, not owned by him. And he was part of an early collective community that shared

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a communal life. It is only with looting that women were brought into his community not as beings that were extensions of the man’s individuality, but as things to be owned by him. But even under ownership these women had their own subjectivity and will – they had minds of their own. This, says Veblen, is at the core of our understanding of property:

And when the habit of looking upon and claiming the persons identified with my invidious interest, or subservient to me, as “mine” has become an accepted and integral part of man’s habits of thought, it became a relatively easy matter to extend this newly achieved concept of ownership to the products of the labor performed by the persons so held in ownership.<sup>2</sup>

So, the thing owned has a consciousness of its own, according to Veblen. It is in this sense that Marx’s question in “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” in *Capital* – What do commodities want? – should be taken as embedded in the tensions between labor and exchange, value and use, and individuality and subjectivity.

During the transition into the Soviet utopia of the 1920s there was an attempt to rethink the relations to objects beyond the commodity relation, to find harmony and camaraderie between people and things in a world of harmony and camaraderie between people.<sup>3</sup> In 1925, Boris Arvatov wrote one such research document. In

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his essay, Arvatov suggested replacing instrumentality and use and exchange value with fraternity and sentimental value:

The organization of Things in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie does not go beyond the rearrangement of things, beyond the distribution of ready-made objects in space (furniture is the most characteristic model). Thus the Thing’s form does not change, but remains once and forever exactly the same. Its function also remains exactly the same. The Thing’s immobility, its inactivity, the absence in it of any element of instrumentality – all these create a relation to it in which its qualified productive side is perceived either from the point of view of a naked form (the criteria of aesthetics or taste: “beautiful” or “ugly” things), or from the point of view of its resistance to the influence of its surroundings (the thing’s so-called durability). The Thing thus takes on the character of something that is passive by its very nature. The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism’s physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup>

A similar argument was presented by Dziga Vertov in his 1922 manifesto “We,” where he proposes a new set of relations between humans and objects in the form of the Kino-Eye: “We



Ohad Meromi and Anna Craycroft in collaboration in Meromi’s *Rehearsal Sculpture*, 2011. Performance.

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exclude for the time being man as an object of filming because of his inability to control his own movements.”<sup>5</sup> Vertov extols the love of the peasant for his tractor and claims that in the communist world, a world beyond commodities, the camera will allow for the appearance of “seen facts” in the form of an international language, enabling the creation of an optic link between the workers and the world. Vertov offers a communist visual language of movement that would not only influence its viewers, as images do, but also help create a new social order.

Both Arvatov and Vertov describe unification and equality between people and objects in a society characterized by equality between people. Following pioneering film theorist Béla Balázs, Stanley Cavell claimed that this sort of equality between people and objects already exists in cinema, as the camera perceives man and object in ontological equality – it does not prefer one over the other.<sup>6</sup> A clear example can be found in romantic comedies, which focus on the relations between people in the world of commodities – be it the sirloin steak the paleontologist David Huxley (Cary Grant) buys for the leopard named Baby in Howard Hawks’s 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*, the walk-in closet and black diamond ring Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) receives from her fiancé in *Sex and the City 2* (2008), or Ben Stiller’s terror-

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stricken roles, Jennifer Aniston’s never-ending bachelorette tales, and certainly Judd Apatow’s insightful bromance movies examining male camaraderie in the midst of familiar commercial products.

Under the current economic regime, our daily labor (which now exceeds traditional employment) is focused mainly on absorbing surpluses. A 2011 report by the US neo-conservative Heritage Foundation asks, in the spirit of poverty-denial: “What is Poverty in the United States Today?” and answers, “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox.” The authors, Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, attempt to undermine the growing phenomenon of the “working poor” – those who are employed, yet remain poor – by accusing them of overconsumption.<sup>7</sup> Yet overconsumption through debt is precisely what is constantly demanded of them. One can see this tendency personified in the obese.

Unlike the wealthy, who are tuned to the culture of abundance, the obese internalize the social logic of surpluses. Sixty years after suffering from malnutrition on a massive scale following World War II, the UK now faces an obesity epidemic. Feudalism had the Black Death, imperialism had cholera, robber baron industrialism had black lung disease, and the shock of industrial warfare brought psychosis;

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Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter, *Das Loch*, 2010. Video, 20'.



Jean-Luc Godard installing the last frame for the movie *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967.

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today's economic order is personified by the conduct disorder of the obese. The case of obesity in the UK today is such that after trying to put people under diet supervision and into educational plans, the NHS faced the collapse of its anti-diabetic and anti-obesity preventive schemes, and acknowledged that weight-loss operations would be the easiest solution. The state-funded health service in the UK has now authorized the use of gastric banding, stomach stapling, and other methods in order to better cope with the actual bodily absorption of surpluses. This has reached a point where the NHS now finances 4,000 operations a year.<sup>8</sup>

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Francesco Finizio, *Self-Portrait as a Remote Control*, from the series *Contact Club*, 2004-2008.

The figure of the hoarder has likewise become prominent in contemporary culture. Pointing to the reality TV show *Hoarders*, philosopher Jane Bennett has discussed the character of the hoarder as a person who answers the call of things. In a recent lecture titled "Powers of the Hoard," delivered at the Vera List Center at the New School in September, Bennett made the claim that, in relation to

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things, the hoarder can be situated on a spectrum opposite the collector. While the latter uses judgment and choice in relation to things, subordinating them to her will, personality, and possession, the hoarder subordinates herself to the will and personality of things, and is possessed by them.

To the vibrant discussion on vitalism, animism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and what Bennett calls "the somatic affectivity of objects," Anselm Franke has recently contributed an elaborate multi-venue traveling exhibition titled "Animism."<sup>9</sup> One volume has been published on this project, reflecting on the boundary between objects and subjects through the Western and the non-Western, applying artistic and theoretical perspectives on these boundaries. It is worth noting that "Animism" comes at a moment when the class project of capital's technocratic fascisms has come to openly express its animistic characteristics. Today it seems that we cannot discuss animism without addressing its actuality in the legal framework of our social life – this is especially apparent with the three C's: commodities, capital, and corporations. In January 2010, the US Supreme Court christened the corporation a person. The court ruled in the case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* that corporate funding of independent political broadcasts in federal elections cannot be limited, as corporations are protected by the First Amendment. This protection entails that corporations are juridical persons.<sup>10</sup> Adding to their various rights, including the right to contract and copyright, this ruling further promotes the equality of these immortal zombies. Free speech, a right attached to "natural persons," is now shared by these personalities of legal animism.

Boris Groys wrote of installation practices that they "reveal the materiality and composition of the things of our world."<sup>11</sup> Translation of the language of things begins with the actualization of the commodity through display. As much as it is common to discuss the master artist as one who knows materials – someone who converses with them intimately – the function of both the master artist and the curator today is to know the material from which all materials are made – the commodity.

The new objecthood of Detroit-based artist Michael Edward Smith brings commodities into the gallery in different compositions – a mobile phone lying in a bowl of water, on which he places a black-colored, split Styrofoam ball; a toothbrush stuck in a light bulb fixture in the ceiling; two bags resting on the gallery's floor. An atmosphere of failure, self-destruction, and exhaustion is expressed by the commodities he

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Woman washing floor in communal dining hall, image from the exhibition "Kibbutz: Architecture Without Precedent" (curators: Yuval Yasky and Galia Bar Or), The Israeli Pavilion at the 12th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennial, 2010.

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exhibits, and with these unready-mades it is unclear whether the artist is the author of this assemblage. Through his strategy of dispossession, Smith does not seem to have more power over the objects than they have over him. If anything, the artist here offers himself as a lover – meaning an *amateur*.<sup>12</sup> As post-appropriation strategies, dispossession and withdrawal bring this proposition closer to constructivist understandings of our relations with objects, and shifts away from Dadaist practices.<sup>13</sup>

In mashing the aesthetics of inanimate subject matter with representations of persons. Brussels-based artists Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter's videos bring portraiture into the realm of still life. In their cinematic narratives centered on frozen images, *Ten Weyngaert* (2005), *Die Fregatte (The Frigate)*, (2008), *Der Schlamm von Branst* (2008), and *Das Loch* (2010) they have formulated a stillness that goes beyond that of the *tableau vivant*. They ask their actors to stand, sit, look, or stretch their limbs while keeping still – an intrinsic mode of display that becomes an exhibition of exhibited stillness.

While things would only have sentimental value in the communist world-beyond-commodities, in the present world Thys and de Gruyter's work confronts the reign of total alienation in which objects, things, and goods are all commodities – alien entities we can no longer understand. In contrast to Vertov's rapid visual and linguistic montage, the extreme stillness of Thys and de Gruyter's videos highlights the impossibility of communication between humans in a world of commodities. Thys discusses this interaction in terms of immobilization, highlighting the quality of stillness the characters in their films exhibit:

You can see this occur in animals who are confronted with some bizarre opponent, another (bigger) animal, a human, or a combination of both. Humans also have this capacity. The same mechanism is applicable for the relation between objects and humans or animals. Sometimes objects can provoke the same immobilization but objects can also undergo the same consternation. They can suffer an eternal shock when they are confronted with some weird character and become silent witnesses of perverted or strange actions, or the behavior of humans and animals ...<sup>14</sup>

This stillness is just one aspect of their investigations into the human-commodity interface. Through its stillness and muteness, Thys and de Gruyter translate the language of things into the language of images. In his book on

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the films of Jacques Tati, Michel Chion discusses the differences in the way cinema treats objects and human faces, and points out that “in the English language a distinction is made between a close image of a face (close-up) and the detail of an object or a part of a body (insert). This distinction does not exist in French; both concepts merge in a single word”<sup>15</sup> – *gros plan*. Following the French example, Thys and de Gruyter refuse to differentiate between the two shots. Instead, the absence of dialogue in their films gives way to another language beyond that of humans: the language of things. Thys and de Gruyter populate their videos first with objects, then with humans so still and mute that they almost become objects themselves. We cannot determine who (or what) possesses a more “evolved” consciousness, and the artists insist on indifference.

Their silence is perhaps due to the fact that neither the objects nor the humans perform the function they were originally expected to perform: the humans, by not being able to interact with each other through speech or meaningful action; the objects, by no longer being of any particular use.<sup>16</sup> Thys links this stillness to a lack of communication, one symptom of a larger malaise,

the final stage in the evolution-decline of Western civilization. The physical expansion has made place for digital expansion, and leads to a slow and gigantic implosion, a massive standstill, an epidemic attack of autism.”<sup>17</sup>

With toys, children are taught to generalize by matching color and shape (the green cube fits into the green square, the red pyramid fits into the red triangle, the yellow ball fits into the yellow circle, and so forth). But one can observe how toddlers treat things before learning to generalize. Playing with sand, for example, does not necessitate its categorization as “sand.” Every fistful is different, and the child examines each as unique, as if every grain had a first name. In the language of things, everything has a first name.

In a letter from 1916, published as “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Walter Benjamin writes:

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “What does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself.” The language of this lamp, for example, does not communicate the lamp (for the mental

being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself), but: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.<sup>18</sup>

For Benjamin, the language of things is not the language that names, categorizes, and identifies things – that is the language of man.<sup>19</sup> The language of things is that of God, of potential, of what can be done with things. Its interest is in the extension of what things have to say – this is “the language of the practice.” But we do not understand the language of the lamp, because the lamp doesn't try to communicate its language to us.<sup>20</sup>

Writing on Benjamin's text, Hito Steyerl suggests the practice of curating as an example of a system that could translate the language of things into aesthetic relationalities. She does not mean that curating translates the language of things by eliminating objects, or by inventing collectivities that “are fetishized instead,” as she puts it, but by means of creating unexpected articulations “by presencing precarious, risky, at once bold and preposterous articulations of objects and their relations, which still could become models for future types of connection.” To follow Steyerl's ideas here would mean to take both the spiritual-vitalist direction and the social-materialist one simultaneously, bringing together early and late Benjamin, the mystic and the Marxist. The commodity entails not only the subjectivity of the people who took part in designing, making, delivering, and selling it, but also of those who use, clean, dismantle, and scavenge it. The commodity is the form in which things come to be in this world. Beyond any concept of alienation in relation to labor, we can see that the commodity's material is constituted by our very social relations. This composition gives the commodity a subjectivity that is not particular to any one of us, but is rather one in which we all participate in forming.

This matter is first and foremost one of presence, not of representation. Therefore, our interest in the language of things has everything to do with our ability to change the social, historic, and material relations that are present in the commodity. Beyond its seductive surface, the political matter-of-factness of the commodity speaks our world. Actualizing it becomes our mission.

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**THE SADNESS OF POST-WORKERISM**  
**or**  
**“ART AND IMMATERIAL LABOUR” CONFERENCE**  
**A SORT OF REVIEW**  
**(Tate Britain, Saturday 19 January, 2008)**

by David Graeber

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, several of the heavyweights of Italian post-Workerist theory— Toni Negri, Bifo Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Judith Revel— appeared at the Tate Modern to talk about art. This is a review.

Or, it is a review in a certain sense. I want to give an account of what happened. But I also want to talk about why I think what happened was interesting and important. For me at least, this means addressing not only what was said but just as much, perhaps, what wasn't; and asking questions like “why immaterial labor?”, and “why did it make sense to all concerned to bring a group of revolutionary theorists over from Italy to talk about art history in the first place?” Asking these questions will allow me to make some much broader points about the nature of art, politics, history, and social theory, which I like to think are at least as interesting and potentially revealing than what happened in the actual debate.

**what happened**

Here's a very brief summary:

The session was organized by Peter Osborne, along with a number of other scholars at Middlesex College involved in the journal *Radical Philosophy*, and Eric Alliez, editor of *Multitudes*. None of the organizers could really be considered part of the art world. Neither were any of the speakers were known primarily for what they had to say about things artistic. Everyone seems to have felt they were there to explore slightly new territory. This included, I think, much of the audience. The place was packed, but especially, it seemed, with students and scholars involved in some way with post-graduate education—especially where it interfaced with the culture industry. Among many scholars, of course, these were very big names, celebrities, even something close to rock stars. Many of the graduate students in particular were no doubt there in part just for the opportunity to finally see figures whose ideas they'd been debating for most of their intellectual careers revealed in to them in the flesh: to see what they looked like, what kind of clothes they wore, how they held themselves and spoke and moved. Perhaps even to mill about in the pub afterwards and rub shoulders.

This is always part of the pleasure of the event. Certainly this was part of the pleasure for me. Great theorists are almost always, in a certain sense, performers. Even if you've seen photographs, it never conveys a full sense of who they are; and when you do get a sense of who they are, returning to read their work with one's new, personal sense of the author tends to be an entirely different experience. It was interesting to observe Lazzarato's smooth head and excellent moustache; Revel's poise and energy; Bifo's hair—sort of Warhol meets Jacques Derrida—not to mention the way he seemed to walk as if floating a half inch above the pavement; Negri's

almost sheepishness at his inability to pronounce long English words, which made him seem shy and almost boyish. I had never really had a sense of what any of these people were like and I walked away, oddly, with much more respect for them as people. This is partly no doubt because anyone who you know largely through obscurely written texts that some treat with an almost mystical adulation tends to become, in one's imagination, rather an arrogant person, self-important, someone who thinks oneself a kind of minor rock star, perhaps, since they are treated as such—even if within a very narrow circle. Events like this remind one just how narrow the circle of such celebrity can often be. These were people who certainly were comfortable in the spotlight. But otherwise, their conditions of existence obviously in no way resembled that of rock stars. In fact they were rather modest. Most had paid a significant price for their radical commitments and some continued to do so: Negri is now out of jail of course and settled in a fairly comfortable life on academic and government pensions, but Bifo is a high school teacher (if at a very classy high school) and Lazzarato appears under the dreaded rubric of “independent scholar”. It's a little shocking to discover scholars of such recognized importance in the domain of ideas could really have received such little institutional recognition, but of course, there is very little connection between the two—especially, when politics is involved.

(Neither were they likely to be walking home with vast troves of money from taking part in this particular event: 500 tickets at £20 each might seem like a bit of money, but once you figure in the cost of the venue, hotels and transportation, the remainder, split four ways, would make for a decidedly modest lecture fee.)

All in all, they seemed to exude an almost wistful feeling, of modest, likable people scratching their heads over the knowledge that, twenty years before, struggling side to side with insurrectionary squatters and running pirate radio stations, they would never have imagined ending up quite where they were now, filling the lecture hall of a stodgy British museum with philosophy students eager to hear their opinions about art. The wistfulness was only intensified by the general tenor of the afternoon's discussion, which started off guardedly hopeful about social possibilities in the first half, and then, in the second half, collapsed.

Here's a brief summary of what happened:

- **MAURIZIO LAZZARATO** presented a paper called ‘**Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security**’, in which he talked about Duchamp and Kafka's story Josephine the singing mouse, and explained how the relation of “art, work, and politics” had changed as we pass from Foucault's “disciplinary society” to his “society of security”. Duchamp's ready-mades provides a kind of model of a new form of action that lies suspended between what we consider production and management; it is an anti-dialectical model in effect of forms of immaterial labor to follow, which entail just the sort of blurring of boundaries of work and play, art and life that the avant garde had called for, that is opened up in the spaces of freedom that “societies of security” must necessarily allow, and that any revolutionary challenge to capitalism must embrace.
- **JUDITH REVEL** presented a paper called ‘**The Material of the Immaterial: Against the Return of Idealisms and New Vitalisms**’, explained that even many of those willing to agree that we are now under a regime of real subsumption to capital do not seem to fully understand the implications: that there is *nothing* outside. This includes those who posit some sort of autonomous life-force, such as Agamben's “bare life”. Such ideas need to be jettisoned, as also Deleuze's insistence we see

desire as a vital energy prior to the constraints of power. Rather, the current moment can be understood only through Foucault, particularly his notion of ethical self-fashioning; this also allows us to see that art is not a series of objects but a form of critical practice designed to produce ruptures in existing regimes of power

- **a lively discussion** ensued in which everyone seemed happy to declare Agamben defunct but the Deleuzians fought back bitterly. No clear victor emerged
- **BIFO** presented a paper called **‘Connection/Conjunction.’** He began by talking about Marinetti and Futurism. The twentieth century was the “century of the future.” But that’s over. In the current moment, which is no longer one of conjunction but of connection, there is no longer a future. Cyber-space is infinite, but cyber-time is most definitively not. The precarity of labor means life is pathologized; and where once Lenin could teeter back and forth from depressive breakdowns to decisive historical action, no such action is now possible, suicide is the only form of effective political action; art and life have fused and it’s a disaster; any new wave of radical subjectification is inconceivable now. If there was hope, it is only for some great catastrophe, after which possibly, maybe, everything might change.
  - **a confused and depressing discussion** ensued, in which Bifo defended his despair, in a cheerful and charming manner, admitting that he has abandoned Deleuze for Baudrillard. There’s no hope, he says. “I hope that I am wrong.”
- **TONI NEGRI** presented a paper called **‘Concerning Periodisation in Art: Some Approaches to Art and Immaterial Labour’** which began, as the title implies, with a brief history of how, since the 1840s, artistic trends mirrored changes in the composition of labor. (That part was really quite lucid. Then the words began) Then after ’68, we had Post-Modernism, but now we’re beyond that too, we’re all the posts are post now, we’re in yet a new phase, Contemporaneity, in which we see the ultimate end of cognitive labor is prosthesis, the simultaneous genesis of person and machine; as biopolitical power it becomes a constant explosion, a vital excess beyond measure, through which the multitude’s powers can take ethical form in the creation of a new global commons. Despite the occasionally explosive metaphors, though the talk was received as a gesture of quiet but determined revolutionary optimism opposing itself to Bifo’s grandiose gesture of despair—if one diluted, somewhat, by the fact that almost no one in the audience seemed able to completely understand it. While the first, analytical part of the paper was admirably concrete, as soon as it began to talk about revolutionary prospects, it also shifted to a level of abstraction so arcane that it was almost impossible for this listener, at least (and I took copious notes!) to figure out what, exactly, any of this would mean in practice.
  - **a final discussion was proposed** in which each speaker was asked to sum up. There is a certain reluctance. Lazzarato demurs, he does not want to say anything. “Bifo has made me depressed.” Bifo too passes. Negri admits that Bifo has indeed defined the “heaviest, most burdensome” question of our day, but all is not necessarily lost, rather, a new language is required to even begin to think about such matters. Only Judith Revel picks up the slack and all is not necessarily lost, despite the miserable realities, the power of our indignation is real—the only question is, how to transform that into The Common

Revel’s intervention, however, had something of the air of a desperate attempt to save the day. Everyone left somewhat confused, and a little unsettled. Bifo’s collapse of faith was particularly unsettling because generally he is the very avatar of hope; in fact, even here his manner and argument seemed at almost complete cross-purposes; his every gesture seemed to exude a kind of playful energy, a delight in the fact of existence, that his every word seemed determined to puncture and negate. It was very difficult to know what to make of it.

Instead of trying to take on the arguments point by point—as I said, this is only a sort of review—let me instead throw out some initial thoughts on what the presentations had in common. In other words, I am less interested in entering into the ring and batting around arguments for whether Foucault or Deleuze are better suited for helping us realize the radical potential in the current historical moment, as to ask such questions are being batted about by Italian revolutionaries, in an art museum, in the first place. Here I can make four initial observations, all of which, at the time, I found mildly surprising:

- 1) There was almost no discussion of contemporary art. Just about every piece of art discussed was within what might be called the classic avant garde tradition (Dada, Futurism, Duchamp, Abstract Expressionism...) Negri did take his history of art forms up through the ’60s, and Bifo mentioned Banksy. But that was about it.
- 2) While all of the speakers could be considered Italian autonomists and they were ostensibly there to discuss Immaterial Labor, a concept that emerged from the Italian autonomist tradition, surprisingly few concepts specific to that tradition were deployed. Rather, the theoretical language drew almost exclusively on the familiar heroes of French ’68 thought: Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari... At one point, the editor of *Multitude*, Eric Alliez, in introducing Negri made a point of saying that one of the great achievements of his work was to give a second life to such thinkers, a kind of renewed street cred, by making them seem once again relevant to revolutionary thought.
- 3) In each case, the presenters used those French thinkers as a tool to create a theory about historical stages—or some cases, imitated them by coming up with an analogous theory of stages of their own. For each, the key question was: what is the right term with which characterize the present? What makes our time unique? Is it that we have passed from a society of discipline, to one of security, or control? Or is it that regimes of conjunction been replaced by regimes of connection? Have we experienced a passage from formal to real subsumption? Or from modernity to postmodernity? Or have we passed postmodernity too, now, and entered an entirely new phase?
- 4) All of them were remarkably polite. Dramatically lacking was anything that might provoke discomfort in even the stodgiest Tate Britain curator, or even, really, any of their wealthiest patrons. This is worthy of note no one can seriously deny the speakers’ radical credentials. Most had proved themselves willing to take genuine personal risks at moments when there was any reason to believe some realistic prospect of revolution was afoot. There was no doubt that, had some portion of London’s proletariat risen up in arms during their stay, most if not all would have immediately reported to the barricades. But since they had not, their attacks or even criticisms were limited to other intellectuals: Badiou, Ranciere, Agamben.



These observations may seem scattershot but I think taken together they are revealing. Why, for example, would one wish to argue that in the year 2008 we live in a unique historical moment, unlike anything that came before, and then act as if this moment can only really be described through concepts French thinkers developed in the 1960s and '70s—then illustrate one's points almost exclusively with art created between 1916 and 1922?

This does seem strangely arbitrary but I suspect there is a reason. We might ask: what does the moment of Futurism, Dada, Constructivism and the rest, and French '68 thought, have in common? Actually quite a lot. Each corresponded to a moment of revolution: to adopt Immanuel Wallerstein's terminology, the world revolution of 1917 in one case, and the world revolution of 1968 in the other. Each witnessed an explosion of creativity in which a longstanding European artistic or intellectual Grand Tradition effectively reached the limits of its radical possibilities. That is to say, they marked the last moment at which it was possible to plausibly claim that breaking all the rules—whether violating artistic conventions, or shattering philosophical assumptions—was itself, necessarily, a subversive political act as well.

This is particularly easy to see in the case of the European avant garde. From Duchamp's first readymade in 1914, Hugo Ball's Dada manifesto and tone poems in 1916, to Malevich's *White on White* in 1918, culminating in the whole phenomenon of Berlin dada from 1918 to 1922, one could see revolutionary artists perform, in rapid succession, just about every subversive gesture it was possible to make: from white canvases to automatic writing, theatrical performances designed to incite riots, sacrilegious photo montage, gallery shows in which the public was handed hammers and invited to destroy any piece they took a dis fancy to, objects plucked off the street and sacralized as art. All that remained for the Surrealists was to connect a few remaining dots, and the heroic moment was over. One could still do political art, of course, and one could still defy convention. But it became effectively impossible to claim that by doing one you were necessarily doing the other, and increasingly difficult to even try to do both at the same time. It was possible, certainly, to continue in the Avant Garde tradition without claiming one's work had political implications (as did anyone from Jackson Pollock to Andy Warhol), it was possible to do straight-out political art (like, say, Diego Rivera); one could even (like the Situationists) continue as a revolutionary in the Avant Garde tradition but stop making art, but that pretty much exhausted the remaining possibilities.

What happened to Continental philosophy after May '68 is quite similar. Assumptions were shattered, grand declarations abounded (the intellectual equivalent of Dada manifestos): the death of Man, of Truth, The Social, reason, dialectics, even Death itself. But the end result was roughly the same. Within a decade, the possible radical positions one could take within the Grand Tradition of post-Cartesian philosophy had been, essentially, exhausted. The heroic moment was over. What's more, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the premise that heroic acts of epistemological subversion were revolutionary or even particularly subversive in any other sense. In fact their effects seemed if anything depoliticizing. Just as purely formal avant garde experiment proved perfectly well suited to grace the homes of conservative bankers, and Surrealist montage to become the language of the advertising industry, so did poststructural theory quickly prove the perfect philosophy for self-satisfied liberal academics with no political engagement at all.

If nothing else this would explain the obsessive-compulsive quality of the constant return to such heroic moments. It is, ultimately, a subtle form of conservatism—or, perhaps one should say conservative radicalism, if such were possible—a nostalgia for the days when it was possible

to put on a tin-foil suit, shout nonsense verse, and watch staid bourgeois audiences turn into outraged lynch mobs; to strike a blow against Cartesian Dualism and feel that by doing so, one has thereby struck a blow for oppressed people everywhere.

#### about the concept of immaterial labor

The notion of immaterial labor can be disposed of fairly quickly. In many ways it is transparently absurd.

The classic definition, by Maurizio Lazzarato is “the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity”—the “informational content” referring to the increasing importance in production and marketing of new forms of “cybernetics and computer control”, while the second, the “cultural content”, refers to the labor of “defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion,” which, increasingly, everyone is doing all the time.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, “immaterial workers” are “those who work in advertising, fashion, marketing, television, cybernetics, and so forth”, on the other, we are all immaterial workers, insofar as we are disseminating information about brand names, creating subcultures, frequenting fan magazines or web pages or developing our own personal sense of style. As a result, production—or, at least in the sense of the production of the *value* of a commodity, what makes it something anyone would wish to buy—is no longer limited to the factory but is dispersed across society as a whole, and becomes impossible to measure.

To some degree this is just a much more sophisticated Leftist version of the rise of the service economy, etc, but there is also a very particular history, which goes back to dilemmas in Italian workerism in the '70s and '80s. On the one hand, there was a stubborn Leninist assumption—promoted, for instance, by Toni Negri—that it must always be the most “advanced” sector of the proletariat that makes up the revolutionary class. Computer and other information workers were the obvious candidates here. But the same period saw the rise of feminism and the Wages for Housework movement, which put the whole problem of unwaged, domestic labor on the political table in a way that could no longer simply be ignored. The solution was to argue that computer work, and housework were really the same thing. Or, more precisely, were becoming so: since, it was argued, the increase of labor-saving devices meant that housework was becoming less and less a matter of simple drudgery, and more and more itself a matter of managing fashions, tastes and styles.

The result is a genuinely strange concept, combining a kind of frenzied postmodernism, with the most clunky, old-fashioned Marxist material determinism. I'll take these one at a time. Postmodern arguments, as I would define them at least, pretty much always take the same form:

- 1) begin with an extremely narrow version of what things used to be like, usually derived by taking some classic text and treating it as a precise and comprehensive treatment of reality. For instance (this is a particularly common one), assume that all capitalism up until the '60s or '70s worked exactly the way described in the first two or three chapters of volume I of Marx's *Capital*
- 2) compare this to the complexities of how things actually work in the present (or even how just one thing works in the present: like a call center, a web designer, the architecture of a research lab)

<sup>1</sup> “Immaterial Labor” (<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>).

- 3) declare that we can now see that lo!, sometime around 1968 or maybe 1975, the world changed completely. None of the old rules apply. Now everything is different.

The trick only works if you do not, under any circumstances, reinterpret the past in the light of the present. One could after all go back and ask whether it ever really made sense to think of commodities as objects whose value was simply the product of factory labor in the first place. What ever happened to all those dandies, bohemians, and flaneurs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention newsboys, street musicians, and purveyors of patent medicines? Were they just window-dressing? Actually, what about window dressing (an art famously promoted by L. Frank Baum, the creator of the Wizard of Oz books)? Wasn't the creation of value always in this sense a collective undertaking?

One could, even, start from the belated recognition of the importance of women's labor to reimagine Marxist categories in general, to recognize that what we call "domestic" or even "reproductive" labor, the labor of creating people and social relations, has always been the most important form of human endeavor in *any* society, and that the creation of wheat, socks, and petrochemicals always merely a means to that end, and that—what's more—most human societies have been perfectly well aware of this. One of the more peculiar features of capitalism is that it is not—that as an ideology, it encourages us to see the production of commodities as the primary business of human existence, and the mutual fashioning of human beings as somehow secondary.

Obviously all this is not to say that nothing has changed in recent years. It's not even to say that many of the connections being drawn in the immaterial labor argument are not real and important. Most of these however have been identified, and debated, in feminist literature for some time, and often to much better effect. Donna Haraway for example was already discussing the way that new communication technologies were allowing forms of "home work" to disseminate throughout society in the '80s. To take an obvious example: for most of the twentieth century, capitalist offices have been organized according to a gendered division of labor that mirrors the organization of upper-class households: male executives engage in strategic planning while female secretaries were expected to do much of the day-to-day organizational work, along with almost all of the impression-management, communicative and interpretive labor, mostly over the phone. Gradually these traditionally female functions have become digitized and replaced by computers; this creates a dilemma, though, because the interpretive elements of female labor (figuring out how to ensure no one's ego is bruised, that sort of thing) are precisely those that computers are *least* capable of performing. Hence the renewed importance of what the post-workerists like to refer to as "affective labor." This in turn effects how phone work is reorganized, now, as globalized, but also as largely complementary to software, with interpretive work aimed more at the egos of customers than (now invisible) male bosses. The connections are all there. But it's only by starting from long-term perspectives that one can get any clear idea what's really new here, and this is precisely what the postmodern approach makes impossible.

This last example brings us to my second point, which is that very notion that there is something that can be referred to as "immaterial labor" relies on a remarkably crude, old-fashioned kind of Marxism. Immaterial labor, we are told, is labor that produces information and culture. In other words it is "immaterial" not because the labor itself is immaterial (how could it be?) but because it *produces* immaterial things. This idea that different sorts of labor can be sorted into more material, and less material categories according to the nature of their product is

the basis for the whole conception that societies consist of a "material base" (the production, again, of wheat, socks and petrochemicals) and "ideological superstructure" (the production of music, culture, laws, religion, essays such as this). This is what's allowed generations of Marxists to declare that most of what we call "culture" is really just so much fluff, at best a reflex of the really important stuff going on in fields and foundries.

What all such conceptions ignore what is to my mind probably the single most powerful, and enduring insight of Marxist theory: that the world does not really consist (as capitalists would encourage us to believe) of a collection of discrete objects, that can then be bought and sold, but of actions and processes. This is what makes it possible for rich and powerful people insist that what they do is somehow more abstract, more ethereal, higher and more spiritual, than everybody else. They do so by pointing at the products—poems, prayers, statutes, essays, or pure abstractions like style and taste—rather than the process of making such things, which is always much messier and dirtier than the products themselves. So do such people claim to float above the muck and mire of ordinary profane existence. One would think that the first aim of a materialist approach would be to explode such pretensions—to point out, for instance, that just as the *production* of socks and silverware involves a great deal of thinking and imagining, so is the production of laws, poems and prayers an eminently material process. And indeed most contemporary materialists do, in fact, make this point. By bringing in terms like "immaterial labor", authors like Lazzarato and Negri, bizarrely, seem to want to turn back the theory clock to somewhere around 1935.<sup>2</sup>

(As a final parenthetical note here, I suspect something very similar is happening with the notion of "the biopolitical", the premise that it is the peculiar quality of modern states that they concern themselves with health, fertility, the regulation of life itself. The premise is extremely dubious: states have been concerned with promulgating health and fertility since the time of Frazerian sacred kings, but the same thing seems to be happening here. The insistence that we are dealing with something entirely, dramatically new becomes a way of preserving extremely old-fashioned habits of thought that might otherwise be thrown into question. After all, one of the typical ways of dismissing the importance of women's work has always been to relegate it to the domain of nature. The process of caring for, educating, nurturing, and generally crafting

<sup>2</sup> Lazzarato for example argues that "the old dichotomy between 'mental and manual labor,' or between 'material labor and immaterial labor,' risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes the separation on board and transforms it. The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, is simultaneously transcended within the 'labor process' and reimposed as political command within the 'process of valorization'" (Maurizio Lazzarato, "General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour", <http://www.geocities.com/immateriallabour/lazzarato-immaterial-labor.html>). Note here that (a) Lazzarato implies that the old manual/mental distinction *was* appropriate in earlier periods, and (b) what he describes appears to be for all intents and purposes exactly the kind of dialectical motion of encompassment he elsewhere condemns and rejects as way of understanding history (or anything else): an opposition is "transcended", yet maintained. No doubt Lazzarato would come up with reasons about why what he is arguing is in fact profoundly different and un-dialectical, but for me, this is precisely the aspect of dialectics we might do well to question; a more helpful approach would be to ask how the opposition between manual and mental (etc) is *produced*.



human beings is reduced to the implicitly biological domain of “reproduction”, which is then considered secondary for that very reason. Instead of using new developments to problematize this split, the impulse seems to be to declare that, just as commodity production has exploded the factory walls and come to pervade every aspect of our experience, so has biological reproduction exploded the walls of the home and pervade everything as well—this time, through the state. The result is a kind of sledge-hammer approach that once again, makes it almost impossible to reexamine our original theoretical assumptions.)

### **the art world as a form of politics**

This reluctance to question old-fashioned theoretical assumptions has real consequences on the resulting analysis. Consider Negri’s contribution to the conference. He begins by arguing that each change in the development of the productive forces since the 1840s corresponds to a change in the dominant style of high art: the realism of the period 1848-1870 corresponds to one of the concentration of industry and the working class, impressionism, from 1871-1914, marks the period of the “professional worker”, that sees the world as to be dissolved and reconstructed, after 1917, abstract art reflects the new abstraction of labor-power with the introduction of scientific management, and so on. The changes in the material infrastructure—of industry—are thus reflected in the ideological superstructure. The resulting analysis is revealing no doubt, even fun if one is into that sort of thing, but it sidesteps the obvious fact that the production of art *is* an industry, and one connected to capital, marketing, and design in any number of (historically shifting) ways. One need not ask who is buying these things, who is funding the institutions, where do artists live, how else are their techniques being employed. By defining art as belonging to the immaterial domain, its materialities, or even its entanglement in other abstractions (like money) need not be addressed.

This is not perhaps the place for a prolonged analysis, but a few notes on what’s called “the art world” might seem to be in order. It is a common perception, not untrue, that at least since the ‘20s the art world has been in a kind of permanent institutionalized crisis. One could even say that what we call “the art world” has become the ongoing management of this crisis. The crisis of course is about the nature of art. The entire apparatus of the art world—critics, journals, curators, gallery owners, dealers, flashy magazines and the people who leaf through them and argue about them in factories-turned-chichi-cafes in gentrifying neighborhoods... — could be said to exist to come up with an answer to one single question: what is art? Or, to be more precise, to come up with some answer other than the obvious one, which is “whatever we can convince very rich people to buy.”

I am really not trying to be cynical. Actually I think the dilemma to some degree flows from the very nature of politics. One thing the explosion of the avant garde did accomplish was to destroy the boundaries between art and politics, to make clear in fact that art was always, really, a form of politics (or at least that this was always one thing that it was.) As a result the art world has been faced with the same fundamental dilemma as any form of politics: the impossibility of establishing its own legitimacy.

Let me explain what I mean by this.

It is the peculiar feature of political life that within it, behavior that could only otherwise be considered insane is perfectly effective. If you managed to convince everyone on earth that you can breathe under water, it won’t make any difference: if you try it, you will still drown. On the other hand, if you could convince everyone in the entire world that you were King of France,

then you would actually be the King of France. (In fact, it would probably work just to convince a substantial portion of the French civil service and military.)

This is the essence of politics. Politics is that dimension of social life in which things really do become true if enough people believe them. The problem is that in order to play the game effectively, one can never acknowledge its essence. No king would openly admit he is king just because people think he is. Political power has to be constantly recreated by persuading others to recognize one’s power; to do so, one pretty much invariably has to convince them that one’s power has some basis other than their recognition. That basis may be almost anything—divine grace, character, genealogy, national destiny. But “make me your leader because if you do, I will be your leader” is not in itself a particularly compelling argument.

In this sense politics is very similar to magic, which in most times and places—as I discovered in Madagascar—is simultaneously recognized as something that works because people believe that it works; but also, that only works because people do not believe it works only because people believe it works. For this why magic, whether in ancient Thessaly or the contemporary Trobriand Islands, always seems to dwell in an uncertain territory somewhere between poetic expression and outright fraud. And of course the same can usually be said of politics.

If so, for the art world to recognize itself as a form of politics is also to recognize itself as something both magical, and a confidence game—a kind of scam.

Such then is the nature of the permanent crisis. In political economy terms, of course, the art world has become largely an appendage to finance capital. This is not to say that it takes on the nature of finance capital (in many ways, in its forms, values, and practices, is almost exactly the opposite)—but it is to say it follows it around, its galleries and studios clustering and proliferating around the fringes of the neighborhoods where financiers live and work in global cities everywhere, from New York and London to Basel and Miami.

Contemporary art holds out a special appeal to financiers, I suspect, because it allows for a kind of short-circuit in the normal process of value-creation. It is a world where the mediations that normally intervene between the proletarian world of material production and the airy heights of fictive capital, are, essentially, yanked away.

Ordinarily, it is the working class world in which people make themselves intimately familiar with the uses of welding gear, glue, dyes and sheets of plastic, power saws, thread, cement, and toxic industrial solvents. It is among the upper class, or at least upper middle class world where even economics turns into politics: where everything is impression management and things really can become true because you say so. Between these two worlds lie endless tiers of mediation. Factories and workshops in China and Southeast Asia produce clothing designed by companies in New York, paid for with capital invested on the basis of calculations of debt, interest, anticipation of future demand and market fluctuations in Bahrain, Tokyo, and Zurich, repackaged in turn into an endless variety of derivatives—futures, options, various traded and arbitrated and repackaged again onto even greater levels of mathematical abstraction to the point where the very idea of trying to establish a relation with any physical product, goods or services, is simply inconceivable. Yet the same bankers and traders who produce these complex financial instruments also like to surround themselves with artists, people who are always busy making things—a kind of imaginary proletariat assembled by finance capital, producing unique products out of for the most part very inexpensive materials, objects said financiers can baptize, consecrate, through money and thus turn into art, thus displaying its ability to transform the basest of materials into objects worth far, far more than gold.

It is never clear, in this context, who exactly is scamming whom.<sup>3</sup> Everyone—artists, dealers, critics, collectors alike—continue to pay lip service on the old 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic conception that the value of a work of art emerges directly from the unique genius of some individual artist. But none of them really believe that’s all, or even most, of what’s actually going on. Many artists are deeply cynical about what they do. But even those who are the most idealistic can only feel they are pulling something off when they are able to create enclaves, however small, where they can experiment with forms of life, exchange, and production which are—if not downright communistic (which they often are), then at any rate, about as far from the forms ordinarily promoted by capital anyone can get to experience in a large urban center—and to get capitalists to pay for it, directly or indirectly. Critics and dealers are aware, if often slightly uneasy with the fact that, the value of an artwork is to some degree their own creation; collectors, in turn, seem much less uneasy with the knowledge that in the end, it is their money that makes an object into art. Everyone is willing to play around with the dilemma, to incorporate it into the nature of art itself. I have a friend, a sculptor, who once made a sculpture consisting simply of the words “I NEED MONEY”, and then tried to sell it to collectors to pay the rent. It was snapped up instantly. Are the collectors who snap up this sort of thing suckers, or are they reveling in their own ability to play Marcel Duchamp?

Duchamp, after all, justified his famous “fountain”, his attempt to buy an ordinary urinal and place it in an art show, by saying that while he might not have made or modified the object, he had “chosen” it, and thus transformed it as a concept. I suspect the full implications of this act only dawned on him later. If so, it would help explain why he eventually abandoned participating in the art world entirely and spent the last forty years of his life claiming he was simply playing chess, one of the few activities that, he occasionally pointed out, could not possibly be commoditized.

Perhaps the problem runs even deeper. Perhaps this is simply the kind of dilemma that necessarily ensues when one two incommensurable systems of value face off against each other. The original, romantic conception of the artist—and hence, the very idea of art in the modern sense—arose around the time of industrial revolution. Probably this is no coincidence. As Godbout and Caille have pointed out, there is a certain complementarity. Industrialism was all about the mass production of physical objects, but the producers themselves were invisible, anonymous—about them one knew nothing. Art was about the production of unique physical objects, and their value was seen as emerging directly from the equally unique genius of their individual producers—about whom one knew everything. Even more, the production of commodities was seen as a purely economic activity. One produced fishcakes, or aluminum siding, in order to make money. The production of art was not seen as an essentially economic activity. Like the pursuit of scientific knowledge, or spiritual grace, or the love of family for that matter, the love of art has always been seen as expressing a fundamentally different, higher form of value. Genuine artists do not produce art simply in order to make money. But unlike astronomers, priests, or housewives, they do have to sell their products on the market in order to survive. What’s more, the market value of their work is dependent on the perception that it was produced in the pursuit of something other than market value. People argue endlessly about what that “something other” is—beauty, inspiration, virtuosity, aesthetic form—I would myself argue

<sup>3</sup> That is, within the art world. The fact that increasing numbers of these complex financial instruments are themselves being revealed to be little more than scams adds what can only be described as an additional kink.

that nowadays, at least, it is impossible to say it is just one thing, rather, art has become a field for play and experiment with the very idea of value—but all pretty much agree that, were an artist to be seen as simply in it for the money, his work would be worth less of it.

I suspect this is a dilemma anyone might face, when trying to maintain some kind of space of autonomy in the face of the market. Those pursuing other forms of value can attempt to insulate themselves from the market. They can come to some sort of accommodation or even symbiosis. Or they can end up in a situation where each side sees itself as ripping the other off.

What I really want to emphasize though is that none of this means that any of these spaces are any less real. We have a tendency to assume that, since capital and its attendant forms of value are so clearly dominant, then everything that happens in the world somehow partakes of its essence. We assume capitalism forms a total system, and that the only real significance of any apparent alternative is the role it plays in reproducing it. Myself, I feel this logic is deeply flawed—even disastrous. For two hundred years at least, artists and those drawn to them have created enclaves where it has been possible to experiment with forms of work, exchange, and production radically different from those promoted by capital. While they are not always self-consciously revolutionary, artistic circles have had a persistent tendency to overlap with revolutionary circles; presumably, precisely because these have been spaces where people can experiment with radically different, less alienated forms of life. The fact that all this is made possible by money percolating downwards from finance capital does not make such spaces “ultimately” a product of capitalism any more than the fact a privately owned factory uses state-supplied and regulated utilities and postal services, relies on police to protect its property and courts to enforce its contracts, makes the cars they turn out “ultimately” products of socialism. Total systems don’t really exist, they’re just stories we tell ourselves, and the fact that capital is dominant now does not mean that it will always be.

#### **on Prophecy and Social Theory**

Now, this is hardly a detailed analysis of value formation in the art world. It is only the crudest preliminary sketch. But it’s already a thousand times more concrete than anything yet produced by theorists of immaterial labor.

Granted, Continental theory has a notorious tendency to float above the surface of things, only rarely touching down in empirical reality. Lazzarato has a particularly annoying habit of claiming his concepts emerge from a large body of recent “empirical research” which he never, however, actually cites or specifically refers to. Negri tends to throw everything, all the specific gestures, exchanges, and transformations into a kind of giant blender called “real subsumption”—whereby since everything is labor, and all forms of labor operate under the logic of capital, there’s rarely much need to parse the differences between one form and another (let alone analyze the actual organization of, say, a collection agency, or the fashion industry, or any particular capitalist supply chain.)

But in another sense this criticism is unfair. It assumes that Negri and Lazzarato are to be judged as social theorists, in the sense that their work is meant primarily to develop concepts that can be useful in understanding the current state of capitalism or the forms of resistance ranged against it—or at any rate that it can be judged primarily on the degree to which it can. Certainly, any number of young scholars have been trying to adopt these concepts to such purposes, with rather mixed results. But I don’t think this was ever their primary aim. They are first and foremost prophets.



Prophecy of course existed long before social theory proper and in many ways anticipated it. In the Abrahamic tradition that runs from Judaism through Christianity to Islam, prophets are not simply people who speak of future events. They are people who provide revelation of hidden truths about the world, which may include knowledge of events yet to come to pass, but need not necessarily. One could argue that revolutionary thought, and critical social theory, both have their origins in prophecy. At the same time, prophecy is clearly a form of politics. This is not only because prophets were invariably concerned with social justice. It is because they created social movements, even, new societies: as Spinoza emphasized, it was the prophets who effectively produced the Hebrew people, by creating a framework for their history. Negri has always been quite up front about his own desire to play a similar role for what he likes to call “the multitude”. He is less interested in describing realities than in bringing them into being. A political discourse, he says, should “aspire to fulfill a Spinozist prophetic function, the function of an immanent desire that organizes the multitude.”<sup>4</sup> The same could be said of theories of immaterial labor. They’re not really descriptive. For its most ardent proponents, immaterial labor is really important because it’s seen to represent a new form of communism: ways of creating value by forms of social cooperation so dispersed that just about everyone could be said to take part, much as they do in the collective creation of language, and in a way that makes it impossible to calculate inputs and outputs, where there is no possibility of accounting. Capitalism, which is reduced increasingly to simply realizing the value created by such communistic practices, is thereby reduced to a purely parasitical force, a kind of feudal overlord extracting rent from forms of creativity entirely alien to it. We are already living under communism, if only we come to realize it. This is of course the real role of the prophet: to organize the desires of the multitude, to help these already-existing forms of communism burst out of their increasingly artificial shackles. Beside this epochal task, the concrete analysis of the organization of real-life TV studios or cell phone dealerships seems petty and irrelevant.

In contrast the main body of social theory as we know it today does not trace back to such performative revolutionary gestures, but precisely, from their failure. Sociology sprang from the ruins of the French revolution; Marx’s *Capital* was written to try to understand the failure of the revolutions of 1848, just as most contemporary French theory emerged from reflections on what went wrong in May ’68. Social theory aims to understand social realities; social reality is in turn is first and foremost that which resists attempts to simply call prophet visions into existence, or even (perhaps especially) to impose them through the apparatus of the state. Since all good social theory does also contain an element of prophecy, the result is a constant internal tension; in its own way as profound as the tension I earlier suggested lay at the heart of politics. But the work of Negri and his associates clearly leans very heavily on the prophetic side of the equation.

#### concerning the fullness of time

At this point I think I can return to my initial question: why does one need a revolutionary philosopher to help us think about art? Why does one call in a prophet?

The answer would appear to be: One calls in a prophet because prophets above all know how to speak compellingly about their audience’s place in history.

Certainly this is the role in which Negri, Bifo, and the rest have now been cast. They have become impresarios of the historical moment. When their ideas are invoked by artists or

<sup>4</sup> Empire, p. 66.

philosophers, this is largely what those artists and philosophers seem to be looking for. When they are brought on stage at public events, this is mainly what is expected of them. Their job is to explain why the time we live in is unique, why the processes we see crystallizing around us are unprecedented; different in quality, different in kind, from anything that has ever come before.

Certainly this is what each one of the four, in their own way, actually did. They might not have had much to say about specific works of art or specific forms of labor, but each provided a detailed assessment of where we stood in history. For Lazzarato the significant thing was that we had moved from a society of discipline to one of security; for Revel, what was really important was the move from formal to real subsumption of labor under capital. For Bifo, we had moved from an age of connection to one of conjunction; for Negri, the new stage of Contemporaneity that had replaced post-modernism. Each dutifully explained how we had entered into a new age, and described some of its qualities and implications, along with an assessment of its potential for some sort of radical political transformation,

It’s easy to see why the art world would provide a particularly eager market for this sort of thing. Art has become a world where—as Walter Benjamin once said of fashion—everything is always new, but nothing ever changes. In the world of fashion, of course, it’s possible to generate a sense of novelty simply by playing around with color, patterns, styles, and hemlines. The visual arts though do not have such a luxury. They have always seen themselves as entangled in a larger world of culture and politics, that they are not simply playing around with form. Hence the a permanent need to conjure up a sense that we are in a profoundly new historical moment, even if art theorists attempting such an act of conjuration often seem to find themselves with less and less to work with.

There is another reason, I think, why revolutionary thinkers are particularly well-suited to such a task. One can come to understand it, I think, by examining what would otherwise seem to be a profound contradiction in the all of the speakers’ approaches to history. In each case, we are presented with a series of historical stages: from societies of discipline *to* societies of security, from conjunction *to* connection, etc. We are not dealing with a series of complete conceptual breaks; at least, no one seems to imagine that is impossible to understand any one stage from the perspective of any of the others. But oddly, all of the speakers in question subscribed to the theory that history *should* be conceived as a series of complete conceptual breaks, so total, in fact, that it’s hard to see how this would be possible. In part this is the legacy of Marxism, which always tends to insist that since capitalism forms an all-encompassing totality that shapes our most basic assumptions about the nature of society, we simply cannot conceive what a future society would be like. (Though no Marxist, oddly, seems to think we should have similar problems trying to understand past societies.) In this case, though, it is just as much the legacy of Michel Foucault,<sup>5</sup> who radicalized this idea of a series of all-encompassing historical stages even further with his notion of epistemes: that the very conception of truth changes completely from one historical period to the next. Here, too, each historical period forms such a total system that it is impossible to imagine one gradually transforming into another; instead, we have a series of conceptual revolutions, of total breaks or ruptures.

All of the speakers at the conference were drawing, in one way another, on both the Marxian and Foucauldian traditions—and some of the terms used for historical stages (“real

<sup>5</sup> Really, I would say, it is the legacy of Structuralism. Foucault is remembered mainly as a post-structuralist, but he began as an arch-structuralist, and this aspect of his philosophy in no sense changed over the course of his career but if anything grew stronger.

subsumption”, “societies of discipline”...) drew explicitly on one or the other. Thus all of them were faced with the same conceptual problem. How could it be possible to come up with such a typology? How is it possible for someone trapped inside one historical period to be able to grasp the overall structure of history through which one stage replaces the other?

The prophet of course has an answer to this question. Just as we can only grasp an individual’s life as a story once he is dead, it is only from the perspective of the end of time that we can grasp the story of history. It doesn’t matter that we do not really know what the messianic Future will be like: it can serve as the Archimedean point, the time outside time about which we can know nothing that nonetheless makes knowledge possible.

Of course, Bifo was explicitly arguing that the Future itself is dead. The twentieth century, he insisted, had been the “century of the future” (that’s why he began his analysis with the Futurists). But we have left that now, and moved on to a century with no future, only precarity. We have come to a point where it is impossible to even imagine projecting ourselves forwards in time in any meaningful way, where the only radical gesture left to us is therefore self-mutilation or suicide. Certainly, this reflected a certain prevailing mood in radical circles. We really do lack a sense of where we stand in history. And it runs well beyond radical circles: the North Atlantic world has fallen into a somewhat apocalyptic mood of late. Everyone is brooding on great catastrophes, peak oil, economic collapse, ecological devastation. But I would argue that even outside revolutionary circles, the Future in its old-fashioned, revolutionary sense, can never really go away. Our world would make no sense without it.

So we are faced with a dilemma. The revolutionary Future appears increasingly implausible to most of us, but neither can we simply get rid of it. As a result, it begins to collapse into the present. Hence, for instance, the insistence that communism is already here, if only we knew how to see it. The Future has become a kind of hidden dimension of reality, an immanent presence lying behind the mundane surface of the world, with a constant potential to break out but only in tiny, imperfect flashes. In this sense we are forced to live with two very different futures: that which we suspect will actually come to pass—perhaps humdrum, perhaps catastrophic, certainly not in any sense redemptive—and The Future in the old revolutionary, apocalyptic sense of the term: the fulfillment of time, the unraveling of contradictions. Genuine knowledge of this Future is impossible, but it is only from the perspective of this unknowable Outside that any real knowledge of the present is possible. The Future has become our Dreamtime.

One could see it as something like St. Augustine’s conception of Eternity, the ground that unifies Past, Present, and Future because it precedes the creation of Time. But I think the notion of the Dreamtime is, if anything, even more appropriate. Aboriginal Australian societies could only make sense of themselves in relation to a distant past that worked utterly differently (in which, for instance animals could become humans and back again), a past which was at once irretrievable, but always somehow there, and into which humans could transport ourselves in dreams and trances so as to attain true knowledge. As with their Past, so now with our Future. It is a myth, but a myth constantly elaborated, as in our endless habit of watching science fiction fantasies on TV and in the movies, even though we no longer believe, as we once did, that the future is really likely to be like that. In this sense, the speakers at our conference found themselves cast in the role not even of prophets, perhaps, but of shamans, technicians of the sacred, capable of moving back and forth between cosmic dimensions—and of course, like any magician, both a sort of artist in their own right and at the same time a sort of trickster and a fraud.

Not surprising, then, that as the sincere revolutionaries that they were, most seemed to find themselves slightly puzzled by how they had arrived here.

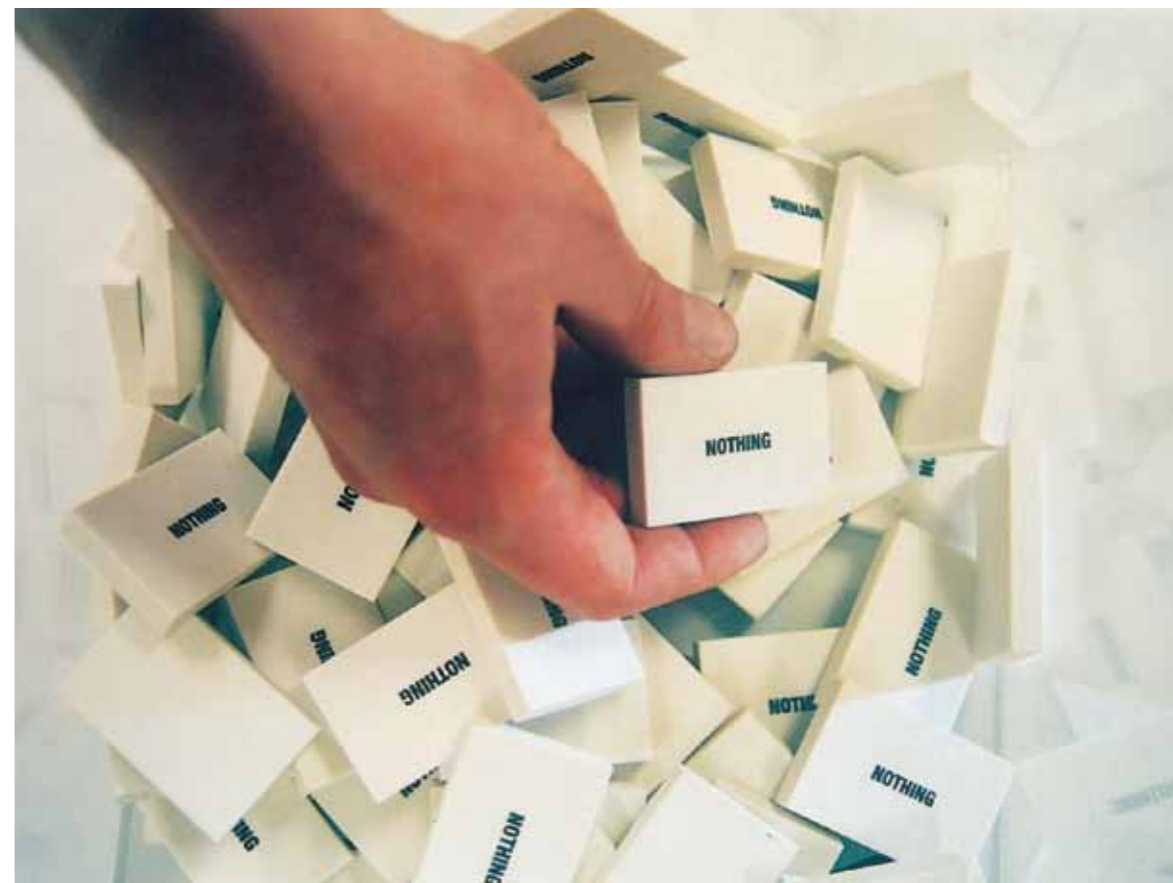
#### **a final note**

Perhaps this seems unduly harsh. I have, after all, trashed the very notion of immaterial labor, accused post-Workerists (or at least the strain represented at this conference) of using flashy, superficial postmodern arguments to disguise a clunky antiquated version of Marxism, and suggested they are engaged in an essentially theological exercise which while it might be helpful for those interested in playing games of artistic fashion or imagining broad historical vistas provides almost nothing in the way of useful tools for concrete social analysis of the art world or anything else. I think that everything I said was true. But I don’t want to leave the reader with the impression that there is nothing of value here.

First of all, I actually do agree that thinkers like these are useful in helping us conceptualize the historical moment. And not only in the prophetic-political-magical sense of offering descriptions that aim to bring new realities into being. I find the idea of a revolutionary future that is already with us, the notion that in a sense we already live in communism, in its own way quite compelling. The problem is, being prophets, they always have to frame their arguments in apocalyptic terms. Would it not be better to, as I suggested earlier, reexamine the past in the light of the present? Perhaps communism has always been with us. We are just trained not to see it. Perhaps everyday forms of communism are really—as Kropotkin in his own way suggested in *Mutual Aid*, even though even he was never willing to realize the full implications of what he was saying—the basis for most significant forms of human achievement, even those ordinarily attributed to capitalism. If we can extricate ourselves from the shackles of fashion, the need to constantly say that whatever is happening now is necessarily unique and unprecedented (and thus, in a sense, unchanging, since everything apparently must always be this way) we might be able to grasp history as a field of permanent possibility, in which there is no particular reason we can’t at least try to begin building a redemptive future at any time. There have been artists trying to contribute to doing so, in small ways, since time immemorial—some, as part of bona fide social movements. It’s not clear that social theorists—good ones anyway—or doing anything all so entirely different.



# IN CONVERSATION: CAREY YOUNG AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ



**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** I want to start in 2001, if that is possible, with the “Gift Economy” piece you did for the exhibition NOTHING. You printed this exhibition title and logo on 1,000 erasers, which were given away for free, much like you would see in the context of a trade show. Can you tell me about the significance of erasure and removal within your work?

**Carey Young:** This connects to an ongoing idea in my work about forms of silence, negation, disappearance, dematerialization and gaps in communication. More recently, this interest has turned to legal forms of silence (such as disclaimers and retractions) and legal grey areas. But with that particular exhibition, I was interested in the idea of “nothing” in a poetic sense—the idea of an object that could be both something and nothing; an object that could also simultaneously suggest the erasure of itself and the erasure of mark making. It also points to a corporate context because of the way the erasers were displayed, referencing the kind of giveaway free gifts often found in a tradeshow.

**JRM:** With respect to this idea of erasure and dematerialization in relation to legal forms of silence, in a way it forms a connection all the way through to the *Redshift* series from 2010, where you are deliberately abandoning copyright protection for the piece on a country by country basis—

**CY:** No, I’m not, and this is very important. It actually suggests a new form within copyright. It is not coming from an anarchist

position where one might say, “let’s get rid of the law.” It’s coming from a position that holds a belief in the legal system – via state-instituted laws - as the only powerful method currently available to contravene corporate power. This is why I have worked with law as an artistic material. But at the same time, through playing with and using the law as an artistic medium, I’m interested in suggesting that there is a kind of malleability and a plasticity to the law. I’m not only interested in the transgressive territory between the legal and the illegal, but also I want people to feel that they have more agency in the face of the law.

I’m not trying to make excuses for the state here, or kowtow to a greater power; rather, I’m interested in suggesting that we might see ourselves as more powerful than we might think when we are faced with ideas of legal domination.

**JRM:** Maybe, then, we should go back to 2001 and work our way to the present. There is a shift that happens in the work; a few shifts. And the connections take more work to develop.

With respect to this interest in silence, and gaps, could you tell me about the significance of the concept of zero within your practice?

**CY:** I’m mostly attracted to the perceived poetic suggestiveness in the idea of nothingness, and also of course the sublime. I’m attracted to that which one can’t quite account for.

I often come back to the initial generation of Conceptual artists because I feel that their varied and urgent attempts to escape the marketplace were key. But the way those works were commodified and did not ultimately escape the market context suggests that ultimately, at a certain point, art cannot evade the logic of the commodity form. It is an interesting intellectual and symbolic game, but tragically there seems to be no escape.

Instead I am more interested in situating a work within the context of the market in such a way that it problematises that context. It is thus not so easily consumed. I want to avoid the scenario of my work “sitting on its ass in a museum”, to quote Claes Oldenburgh. I hope that my work sets up a critical and discursive relationship with its exhibition context, and subtly warns of that context as having a more ‘corporatized’ future (since, in our neoliberal era, all of life now takes place in a marketplace, this is not an unreasonable ‘modest proposal’.)

**JRM:** In this respect, we are departing from thinking about the artwork as an object of contemplation in favor of considering the way in which it can function as a mechanism that is capable of entering certain predetermined spaces and operating so as to open up different patterns of behavior.

**CY:** Yes, and I’m interested in the idea of the artist going deep within those spaces with subversive intent. But a subversive intent that is not immediately obvious...



**JRM:** But within late neoliberalism, or whatever we're in, critique has been commoditized to the point that systems actually depend on it. Or, to paraphrase Tiqqun, Empire manages violence (critique) to the extent that violence is not only anticipated, it is incorporated. But it was never outside the mechanism, it was always a constitutive element.

**CY:** But in terms of the neoliberalist view that the whole of life takes place within a market context, then where can we find critique? I'm an optimist – I believe we can find or create it somewhere. Culturally speaking, we are often looking for possibilities to offer critique, but if there is nothing that lies outside of the marketplace, than what does one do?

So, my work doesn't suggest an attempt to stand 'outside' corporate structures, or legal structures, or political structures, but tries to go deep inside those structures by taking on that deep knowledge, taking on that identity, taking on those kinds of modes of address to make artwork from inside that. And I also alter corporate tools so as to expose them, by adding new content which criticizes them from within. It can be seen in a Zizekian way as an overidentification with power structures in order to become subversive. This is also explored by Deleuze, in *Venus in Furs*, in relation to the idea of the masochist as a figure who identifies with rules and laws to the extent of being transgressive.

**JRM:** You've previously been employed in the corporate sector, is that correct?

**CY:** Yes. It was kind of by accident. I finished a fine art Masters in photography in 1997, but because the subject of my artistic work and research at that period was very much looking at the technological sublime and the interplay of the physical and virtual, I found it very useful to be looking at the so called "new economy"—the period of rapid technological growth and dot.com fuelled economic boom at the end of the 1990s. As a result, very shortly after leaving art college I agreed to take up a surprise part-time job offer in the corporate sector working for a management consultancy that specialized in information technology. I agreed because, despite my political leanings being pretty much hard Left, I felt that one might want to roll the dice and see where this highly unusual offer might lead.

Ultimately, although it was a regular corporate job, not a residency, it gave me access to many new contacts, conversations, and servers full of information—which developed into a major research opportunity for me. Out of this, unbeknownst to the company, I started to develop a large body of artistic work. It was a kind of clandestine artist residency, and I imagine they still don't really know about it in an official way. My artistic work never referred directly to the company since I feel that artists such as Hans Haacke had already made such pointed work in relation to specific corporate examples and there was no point trying to repeat a similar position with relation to institutional

critique—I was more interested in general "corporation as institution."

So, I stayed in the corporate world for four and a half years working at the same company, and subsequently I was hired as a marketing person by an organization that represented pretty much the opposite of the corporate sector - a wonderful leftist think tank, specializing in economics, called the New Economics Foundation. I worked there for three years. So I also work with ideas from that context. I chose each of these jobs for the opportunities they would give me to do a kind of paid research. At the same time as doing these jobs, I also did artist residencies at places like the BBC or Xerox. I was looking at their materials, research, knowledge, tools, all sorts that I could use as starting points for works. It was highly unusual for an artist to be able to go from one corporation into another as a colleague and insider (in terms of having trusted access to their servers and staff) and I made the most of it – it was a particularly energetic period for me in terms of production.

**JRM:** While you are interested in the dialectic of the inside/outside, it doesn't seem like you have ever really been convinced about withdrawal as a critical strategy. You are more interested in embeddedness, occupation, and a certain ventriloquism.

**CY:** Yes, and I would also say learning, and a kind of becoming. There is a lot about embodiment and physicality in my work. I often come back to the object status of the work, and emphasize the piece as object. With the erasers that we discussed earlier, for example, it is very important that they exist as physical objects in the gallery. Or, as in the *Disclaimer series*, 2004, in which prints featuring legal disclaimers were mounted onto wooden supports that were then hung on the gallery wall - it is important that those weren't just flat prints or vinyl texts on the wall. I gave them a kind of physicality.

This is something that occurs across my whole practice: the idea of physical participation and embodiment, and a bodily enactment of ideology. It is like *habitus*, to invoke the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and Marcel Mauss. Even the Soviet statues in my video *Memento Park* (2010) are seen as performers suspended in a mid-action enactment of political ideology and propaganda.

**JRM:** Your works are often also polyphonic in nature—the terms of your collaborations allowing your work to move in and outside of the art context, operating as multi-authored texts suggesting legibility in several vocabularies at once. Could you expand on the relationship between polyphony and simultaneity, but also absence?

**CY:** I've often been trying to minimize my own artistic identity in the work, so I become a kind of vehicle for the projects, a symbol of the artist. It is almost a strategy of disappearance, which is actually very ironic, because that is probably the last thing you would expect when you first see my work, since I



often feature within it in one way or another. But that character in the work is often a cypher representing the identity of the artist merged with this corporatized being. A kind of neoliberal, corporate, science-fiction future that we seem to be hurtling toward, one which is even more in thrall to neoliberalism. And it asks the question: is this what artists might look like? Might be like? Might think like? There is a strategy of disappearance within that (as well as a challenge and warning for us in the present.)

In terms of polyphony, I have worked closely with a number of non-art professionals in the creation of many of my works, from lawyers to computer hackers and a venture capitalist. Their input is always credited and one can clearly discern their input into the work. With my law works, it is important that the works are functional legal instruments as well as works of art, and for this reason I name the lawyers who have helped me develop the works. Their names add legal weight and credibility to the works. With a status as legal instruments, the works have a separate and perhaps parallel reality. The law to me is a separate reality since it inherently involves the idea of punishment, which has its own physical charge. This to me is an interesting form of the 'real'. In a conceptual sense, I create the machine of the work, and the content of the work is created by others, including myself. With *Nothing Ventured*, (2001) I wrote a script for a call center which discussed myself and my artistic work. At the gallery where I was exhibiting, my installation featured a phone, desk and chair, and a sign inviting callers to pick up the phone receiver. They would be connected direct to a call center agent, who would offer them a little information about my work, background and concerns. The script was pretty limited—just enough to tempt the caller to try and get off the script and have other conversations with the agents. I told the agents they could get “off script” whenever they liked with any inquisitive caller who wanted to test the boundaries of the work. The visitors were very curious, and immediately wanted to ask the agents about what they thought about the work and what it might be about. I recorded and transcribed those conversations. So, the call center agents and the caller were actually co-creating the content of the work by having those conversations. The transcriptions of that work form a very interesting, free flowing engagement with themes in my work and act as the main content of the work, as well as the documentation.

**JRM:** What do you ask of your audience?

**CY:** I ask the audience to engage with the works almost despite themselves. I actually expect a degree of affront in relation to the corporate identity of the artist depicted in the work. I know this is going to go against the more Leftist sensibilities of the typical art audience. I also try to use beauty or humor as a way of disarming people and engaging with them almost before they have a chance to really think about the work. By finding the work humorous—because there is often a comic vulnerability, or elements of the absurd or ironic in the work- or by finding the

work visually seductive - I want to people to like the work or feel connected to the work almost despite themselves.

**JRM:** With the video *Terms and Conditions*, (2004) for example, the viewers find themselves invited into an idyllic landscape, but they are immediately given a spoken presentation consisting of legal disclaimers borrowed from corporate websites. There is actually a humorous element in the fact that you are going to these websites and the one thing that you actually can easily take away is the text, it is open, free, and malleable, even though the way in which the text is presumed to operate is to limit the malleability or interpretations or the openness of one's relationship to landscape. In using the terms to subvert them or open up a more poetic relationship to them.

**CY:** It is interesting that you find humor in that piece—I see it as centering more on the absurd.

I would say there are other pieces that engage more overtly with humor, such as the videos *I am a Revolutionary*, (2001) or *Product Recall* (2008), both of which are both deadpan and ridiculous. Partly because I've got a certain dry sense of humor I can't help but injecting that. But I think when someone intellectualizes it.... I've given you my main reason, which is to try and deliver a sense of connectedness to the audience. I think it is important with my video work that the audience feels as though the work has physically entered their own space, so I want them to have that physical, embodied connection, and humor is one way to do that.

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his local purview. And no man could keep the object he received nor, once in, could he opt out of this ritualized exchange.<sup>3</sup> “A partnership between two men is a permanent and lifelong affair.”<sup>4</sup> The things that moved between them could also never stop moving. Once within the circle of Kula exchange, ritual objects only left when they physically perished.<sup>5</sup> But if the ceremonial exchange of necklaces and bracelets publicly defined Kula, “a greater number of secondary activities and features” took place “under its cover,” including the ordinary trade and barter of various goods and utilities that, although indispensable for everyday life, were often locally unavailable.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Kula embraced an inter-connected complex of activities, created an organic social whole out of disparate social parts, and established a hierarchy of prestige that defined this social world in part and in whole.<sup>7</sup> Ceremonial necklaces and bracelets were given, accepted, and reciprocated, but what returned was not mere jewelry, but a world. This world was fabricated by the hierarchies of power and prestige Kula established, represented, and conserved; and by the ordinary activities that went on under its cover, embedding these hierarchies of prestige ever deeper into the

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fabric of everyday life.

If we are interested in how Kula provides a genealogical backdrop to network and sphere theory, let alone to new forms of exchange communities, then three observations about Malinowski’s methodological and conceptual claims are pertinent. First, Malinowski sought to found the discipline of anthropology on the premise that the anthropologist had a different analytical perspective on the social world than “the native,” namely, that the anthropologist could see the total social system of exchange whereas “the native” could only see his local part. Second, in order to produce this anthropological point of view, the anthropologist had to abstract the Trobrianders from the diachronic nature of Kula (that Kula lines were always being made and remade) and himself from the history that connected him to his subjects. And third, anthropologists had to reconceptualize acts of reciprocity as the condition rather than the end to sociality – reciprocity does not end social relations, but knits them.

The understanding of “gift economies” as a vital part of the machinery of social power was essential to Marcel Mauss’s reinterpretation of Malinowski’s account of Kula and other

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Airline seating since 1978 to Airbus's standing-room concept.



Edward S. Curtis, *Tolowa Indian Measuring shell money*, 1868-1952.

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ethnographies of the Pacific in *The Gift*. For Mauss, the gift had a straightforward tripartite structure – the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. It also had a dominant spirit. Gift giving was not an exercise in treaty making. It was an exercise of aggression wrapped in dazzling ribbons and elaborate language. Although new networks are formed through seduction and wooing, the spirit of the gift was more akin to the gods of war than the gods of peace.<sup>8</sup> To offer a gift was to assert power (*mana*, *hau*) over another, a power that remained until the recipient could reverse the dynamic. In other words, if the offer of a gift was an invitation to sociality, it was also an announcement of the onset of a perpetual war of debt in which the books could never be settled. If the recipient of a gift was unable to reciprocate, then any *mana* he had accumulated in previous exchanges was nullified. Thus anyone who enters the Kula wages that he will acquire more prestige *in due time*; but he also risks losing all the prestige he has previously acquired – and more, since he might lose not only what he has gained but also, in coming to know what he might have had, might lose his innocence as well. In short, Malinowski and Mauss read Kula as a kind of bank, and banking as a kind of warfare. Before banks, before currency, valuable things were placed in circulation as *lines* of credit whose ultimate end was to return to the sender having accumulated surplus value. Participants gave in order to increase their holdings, but this interested act created something more than the interested rational subject – it created moral obligations and social worlds.<sup>9</sup>

The great French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, would take this insight and make it the foundation of the incest taboo and subsequently his structural anthropology. The incest taboo was not a prohibition against sex so much as a prohibition against hoarding. Men – and for Levi-Strauss, like Mauss, this was a man's world – had an obligation to indebt others by giving them valuables – the most valuable of all values being a woman. To indebt a person was not an antisocial act but the very conditions of sociality. Here Levi-Strauss followed Marx, who also saw hoarding as an antisocial practice. For Marx, as for Levi-Strauss, human sociality depended on a kind of reflexive fold that appears when one sends out a value in order for it to return having gained a surplus.<sup>10</sup> These reflexively structured routes make the worlds within which people dwell.

While Levi-Strauss's views about men's manipulation of women, words, and goods have been subjected to a thorough critique, his representation of the world of human exchange offered us a new visual metaphor – a sealed

bag.<sup>11</sup> Several qualities of this sealed bag bare noting. First, whereas Levi-Strauss saw the social worlds that emerged in the circuit of credit and debt as a structurally closed totality, from a diachronic perspective, new social networks were always being added or removed such that the symmetrical form of the matrix was always being distorted. In other words, a bag might appear sealed off from other surrounding bags from a synchronic point of view, but if we take into account Mauss's argument that new lines of gift-exchange are always being created through seduction, then, from a diachronic point of view, the strings that open and shut it reappear. Second, Levi-Strauss gave volume to gift exchange. The famous signifying chain was revealed not to be a chain so much as a set of interlinked fences that enclose a world giving it semantic volume and weight, as well as pragmatic space and time. It would seem, then, that Levi-Strauss overcame a certain problem Sloterdijk would later diagnose as endemic to network theory (and here we could add to Malinowski's schematic representation of the gift). The problem with network theory, Sloterdijk claims, is that it overstates the linear connections of points within a planar surface to the detriment of the intrinsic volume of all social space – network theory replicates rather than analyses the Euclid hierarchy in which a point is that which has no part, lines are made out of these empty points, planes from lines, and spheres from planes. For Sloterdijk – and it would seem for Levi-Strauss as well – because humans cannot reside in a point, in the beginning there was the bubble.<sup>12</sup> Third, for Levi-Strauss, because every cultural world feels like a closed space to those within it, each cultural world is structured immunologically in the sense that each world interprets every difference within it as a possible foreign invasion and uses mechanisms to neutralize, expel, or extinguish this "invasion."

But whether they foreground a symmetrical (synchronic) or asymmetrical (diachronic) matrix, anthropologists of the gift saw the prohibition against hoarding valuables and the obligation to enter into debt/credit relations as vital to the creation of self-reflexive folds that make social and cultural worlds possible. If people were allowed to hoard their valuables, no social matrix could be fabricated out of the reflexive networks of giving and receiving. Social space would not bend back on itself and form pockets of communication and inhabitation. Instead, space would remain empty, negating any place for humans to dwell. We can think of these reflexive movements as a kind of *embagination* of space – the creation of a flexible receptacle closed in all places except where it can be tied and untied.

But, again, this fold, or embagination, fabricates a world in which individuals, and competing worlds, attempt to dwell – to their advantage or disadvantage.

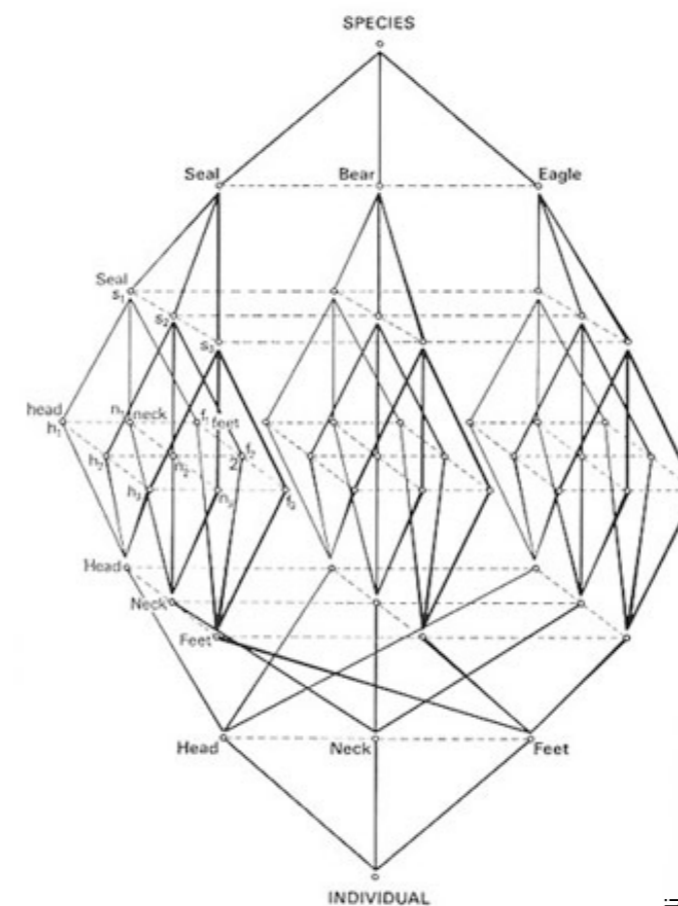


Illustration from Claude Levi-Strauss's book *The Savage Mind*.

## 2. Routes and Worlds

It is in this light that the anthropology of the gift provides a genealogical backdrop to Latour's network theory and Sloterdijk's theory of spheres. To borrow from Latour, gift-exchange can be seen as one kind of network: they create nodes and linkages as things (whether men, women, boys, ritual bracelets, pigs, or words) circulate and are localized. And, insofar as gifts return, they create a specific kind of envelope – a self-reflexive sphere – in which a life-world might emerge. But this life-world relies not on points that have no part but on thick networks of differentiation where actual and potential meaningful inhabitation takes place.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Malinowski, Kula stitched space together reflexively, creating enclosures that the Trobrianders experienced as *their* world. And Levi-Strauss believed that the universal circulation of women in particular ways, and the indebtedness and risk this circulation created, stitched together particular cultural spaces. For

Levi-Strauss, women were the needles that men used to fabricate cultural spaces out of universal space, human enclosures out of abstract opens, each according to their particular pattern. But as feminist and queer scholars demonstrated the gendered nature of anthropological accounts of the gift, other needles came to emerge.<sup>14</sup>

Anthropology, even before the rise of structural anthropology, initially treated these human enclosures as if they had no drawstrings, ignoring the networks that allowed them to enter these embagged worlds in the first place (so Malinowski did not discuss the forms of circulation and governance that allowed him to chose between the Trobiand Islands and an Australian internment camp). But, following colonial, feminist, and anti-colonial critiques, anthropologists became interested in the networks that ran between and into clusters of embagged worlds, and how these networks pulsed with various forms of debt, risk, and power, with various hierarchies of being and existence.<sup>15</sup> When the strings forming and connecting embagged space began dominating disciplinary interest, the anthropology of globalization and transnationalism emerged.

And this is one of the great lessons that the anthropology of the gift – and later the anthropology of circulation – bestowed on us: that things do not simply move. Routes *figure* space – they create worlds – and are figured by figured space, by the worlds through which they move.<sup>16</sup> They are the condition of previous circulatory matrixes and become part of the matrix that decides which other kinds of things can pass through and be made sense of within this figured space. And routes configure things – they shape them into 3D manifestations. What "things" are – what counts as an entity – should be understood broadly. Whether container ships, kin or stranger socialities, psychic expectations, affective intensities, linguistic forms: all form, conform, and deform existing cultures of circulation. Social institutions, or "demanding environments," emerge around these material and affective curvatures, effectively controlling the further fabrication of things and their movements.<sup>17</sup>

As an example of the dynamic between the figuring function of routes, we need look no further than the Panama Canal. Ashley Carse has examined how it was not only the landscapes around the Panama Canal that were reorganized by its creation and management, but the shipping that passed through it. To see what is at stake here we must first take seriously the materiality of the earth, and assume that moving goods across continents through waterways is not an abstract idea, but a history of material fabrication. Various routes exist or have been





Elizabeth Povinelli, sketch from the graphic memoir *The Knifegrinder's Daughter*.

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built to allow ships to minimize transport costs and maximize profit. The Panama Canal became one of the key transit points for shipping when it was completed in 1914. Originally, all sizes and shapes of ships passed through it, with the only constraint being that the ship should not exceed the width, depth, and buoyancy conditions of the canal. But, over time, in an effort to maximize profit, companies designed what came to be called a Panamax ship: transport vessels that occupied every meter of the canal's lock system and container boxes that could be stacked tightly side-by-side.



Panamax ship adrift.

Another great lesson bestowed on us by the anthropology of the gift was the insight that these figured spaces were subtended and distended by time. Social theorists originally focused on the interval of time between the act of giving (credit) and the act of reciprocating (debt payment). Levi-Strauss, for instance, argued that as men sought to expand their network advantageously, they developed increasingly complex temporal intervals between marriage givers and marriage takers.<sup>18</sup> Earlier, Marx attempted to understand the function of the interval between commodity production and money form, and exchange and use value. In his two-volume *The Civilizing Process*, the sociologist Norbert Elias argued that modern forms such as self-restraint, stranger sociality, and trust emerged out of increasingly complex networks of social connection across ever-vaster expanses or geographical social spaces.<sup>19</sup> As these increasingly complex exchanges unfolded across time and space, new social institutions (such as capital) came into being alongside their specific technologies (such as insurance).<sup>20</sup>

Bracketing debates in Marxism and anthropology over the differences and convergences between gift and commodity societies – such as the seeming differences of

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alienation, domination, and control (alienable versus inalienable objects, undisguised versus disguised domination, utilitarian versus moral controls, the reification of objects versus the personification of subjects) – one can understand the temptation to understand financial capital as a form of Kula exchange. Participants in the market seem to believe in the independent power of the market, similar to how participants in Kula believed in the power of Kula. And they believe in and trust the market even though – no more than Kula participants – beyond their local currents and eddies, market participants can have a striking understanding of complex networks and spheres that they create and participate in. Moreover, there seems to be a necessary relationship between the ignorance of trust and the cunning of information for the system to work. This is nowhere more profoundly demonstrated than in the recent financial crisis involving Commercial Mortgage Backed Securities (CMBS). Even the critical understanding of the system as such doesn't guarantee a specific social outcome. If Marx sought to articulate a disenchantment with the black box of capital accumulation, countless speculators seek to beat the margin through a similar analytic acumen by creating new forms and networks, further complicating the circuit of capital and the spheres of its inhabitation.

At this point we must return to the real fundamental insight of the anthropology of the gift. While dramatic displays of wealth, such as Kula rituals and CMBS structures, might focus the social eye, "a greater number of secondary activities and features" are done "under its cover." These other unperceived activities carried out in plain sight carry out the routine of creating the subjects who then take these routes and worlds as the best and most natural condition of *the world*. But no world is actual *one world*. The feeling that one lives in the best condition of the world unveils the intuition that there is always more than one world in the world *at any one time*. The very fact of Malinowski's presence, and his own argument that for the Trobrianders there were worlds within worlds, testifies to this claim. The material heterogeneity within any one sphere, and passing between any two spheres, allows new worlds to emerge and new networks to be added. This heterogeneity emerges in part because of the excesses and deficits arising from incommensurate and often competing interests within any given social space. These interests press materiality toward different futures even when operating within the same general social logic. Take, for instance, the different futures pressing into the materiality of contemporary air transportation. The pressure of human transport capital is to cram an ever-

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Rex Edmunds, Karrabing Indigenous Corporation. Photo: Liza Johnson.

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increasing number of people into limited space, while the pressure of agricapital is to increase the consumption habit of human beings, creating ever-larger human bodies. And both of these are subject to the speculative trade in oil and commodity futures driven as much by the gamble of bubbles as the logic of corporate functionality. But these futures are driven as much by the communicative networks that allow vast and high speed trading as the slow production and life of the transportation industry. And here we return again to an insight gleaned from the gift: the potential futures internal to every actual world do not emerge willy-nilly. Debt/credit relationships tie up and encumber the future with present obligations, and these obligations are literally carved into landscapes and subjects.

And it is here, in the excessive heterogeneity of social life, that the anthropology of the otherwise meets contemporary theories of routes and worlds, networks and spheres. Bataille is the name we usually associate with the critique of the economy of the gift as oriented to a balancing of accounts rather than radical expenditure, pure waste, or senseless excess. But the anthropology of the gift was also always an anthropology of an otherwise, and of radical deracination – of a part that has no part as of yet. Alongside their interests in gift economies, these anthropologists were also interested in the formless, in radical expenditure/deficit, and in the abject that exposed, escaped, or was produced by these systematizations of circulation and exchange. These excesses, deficiencies, and abscesses in the complex relationship between networks and spheres, routes and worlds, and the potential new worlds that emerge out of them has been the focus of two ongoing projects of mine.

### 3. Excesses and Deficits

For the last year, I have been working on a graphic memoir about the incommensurate social imaginaries that defined the relationship between my grandparents and me. Like many graphic memoirs, this one attempts to poetically condense a series of visual and written texts. It uses standard representational logics to probe a set of questions about how life worlds ravel and unravel in the historical unfolding of empire, nation-state, and global capital, and how these ravelings and unravelings create new social imaginaries that may or may not develop the institutional supports to inflate and sustain themselves. Like other things, these gifts of memory move along specific routes, raveling and unraveling worlds in the process. Memory does or doesn't transfer across space (as organized kinds of places) and time (in the sense of

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generational logics), and it is here that we can see, perhaps most clearly, that gifts can be given long after the spherical world in which they make sense has collapsed. And gifts can return from a world not yet fully made to a world long since passed away. If these are the gifts of death, then gifts of death are indeed the condition for true beginnings.

The book is broken into three sections, “*Topologies*,” “*Mythologies*,” and “*Analogies*,” and is written from the perspective of a six- to eight-year-old girl. The first section, *Topologies*, centers on an image in a frame that hung in my paternal grandparents’ dining room. This image riveted my paternal relatives, causing fights, evoking tears, and staging long silences. The image itself was incomprehensible to me at the time. I would retrospectively learn that it was a topological rendering of the mountains of the Trentino-Alto Adige region. My paternal grandparents were born in a small village called Carisole, just north-west of Trento in Italy, where their families had lived for countless generations. The Trentino-Alto Adige region was divided between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Italian state prior to World War I, incorporated into Italy only after the War. During the war, the region saw vicious trench warfare and mass slaughter, and my grandparents left soon after World War I, taking with them a life-world that I could not see. For this reason, the image within the picture frame carried significant symbolic weight for them. Family fights would erupt when anyone would tack down the referent of this sign. When I would ask my father what the picture meant (What’s that? “That’s where our village Carisole is.” Where’s Carisole? “It’s in Italy.”), my grandfather would fly into a fury that rippled across older relatives. But when my grandfather described what the picture portrayed (“That’s our village Carisole.” Where’s Carisole? “It’s in the Empire.”), it failed to align with any of my known social cartographies.

The second section, *Mythologies*, in turn presents the core myth of each of my grandparents. For instance, the condensed story of my maternal grandfather was that of his parents’ attempt to survive in Alsace Lorraine as hyperinflation was burning through the German Empire, which put him on a boat to the US with five dollars in his pocket. He was a gambler and womanizer as a young man, knocking up my mother’s mother, marrying her, and then descending into extreme poverty. One day he won big at the horse races, bought a butcher’s shop, got lung cancer, lived long enough to see my mother marry, and then died. The final section, *Analogies*, shows how the small child attempts to make sense of this history in the 1960s in the racialized and racist American South.

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Behind the drawings is a mediation on how *forms* and *practices* of sense become impractical as one sphere of life collapses into another – how a spherical world can continue to send out gifts of memory long after it has collapsed. The deformations and reformations of memory I try to capture here are possible because of the excesses and deficits that emerge as routes force open worlds and migrate objects (here subjects, my grandparents) into the midst of other worlds, creating embagged forms of life. In standard condensed graphic form, I can conjure the actual routes and localizations, the embagination of world, the tensions internal to these new worlds because of networks already running through them, and the potential networks and worlds that emerge out of the unwindings and rewindings of memories in motion.

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#### 4. Augmented Reality

A second project on which I have been working focuses on the media and mediation of memory as memory travels across time and space, and the effect of this mediation on the worlds in which people dwell. In this case, very old Indigenous friends and colleagues and I are trying to build an augmented reality project that would allow access to stories about place, in places. The project started about five years ago, when new smartphone software such as 2D barcode-readers and GPS were just emerging to allow for augmented reality.

We were calling what we tried to envision “the mobile phone project,” a digital project seeking to use mixed-reality technology to embed traditional, historical, and contemporary knowledge back into the landscape. More specifically, it would create a land-based “living library” by geotagging media files in such a way that they would be playable only within a certain proximity of a physical site. The idea was to develop software that creates three unique

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interfaces – for tourists, land management, and Indigenous families, the latter having management authority over the entire project and content – and provide a dynamic feedback loop for the input of new information and media. Imagine a tourist, or one of our great-great-grandchildren in the same area. They open our website, which shows where a GPS-activated mixed-reality story is located. They download this information into their smartphone. Now imagine this same person floating off the shore of a pristine beach in Anson Bay. She activates her GPS and video camera and holds up her smartphone. As she moves the phone around she sees various hypertexts and video options available to her. Suddenly the land is speaking its history and culture without any long-term material impact on the landscape. And the person can only hear this story in the place from which it came.

I understand media as a demanding environment striated by other demanding environments (or, a complexly networked sphere). In other words, media, like the gift, is not an empty space, but aggressive spacing within already existing routes and worlds. Media does not open itself up to make room for a new object so much as it makes a demand on how the object gives itself over to the spacing. More so perhaps than the graphic memoir project, this augmented reality project suggests how an anthropology of the otherwise encounters the excessive heterogeneity of contemporary routes and worlds, networks and spheres.

The project itself emerged out of noncorrespondence within settler colonial logics of domination. My Indigenous colleagues had spent their lives, as had their parents and grandparents, in a small rural Indigenous community across the Darwin harbor in Australia. They had grown up in the shadow of the land rights movement and the celebration of Indigenous cultural difference. Land rights and cultural recognition in Australia was exemplary of the logic of care in late liberalism – by making a space for traditional Indigenous culture, the state argued it was making a space for this traditional culture to care for Indigenous people.

However imperfect, this way of life started to unravel in 2007. As reported in the local Darwin newspaper, on March 15, 2007, members of this project were threatened with chainsaws and pipes, watched as their cars and houses were torched, and their dogs beaten to death. Four families lost rare, well-paying jobs in education, housing, and water works. Public meetings were held, and were attended by the leaders of Department of Family, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs in the Northern Territory Labor government. In these meetings,

the displaced people were held up as examples of the failures of land rights policies to protect Indigenous people living in communities outside their traditional country. The families driven out were promised new housing, schooling, and jobs at Bulgul, a site closer to their traditional countries. Fifty people promptly moved to Bulgul and set up a tent settlement.

But on June 21, 2007, John Howard, then prime minister of Australia, declared a “national emergency in relation to the abuse of children in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.” Indigenous people living in remote communities, or those like my friends who were promised housing in or nearer to their traditional country, were told to move closer to the cities where infrastructural and service delivery costs were lower, even if doing so would endanger their lives. The people who made the promises to the displaced persons confronted the budgetary consequences of these promises and suddenly became difficult to reach. In the year that followed, the income of two of the six families driven off went from roughly \$AUD28,000 to \$AUD12,000 per year after they lost their permanent jobs and were moved onto the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP, a work and training program within a social welfare framework, loosely called “work for the dole”).

If this project emerged out of the material and discursive networks that moved my colleagues across social landscapes, then the communicative sphere into which they sought to insert their modes of memory and memorialization retain their own forms of reflexive movement and figurating force. I will mention only three. First, all objects that are placed into our augmented reality project are treated according to specific software routes that create semantic worldings. No matter which semantic ideology underpins this routing – such as the new Ontological Web Language (OWL) – it nevertheless demands that the entextualized memory and knowledge conform to it. Second, although many postcolonial archives and digital projects seek to develop software that would encode local protocols of information circulation and retrieval – such as restrictions based on kinship, gender, or ritual status – it remains that, in order to be part of the global condition of the contemporary internet, such information must be universally available before it can be sorted based on user particularities. In other words, user protocols – the software that takes into account local social principles of circulation and retrieval – are always secondary and subordinate to the infrastructure of the Web itself. Finally, the ability to hinge information to place is mediated by a specific set of demanding environments and

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the institutions that support them.

But remember: all embagged spaces are the result of not merely two strings hanging from the end of an open, if concealed mouth, but many strings tying and retying the body and its contents.

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Lawrence Liang  
**Is it a Bird? A  
Plane? No, it's a  
Magic Chair**

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e-flux journal #27 — september 2011 Lawrence Liang  
**Is it a Bird? A Plane? No, it's a Magic Chair**

Aren't our favorite Superman stories the ones in which Superman – drained of all his powers by Lex Luthor, who has hidden kryptonite in a pill or behind a painting, take your pick – must recover his strength to outwit Luthor? Reduced to a pile of muscles, the Man of Steel is momentarily vulnerable and forced to rely on the only superpower he has left – one that we ordinary mortals share with him: his creativity and imagination. The pleasures of these stories arise precisely from the challenge of things not being ideal. Given the perpetual threat under which Superman lives, it would not be inaccurate to say that he flies between the stratospheres of the ideal and the impossible. This hovering between perpetual impossibility and an absolute potential also measures the distance between the bespectacled, clumsy Clark Kent and his alter ego. But what if the true alter-ego of Superman is not Clark Kent, but Walter Mitty, the everyman from James Thurber's 1939 short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, who dreams his way into his absolute potential much like all of us? What if Superman is the necessary fiction that allows Kent/Mitty to fly, despite the heaviness of the real world around them? After all, Walter Mitty is the one who really understands that the most subversive power we possess is our imagination – it penetrates walls, stops bullets, flies across the world, and in it we are all light as air.

Italo Calvino urges us to take things a little lightly as we step into the twenty-first century. Enumerating lightness as one of the desirable attitudes to cultivate, Calvino says that when the entire world is turning into stone through a slow petrification, we should recall Perseus's refusal of Medusa's stone-heavy stare. To slay Medusa without allowing himself to be turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and "fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror."<sup>1</sup> Calvino reminds us that Perseus's strength lay in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live. But what of those who live under the terror of the Gorgon – do they wait for their Perseus, their Superman? For his 2010 documentary on the crisis of the education system in the United States, Davis Guggenheim used the appropriate title *Waiting for Superman*, in reference to a Harlem teacher's childhood belief that a superhero would fix the problems of the ghetto, and his frightful realization when his mother tells him that superman does not exist.

The transformation of Clark Kent into Superman is always precipitated by a crisis, usually one large enough to potentially destroy the world. But what if it is not a monumental

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Pirate dvd stand. Photo: Eunheui.

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end-of-the-world that scares us, but the prospect of losing the small worlds that we inhabit and know: a bookstore disappearing, a public organization running out of funds, an independent gallery shutting down?



Scene from the *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* where Walter Mitty assumes the role of a surgeon.

The crisis of funding in arts and culture threatens to destroy many such worlds with a slow petrification of our sensibilities, and the understandable impulse is to despair and bemoan. It is, after all, no coincidence that a state of the economy – depression – also names or appropriates an affective state whereby a self-fulfilling prophecy is initiated: an economy drained of capital produces a draining of life. An alternative economy would have to seek a language that does not just name a different economic process, but names different psychic energies amidst the prediction of gloom that normally accompanies the retreat of capital from all forms of life, including creative life. And yet it remains important to maintain that the mere presence of healthy public institutions does not guarantee a richer cultural life, just as their absence does not necessitate a poverty of cultural life.

In his satirical poem mocking the sad passions of A. E. Housman by emulating his doom-filled verses, Ezra Pound writes:

O woe, woe,  
People are born and die,  
We also shall be dead pretty soon  
Therefore let us act as if we were  
Dead already.

But the fact of the matter is that we are neither dead, nor indeed is the state of cultural life. We now inhabit a paradoxical moment in which, even as known spheres of cultural life are retreating, we find a simultaneous eruption of energetic

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practices and possibilities. A film club in Berlin screens downloaded films and hands out copies of the film to the viewers at the end of the film (when was the last time you went to an exhibition and walked away with the artwork?), cineastes in China curate samizdat collectible DVDs of world cinema combining the best of various legitimate DVDs, a website claims to have a better collection of video art than the MoMA, and young people across the world are experimenting with cheaper technologies that bridge the gap between the films they see and the ones they simultaneously make in their minds.

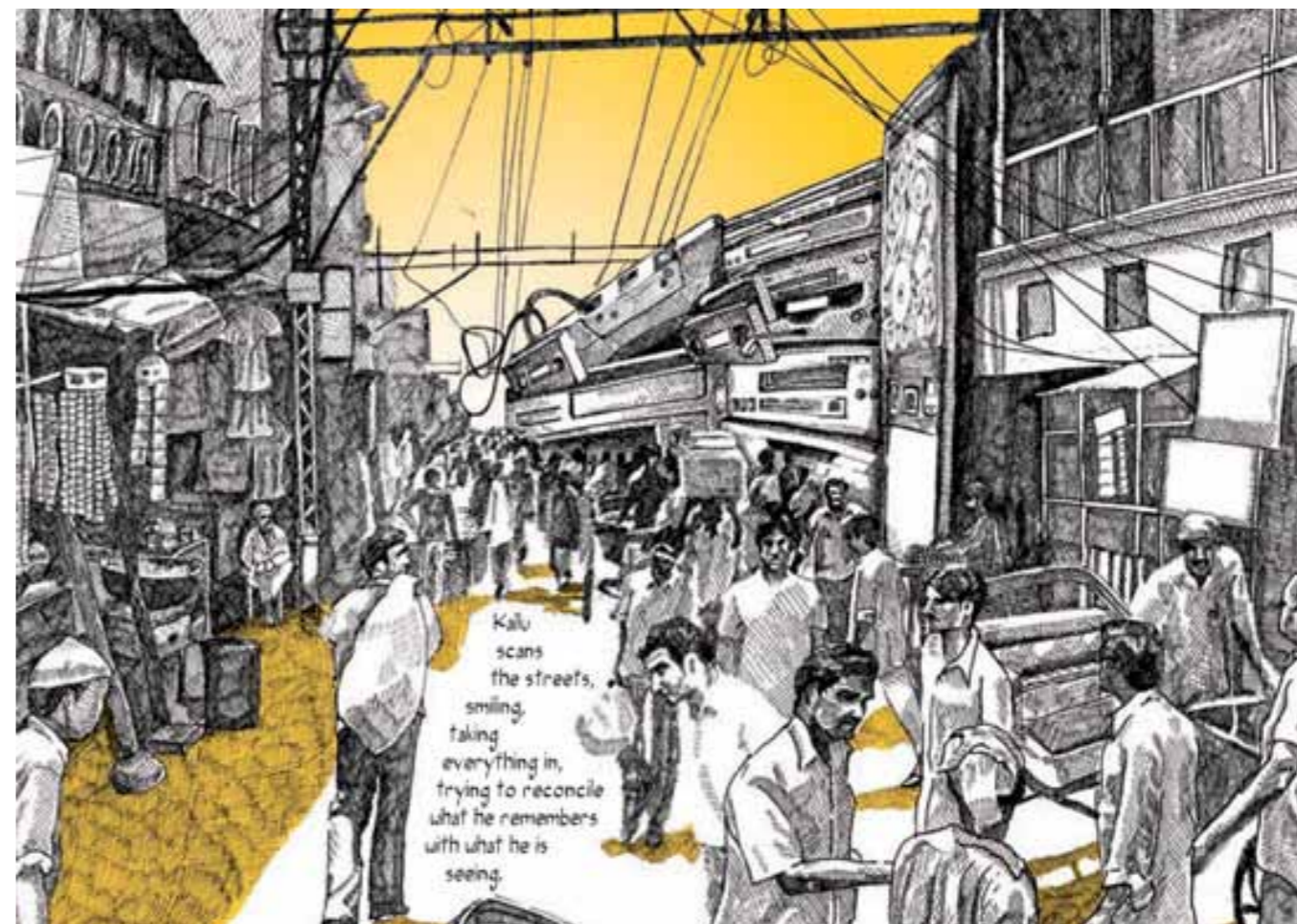
In most parts of the world, the crisis in art and culture is not a new one, and the absence of strong state or private support has been a perpetual condition whereby material constraints become both the precondition as well as the context in which various creative forms find forceful expression. Attesting to the vitality of the electronic everyday, Bhagwati Prasad and Amitabh Kumar's graphic novel *Tinker Solder Tap* narrates the story of most parts of the world from its vantage point in Delhi, where scarcity and abundance, creativity and decay dance together – sometimes flirtatiously, at other times threateningly. *Tinker Solder Tap* provides us with two images of Delhi's urban landscape as it morphed throughout the 1990s and 2000s into a mediascape of sensation and excitement, with extremely cheap media opening myriad possibilities for transforming everyday life through creativity and cultural production.

So the question might not be a matter of what is to be done, but rather what is to be done now that the six screen projections may not be possible? Is there hope, or are we doomed to live as though already dead? In his conversation with Mary Zournazi on the philosophy of hope, Michael Taussig suggests that it could be useful to think of hope as a kind of sense, much like our other senses. For Taussig, it is precisely because of the life-draining threat posed by our material circumstances that we need hope.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in the book, it is argued that hope is what one cultivates against all reasonable evidence suggesting that there should be none. Referring to the temporary autonomous zones that people create to test the outer possibilities of freedom, Taussig asserts that even when imminent failure looms, autonomous zones provide a glimmer of possibility. And is it not the case with hope that all it takes is a glimmer, and not a burning bush?

I would suggest that one could extend the idea of the hope sense into other domains rarely articulated as belonging to that of the senses or sensibility, engulfed as they are by their legal status. How, for instance, might we think of a pirate sense – like a hope-sense this is not a foregrounded sense, but a subterranean one,

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Bhagwati Prasad, Amitabh Kumar, last plate from *Tinker Solder Tap*.

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flying just below the radar of the visible and the audible, but ever alert to the possibilities offered in spite of the apparent impossibility of our material life? While our capacity to lead imaginative lives is dependent in part on conditions such as the availability of resources and infrastructure, it would be erroneous to subsume one under the other. Piracy has been over-analyzed in terms of its legality and access, yet under-theorized as a specific sensibility and attitude, and it may be useful to turn back a bit differently to Superman to see the heroic possibilities of a pirate sense.

Approximately eight hours away from the bright lights of India's financial and film capital of Bombay is a small non-descript town called Malegaon. The town is populated mainly by migrant Muslim laborers from North India who work in the power loom sector. Malegaon saw major riots after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and became infamous in 2006 after a series of bomb blasts. But the town has recently been in the news for something else. It has emerged as the center of a parallel film industry that churns out remakes of Bollywood hits, re-contextualizing them to address local issues and to cater to local tastes. Thus, one of the biggest Indian blockbusters, *Sholay* (1975), is remade as *Malegaon ki Sholay*, and Oscar-nominated *Lagaan* (Taxes) is remade as *Malegaon ki Lagaan*, in which, instead of depicting opposition to colonial taxes, the film takes problems of civic amenities as its subject. All the actors in the film have become stars within the local community, and one of the reasons cited for the popularity of these remakes has been that the local community can see people they recognize on the big screen. The average budget of a Malegaon production is

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around Rs.50,000 (\$1000), and runs in one of the fourteen local video theaters in the town, while now also circulating via VCD and DVD. It all started when Nasir, a local videographer who shot wedding videos, decided to borrow money to make his own film. He shot it on video and used two VCRs to edit the film in real time. The film turned out to be a surprise hit, and thus started the Malegaon film industry.

Local workers in the various small-scale industries double as actors, and they try to stay as close to the original film as possible, emulating the same camera angles, lighting, and so on. It is understandably difficult to emulate a large, mega-budget Bollywood film in a small town like Malegaon, so the Malegaon crew has learned to adapt and innovate using local resources. A bicycle stands in for dolly, and a bull cart is used for crane shots. While remaking Hindi epic *Shaan* (1980), the director realized that there was no way to hire a helicopter with a total budget of Rs.50,000 for the film, so they simply had to make do with a toy helicopter and shoot it in a way that made it look as authentic as possible.

Faiza Khan's documentary film *The Supermen of Malegaon* (2008) follows Nasir Sheikh as he sets out on his most ambitious venture – a remake of *Superman* for Malegaon.<sup>3</sup> In the documentary, Nasir speaks about what made him arrive at *Superman*:

I never went anywhere to learn to make films. I would select different English films to screen. After that, I found Hindi films boring. "Weak direction," I thought. So my film education was at the video hall, I learned master angles, master lighting, the works. I used to cut out newspaper listings

of films being shown in Bombay, and play the same films here. I used to copy the posters and put them up outside my video hall. This is what obsession leads you to. I just wanted to do something differently – a little bit of this and a bit of that – and now the story has come to this. [Nasir holds up a picture of Superman.]

The film avoids what could easily have been a semi-patronizing, semi-amused look at a small film industry with its quaint and quirky films. By focusing instead on the creative impulse and passion that drives the filmmakers of Malegaon, *The Supermen of Malegaon* draws us into thinking about who a Superman is, what it means to believe you can fly, and how lightness overcomes the burden of the real. It takes for granted, as the filmmakers themselves do, the very limited resources with which they make their films, and it invites us instead to share the unlimited reserves of enthusiasm and energy that they bring to their craft. As a film writer in Malegaon says:

When a writer has a thought in his head, whatever his vision, he never achieves more than 20 percent of it. Even if it is a *Titanic*, the output is 20 percent. To live with the other 80 percent – the vision, the characters who inhabit your head – no one can understand that pain. And no money can compensate for it.

For me, the essence of *The Supermen of Malegaon* is captured in a statement by one of the weaver-actors when he says "We don't have the facilities but are we making films. That's what's special. We don't have great voices, but we are singing. That is what is exceptional ... We have no weapons but we are fighting a war, and we are winning it." The statement reminded me of a story by Guy Davenport in which he recalls a sports function where he saw a high school marching band. Noticing that one of the horn players was a young man with Down syndrome playing an imaginary horn – keeping step admirably, and intently playing his instrument – Davenport recounted:

Tears came to my eyes, as I saw great metaphysical depths in it, and perhaps a metaphor for life itself as we now live it. I hope the boy really thought he was playing in the band (I wonder if he goes to practice?) and that he was overcoming the dreadful handicap in some way that counterfeited reality for him. He may even be a student in high school, pretending he can read and do arithmetic (just like my

students). I then entertained a fantasy in which I, who can't sing or play a note, might be allowed to play an imaginary violin in a symphony orchestra.<sup>4</sup>

There is perhaps a lesson to be learned from *The Supermen of Malegaon* and their finely-tuned pirate sense that does not name the legality or illegality of an act, but marks an attitude – to time, to resources, and to creativity. If the state (as benign promoter of the arts) and private corporations (as owners of culture) both promise access on paternalistic terms, then a pirate sense is one that demands a defiant access. It refuses to wait for Superman, and instead pretends that it can fly. It is to be found in Borges's village librarian, who, upon finding that he cannot afford to buy the books he has read positive reviews of, proceeds to write those books on the basis of their title.

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Faiza Khan, *Supermen of Malegaon*, 2008. Filmstill.

Alternative economies are alternative not just because they are quaint, but because they have figured out a way of being in the world that extends the limits of what they can know by drawing their own boundaries of the knowable. If we are to face up to the challenge of the crisis of the arts, it would be through a recognition that our potential lies beyond the threshold of the possible. As Brian Massumi puts it:

That vague sense of potential, we call it our "freedom," and defend it fiercely. But no matter how certainly we know that the potential is there, it always seems just out of reach, or maybe around the next bend. Because it isn't *actually* there – only virtually. But maybe if we can take little, practical, experimental, strategic measures to expand our emotional register, or limber up our thinking, we can access more of our potential at each step, have more of it actually available. Having more potentials available intensifies our life. We're not enslaved by our situations. Even if we never

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Left: Naseer Editing his film using two videos, 2003. Photo: Sukhija; Right: Faiza Khan, *Supermen of Malegaon*, 2008.

have our freedom, we're always experiencing a degree of freedom, or "wriggle room." Our degree of freedom at any one time corresponds to how much of our experiential "depth" we can access towards a next step – how intensely we are living and moving.<sup>5</sup>

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Echoing Massumi, a recent text by the Cybermohalla ensemble describes a playful experiment with conditions of intellectual life and speech in localities:

The magic chair is a condition everyone carries in them. It's a matter of its activation. How to build an environment around us that can bring the highest level of activation of this magic chair? In daily life, the place of the magic chair diminishes or expands depending on what and who it encounters. What can we or do we create around ourselves, in what ways can we enter that which has been made by others around us, so that an activation and expansion of the magic chair may happen in and around us?<sup>6</sup>

Avant-garde arts practices of the recent past have been so tightly coupled with institutional forms that this crisis could perhaps open a possibility for us to bring back what Jeebesh Bagchi describes as a spirit of the "rearguard." As both an attitude and a strategy, Bagchi describes the rearguard as a practice that knows that in order to survive, there is a need for many "do-it-yourself" tools. It acts like a craftsman and builds them. It knows that it is by multiplying throughout diverse paths and forms that one can breathe within debris. It takes this agility, porosity, and masking as a site for discovery, exploration, and connection.

Thus, the transformation of Clark Kent into Superman may not be a matter of a quick fix, running in and out of a magically-appearing telephone booth, but, instead, a careful combination of new skills and senses with which we, like Perseus, take flight. Indeed, the time has come to talk of many things, of cabbages and kings and whether men have wings.

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Lawrence Liang is a researcher and writer based at the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore. His work lies at the intersection of law and cultural politics, and has in recent years been looking at question of media piracy. He is currently finish a book on law and justice in Hindi cinema..

1  
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2  
Mary Zournazi, "Carnival of the Senses: A Conversation with Michael Taussig," in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003), 42.

3  
See  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PipEakbjsa0>.

4  
Bernard Hoepffner, "Pleasant Hill: Interview with Guy Davenport," *Conjunctions*, no. 24 (Spring 1995). See <http://wv.org.free.fr/hoepffner/PleasHillEng.html>.

5  
"Navigating Movements: A Conversation with Brian Massumi," in Zournazi, *Hope*, 214.

6  
Love Anand, Azra Tabassum, Neelofar Shamsher Ali, Lakhmi Kohli, Jaanu Nagar Nasreen, Rabiya Quraishy, Rakesh Khairalia Babli Rai, and Tripan Kumar, *No Apologies for the Interruption* (New Delhi: The Director / Sarai-CSDS, 2011), 62. See <http://www.sarai.net/publications/occasional/no-apologies/no-apologies.pdf>.

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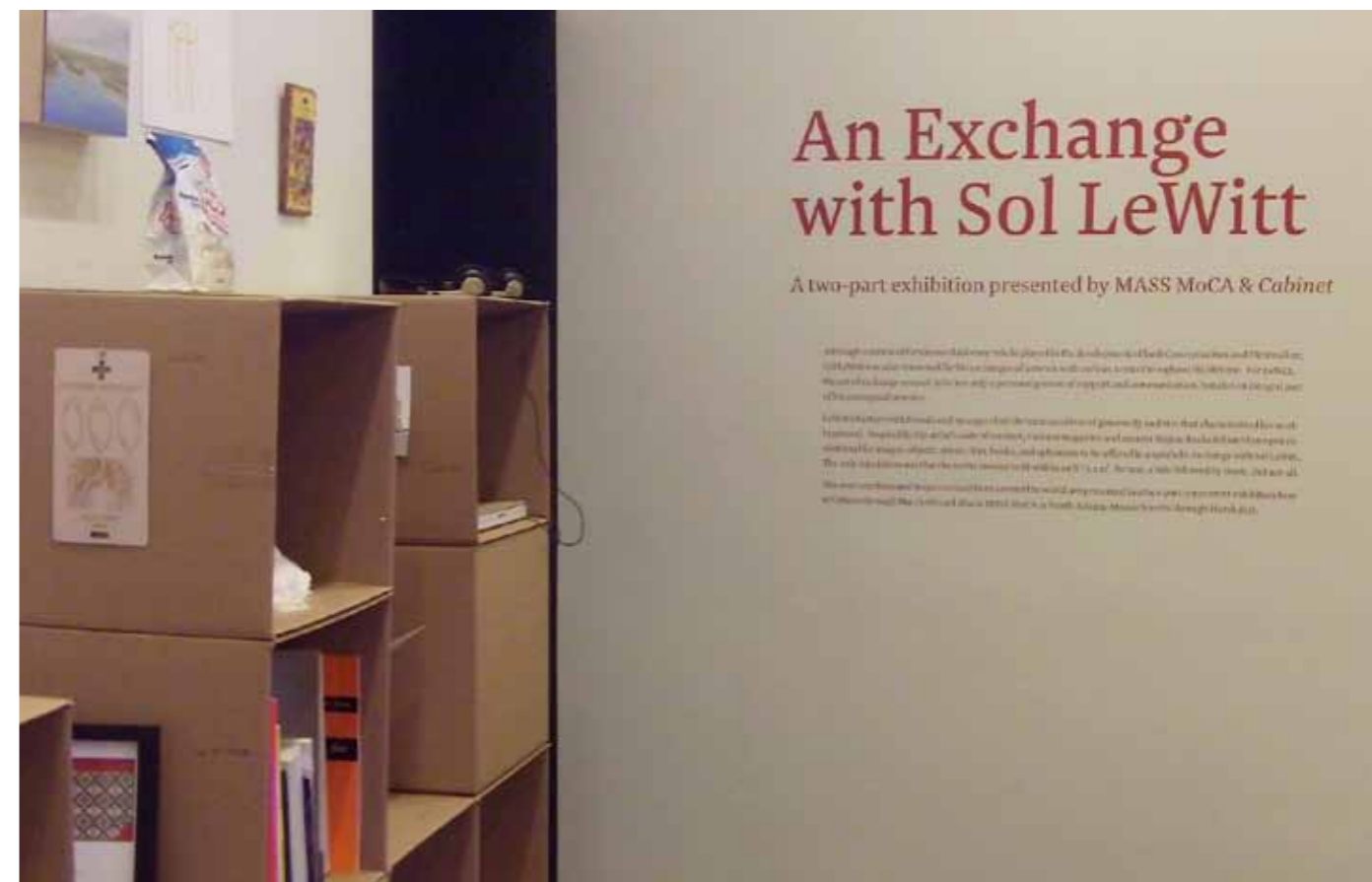
# IN CONVERSATION: REGINE BASHA AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** In the catalogue text for “An Exchange With SolLewitt,” you mentioned that the project allowed you to enter into conversation with the “culture of Sol LeWitt” through what one might call the “minor histories that intersect with it.” Can you tell me more about the culture of Sol LeWitt and how you determined it would be possible to meaningfully engage with this?

**Regine Basha:** Early on as an artist, LeWitt began exchanging works with his peers just as a form of support and communication—just the way that artists often exchange works with one another as a sort of gesture, let’s say—and that eventually turned into a sort of game, if anything, where he always made a point of responding to exchanges people offered him.

**JRM:** Who were the artists entering into these exchanges with LeWitt?

**RB:** A majority of the works exchanged were of course with his peers—Eva Hesse, Hanne Darboven, Robert Mangold, and so on. But many others were not necessarily well known. They were not in the art milieu he was used to; these were often times amateur artists or laymen, people who came across Sol LeWitt in daily life—his neighbors for instance. But I learned that in return for their own work, LeWitt would always make a work just for them. He wouldn’t just give one of his already existing works. The curator of the collection in Chester, Janet Pasehl,



explained that this became a major problem for his galleries because LeWitt was making work beyond the market and just giving it away.

Even by the time he was a very well-known artist, he continued to reciprocate these exchanges. He clearly didn’t need to be just giving away his art like this, but it was part of, I would say, his practice as a conceptual artist. And I don’t know that that has been recognized within the major history of Sol LeWitt. That is more typically seen as a minor history. It’s talked about in anecdotal ways, usually addressed in terms of its relation to his personality by those who knew him personally.

**JRM:** But you wanted to address these exchanges in terms of his artistic practice?

**RB:** I wanted to address this apart from his personality, in part because I didn’t know him and I didn’t feel that I had the right to make these judgments. I was more interested in asking whether we could talk about this in terms of a conceptual practice and to sort of reenact it as a discourse—just to continue the instructional sense and allow it to exist and allow it to illuminate his practice without it being considered only as a peripheral anecdote.

I do acknowledge that the project was risky—coming from a curator and not anyone who knew him personally—because, in a way, I took this extremely subjective matter and maybe tried to pull it into the realm of looking at it almost as an object in and

of itself. Meaning, if it might be possible to look at a practice as a kind of object. Not objectively, but sort of the practice as an object.

**JRM:** In the same catalogue text, you wrote that an open call would “not only be appropriate, but symbolically meaningful for this project.” I think this is related to some of the things you’ve already talked about, but how did this type of open engagement implicate the curator in relation to LeWitt’s practice?

**RB:** I don’t think it would have been pertinent enough to do this project as a straightforward curatorial selection of artists who have an affinity with Sol LeWitt’s work or have a sort of relationship to the various tangents throughout his career. Certainly, there is a show in there that could be done, and one could easily picture it. It’s probably in the making right now by many curators as we speak, but since I was speaking particularly to this open exchange practice Sol LeWitt had, the project had to involve artists I didn’t know who had to come out of the ether from communities unknown to me. It was an acknowledgement that this project was beyond me and beyond the idea of the “curated show.”

**JRM:** But how do we think about this in terms of the artist’s conceptual practice and not in terms of a certain generosity associated with his personality?

**RB:** If you consider LeWitt’s instructional works, they initiate a

kind of call and response, not driven by content but by registers of subject and objective positions. To some degree, you might say that LeWitt worked on an honor system in which ‘executors’ became part of the work through their own hand. In the same way, his exchanges mirrored the interactions he had had with people but only seen through the artwork retained. Is it possible to consider his exchanges as conceptual mind games? Or as transactions of visual communication between known and unknown parties? If he responded to each and every request to exchange, then he may have been compelled to do so for artistic reasons and not necessarily for ethical reasons only. Of course, it is a given that the act is generous in and of itself, mainly because of LeWitt’s celebrity status. Yet, generosity is such a loaded word and I’m a bit uncomfortable with foregrounding it as the premise of this project—especially since I did not know Sol LeWitt personally, so I cannot make those kinds of moral claims about his personality. LeWitt is an artist who has already been monumentalized in the traditional art historical canon, I became interested in considering his exchanges as an equally valid “material culture” that said as much about his approach conceptually as the other work does.

The open call, for instance, was not about saying “I want you to respond specifically to this,” it was more like opening up a window—like creating the possibility for a flash mob, to speak toward what it would mean to share the culture of Sol LeWitt. And in this way, the project picks up on the conceptual premise of LeWitt’s work (with a small c) and not the monumental history of the work itself.

**JRM:** In some measure, your exhibition could be thought of in relation to the 2011 Istanbul Biennial, where Felix Gonzales-Torres is the absent center of the exhibition. But the way in which the curatorial team utilized Gonzales-Torres as a point of departure is entirely different than what you have just described, where the project proceeds from the conceptual premise of the work irrespective of the formal attributes of the work itself.

**RB:** I was curious to see the biennial, and for many reasons. With “An Exchange With Sol LeWitt,” I specifically did not want to draw a curatorial parameter around that project so as to make a statement that these were the people who were affected by such-and-such. I needed to leave it more open than that. With Felix Gonzales-Torres especially, it is so important that his work is left open, completely open-ended. My problem with the biennial is that it is a little too stylized in the work of Gonzales-Torres. It felt like it took the most superficial aspect of the work, stylized it even in the marketing areas, the invitations, posters, billboards—I had a major problem with the fact that everything that was marketing the biennial looked like a piece by Felix Gonzales-Torres. For new audiences especially, these blurry lines start to cancel out the validity of the original intention of the work itself, so you start to see everything in terms of style. It limited the reach of the work, creating boundaries. Though, I do have a lot of positive things to say about the biennial that has

nothing to do with the work of Gonzales-Torres. The selection of many of the Latin American artists was very strong, and there were some really interesting juxtapositions. But ultimately, the overlay of Felix felt a little heavy handed. It could have been a little more complex, perhaps.

**JRM:** I’m particularly interested to know what you think about the biennial because of what you had mentioned earlier about the “spirit of Sol LeWitt” and how that was an entrance into conceptualizing this project—a desire to engage directly with what appears to be peripheral to the artist but in fact comes forward as a viable way of establishing a meaningful understanding of the artist’s work.

**RB:** And I realize we are walking into the realm of aura, and all of these dangerous ideas about who has the right to speak on behalf of whom. I guess I’m attracted to that—that we live in the world of art and this should be allowed. Why not?

**JRM:** Are there any questions in particular that came up during “An Exchange With Sol LeWitt” that you are still occupied with now?

**RB:** I became really interested in picking up on the ideas of the so-called “minor history,” or the material culture of an artist. In a way, that circumference around a body of work that becomes part of a work, but not really. The discussions, the process, the ripple effects. This is something I want to explore further with other artists, both historical and contemporary.

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nothing to do with the work of Gonzales-Torres. The selection of many of the Latin American artists was very strong, and there were some really interesting juxtapositions. But ultimately, the overlay of Felix felt a little heavy handed. It could have been a little more complex, perhaps.

clearly because the one concept, which is hit hardest by it, is that of money as “the crystallized relationship between debtor and creditor at the final moment of monetization” (note 3), or, more simply put, as a medium of exchange that can be used to purchase goods and services in an age-old definition whose contours are hardly considered anymore. And the debtors who are at the center of this are not given us such high status and honor as we might expect. *“Thoughts and ment vehicles, they have taken their flight above five ft. (...) They are not present in its universal condition, is not favorable to art. As regards the artist himself, it is not assets. Clearly, the hypertrophy of debt-related jargon in recent years serves to remind us of the central role that round him, and the universal habit of having an opinion and passing judgment about art infect him, and mislead him into putting more abstract thought into his work than he really has.”* But also the whole as a culture transformed into a commodity nevertheless.

Although most of these have at least a certain utility, it is what is meant by these various technical terms, and resolve, understandably, not counting for interest in the long compression of contemporary condition of the world. In the middle of Ferguson’s *son*, a particular attitude that would be the result of the evaporation of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management in 1971 – a moment in economic history more commonly referred to as the end of the gold standard – and culminated in the oil crisis of 1973 and precipitating art with market crashes, trade deficits, sinking interest rates, and unprecedented rates of inflation, alike. Interestingly, enough, as David Harvey puts it, “the breakdown of money as a vehicle of security means its re-emerging value” as the crisis becomes of what has come to be known as the “Nixon shock” “itself created (when he ventures that “the science of art is and here, as we shall see, immediately required to be very important in the history of art. As an immediate consequence of the dollar’s severance from the notion of real value (however, a virtual one anchored in gold) emerged, greatly increased the possibility of art when such a fortunate age of any length of time.” so that “alternative means had to be found to store value, identify what was being bought, and what was transmitted theory, much like the owl of Minerva, who objects, antiquas, houses, and the like.”<sup>25</sup> This, certainly, is not then, in my opinion, using the descent of money in an inexorable triggered the ascent of art, if we are content that money, perpetuate the confusion of art and its market. But it shared is precisely this confusion that the most important artistic developments of the late sixties and early seventies (the

the German Romantics’ philosophy of art, if not of the

16 Dieter Roelstraete

18 Dieter Roelstraete

“The goal of management is to make money, not to make steel”– James Roderick, chairman of Sotheby’s, 1979’s period coinciding with the transition of the post-war boom into its end, and the beginning of its agreed-upon point of monetary based form, and surrendering the key factor in the history of art. Indeed, in most standard art history the 1971–1973 period of monetary as the apogee of the concept Art I

## 0. Prelude

In April 2008, a chunky special issue of one of the world’s most influential and widely-read art magazines put on the cover of Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God*, a platinum cast a human skull studded with 8601 flawless diamonds, cover. Published at the peak of the art boom – just five months later, Lehman Brothers filed for the largest bankruptcy in his Hirst would make an estimated 200 million dollars so far. One could of course argue that the day at a Sotheby’s auction – *Artforum’s* investigation of its markets” made for some quite a bit of it very good of course. In fact, it had been a 275 pages of gallery (and some museum) in under two

some time months later, in January 2009, another issue of *Artforum* appeared, this time with an image of a work by the much more critically acclaimed (and much more affordable) Jimmie Durham on its cover – a sculpture consisting of a giant boulder squashing a small, avorless issue, art historian Christopher S. Laslett

British colleague Michael Baxandall, who had died in August 2008, in a tribute that appeared with the title of one of his most popular books, *Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. In fact, because of the steep drop in advertising revenue following the global financial crisis, that was seemingly ushered in by the aforementioned Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, this particular issue of *Artforum* was about half the size of those published in the previous two years, demonstrating a major shift never before had money been so important in the history of art – or at least never so ostentatiously so. In fact, the

## 1. Allude

The complexity of the processes that have set off the credit crunch and the subsequent economic downturn effectively continues to cloud our ability to appreciate as a *real* crisis (and an especially epochal one at that, as we are continually reminded). Yet, one thing that particular crisis has in common with most of its more thoroughly studied predecessors (counting from the post-war crisis of all crises, the oil crisis of 1971–73) is the deepening sense that we are witnesses to, and participating in, yet another chapter in the ongoing story of the end



## “Where’s the Money, Lebowski?” Making Ends Meet

Dieter Roelstraete

“The goal of management is to make money, not to make steel” – James Roderick, chairman of U.S. Steel, 1979<sup>1</sup>

### 0. Prelude

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### 1. Allude

The complexity of the processes that have set off the global credit crunch and the subsequent economic downturn effectively continues to cloud our ability to appreciate this as a *real* crisis (and an especially epochal one at that, as we are continually reminded). Yet, one thing that this particular crisis has in common with most of its more thoroughly studied predecessors (counting from the post-war crisis of all crises, the oil crisis of 1971–73) is the deepening sense that we are witnesses to, and participants in, yet another chapter in the ongoing story of *the end of money*. Indeed, if the current crisis ‘feels’ like a (global) financial one rather than a (global) economic one, it is

1

Quoted in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p. 158.

2

It is worth quoting the context in which this fragment appears in greater detail. Baxandall’s primer in the social history of pictorial style begins by stating that “a fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. (...) The relationship of which the painting is the deposit was among other things a commercial relationship, and some of the economic practices of the period are quite concretely embodied in the paintings. Money is very important in the history of art. It acts on painting not only in the matter of a client being willing to spend money on a work, but in the details of how he hands it over. (...) Paintings are among other things fossils of economic life.” In: Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 1. I was reminded of Baxandall’s terse formulation when I last visited the Museo Civico d’Arte Antica in Turin (during an art fair, it may perhaps be useful to admit), the prize possession of which is an Antonello da Messina portrait of an unidentified man from 1476 that adorns every single piece of museum advertising. Controversy over the sitter’s precise identity continues to rage, but one thing is for certain: Turin’s most widely celebrated piece of ‘ancient’ art is a portrait of a *banker* – a powerful reminder of the extraordinarily long history of art’s relationship to money, a history reaching much further back, clearly, than that of art’s relationship to (to name but one obvious alternative) *critique*, especially the critique of the commodification of art.

clearly because the one concept, which is hit hardest by it, is that of money as “the crystallized relationship between debtor and creditor” (in Niall Ferguson’s formulation, see note 3), or, more straightforwardly, as “a medium of exchange that can be used to purchase goods and services” – an age-old definition whose contours can hardly be discerned anymore beneath the financial wizardry that has given us such hallucinatory constructs as *structured investment vehicles*, *debt-for-equity* or *credit-default swaps*, *collateralized debt obligations* and, most plastically, *toxic assets*. Clearly, the hypertrophy of debt-related jargon in recent years serves to remind us of the central role that debt, as “the condition of owing something to somebody,” plays in the current financial crisis – a crisis spawned by money that essentially *isn’t there*, but which has been transformed into a commodity nevertheless.

Although most of us have no easy way of knowing what is meant with these various technical terms, it is understandably tempting to interpret the incomprehensibility of contemporary finance – “Planet Finance,” in Niall Ferguson’s semi-partisan terms – as yet another instance of the evaporation of money, its disappearance and descent, rather than its ascent.<sup>3</sup>

According to most standard historiographies (that is to say, not just Marxist ones), the “descent of money” was decisively inaugurated by the string of events that started with the termination of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management in 1971 – a moment in economic history more commonly referred to as the end of the gold standard – and culminated in the oil crisis of 1973, precipitating stock market crashes, trade deficits, spiking interest rates and unprecedented rates of inflation alike. Interestingly enough, as David Harvey put it: “the breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value” – the gist, in essence, of what has come to be known as the “Nixon shock” – “itself created a crisis of *representation* in advanced capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> And here again money immediately proved to be very important in the history of art. As an immediate consequence of the dollar’s severance from the notion of real value (however arbitrarily anchored in gold), “money consequently became useless as a means of storing value for any length of time,” so that “alternative means had to be found to store value effectively. And so began the vast inflation in certain kinds of asset prices – collectibles, art objects, antiques, houses, and the like.”<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent, then, it may appear as if the descent of money effectively triggered the ascent of art – if we are content, that is, to perpetuate the confusion of “art and its markets.” But it is precisely this confusion that the most important artistic developments of the late sixties and early seventies (the

period coinciding with the transformative moment in economic history referred to above) sought to counter, if not undo in its entirety, by way of severing the *idea* of art from its agreed-upon point of anchorage in material, object-based form, and surrendering the art object as such. Indeed, in most standard art histories of the post-war era, the 1971–1973 period of monetary crisis stands enshrined as the apogee of the Concept Art revolution – the glory years of what has long been known, in the words of American art critic Lucy Lippard, as the “dematerialization of the art object.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, we are talking of one form of dematerialization shadowing another. Not for the first time in both histories, the end of money appeared to converge with the end of (a certain conception) of art.

## 2. Interlude

One could of course argue that the concept of the end of art is as old as the concept of art as such, for, philosophically speaking, both concepts belong together *as historical artifacts*; both the concept of art and the concept of the end of art *as we know them* are rooted in one and the same philosophical tradition. The very notion of the end (as in the death of the subject, the end of history, the death of art, the end of money, etc.) has accompanied the history of time as such, just like the notion of ‘crisis’ may well be the one constant factor coursing throughout the whole of modern occidental history. Yet, one of the very basic characteristics of our apocalyptically inclined culture is that it imagines itself to experience a qualitatively new kind of crisis *all the time*, effectively stumbling from one crisis (‘end’) to the next. In the admittedly crude terms of Marxist economic theory, this is probably because modern occidental history is, in essence, a *capitalist* history: the dawn of the modern era also witnessed the emergence of a capitalist economy, and every subsequent chapter in the history of ‘modernity’ has in large part been written in the shadow of that capitalist economy’s momentous developments. Indeed, as Richard Sennett puts it, “instability since Marx’s day may seem capitalism’s only constant”<sup>7</sup> – the iron law of Nietzschean “creative destruction,” in Joseph Schumpeter’s celebrated formulation.

What were the economic circumstances, one wonders, of the most influential formulation of the end-of-art thesis known to man? Let us reiterate the well-known passage in Hegel’s *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, delivered in Heidelberg in 1816 and further developed in Berlin in 1820–1821, in quasi-completeness:

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 16. Here again, it is worth remembering how much Marx’s famous image of “all that is solid melting into air,” conjured in the opening pages of *The Communist Manifesto*, retrospectively sounds like a foreshadowing of the “dematerialization of the art object,” from Marcel Duchamp’s *Air de Paris* and Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Breath*, via Robert Morris’ *Steam* and Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube*, all the way to – the most dramatic and appropriate example of all – Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty’s *K Foundation Burn a Million Quid*.

<sup>3</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009. “The Descent of Money” is the title Ferguson has given to the postscript to his “Financial History of the World.” That Ferguson’s is not an *economic* history of the world is worth emphasizing here, as the distinction between finance and economy is indeed crucial to our current discussion, much like it is crucial to our understanding of the current crisis as one that concerns the reigning system of financial flows rather than trade flows.

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 298. My emphasis in italics.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



The peculiar mode to which artistic production and works of art belong no longer satisfies our supreme need. We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped; the impression which they make is of a more considerate kind, and the feelings which they stir within us require a higher test and a further confirmation. *Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art.* (...) Therefore, our present in its universal condition is not favorable to art. As regards the artist himself, it is not merely that the reflection which finds utterance all round him, and the universal habit of having an opinion and passing judgment about art infect him, and mislead him into putting more abstract thought into his works themselves; but also the whole spiritual culture of the age is of such a kind that he himself stands within this reflective world and its condition, and it is impossible for him to abstract from it by will and resolve, or to contrive for himself and bring to pass, by means of peculiar education or removal from the relations of life, a peculiar solitude that would replace all that is lost. In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past. Herein it has further lost for us its genuine truth and life, and rather is transferred into our *ideas* than asserts its former necessity, or assumes its former place, in reality. (...) Therefore, the science of art is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth rereading this passage and replacing ‘art’ with ‘money’ throughout – the essence, in essence, remains intact: whatever has come to an end (art or money), has been supplanted by reflection upon it; or, alternatively, whatever has come to an end has done so *because* it was being reflected upon too much, in part by the likes of Hegel himself (when he ventures that “the science of art is a much more pressing need in our day” he of course means *his* science of art first and foremost). Or, in the words of Hegel’s traveling companion (and, ultimately, rival) Friedrich Schelling, as written down in his equally eschatologically-minded *Philosophy of Art*: “When such a fortunate age of pure production has passed, reflection enters, and with it an element of estrangement. What was earlier living spirit is now transmitted theory.”<sup>9</sup> Much like the owl of Minerva, who only flies out after the dark, a true philosophy of art can only come into being once art itself has set in an inexorable decline – and much the same may be true of money, especially in view of the intimacy of art and money’s shared history. It doesn’t quite suffice to call this turn of events merely “ironic” – for irony, after all, is the very essence of the German Romantics’ philosophy of art, if not of *the*

*philosophical* project of German Romanticism (in whose shadow much of our own thinking around and about art and culture continues to flourish). And irony has been perhaps *the* key factor in the history of art “after the end of art.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Quaalude

Oh irony: whether we are living through late capitalism (Mandel), new capitalism (Sennett) or the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello), most well-informed observers seem to agree that, for quite some time now, capitalism has been the only game in town. Insofar as we are still happy to use Marx’s circumscription of the phenomenon, then, this means that the accumulation of capital in private hands continues unabated, and largely unchallenged. It appears nonsensical, therefore, to assert that the age of money (as the most common form of capital) has come to an end. Pronouncements of “the end of money” seem just as premature and misguided as pronouncements of “the end of art”; after all, never in the history of art has there been so much art, and never in the history of money has money mattered this much. Money *is*, it may sometimes seem, the only game in town. (Also, returning to our initial observations concerning Hirst, Messina and co.: never in the history of art has money mattered as much, and never in the history of money has art mattered as much.)

How are we to work our way out of this aporetic irony? Perhaps the key critical shift may be located in admitting to the fact that both money and art are indeed no longer ‘here’ (there), but that we’re only *pretending* they’re still ‘here’ (there). More precisely: some pretend, with varying degrees of malicious intent, that art and money *are* still there, while others really don’t know they aren’t there anymore. In the field of money, the humble quotidian device that is the credit card occupies a position of symbolic centrality in this regard. It is the channel for the transmission of money that never was ours in the first place (and thus was never really ‘there’ to be spent), but that is *believed* to have been ours (by each creditor who accepts the card). Credit, after all, is a direct descendant of the Latin verb for believing, *credere*; *credit* literally means “he believes.”<sup>11</sup> The credit card, that magical object of so much confidence and good faith, truly *is* the paradigmatic expression of a culture that has reconciled itself with the complete virtualization of money – that which we earlier on referred to as dematerialization or evaporation. Credit lies one step further still than the gradual disappearance of money into the electronic maelstrom of bits and bytes, zeroes and ones (electronic money may be both invisible and immaterial, but at least it can still be mine).

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One particular quote from Hegel’s *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* will (hopefully) help to illuminate my point: “if Irony is taken as the keynote of the representation, this means that the supremely inartistic is taken as the true principle of the work of art.” (Op. cit., p. 74.) The basic recipe for Marcel Duchamp’s readymade, in other words – the first in a long line of contenders to claim the crown of the *post-artistic* realm of artistic production. “After the End of Art” is the title of a collection of essays published by Arthur C. Danto in 1998, fourteen years after he published an essay titled “The End of Art” in a book titled “The Death of Art” – can anyone really feign surprise that anthologies with titles such as “Essays After Danto” have since seen the light of day? Danto has long been known for his ability to date the so-called end of art to a very precise day – that of the opening of Andy Warhol’s exhibition of Brillo boxes at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1964.

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Wading into the troubled water of money’s philosophical relationship to religious belief (or more generally, religion) would surely lead us too far astray, but it is worth considering the basic tenet of the leap of faith that characterizes the religious world-view as such: *credo quia absurdum*, or “I believe because it is absurd.” The same could certainly be said about both art and money, which are really only worth believing in if we accept the absurdity of the claims on which their respective systems are built.

In the field of art, one could identify a comparable shift to have taken place in the gradual occlusion of the very *idea* of art by the growing importance of the notion of the art *world* and the corresponding inflationary growth of art *discourse* on the one hand, and in the dissolution of art into the broader sphere of culture on the other hand.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, we could say that what is being talked about as art, or referred to as art, is no longer art – we just pretend or believe it is – but rather mere commentary upon art (compare this to Schelling’s lamentation quoted above), much of which also pretends or believes itself to *be* art, like credit pretending to be money – and there certainly appears to exist a connection here with the hypertrophy of art-about-art, or art-about-the-art-world, in the last two decades in particular (the same time span during which the art market went through a series of exponential growth spurts, in other words), as well as with the sheer excess of discursive attention paid to art in writing and words during that same period (which the current essay knowingly – and gleefully! – participates in, of course, just as it gleefully and guiltily participates in the problematic cult of referentiality, as both its title and profusion of footnotes clearly attest). On the other hand, we could concur with Alain Badiou that “the name ‘culture’ [has come] to obliterate that of ‘art’,” and here too we must refer to a key aspiration of all vanguard art movements of the last century, all the way from Dada to Concept Art’s ten-point-program for the dematerialization of the art object – the dissolution of *art into life*.<sup>13</sup> Now this particular call, like so many erstwhile battle cries of both the political and artistic avant-garde (these things used to be interchangeable once), has of course proven singularly successful in that, historically speaking, art truly *has* been dissolved into life – without life becoming much more artful or aesthetically pleasing as a consequence, alas. And what is more, it has done so at the exact moment when life itself became increasingly subject to the irrevocable logic of total commodification: if it is now near-impossible to imagine art outside the market, how much more difficult still it has become to imagine *life* outside the market!

Let us conclude, however, on a note of cautious optimism – for the end of art may not be such a bad thing after all (the art world, which comes after is not the worst world – it may even be the best of all possible worlds right now), and the same may be true of the end of money as we have understood it throughout this speculative exercise. Let us imagine ways of making both ends, that of art and that of money, meet: firstly, if the complex known as the art world, complete with its market and its discourse and its market

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It is worth remembering here that the title of the essay in which Danto first articulated his intimations of a true end-of-art scenario was quite simply “The Artworld” (first delivered as a lecture at a symposium titled “The Work of Art” only a couple of months after seeing Warhol’s aforementioned Brillo box exhibition in New York); it starts, by way of quotation, with the following memorable exchange between Hamlet and the Queen of Denmark: “Q: Do you see nothing there? A: Nothing at all. Yet all that is I see.” Towards the end, Danto ventures that “What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of *is* other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting.” In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 19, p. 581.

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Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 12. It is important to point out that for Badiou, art is one of four fields of human activity (along with science, politics and love) capable of yielding truth. In this sense, the French *maitre-penseur*’s contemptuous notion of culture is not terribly different from the Frankfurter Schule’s tried-and-tested formula of the culture *industry*. According to one slightly more updated variation on this theme, artists, critics and curators alike are today all active in the *entertainment industry*. The very notion of industrialization (or, alternately, administration) in these various formulas only adds further weight to the importance of commerce (hence money) in their construction.

*for* discourse, has come to occupy the place once allotted to art, or succeeded in obscuring it, this must necessarily mean that the art world, as a world, is in fact built upon or around something that is not, or no longer, *there* – an absence, void, or empty center: the divine hole in the middle of the ontological donut (I am reminded here, inevitably, of Lawrence Weiner’s call to “take the bagel from Hegel”). And this may well be a good thing, much like the perennially empty chair at the dinner table – one never knows who (or what) may be coming to dinner. And secondly, if money isn’t there (anymore) either, something else or other must be found – a formidable challenge, but also a fantastically stimulating one. Indeed, maybe art can be brought *back* to help us find this ‘other’ – or become it instead, as in the art I was given to write about in turn.



# IN CONVERSATION: BURAK DELIER AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** Thank you for sending me your book, *WE WILL WIN*. I've just finished reading through it and a few things came to mind. I find the whole project to be characterized by a certain delirious awareness of the systemic violence within which the work is situated, as an actor of sorts. There is a simple line in the early part of your essay at the end of the book that stays with me: "If the apparatus of capture is exploiting even the cognitive fields, then the struggle must also be carried there." You conclude this section by stating, "semi-autonomous zones like Biennales are fields of knowledge where we can carry out the experimental discussions and inquiries that we need." And at the moment, I'm trying to stay with this. I've recently started rereading the work of the American anarchist Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson), specifically his writing about Temporary Autonomous Zones. Are you familiar with this work? I think it may be of some interest to you in relation to what you've laid out in this book.

But this is all somewhat complicated by the simultaneous a-legal implications of the offshore, or hidden space of global finance... In some respect, it reminds me of the way in which Jean-Joseph Goux writes in *Symbolic Economies* that money would have to be decapitated in order for an emancipatory secret society like George Bataille's *Acéphale* to emerge. And of course, money is decapitated, and an emancipatory, secret society does emerge, but on an entirely other order than the once Goux was trying to anticipate. That secret, hidden, emancipatory organization - a dispersed, concealed, non-essentialist political organization - comes to us in the form of Global Finance.

But the crucial difference is that the temporary autonomous zones were (are) in fact occupied, whereas the xenospatial sovereign praxis of global finance is merely a taking leave of regulatory measures in order to operate beyond the principal of centralization. No movement occurs, in fact.

Movement, it would seem, is a crucial aspect of the *WE WILL WIN* project. Several times already, I've read over the section where you organize the responses to the question "if you had the opportunity of placing the 'WE WILL WIN' banner somewhere, where would you put it?" It has a poetic dimension to it. Audible almost. It too, reads as an acephalous multi text. But the body is implicated, and seems crucial to your work.

**Burak Delier:** As you put it, the *WE WILL WIN* project is perhaps the anti-thesis of what can be called "Acephale," headlessness. Because it has a specific place and specific address. At that time, I was imagining local specificity against the volatile hype of global economy. In my mind, I had this topology where money can move freely and without constraint yet people, for example in this specific neighborhood in Taipei, are stuck within their environment/physicality. I was trying to put the concreteness of locality against the abstractness of money/global economy.

When you showed me the "Here and Elsewhere" headings the same image come to my mind. I believe that we have to work on demonstrating that "here is elsewhere" and "elsewhere is here." The tomato here in front of our eyes is also an abstract entity and the abstract entity on the screen of a broker is the tomato. There is not only a connection, there is a strong dependence. And maybe we have to work on defining this relationship: Is it exploitation? Is it a mutuality? Also, in French, "et" and "est" are pronounced the same. When you say "ici et ailleurs" you are saying both "here and elsewhere" and "here is elsewhere." I would imagine Godard was playing with this phonetic...

But I never imagined money or Global Finance as an example of headlessness. Because offshore banking has a specific purpose, it is not a body without organ—a term that Deleuze and Guattari use. I think the terms "headlessness" and "body without organ" are close to each other. In my thinking, offshore banking is a big head instead of being headless. It reminds me of the blackout tactic, which is the most primitive tool of power. Agamben put it as "state of exception." But state of exception is not a "free" zone; on the contrary, it is where the power appears in its most abject image. We don't see what is happening there, we don't know but that doesn't mean it is a zone of freedom. Besides, we saw pictures from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, actually I think that is exactly what is going on in the case offshore banking. Offshore banking, finance, and stock markets are places where some capital—with the help of legislations and complex algorithms—exploits other capital. But we may confuse it with headlessness because it is happening in abstraction. Maybe we have to show the violence, the physicality of this abstraction...

Hakim Bey's TAZ is a concretization of headlessness, it is a body without organ. That means people who engage in this zones don't have a program, they don't have a revolutionary purpose but they have only the means. The means that the zones are the goal of the whole thing. They run away to prevent becoming established movements. They don't face the power with an "alternative" power structure, as a Party or any other institution. This is exactly what acephale means. But I am not sure if Bataille's secret societies can be a model for today's struggles. For example, when you look at what happened in Tahrir or what is happening now in Wall Street they are completely transparent and physical. They are in the square, they don't hide anything, they don't plan to bomb Wall Street in a secret room, they expose themselves as they are. I think their legitimacy stems from this "nakedness."

**JRM:** Can you tell me more about what it might mean to work on demonstrating that here is elsewhere and elsewhere is here? Perhaps this has something to do with the violence, or at least physicality of abstraction, as you've already mentioned.

Maria Lind curated an exhibition "Abstract Possible" where she looked abstraction in terms of its relationship to withdrawal; abstrahere meaning, literally, to draw away, detach, or divert. Broadly speaking, in one of the three components of the program she was interested in tactics and strategies of self-organization used by artists and cultural producers in order to allow for greater freedom of action—tactics that both mimicked and questioned contemporary practices of, for example, contemporary finance. But it seems you are not interested in withdrawal so much as you are in reconsidering strategies of embeddedness. Maybe this is asking the question too bluntly, but do you think artists working within bank-supported cultural initiatives can still operate in such a way that this line of inquiry remains legible as such? Or does it lend itself more toward being read as an impotent display of oppositionality, or, perhaps even worse, a proclamation of complacency?

Maybe this goes back to the exhibition title, "I slowly come to discover that it is more meaningful and subversive to engage in experimental investigations on art than carrying out some self-content, easily commoditized anarchist gesture." I'd like to know what you think about those investigations possibly taking place within a bank-supported cultural initiative like SALT, which is technically an extension of Garanti Bank's Social Responsibility program.

**BD:** Firstly, I think that while the probably inevitable global warming catastrophe is coming, now it is much more necessary to grab the relation between here and elsewhere. This has two dimensions: First, we should understand it "horizontally"—that the economic, social, and political life in New York is strongly depending on the life in São Paulo, Cairo, or Niger. Secondly, we should understand it "vertically"—the economic calculations about the future of capitalism are depending on physical and biological life. When I used the term "physicality

of abstraction,” I was trying to emphasize that the lights flashing on the broker’s screen in a financial institution are depending on concrete things, like forests, oil, water, tomatoes, and so on. Further, as the crisis of 2008 showed us, at the end someone will pay. And now it seems that the younger generation and their future children will pay for capitalism to regenerate itself..

I think your second question is about the working conditions within the art world. Especially in Turkey, almost every art institution is depending on banks. What I understand from withdrawal is that it is aimed at finding new types of relationships between artists, audiences, critics, curators. At present, all our relations are mediated through banks and established art market principals. I see myself as surrounded by these relations, and that is why I don’t think that an art project realized in an art institution could be an example of the withdrawal strategy. To put it within a wider framework, I think you can take into account to name your actions as withdrawal when you don’t use currency in order to exchange goods, when you don’t use Google to discuss theoretical issues, or when you don’t pay taxes. All of these strategies will push you to find alternative ways of communicating, exchanging ideas, and forming solidarity. An art project is not an alternative entity; it is over coded by the art system. I think we can discuss what is alternative, we can produce knowledge, but I am not sure if we can claim that exhibitions and artworks are examples of withdrawal.

But that doesn’t mean we have to shut up and embrace these conditions and the framework of institutions within which our activities are over-coded. On the contrary, I think we should use—or better, we should “misuse”—these institutions to show how hypocritical their policies are. We have to produce more knowledge and more discourse about the current incapability of these institutions facing the weakness of capitalism. We also need to address their poor policies of “Public Responsibility.” Besides, no art institution is managed from a strict ideological worldview. There are always negotiations. When there is no negotiation, we can name this system/institution as fascism/fascist. For example, SALT wouldn’t be an interesting art institution if it were solely managed through Garanti’s public relations agency. Garanti as a bank—as a chain of capitalist relations and mechanisms constructed in order to get more profit and to obtain increased ratings of growth—needs to get from us some sense of legitimacy.

I think we can use this interval to think about what we will do when the last economic crisis will happen.

Still, that doesn’t mean these institutions are the only place to be. With their cultural policies and inconsistencies, they are possibly the worst place to be. I don’t think working with a bank-supported cultural institution is a “proclamation of complacency” or “an impotent display of oppositionality.” We don’t need to tame our aspirations, intentions, and thoughts regarding our mis-place. Our aspirations, intentions, and

thoughts should be their problem not ours. When I said that we need much more than “self-content, anarchist gestures,” I was trying to emphasize slower, more resistant, discursive, and settled ways of working. While they believe they can trick the world, we should work on the possible coming society.

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November 2011







# ART FACTS: PART 1

*Art Facts* is an artist project measuring the institutional performance of SALT. The research project has been developed by artist Burak Delier within the framework of “*One day, everything will be free...*”

Appropriating research techniques developed according to a contemporary managerial logic, the project begins with an institutional survey realized through on-site interviews. Attempting to situate SALT within its economic, social, and political coordinates, the questions asked to the participants at SALT Beyoğlu are simple, yet difficult to answer: Why is SALT free even though it is a private institution? Why have the bank, which is a representative of pure economic rationale, and art, which has dared not to claim responsibility in so many recent art historical incidents become tools for “social responsibility” projects? What is the effect of SALT on our lives and thoughts? Is SALT able to achieve its goals and if so, to what extent?

The intention is to take this specific place and open it up, in another way, to its audiences for debate. Pollsters will be gathering input and distributing surveys to participants in the exhibition galleries of SALT Beyoğlu between April 27 and May 7. The survey used to gather input and guide conversations with participants has been reprinted in full on the following pages of this reader.

Burak Delier is an artist living in İstanbul. In *Collector's Wish* (2012), he realized an art work conceived by the collector Saruhan Doğan. At the 2010 Taipei Biennial, Delier presented the workings of the Biennial institution and the critical potential of art by surveying the Biennial staff—from the decision-makers to the interns. Delier finished his MA in the Art and Design Department at Yıldız Teknik University and continues to pursue a PhD in art practice at the same institution.

**"Hello, we are interviewing viewers as a part of artist Burak Delier's research project. The research is conducted to quantify SALT's artistic and social functionality. Would you like to participate in this interview that will take approximately 15 minutes?"**

**(During the conversations, the interviewer should leave the answers as open-ended as possible and enable the participant's self-expression. Answers that are not amongst the given choices should be noted down.)**

<b>1.</b>	<b>How do you feel in this space?</b>  ( ) Foreign ( ) Uneasy ( ) At home ( ) Comfortable ( ) Pleased ( ) Other ...
<b>2.</b>	<b>If you are feeling "foreign" or "uneasy," why do you think that is?</b>  ( ) Spatial design ( ) Lack of information ( ) Content of the exhibitions and programs ( ) Information desk attendants ( ) Security personnel ( ) Other ...
<b>3.</b>	<b>How would you define your current position at SALT?</b>  ( ) Audience ( ) User ( ) Participant ( ) Stakeholder ( ) Other ...
<b>4.</b>	<b>As a ... (the answer selected for the previous question) do you think you are adding value to SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
<b>5.</b>	<b>Even if you only tour the space, do you still consider yourself a ... (the answer selected for the question #3)</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
<b>6.</b>	<b>Could you explain why you think as such?</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Do you think you create value by coming here? (For example, by coming here, viewing the exhibitions, and discussing the exhibition in various contexts, are you producing value for SALT?)</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
<b>8.</b>	<b>Can you please elaborate?</b>

<b>9.</b>	<b>Would you like to participate in the decision-making processes that determine the programming at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No					
<b>10.</b>	<b>Do you think it is possible for you to participate in the decision-making processes at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No					
<b>11.</b>	<b>What do you think is the most important characteristic of a work of art?</b>  ( ) Political stance ( ) Openness to interpretation ( ) Beauty ( ) Criticality ( ) Technique ( ) Novelty					
<b>12.</b>	<b>Please respond to the following statement with one of the choices below: art needs to be independent of economic and political power.</b>  ( ) I strongly disagree ( ) I disagree ( ) I don't have an opinion / neither correct nor incorrect ( ) I agree ( ) I strongly agree					
<b>13.</b>	<b>Do you think art contributes to people's minds and impacts society at large?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No					
	<b>On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely', please rate how you see the factors below to have impacted the emergence of art institutions in Istanbul over the last decade?</b>					
		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>14.</b>	<b>The development of art in Turkey</b>					
<b>15.</b>	<b>Society's increased interest in art</b>					
<b>16.</b>	<b>The endeavors of artists/curators/critics/art historians</b>					
<b>17.</b>	<b>Society's increased level of education</b>					
<b>18.</b>	<b>Expansion of the country's economy</b>					
<b>19.</b>	<b>Expansion of the art market</b>					
<b>20.</b>	<b>Increased inequality of income</b>					



21.	Aside from the factors I just inquired about are there other factors that you think have impacted the emergence of art institutions in Istanbul over the last decade?					
On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely', indicate the extent to which SALT realizes the responsibilities listed in the mission statement.						
		1	2	3	4	5
22.	Explores critical and timely issues in visual and material culture					
23.	Cultivates innovative programs for research and experimental thinking					
24.	Aims to challenge, excite and provoke its visitors					
25.	Encourages visitors to offer critique and response					
26.	Sources diverse fields of knowledge and provides outlets for thought within the fissures and crossovers of different disciplines					
27.	Its research projects expand beyond linear chronologies, medium-based questions, and the traditional separation of fields of study					
28.	Assembles archives of recent art, architecture, design, urbanism, and social and economic histories to make them available for research and public use.					
29.	These resources are interpreted in the form of exhibitions and discussed in all other areas of programming.					
On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely', indicate the extent to which SALT realizes the goals listed below.						
		1	2	3	4	5
30.	Contributes to the development of art in Turkey					
31.	Demonstrates an acute awareness of recent significant developments in contemporary art around the world					

32.	Creates a space for controversial ideas / Supports freedom of expression					
33.	Raises awareness on political issues					
34.	Contributes to the integration of art into people's lives					
35.	Supports the creative potential of society					
36.	What are your expectations of SALT and to what extent is SALT fulfilling these expectations?					
On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely', to what extent is each of the below considered in developing research and programs at SALT?						
		1	2	3	4	5
37.	Openness to participatory processes					
38.	Managerial transparency					
39.	Commanding trust					
On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely', can you rate three exhibitions that you have seen at SALT based on the criteria listed on the left?						
		SALTVanAbbe 2	I decided not to...			
40.	Creative					
41.	Critical					
42.	Experimental					
43.	Interdisciplinary					
44.	Drawing from the archive					
45.	Pleasurable					
46.	Related to daily life					
47.	Questioning social norms					
48.	How would you define this space and the programmes that take place here?					
<input type="checkbox"/> Inspiring <input type="checkbox"/> Awareness-raising <input type="checkbox"/> Thought-provoking <input type="checkbox"/> Informative <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasurable <input type="checkbox"/> Fun <input type="checkbox"/> Useless / unnecessary <input type="checkbox"/> Incomprehensible <input type="checkbox"/> Irrelevant to my life <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient						

49.	<b>Have you ever changed your opinion based on an exhibition/talk/art work you participated in or encountered at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
50.	<b>If yes, could you please indicate which one(s):</b>
51.	<b>Has SALT ever opened up another viewpoint, knowledge, or skill for you?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
52.	<b>Did you know that SALT was founded by Garanti Bank?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
53.	<b>Does SALT's relationship Garanti Bank affect your engagement with the research and programs at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
54.	<b>How would you explain Garanti Bank's support of SALT?</b>  ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT because the bank wants to support the arts. ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT because supporting the arts is fashionable. ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT to contribute to the banks own image. ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT because the bank wants to benefit society. ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT because the bank feels obliged to society. ( ) Garanti Bank supports SALT because the bank wants Turkey to be a more democratic country. ( ) Other ...
55.	<b>Do you think Garanti Bank has a responsibility to support arts and culture?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
56.	<b>Are you thankful to Garanti Bank for founding SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No
57.	<b>Please elaborate on your reason for saying "Yes" or "No."</b>  .....

58.	<b>If Garanti Bank decided to relinquish their support for SALT, would you support SALT financially and/or otherwise?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No		
59.	<b>If Garanti Bank did not support SALT, what would you prefer to be funded with the money that is currently allocated to SALT?</b>  ( ) Education ( ) Health ( ) Fighting poverty ( ) Fighting unemployment		
60.	<b>Would Garanti Bank's financial support of projects that are potentially socially controversial and/or environmentally harmful effect your engagement with research and programs at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No		
61.	<b>Would Garanti Bank financing projects like HES (Hydro-electric Plant) and the 3rd bridge effect your engagement with research and programs at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No		
62.	<b>Can you please elaborate?</b>		
63.	<b>Would you participate in discussions of potentially socially controversial investments of Garanti Bank to take place at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No		
64.	<b>Can you please elaborate?</b>		
65.	<b>Would a discussion about socially controversial investments potentially linked to Garanti Bank be compromised if it took place at SALT?</b>  ( ) Yes ( ) No		
	<b>Could you please tell me if you agree or disagree with the below statements on the programing (exhibitions, talks, etc.) that take place at SALT?</b>	I disagree	I agree
66.	<b>The programing benefits the society</b>		
67.	<b>The programing increases the quality of life in society</b>		
68.	<b>The programing contributes to the creativity of individuals</b>		



69.	The programing raises awareness of social, political and economic problems		
70.	The programing addresses only a limited audience		
71.	The programing has the potential to contribute to Turkey's process of democraticization		
72.	What do you think about SALT's programing being free? .....		
73.	Do you think SALT's programing should have an admission fee? ( ) Yes ( ) No		
74.	Please complete the following sentence with one of the choices below: If SALT's website and directions were to be made available in languages native to Turkey: ( ) I'd boycott ( ) I'd be disturbed ( ) I'd be supportive ( ) I'd feel a stronger sense of belonging to the institution ( ) Other...		
75.	Please complete the following sentence with one of the choices below: If SALT's website and directions were to be made available in languages such as Kurdish and Armenian: ( ) I'd boycott ( ) I'd be disturbed ( ) I'd be supportive ( ) I'd feel a stronger sense of belonging to the institution ( ) Other...		
	Could you please state if you agree or disagree with the statements that I will read?	I disagree	I agree
76.	SALT should stay away from social issues.		
77.	SALT should stay away from political topics.		
78.	SALT should only be concerned with the quality of the art.		
79.	SALT should announce their budget every year.		
80.	SALT should prepare programing that will strengthen the conditions of minorities in Turkey.		
81.	SALT should take sides on social issues more actively.		

82.	SALT should exhibit cutting-edge work that subverts existing forms of thinking, beliefs, and cultural habits.		
83.	SALT should organize entertaining programmes.		
84.	SALT should organize programing that will trigger participatory processes.		
85.	SALT should collaborate with non-governmental organizations and activist groups		
86.	How old are you? ( ) 18-24 ( ) 25-34 ( ) 35-44 ( ) 45-54 ( ) 54 and above		
87.	What is your level of education? ( ) Primary ( ) Secondary (middle school / high-school) ( ) Undergraduate degree ( ) Graduate degree		
88.	What is your occupation?		
89.	How many books do you read on average in a month?		
90.	How many exhibitions do you view on average in a month?		
91.	How many films do you see on average in a month?		
92.	Did you visit this space (SALT Beyoglu) before?		
93.	Have you been to SALT Galata?		
94.	Have you used SALTOline.com ?		

95.	<p><b>How would you define your reason for coming to SALT?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> View an exhibition</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> See a film</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Participate in the talks</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> To be informed about and discuss contemporary matters</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Personal-development</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Exposure to new ideas</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Meet new people</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> To have fun/spend time with friends</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> To spend time</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other</p>
96.	<p><b>Do you believe that the impact of art on people's minds and society at large can be quantified/measured?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
97.	<p><b>Do you think this artistic research project is meaningful?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>



**If you'd like to follow the results of the research and the subsequent stages, you can leave your mail address at the information desk.**

**Thanks.**





(1985) argued, economics was a ‘box of tools for persuasion’, not an objective reflection of some underlying economic ‘truth’. All this is liberating, because association allows us to ‘make sense of abstract events in more familiar terms’ (Lakoff 1993) and hence opens up the intellectual space for a culturally informed political economy. Yet to date cultural analyses have been better at identifying and observing analogy and metaphor in other discourses, than in the controlled and critical deployment of analogy and metaphor on their own. This article is hence a demonstration or provocation about what cultural economy could achieve by changing the associational frame around hedge fund activity.

The article grows out of dissatisfaction with academic and policy texts which employ loose metaphorical characterisations of hedge funds as either trader/arbitrageurs or speculator/gamblers. This conventional imagery works by crediting hedge funds with an essential identity so that they are always either ‘good’, efficient arbitrageurs perfecting the market or ‘bad’, errant gamblers distorting it. The article seeks to develop new analogies of hedge funds and hedge fund activity within the financial sector, which is conventionally understood as a marketplace for assets with ‘real’ and fixed risk/return characteristics on the supply side and a collection of active buyers and sellers on the demand side. To do this, our article proposes two discursive moves. First, it counters metaphor with analogy by replacing the trading metaphor with the war analogy. Second, it combines the military analogy of war with our own more political and economic concept of conjuncture to illuminate the relevance of space and time in understanding hedge fund practice and performance.

Militaristic analogies such as ‘raiders’, ‘war’ and ‘weapons’ have been employed by other authors writing about the financial sector (Partnoy 1998; Das 2004; Burroughs and Helyar 1990). The war analogy, and in particular the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) on ‘War Machine’, help develop our understanding of hedge fund activity by introducing notions of deception, power, threat and tactical alliance. This is because hedge funds are not just active traders, but active manipulators of those trades, where the task at hand is to ‘make the positions work’ by using shorting, leverage, derivatives, rumours and so on as weapons, not tools. The war analogy also helps us to explain how and why identity-based mainstream analyses of hedge funds find it increasingly difficult to distinguish hedge funds from other economic actors, including ordinary companies which are increasingly using their tactics.

Our second association between hedge funds and the political and economic ‘conjuncture’ is part of our continued attempt (Ertürk et al. 2008; Engelen et al. 2010) to think through how financialisation in present-day capitalism is different from earlier forms of rentier capitalism, without succumbing to crass epochalism. As such we analyse variable time frames over shorter periods, where a conjuncture is a period of four to seven years defined by a capital market configuration of asset prices and the availability of funds supported by appropriate grand narrative and performance, as in the New Economy period from 1996 to 2000 or the excess liquidity period from 2000 to 2007 (Ertürk et al. 2008: 24–9; cf. Langley, this issue). The emphasis on conjuncture is important in qualifying any ‘war machine’ view of hedge funds because it adds a context which cannot be read off Deleuze and Guattari. The possibility of raising funds, the ease of borrowing

to lever positions and the possibilities of making money through trades on prices, spreads and volatility will all vary over asset price and credit cycles within and between conjunctures. As such it is possible to extend the analogy to think of the conjuncture as the terrain upon which a campaign is fought, and where hedge fund strategy, manoeuvrability and success change in response to the topography of the battlefield, which can facilitate quick victories, only then to limit movement and expose overextension. This image is useful because as the economic conjuncture shifts from excess liquidity to subprime-inspired financial crisis, many hedge funds now find themselves overextended – victims of their own success in the previous phase.

The analogy of war can therefore shed more light on the activity of hedge funds; but it is possible to understand hedge fund activity using other frames. Analogies of war and speculation overlap when aggressive activities can be understood as either military struggles or poker games. In our view, this is an index of the strength not weakness of our position, because our aim is not to displace the scientific apparatus of mainstream economics and finance and their analogical baggage, but to add analogies which open up overlapping visual fields. This article represents an attempt at developing a ‘parallax view’, where a change in our observational position provides a new line of sight and thus interpretation of our object to gain perspective and depth. This is important because, as we shall argue, opinions on hedge funds are highly polarised, yet are fundamentally rooted in a shared narrow, one-dimensional visualisation of what hedge funds are and how they operate in financial markets. Our aim is to broaden and deepen this understanding.

The article is structured to achieve this result. A first section explores the conventional approach to the study of hedge funds, which first seeks to define what hedge funds are, then assigns to them a particular identity as ‘arbitrageur’ or ‘gambler’, before judging the outcomes of their identity-determined behaviour for financial markets and society. We reject the definition–identity–outcome method of analysis which was generally shared by defenders and critics of hedge funds in the first half of the 2000s. Section two argues the case for a change of analogy and explains how the imagery of ‘war’, ‘raiders’ and ‘weapons’ is already well-established in writings on finance. This section also resists war as a procrustean metaphor by introducing the ‘frame–conjuncture–bricolage’ approach which we have used elsewhere in discussion of financial innovation (Engelen et al. 2010). A third section of the article develops the war analogy and takes up the question of what kind of war and warrior hedge funds represent. It does so by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) concept of ‘nomadic war machine’ which puts the emphasis on the mobility and opportunism of hedge funds. Section four turns to analyse the importance of changing conjuncture – or, in military terms, the changing topography and climate – which explains how quick and easy victories turned into overextension, heavy losses and forced to retreat from positions of strength.

#### **Hedge funds: definition–identity–outcome**

We began to write this article out of frustration with existing academic, policy and media representations of hedge funds as a new kind of economic actor. There is



much apparent and noisy disagreement in these texts about whether hedge funds are good or bad and should be welcomed or discouraged. But behind these manifest differences, we find surprising agreement on a shared method of analysis: most texts begin by proposing a definition of hedge funds and then assign to them a particular personality or function before finally crediting hedge funds with general outcomes for investors, financial markets and the economy. We call this method the 'definition–identity–outcome' approach. This approach is immediately problematic because it is difficult to find definitions which clearly distinguish hedge funds from other actors and encourages a kind of circular logic as identity determines outcomes. Equally undisclosed and contestable is a shared basic representation of the activity, as the active buying and selling of financial assets to exploit price anomalies, whether perceived or real, and a view of the market as a constellation of assets with 'real' risk/return characteristics which may or may not be reflected in their current market price.

The definition–identity–outcome approach seeks to do two things. First it seeks to define hedge funds in contradistinction to other financial actors. Second, once hedge funds' fundamental difference is established through definition, it is possible then to assign them 'good' or 'bad' identities, and to consider their positive and negative effects on other economic actors, institutions and outcomes. However, this approach confronts an immediate major obstacle because it is difficult to find characteristics which distinguish hedge funds from other actors. Hedge funds cannot be defined in terms of legal rules or regulatory provision as in the case of banks, so those in search of definitions have tried to find features and characteristics which distinguish hedge funds from other financial actors.

Many accounts of hedge funds offer a potted history of the industry, beginning with A.W. Jones in the 1940s whose fund was the first to use shorting and leverage (IMF 1999; Tsatsaronis 2000; Bandopadhyaya and Grant 2006; Hardie and MacKenzie 2006). But these two techniques now simply form part of a growing and changing list of definitional characteristics. Thus authors like Fung and Hsieh (1997), Nyberg (2008) and Meligkotsidou and Vrontos (2008) extend the definition to include the goals of the enterprise, where a hedge fund is defined as one that seeks absolute rather than relative returns. Bandopadhyaya and Grant (2006) focus more on strategy, by highlighting hedge funds' greater use of derivatives, particularly after the 1990s. Lo (2008) uses six categories to contrast hedge funds and other financial actors, claiming the former are characterised by proprietary trading strategies, minimal risk management procedures and the drive for absolute returns, while the latter pursue risk-weighted returns that keep up with, or beat the index. For Garbaravicius and Dierick (2005: 7), six becomes ten, as they highlight differences within the formal characteristics of hedge funds and other asset managers, focusing on 2 and 20 incentive structures, domicile, legal structure and obligations for disclosure. If the aim is to highlight the difference between hedge funds and other financial actors, their distinguishing characteristics are not so fundamental or apparent as to have solidified into one consensus definition. Indeed each new attempt to finesse definitions and recognise complexity increases problems of discrepancy and inconsistency with earlier definitions of hedge funds and overlap with the characteristics of other actors.

In terms of discrepancy, it is clear that many hedge funds do not 'hedge' with short positions. Many or most start-up hedge funds in the 2000s boom were simply leveraged long-only firms and did not short (Biggs 2008). Furthermore, with the advent of institutional investment through funds of funds, the argument that hedge funds seek absolute rather than index-linked returns is difficult to sustain. The estimated share of hedge fund investment coming from institutional investors grew from 39 per cent in 1997 to 60 per cent in 2007 and with it came the growth of the hedge fund index industry such as Credit Suisse/Tremont Hedge Index or Barclayhedge, which enable investors to compare historic performance of particular funds or market strategies. Achieving superior relative returns as measured by these indexes became increasingly important for hedge fund managers because the ranking would influence new funds raised in the next phase (Hedge Funds Review 2005: 34). It is in part for this reason that hedge funds often de-list themselves from indexes when they underperform (Greco et al. 2007).

In terms of overlap, the distinction between hedge funds and other actors becomes increasingly hazy. Private equity funds, like hedge funds, are highly leveraged with 2 and 20 fee structures for general partners, but before 2007 were considered different because of their buyout-focused activity and longer lock-in periods for investors. Yet the crisis in debt markets after 2007 encouraged private equity funds to move into distressed debt investment and to take minority stakes in listed firms (see Leaver 2009; Froud et al. 2009), which are traditional strategies of hedge funds. Hedge funds similarly are now increasingly seeking to extend lock-in periods, and some even reserve the right to suspend redemptions in exceptional circumstances (Garbaravicius and Dierick 2005: 7), making them much more like private equity firms than before.

By adding more characteristics to the definitions, the distinction between hedge funds and other financial actors becomes less clear-cut in a world where, through mimesis and mutation, the practices of many financial actors such as private equity and hedge funds are converging. If definitions of hedge funds are hazy, the identities and behaviours assigned to them are, by contrast, strong and clear in the literature on hedge funds. At least, this is so if we begin by excluding those technical finance texts which test the effects of different variables on, for example, investor returns, fund survival, amounts of leverage and so on. The remaining literature positions itself clearly 'for' or 'against' hedge funds, referring to their broader function and the social and economic outcomes of their activity. But these divergent representations of identity and outcomes share a highly stylised and metaphor-driven form, and share a common concept of the economy and the activity of hedge funds within it.

For some, hedge funds are simply 'traders' or 'arbitrageurs', and their activity is understood as the active buying and selling of underpriced/overpriced stocks. This perspective asserts that hedge funds help perfect market operations because their arbitrage activity helps improve the price discovery process. This is because hedge funds possess better human capital and utilise superior mathematical models which help them identify mispriced risk at speed more accurately, and use the tools of shorting, leverage and derivatives to rectify price anomalies within and across asset classes (Agarwal and Naik 2004; Duarte et al. 2005; Financial Stability Forum 2007: 8). This, it is claimed, has a positive

spin-off for the efficient allocation of capital because when prices are more accurate, resources may also be distributed more efficiently, with the risks better managed (Nyberg 2007: 1). Similarly hedge funds' greater appetite for risk means that in new and complex markets such as emerging market bonds, credit derivatives and distressed debt, hedge funds provide the liquidity that other risk-averse investors may shy away from, thus limiting the exposure of core financial institutions such as banks (Financial Stability Forum 2007: 8–9; Warsh 2007).

Other authors, particularly those with regulatory responsibilities or columnists in the business press, share the same underlying concept of the economy but are more sceptical about hedge fund capabilities. Like the supporters, moderate critics understand the financial market as a constellation of assets with different risk/return profiles, where hedge funds are traders or arbitrageurs exploiting the difference between an asset's fundamental price and its market price. Critics are simply more sceptical of hedge funds' skill and calculative capacity, and so emphasise not informed trading, but risky speculation with potentially negative systemic results. Some, like Garbaravicius and Dierick (2005), question hedge funds' ability to always measure risk correctly and consider whether, due to the adoption of similar mathematical models and trading strategies, hedge fund positions may amplify small movements in price, leaving banks and other credit suppliers exposed to their trades. Others in left-leaning newspapers use the emotive language of 'gamblers' and 'speculators' to understand hedge fund activity, whilst retaining the same metaphor of the financial market as a bundle of assets with different return profiles. This was the basis of Will Hutton's (2008) position on the financial system and hedge funds in an *Observer* column where he argues that the financial system, 'consists of what are essentially gambling chips, such as credit derivatives, options, swaps, contracts for difference and stock lending for short selling. These are used by a vast global hedge fund industry to bet on movements of prices in the first financial system – shares, currencies, interest rates and commodity prices'. Hedge funds thus join rating agencies as the main culprits (see Sinclair, this issue).

The analysis of hedge funds using this definition–identity–outcome method encounters a fundamental difficulty because it is unclear how such clear-cut identities and outcomes can be assigned to a class of actors that are so difficult to define. This road block difficulty cannot be resolved by turning to the empirics on hedge fund performance and broader market effects because each side can find evidence to support its case. Hedge fund supporters highlight the 'long calm' from the early 1990s to just before the subprime crisis in the summer of 2007, and claim that steadily rising asset prices and low volatility in returns were encouraged by active traders like hedge funds using strategies of arbitrage to limit abnormal price movements and offset risk. Detractors and doubters meanwhile point to evidence of the disorderly markets after 2007 which led to a crisis inside hedge funds about investor redemptions, write-downs, collapse and scandal in hedge funds driven by a collapse in returns on such alternative investments which led many to question the ability of such funds to generate absolute returns and stabilise markets (Brunnermeier 2008; Elliot 2008). Supporters retorted that the crisis highlighted hedge funds' ability to limit losses and preserve capital better than mutual funds and other long, passive investors, and

by early 2009 were insisting that hedge funds had lost only 19 per cent of the value of assets managed relative to the 42 per cent decline in global equity values (Shadab 2009).

Mainstream analysis of hedge funds is therefore circular and inconclusive because it is committed to a method that finds confirmation of a prior position over short, discrete time periods. The fundamental problem is the shared frame which encourages a view of hedge fund activity through the lens of identity and ignores the possibility that hedge funds are an irregular force, whose strategies and performance respond to changing conjunctural opportunities and threats. Hence, rather than pick a side, it is more constructive to look at the industry from a different angle, one that helps us to understand both the different consequences of hedge fund action over different periods, and helps to explain the enduring paradox of how actors with such clear-cut identities can be so difficult to pin down in terms of defining characteristics.

Here we have a precedent. Froud et al. (2006) explored the impact of 'shareholder value' on giant firm strategy. The aim was to avoid producing an all-encompassing definition of 'shareholder value', because, as we argued in the book, its meaning and interpretation depended on time, place and actor. We instead focused on the context within which the term was mobilised, and explored its variable meanings and effects in different firms. The term 'hedge funds', like shareholder value, shares similar properties because it can mean many different things to different authors in the absence of formal or legal definitions. As such, we resist the temptation to begin our argument with a definition, and instead follow the sentiments of this special issue's introduction by exploring the relation between the changing political economy or 'conjuncture' and the strategic moves of those firms that are ordinarily termed 'hedge funds'. This alternative starting point is important because, as we shall argue, hedge fund strategies are constructed to capitalise on conjunctural events which are specific to that time period. Hence, to understand the direction, form and outcomes of hedge fund activity we need also to consider the context of the bubble and the sub-prime-triggered crisis. We term this approach the frame–conjuncture–bricolage approach (see Engelen et al. 2010).

### Changing the analogies: introducing war and conjuncture

How can we challenge the dominant representation or 'frame' of the financial market as a portfolio of assets and coupons with different risk and return profiles, within which hedge fund activity (good or bad) becomes the trading of assets perceived to be under- or overpriced? In our view, the challenge is best done by introducing new analogies which help us to understand what hedge funds are like and why the outcomes of their activity are so variable. After some thought, we chose the analogy of war as a frame for understanding the activity of hedge funds and other key actors in the financial markets since the late 1990s. The key advantage of this analogy is that it allows us to discuss power and force, threat and manipulation, secrecy and deception as routine everyday tactics, not lapses from some norm of civilised or efficient market behaviour. A hedge fund is like a military force because it will do whatever is necessary to 'make positions work' and



win first the immediate struggle and then the campaign. But the war analogy does not exhaust the object conventionally termed 'hedge fund' and so we add a complementary concept of conjuncture as a way of understanding the variable scope and outcomes of the activities of those in the hedge funds who are prepared to do whatever it takes.

There is nothing new in the general idea that business in general, and finance in particular, are warlike. The popularity of the metaphor is indicated by the way in which the US business best-seller lists have included Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, a Chinese manual of military strategy written some time between 403 and 221 BC. Other bestsellers include Burroughs and Helyar's (1990) *Barbarians at the Gate*, Das' (2004) *Traders, Guns and Money*, Partnoy's (1998) *Blood in the Water on Wall Street* and Charles Gasparino's (2005) *Blood on the Streets*.

It should also be said that war is only one amongst several competing analogies for understanding present-day finance. The themes of dishonesty, theft and criminality are invoked in the titles of other publications, which include Michael Lewis' (1990) *Liar's Poker*, Connie Brooks' (1989) *The Predators Ball*, John Rolfe and Peter Troob's (2000) *Monkey Business* and James B. Stewart's (1999) *Den of Thieves*. In some cases this all gets an apocalyptic twist with references to Mephistophelean wrongdoing in finance, as in Bookstaber's (2007) *A Demon of our Own Design* and Chancellor's (2000) *Devil Take the Hindmost*. There is therefore a choice of analogies and, of the several available, we prefer war for hedge funds because the idea of war connects with a relevant classical literature.

Von Clausewitz (1993: 99) famously observed that war is, 'not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means'. If his emphasis was on how war extends the range of permissible behaviour and tactics, Von Clausewitz (1993: 138) also insisted that war involves the use of force under conditions of uncertainty, brilliantly captured through his images of 'friction' and the 'fog of war': 'the great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently – like the effect of a fog or moonshine – gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance'. Within this frame, Von Moltke (1971) insists that military campaigns are not about implementation of grand plans because they never survive contact with the enemy. The emphasis instead is on improvisation, which explains von Moltke's 'willingness to change plans to conform to events' (Godefroy 2006: 132). For Von Moltke (1971: 64), war was 'a matter of expedients' with strategy, 'the art of action under pressure of most difficult circumstances'.

If the super-ordinate aim is to win the war, this can only be achieved by a military force which wins the major campaigns. This will include major battles and skirmishes that are normally partly won and lost. From our point of view the idea of the campaign is the critical principle as it involves a temporary unity of time and place. A military campaign comprises a series of related operations within a delimited area, usually involving a number of battles over a time period of up to a year or longer. Victory in the campaign is enabled or frustrated by a sequence of prior events and the changing physical terrain. Whether we consider Napoleon's attack on Russia in 1812 or the Wehrmacht's assault on Soviet

Russia in 1941, we can understand that early brilliant successes do not guarantee victory in the campaign but often lead to retreat from early positions of strength. This is so because early success in any campaign creates problems about holding territorial gains, supplying forces and following through on different and less favourable topography against seasonal climate change with rain or frost hampering movement. To understand how these kinds of limits play in the markets of a financialised economy we will introduce a second concept of conjuncture.

The concept of conjuncture is introduced in *Financialization at Work* (Ertürk et al. 2008) and is developed in Engelen et al. (2010) to understand how the improvisatory nature of financial innovation in credit derivatives led to financial crisis after 2007. The aim of the original concept of conjuncture was to resist epochalism and the idea that financialisation after the mid 1970s inaugurated one, permanent new logic of relation between capital market actors and the rest of the economy. These arguments in turn developed our earlier position (Froud et al. 2006) that 'shareholder value' was not one process with a general logic like downsize and distribute. The aim of the frame–conjuncture–bricolage approach to financial innovation is to emphasise the temporary, variable and context-dependent nature of innovation activity by market actors. We represent bricolage as a kind of improvisatory activity by actors at nodes that responds to conjunctural opportunity, and incidentally creates long, fragile chains whose collapse led to financial crisis.

The conjuncture is a space of temporary, contradictory and partial organisation which we define in a Braudelesque, non-Marxist sense. A conjuncture is simply the distinctive combination of circumstances within which events and episodes happen for periods which typically last from four to seven years. The combination mixes two sets of defining characteristics: the quantitative economic aspect of conjuncture comes from central bank policy and capital market configurations of asset prices and the availability of funds which is embedded in mass saving and consumption patterns as well as trade imbalances; the socio-cultural support is supplied by appropriate grand narratives produced and circulated by practitioners, consultants, commentators in the media as well as academics who all variously rationalise the trajectory of the economy. In these terms, the New Economy period from 1996 to 2000 or the excess liquidity period from 2000 to 2007 were both distinct and successive conjunctures. In our view, this is different to the recurrent business cycle arguments of old style political economy, such as Keynes' emphasis on the shallow judgement of stock market investors, or Minsky's financial instability hypothesis. For us, each new conjuncture represents a fragile combination of narrative and numbers which first creates opportunities of money making and then closes them down.

This concept of conjuncture and bricolage fits quite neatly with the classical Prussian view of war where strategy is an improvised response: hedge fund strategies become the extemporised, changing response to conjunctural opportunities which are specific to that time period. Incidentally, this undermines attempts at definition in terms of techniques and tactics (like shorting) because a competent military commander or hedge fund manager will adjust tactics as circumstances change. But this still leaves open questions about what kind of actor or army hedge funds represent.

### A kind of war: Deleuze and the nomadic war machine

At this point, some empirics will help us decide what kind of army hedge funds are and what sort of war they are fighting. Interestingly, they are a relatively small force who nevertheless are everywhere because they fight many skirmishes and battles. Whilst hedge funds manage around 1 per cent of all assets in the financial sector, they accounted for between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of all trading on major exchanges (Stalman and Knipps 2007), and they are the majority counter-party in some areas of the market such as structured credit trades (Feenstra et al. 2007). Furthermore, their weapons of choice are sophisticated, and allow for both the element of surprise and control with the least commitment of resources. For example in the mid 2000s it was estimated that up to 40 per cent of trading on the London Stock Exchange related to hedge funds' use of 'contracts for difference', which are derivatives that allow investors to bet on a change in stock price without owning the underlying shares (Ethical Corporation 2006). All of this suggests sophisticated guerrilla tactics and a war of movement rather than a war of position. But we would not endorse the familiar cultural trope which presents the irregulars as rampaging raiders in a way which sets up an opposition between war lords and unruly raiders like the Vikings or Mongols who pillage the pastoral, settled, organised societies and states. Whilst hedge funds are perhaps a small and effective band of marauders in a sense, we require a concept that allows us to highlight their connectedness and reliance on other financial actors who are part of more formal apparatus and settled hierarchy.

Here we draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and in particular their notion of 'nomadic war machine' (NWM). Our analogical use of their ideas is coherent with Deleuze and Guattari's original concept insofar as they argue that NWM is not a description of actually existing phenomena, but a representation of action that can be applied across a range of domains, including modern wars, science and so on. In this sense it is entirely possible to consider hedge funds as warrior nomads acting in financial not physical space and to use Deleuzian ideas about relations between the irregular and regular to highlight connections between these funds and more established institutions like banks. For Deleuze and Guattari; NWMs are a marauding, rootless army – a self-organising structure without state control that exists for itself, and where the importance of the journey from battle to battle is the journey itself. They are countercultural by instinct, separate from mainstream values and antagonistic to state apparatus and intervention, but nevertheless are often harnessed by the state in an attempt to do their bidding.

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) develop three main foci for their discussion: the distinction between weapons and tools; the division and interrelations between Nomos versus Law; and finally the idea of smooth versus striated spaces. In terms of weapons versus tools, they argue that whereas weapons are projective and imply speed and vector in a context of war, tools by contrast are introceptive and refer to the world of work. For Nomos versus Law, they highlight surface-level independence between the two because there is opposition and rivalry between the NWM and other armies (and the state); however, at another level there is also coexistence and competition in a perpetual field of interaction

(Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 17). As such, NWMs and more respectable warriors/armies are both 'antithetical and complementary, necessary to one another'. Finally, with regard to the mobility of routes and objectives, they differentiate striated versus smooth spaces, where the ultimate aim of the NWM is to alter space to facilitate the journey—that is, to 'extend the desert' and escape attempts to control the direction of their route.

### Weapons not tools

The three foci of the Deleuzian war machine analogy help us to better understand hedge fund activity through analogy. First, it is clear that hedge funds are armed and that they use weapons to make the positions work. Hedge funds use shorting and derivatives like options as a way of exerting power, threatening, manipulating other financial actors. This stands in contrast to the enduring image of hedge fund as 'trader', 'arbitrageur' or gambler, which implies that the activity is simply the buying or selling different assets with shorts, options and such like used as 'tools' to facilitate the identity-inferred activity.

The idea of hedge funds as nomadic war machine illuminates the distinction between weapons and tools. This is important because hedge funds do not merely take passive positions; rather, once taken, hedge funds have to make their positions work. This has been facilitated by Sarbanes Oxley in the US and the Combined Code in the UK, which encouraged shareholder activism to resolve agency problems so that hedge funds can piggy-back on responsible governance and use new strategies to influence corporate payout policies or major strategic moves. For example, Carl Icahn, William Ackman, Nelson Peltz, Chris Hohn and Eric Knight used their hedge funds to pursue such goals in companies like Time Warner, McDonald's, Cadbury Schweppes, Deutsche Borse and Shell. They used a variety of mechanisms to effect change, including proxy fights which asked shareholders to vote on key initiatives at AGMs, hostile 13-D letters which publicly criticised management, and leveraging positions through contracts for difference which allowed buyers to enjoy the underlying rights of a share without actually owning them, while covering positions with swaps and anticipating events by short selling of stocks.

Fears about hedge funds using these devices as weapons were raised by the European Parliament in a document produced in December 2007, where it was alleged that hedge funds were buying voting rights in companies where they held an overall short position, thus raising serious conflicts of interest (Naik 2007). Similarly hedge funds are also implicated in insider trading when between a quarter and a half of all merger announcements are preceded by abnormal share price moves, driven largely through the options market where hedge funds are most active (Scheer 2007). As hedge funds are the most important generators of commissions, it is also alleged that stockbrokers will release price-sensitive information on planned third-party trades in exchange for a greater share of future commission flow from hedge funds (Naik 2007: 30). Acharya and Johnson (2005) also claim that, 'hedge funds often purchase small syndicate stakes in firms precisely to acquire non-public information to aid them in arbitrage trading'. These general misgivings were reinforced in late 2008 when many believed that



hedge funds were exploiting febrile markets at the peak of the crisis by spreading rumours about banks like Barclays. This pushed UK regulators to ban the use of short selling in 2008, in the belief that rumour spreading and shorting were being used as a weapon to realise profits in a climate of fear, not a tool to create market efficiency (*Financial Times*, 6 October 2008: 13).

If many of these allegations about use of weapons cannot be proven, it is clear that war removes old restraints and adds few new limits as the irregulars break conventions or push at whatever is not forbidden. But the logic of this particular process is that it encourages mimesis and the ever wider use of new weapons, even amongst the apparently pastoral communities that are attacked. Thus, in 2005 it was (in European terms) aggressive and novel when a London-based hedge fund, the Children's Investment Fund, used shareholder activism to stop the Deutsche Borse bid for the London Stock Exchange so that Deutsche Borse could pay higher dividends and hedge funds could make money out of the fall in the LSE stock price after the deal fell through. By 2008, with Porsche's attempt to take over Volkswagen (VW), a small German industrial company planned to take over a much larger industrial company through the use of cash settled derivatives. The fact that the derivatives were cash settled meant that Porsche's stake did not have to be disclosed. When Porsche finally revealed that it held 31.5 per cent in derivatives in VW, it meant that there was a free float of only 5.8 per cent creating panic among hedge funds which then had to cover their short positions. Hedge funds bid up VW's price by 348 per cent in two days and in doing so made an estimated loss collectively of around €10bn–€15bn (\$12.5bn–\$18.8bn) (*Financial Times*, 27 October 2008). It is for this reason, as the weapons of hedge funds are adopted by other actors and companies like Porsche use the weapons of hedge funds against hedge funds, that it becomes increasingly difficult to define what is a hedge fund and what is not.

#### *Opposition and co-existence*

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) understand nomos as the self-organising assemblages of people, ideas and space. Hedge funds fit this description because they define themselves as outsiders, with ideas and moral codes outside the social norm. Yet irregular forces are often funded by states and armed from regular army stock-piles. And so it is with the irregulars in the hedge funds who exist in a symbiotic relation with regular institutions like banks, who supply liquidity and vital services in return for a fee (Aldridge 2008) or pension funds which lend their shares for a fee. Hedge funds' connection with, and reliance upon, other actors contradicts the standard assumptions about difference and uniqueness described in our first section, and complicates the notion that they act alone in financial space.

The closest, most important relation is with investment banks which act as prime brokers for hedge funds and supply a range of essential services and profit hugely from servicing hedge funds. For example, prime brokers lend hedge funds the securities they need to undertake short sales, provide debt to allow hedge funds to leverage their investments, provide global custody services for the assets hedge funds acquire, and provide 'back office' accounting and

portfolio information services. They can also aid hedge funds in accessing local shares abroad, provide cash management services, locate real estate and office space, provide headhunting services and provide consulting on IT, compliance and risk management. Small hedge funds usually have one prime broker, but large funds have several prime brokers. In 2007 Morgan Stanley, Bear Stearns and Goldman Sachs together had over 60 per cent of the prime broker market (Lipper 2007). Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs each reported over \$2bn in prime brokerage revenues from prime broker services to hedge funds in 2006 (Annual Reports). In 2008 the expected hedge fund revenues for prime brokerage services was more than \$11bn (Anon 2008).

In many ways, by 2007 the line between investment bank and hedge fund was already hazy because banks themselves were portfolios of assets which could be used in prop trading. Thus, some leading banks like Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers and Citi had their own in-house hedge funds so that they would not miss out on gains on either side of the hedge fund/bank relation, though this often ended badly – as when the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers left hedge funds, some of them bank-owned, unable to reclaim \$22bn of their own assets from Lehman's which had re-hypothecated them into its prop trading operations (*Financial Times*, 23 September 2008).

#### *Striated vs smooth spaces*

In the Deleuzian concept, the state constructs striated spaces within which the activity must function, and the nomadic war machine predictably resists such direction. In hedge funds much of this resistance is through what is conventionally termed financial innovation, whether via corporate structures which channel profits to the Cayman Islands or through instruments like contracts for difference which allow them to wield force but avoid commitment. In other words, as the state tries to contain and direct the traverse of the hedge funds, they will persistently use tax, accounting and financial innovations to smooth space and 'extend the desert'.

The vast majority of hedge funds are domiciled in tax havens like the Cayman Islands, Bermuda and Jersey, thus escaping regulatory scrutiny and reducing tax payments for funds and investors alike. As of 31 December 2007, there were 9,413 funds domiciled and regulated in the Cayman Islands. Of these 8,571 were registered private funds with a minimum initial investment of over \$1 m (Hedge Funds Review 2008: 6). Hedge funds have exploited exemptions and loopholes in both the US 1940 Investment Advisors Act and the Investment Companies Act to avoid the reporting and standardised disclosure requirements that apply to public funds, like mutuals in the US (Shadab 2009: 11–15). The lack of regulatory oversight and non-adoption of conventional accounting standards mean hedge funds have some discretion in valuing the market price of their more complex assets under management. A variety of academic papers have highlighted how this metrological power results in attempts at monthly 'return smoothing' to allay the fears of investors averse to too much volatility over the annual cycle (Getmansky et al. 2004; Bollen and Pool 2006; Goltz and Schroeder 2008: 30). Others highlight a more opportunistic use of this power, identifying

the significantly higher valuations of returns in December – the month in which incentive payments, calculated as a percentage of those returns, are traditionally paid out to General Partners (Agarwal et al. 2006). In such instances the weakness of SEC regulatory oversight, poor due diligence on the part of investors and other actors, and the funds' use of relatively small, inexperienced auditors allowed hedge funders to define the parameters of victory, and to claim the spoils of war with relative impunity.

The position was hardly stable because the (unregulated) routine hedge fund power to measure and price returns almost inevitably resulted in fraud, as with Madoff's \$50bn hedge fund cum Ponzi-scheme which reported 15 per cent on-paper returns year on year (*Financial Times*, 15 December 2008) or Stanford's alleged \$8bn fraud which supposedly involved the fabrication of his fund's historic returns and current risk exposure (*Financial Times*, 17 February 2009). Although misstatements of financial position and risk exposures was prohibited under the 1940 Advisers Act, the absence of checks and oversight handed funds an advantage so that Madoff and Stanford were only accused after markets turned down. US regulators have moved quickly to re-regulate the sector through the Hedge Fund Transparency Act, which now requires most hedge fund advisers to register with the SEC and publicly disclose basic financial information (Levin 2009). Meanwhile, European funds are noisily resisting EU regulation of alternative investments (*Financial Times*, 2 May 2009).

### The changing conjuncture: from success to failure

From the mid 1990s onwards, there was a hockey stick as hedge funds' assets managed increased from \$20bn in 1997 towards \$2 trillion in 2007 globally. The number of funds also grew spectacularly from some 600 funds in 1990 to 9,000 in 2008. If the 1990s involved large percentage growth from a small base in funds managed, the remarkable point is that growth rates of 50 per cent per annum were sustained on much larger bases. In these circumstances, the capability of the irregulars was secondary because a favourable conjuncture ensured that their campaigns usually ended in victory. The bursting of the dotcom bubble, a stock market crash and Greenspan's cutting of US interest rates established new and more favourable conjunctural conditions: after 2000 depressed equity prices propelled institutional investors into alternative investments and low interest rates facilitated cheap borrowing which could be used to lever returns upward. Returns relative to stock market indexes such as the S&P500 did turn up in 2001 and 2002, as hedge funds moved out of equities and into currencies and energy futures, shorted a falling dollar and exploited remaining interest rate differences through the yen carry trade (Credit Suisse 2008: 5). These conditions were reinforced over the next few years by generally rising asset prices as there was more money than good assets in most markets, helped by the liberation of global capital which was facilitated by deregulation and the growth of savings in larger fast-developing countries like China and India.

The importance of conjuncture was decisively demonstrated when circumstances changed after the credit crunch in August 2007, so that industry returns, and sometimes whole funds, collapsed. The early casualties of 2008 were funds

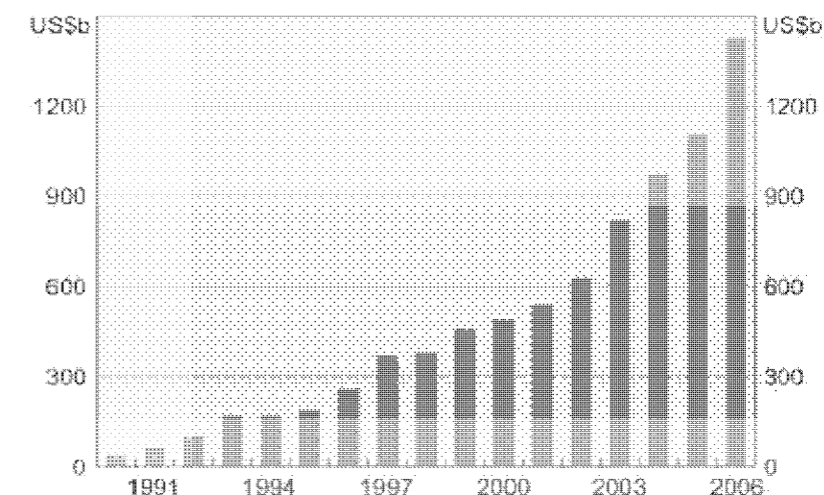


FIGURE 1. Growth of hedge fund assets under management, 1995–2007 (global).  
Source: Hedge Funds Research (2008: 2)

like the quoted Carlyle fund, which collapsed amidst much recrimination in March because it was 32 times levered in an attempt to raise returns on mortgage paper (*Guardian*, 14 March 2008). In the first six months of 2008, 243 funds liquidated, while the September 2008 ban on short selling was rumoured to have cost hedge funds £1bn (*Independent*, 23 September 2008). By October 2008, hedge fund returns were down 15.54 per cent on an annual basis, with some like Convertible and Fixed Income Arbitrage and Emerging Markets down 20–30 per cent (Table 1).

There had been some discussion before 2007 about whether hedge fund activity would make hitherto uncorrelated asset prices more correlated and how this could result in fund failures like that of Long Term Capital Management in 1998. But in the event, the stress was more severe in the new conjuncture after 2007 and came from external sources when credit dried up. As Table 1 demonstrates, year-to-date returns on all investment strategies then turned down sharply with the exception of dedicated short funds and managed futures, though even these have experienced volatile returns. This is an embarrassing development because it raises serious questions about the ability of hedge funds to deliver superior returns relative to passive, long only equity strategies over substantial time periods, when bull and bear markets alternate. Figure 2 demonstrates that hedge funds did not manage to beat a major US stock index in the good years from 2003 to 2007, when returns from equities or hedge funds or 'funds of funds' were strikingly similar. If there is little outperformance in the good years, superior long-run returns from hedge funds depend on avoiding underperformance in the bad years, which may well depend on unusually favourable circumstances as in 2001 and 2002. The current experience shows how adverse circumstances can easily produce underperformance in difficult years.

If most campaigns succeeded before 2007, the changing conjuncture meant the irregulars have since found out how difficult it is to manage orderly retreat under pressure. The leverage which had been an advantage in raising returns before



TABLE 1. Monthly and year-to-date hedge fund performance

	Index Value			Return %		
	Currency	Oct 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Sep 08	YTD
Credit Suisse/Tremont Hedge Fund Index	USD	366.39	391.02	-6.30	-6.55	-15.54
Convertible Arbitrage	USD	228.10	260.96	-12.59	-12.26	-29.59
Dedicated Short Bias	USD	87.79	80.06	9.66	-6.08	13.38
Emerging Markets	USD	268.95	311.39	-13.63	-8.93	-29.24
Equity Market Neutral	USD	377.08	384.09	-1.83	-1.41	-0.19
Event Driven	USD	413.85	436.03	-5.09	-5.75	-13.92
Distressed	USD	488.38	517.69	-5.66	-5.18	-14.11
Multi-Strategy	USD	381.13	400.20	-4.77	-6.17	-13.97
Risk Arbitrage	USD	273.31	281.93	-3.06	-3.49	-4.77
Fixed Income Arbitrage	USD	178.11	207.19	-14.04	-6.80	-23.99
Global Macro	USD	567.56	598.28	-5.13	-6.63	-7.10
Long/Short Equity	USD	403.48	434.47	-7.13	-7.81	-19.46
Managed Futures	USD	268.96	256.24	4.96	-0.57	11.99
Multi-Strategy	USD	293.63	315.52	-6.94	-7.35	-18.68

Source: Credit Suisse/Tremont Hedge Fund Index (2008).

2007 was now a disadvantage because involuntary deleveraging was inevitable as credit lines were withdrawn. Similarly, assets had to be sold to meet rising redemptions, while write-downs increased margin call pressures from banks. As in a military withdrawal, forces must retreat with losses from positions

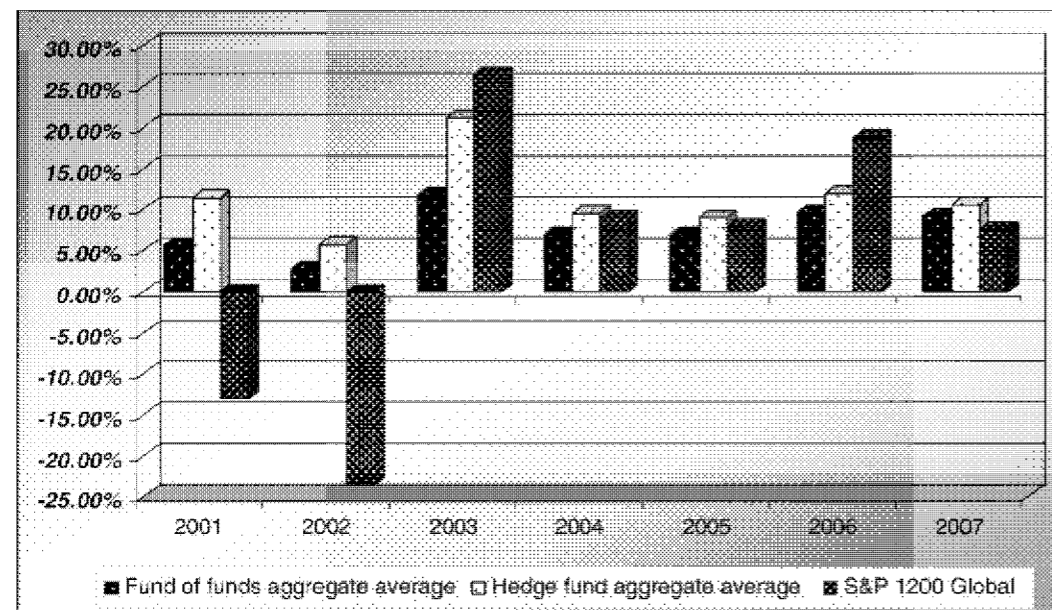


FIGURE 2. Hedge fund, fund of funds and the S&P global 1200 returns 2001-7.

Source: Hedge Fund Net (2008: 1).

which if defended might have proved valuable; and it is often the strongest positions that are easiest to evacuate. By December 2008, the *Financial Times* claimed this kind of retreat was going on across the industry, as hedge funds withdrew from their most liquid and most profitable positions to fund redemptions by fleeing investors (*Financial Times*, 1 December 2008). One of the more interesting indicators of disorderly retreat is the price of gold in September to October 2008. Traditionally gold prices rise in a crisis because gold is a safe haven for investors when markets are uncertain, yet in the period immediately after Lehman's collapse gold prices fluctuated erratically. During the crisis months of September and October 2008, gold prices were \$815 per ounce, or \$20 lower than the \$835 recorded at the end of August because margin calls had forced deleveraging onto hedge funds, which dumped gold, forcing the price down. The price fell despite unprecedented retail demand from consumers in the open market who had bought 121 per cent more gold coins and bars in the third quarter of 2008 than in the same period in 2007. Similarly, in the last week of November 2008 prices suddenly surged by \$135 per ounce, apparently caused by hedge funds on the other side of the bet having to close their short positions (*Financial Times* 29 November 2008).

Confused retreat suggests that hedge funds are not gamblers who made the wrong call or traders who misjudged price movements. They are raiders whose strategic overextension is exposed as they traverse new topography in a different climate where unprecedented volatility in 2008 had much the same importance as the mud and cold of the Russian winter in 1812 or 1941. This view agrees with that of Holmes (2009), who argues that the alpha returns for hedge funds in the upturn (and their investment losses in the downturn) should not be understood as an act of 'discovery' in the marketplace, with market and fundamental prices converging through a process of arbitrage. The prices achieved, and thus the returns generated by hedge funds, reflect the relative success of the skirmishes, battles in campaigns fought under changing conjunctural circumstances. So it is difficult to assert the presence of a real 'fundamental' market value of the assets traded when prices are *created* through the investment and divestment act, and are not *discovered* or *found*.

## Conclusion

What then is the significance of our problem shift away from the circular definition-identity-outcome approach and its corollary assumption that hedge funds are (as traders or speculators) active buyers and sellers of assets with fixed risk/return characteristics? Our analogies open up a different view of hedge funds as mobile opportunist raiders making positions work under conjunctural conditions not of their choosing. It seems inherently unlikely that these irregulars can consistently deliver superior returns for investors, without relying on leverage which leaves them heavily exposed to conjunctural misfortune. And the flow of funds into and out of hedge funds then depends partly on the apparent attractiveness of other asset classes and the stories hedge fund managers tell. But, if hedge funds will most probably neither make markets more efficient nor end financialised life as we know it, what is the significance of hedge funds? In

answering that question, we can turn the standard approach on its head. Mainstream analysis starts from the question about how to distinguish hedge funds from other actors. Our alternative, analogical analysis ends with the discovery that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish hedge funds from other actors because the logic of war dictates that different actors will inevitably take up similar weapons and strategies. At a time when the US government, through the Public–Private Investment Partnership (PPIP), provides public money to hedge funds to bid for complex derivatives stuck on bank balance sheets (*Financial Times* 27 March 2009), we would expect much less ‘price discovery’ and much more overbidding (at the taxpayer’s expense) coupled with a long strategy on bank stocks (or vice versa). That is the logic of hedge funds as war machines.

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# IN CONVERSATION: KATYA SANDER AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** Can you tell me about your interest in using everyday language to describe seemingly opaque financial mechanisms?

**Katya Sander:** I've been interested in how certain notions take shape and circulate in our everyday language—and thereby also social imaginary. I'm interested in what we imagine as possible and how we imagine it possible. A large part of politics is a struggle over language: to be able to define certain notions and how they can be used; their obvious, as well as implicit, meanings. It is a struggle over who steers discourse and what interests allows what to appear sayable, reasonable, and valuable. From feminist critiques, we know several good examples of this: simple words as "woman," "femininity," "nature"—not to mention words such as "normal" or "objective"—have been used to keep certain interests and ways of living marginalized. They are words that are often used in a way that makes them appear simple and obvious. But once they are tapped into, they quickly reveal themselves as complex and dependent on the power of the context in which they are said and dependent on certain circulatory systems in which they are allowed to appear as obvious.

My own investigations of words such as "Danish," "Öffentlichkeit," (German for "publicness") "consumer," "capitalism," "enemy," "war," and "futures" derive from an interest in trying to investigate (or pick apart) such notions in their circulatory systems and their respective contexts. At certain moments of my life, I have found these words central in larger political discussions, but also that they are used in ways

that implicate something not quite clear to me. Something you have to be careful about, in order to not fall outside. I think we all have the experience of language being used in certain ways that aim to marginalize certain unspoken possible meanings; other potential interpretations and consequences. My approach derives from my experience of language—as abstract as it might seem—as something that has very real, very physical consequences, sometimes possible to generalize, sometimes seemingly singular. This is where I situate myself as an artist. I allow myself to make very simple, singular investigations, in which what I claim to be "examples" can't be generalized in the way an example is traditionally supposed to be possible to generalize. Yet it is not possible to reduce it only to itself either. There is excess somewhere.

My interest in *What is capitalism?*, from 2003, was at first glance a naïve attempt to find out what this word "capitalism" means. The naïveté and literalness I often use as vehicles in my work, could be seen as a kind of performed over-identification with a system of thoughts, that thereby becomes partly revealed or alienated by being taken so literally—sometimes to an extent where it is absurd, or perhaps humorous. It is a kind of deconstructive method. Anyway, I worked on *What is Capitalism?* in 2003, and in comparison to today, the word "capitalism" was really not so commonly used by mainstream politicians, in newspapers, public statements, or anything like that. (It's actually interesting to think about how much it is used in mainstream media and discourse today!) I was curious because I was really trying to figure out if there was a definition myself. I remember speaking with people and finding that a)

many people found the notion to be an outdated, historical, and related to certain political beliefs that were likewise outdated, and b) people assumed that any idiot knows would know what capitalism is. As if it could be taken for granted, as an unspoken implication or ground (though its discourse was disqualified and ridiculed). Often, I was explained that people felt they knew exactly what it entailed, that word, what it was the name of. But then they often came up with statements along the lines of “Oh, I know what it is, it’s just hard for me to explain. Eh...” Or they came up with something very vague, very abstract—or a fragmentary theoretical memory. I was curious about how this notion, “capitalism,” whatever it might be or implicate, seemed to be something a lot of people in my immediate context felt they knew, yet it was difficult for them just to describe it in everyday language, in an everyday situation.

**JRM:** In later work, you are reaching out to industry experts and professionals; what was the significance at this point of reaching out to a general public?

**KS:** With a work like *What is Capitalism?* or *Was ist Öffentlichkeit?* I played with—and also looked to undermine—something like the concept of a “Vox-Populi”. It is basically about a problem of representation of a collective of “people.” It is particularly a problem when representation is sought from a superior, abstract position (like art, theory, governmental work, and so on). Here, one often finds an idea of measurability, which implies that people are simply the way they are, and respond as final entities. Be it by consumption or other acts. It implies that people are not also constantly producers—of themselves as well as of their worlds. The idea also entails that by a certain number of (well-chosen) examples, a generalizing tendency can be recognized and conclusions can be reached. It is often the kind of generalization that may seamlessly slide into naturalization. This movement is a demonstration of power and privilege. Such a process of naturalization is something I just have an irresistible desire to tease, irritate, undermine, challenge...

**JRM:** What led you into taking up these questions?

**KS:** I had been working on ideas of “the public” or “a public” for a number of years; investigating the idea that you can talk to “a public”—that you can distill “a voice”—by choosing a certain number of people and recording their response to certain questions. As if opinions, needs, desires, and so on are there first, not influenced by contexts; by what and how things are asked, told or offered. (The advertising business itself, for examples, shows us that our desires and choices are indeed influenced by how certain things and notions are put into circulation; with what images and through what speech and contexts.) This is an idea that I’ve been working with and deconstructing in other pieces as well: asking what it means to address a public for example as consumers; what kinds of subjectivities are produced by that address itself. And of course, wanting to point to that hinge between finality and constant production of subjectivity,

the projections and ideas of the one who makes the questions become central. In this case, “me.” I say “me” in quotation-marks because I often play that role, the role of the “me,” the questioner, myself. But this figure is of course as much fiction as the fiction of “the voice of the people,” it attempts to uncover. There are several layers of fictions; several layers of projection going on.

**JRM:** I’ve been interested in the relation your stagings create between place, non-sites, the vox-populi, and the question of how to represent a public.

**KS:** I have used different existing ideas of how to represent “a public” or “people” in several pieces. In *What is Capitalism?*, a vox-pop was staged in a nature-landscape, a wide open field, and became slightly absurd. I would simply ask the question to people who—from out of nowhere—casually entered the frame. Of course it was staged, and that was clear. But being staged was part of the point of the piece: The video is installed between two mirrors, mirroring the landscape, the figures inside it as well as the spectators infinitely in both directions. Like an unending panorama. I wanted to talk about this horizon that lays before us, seemingly opening wide out to all sides—though technically it is only an unending multiplication of a very small fragment of an image. What is mirrored in itself to seem like a world is actually just one narrow selection. When people in the video leave this fragment of an image that makes up a world, they are simply not visible any longer. It’s like they disappear into nowhere.

**JRM:** This was also one of the first works you did in which the installation of the work suggests a very specific mode of spectatorship.

**KS:** Actually, investigating modes of spectatorship has always been at the core of my artistic practice. I’ve always worked, if not directly site-specific, then definitely spectator-specific, in the sense that I’ve always both investigated and especially used language and architecture to create a certain position for the viewer. This is very much in order to point at these two—language and architecture—as ways of producing particular modes of address, and thereby producing particular kinds of spectatorship. Just like architecture will order your movements and put you in specific relations to what you see or know from it or through it, so will language. For me, images are always secondary, always something “seen through”—or made possible—by spectators, who are organized as spectators by architecture and language. So, placing a spectator in a space as well as in a discourse and making the operation of that placement active and visible is central to everything I do.

**JRM:** What is the significance of this discourse on spectatorship?

**KS:** Understanding spectatorship plays a big role in understanding how we are being shaped as subjects today. But



spectatorship can be many things and have many roles. It is not just about “seeing something.” It is also about putting something on exhibition, out to be seen—often seen “as example.” We are being addressed as different kinds of spectators through different kinds of addresses. This was how I was thinking about the question of “What is capitalism?” I was thinking about how you are being addressed—in spatial relations, in terms of being a spectator—as a certain kind of subject with certain kinds of agencies. This extends to a consideration of how, according to that address and the possibilities for response we find, we are also being shaped as subjects.

**JRM:** In July, 2011, at *The Human Snapshot*, the LUMA Foundation conference in Arles, you spoke about the way in which panoramas imply a mode of spectatorship that is constituted by “seeing what power sees.” In what ways are your recent projects concerning speculation and the production of futures—projects which continue your investigations about the constitution of the subject, citizen, consumer, and spectator—also engaging with this dialectic?

**KS:** This idea of “seeing what power sees” is actually from Tony Bennett’s explanation of the first ‘public’ museum: after the French Revolution, the collections of artifacts that the French emperor had in his castles were put on view for ‘the people’ (!) to see. And masses of people went to see; they wanted to “see what power sees.” Bennett uses this idea to talk about the genealogy

of museums, but I find his observation very sharp and useful for a lot of situations that produce spectatorship. In fact, it might be interesting to think about most of mass- and mainstream-media in that light.

I was using Bennett’s way of describing a certain situation of spectatorship in relation to the panoramas I’ve filmed. But I’m glad that you are posing this question in this way. I do think it’s interesting to use this idea in relation to other projects of mine as well. It could well be understood as having to do with what I’m trying to do with the Futures project. In this project, I am simply asking different so-called specialists from the financial sector, what a certain kind of derivative—the one called a “Future”—is. Of course, again, the question is both naïve and to some extent stupidly literal, but also indeed very sincerely meant. I simply couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that 99.99% of global financing happens through a particular kind of contracts called “derivatives.” One kind of derivative is called a “future,” and it—very simply put—consists of a contract that binds its partners to a certain bet on the future—a future not necessarily very far away. Sometimes a year or a couple of years, but very often much less: days, hours and micro-seconds. The notion of time changes completely; investment is no longer something that grows slowly over many years—or even generations, but rather something that ends—with either win or lose—very soon. It is not building up something, it is betting on something. Anyway, what I couldn’t understand was how this





particular format or medium for moving value around would actually be so central to global financing, yet nobody I know, nor myself, knows what it is or entails, and what consequences it has. When I began, nobody I knew had a clue what it was, not even a hunch. I mean, a lot of people know about or even understand some basic ideas behind stocks, shareholders, and the like. Maybe even pension funds, national economy, and the like. Their workings are discussed in newspapers. But derivatives? No! Not outside the financial world itself. At least before 2008, it was really something that wasn't considered of any interest for anyone; it was understood as merely a way of operation; nothing to do with its contents. I wanted to understand derivatives, or at least I wanted to understand or learn something about their enormous presence yet absolute invisibility. They play such a big role in moving money around the globe, but most of us have no understanding, no idea of what they are. This is what makes us powerless: not the amounts or the speed with which they move credit, but rather the fact that we have no image or model through which we can describe and begin to understand the phenomena. Or, at least, that was my contention before 2008. Since the financial crisis—which the piece becomes indirectly about without knowing it itself—there has been more talk about these financial instruments. Anyway, I decided to go look for explanations and descriptions amongst “industry professionals” by asking them, “what is a future?” It is the opposite operation of asking “the public” certain things, but the point of the piece is also very different. Where I wanted people to leave *What is*

*capitalism?* discussing amongst themselves what they would respond if they were asked, the point of making *Production of Futures* was very different. You could say that I wanted “to see what power sees,” and in that attempt showing how invisible certain aspects of “what power sees” have gotten. So that we are not able to see it; we are clearly not “power” in this particular equation.

**JRM:** Around the same time you did *Production of Futures. A Science Fiction about Counting*. (2008) you were also commissioned to present *Estimations* at the 2008 Taipei biennial. The audio track for the *Estimations* project, however, consists entirely of recorded transcripts of conversations you had over Skype—much like the conversation we are having right now, where you've never really even met in person—with employees of a reinsurance company. Professionals, presumably.

**KS:** Exactly. *Estimations* was produced directly in relation to my work on *Futures*.

**JRM:** And the protagonist is asking these reinsurance professionals about that which cannot be estimated. That which is, therefore, outside of the global economy. I've watched this video on Vimeo, so I wanted to ask you about the site-specificity of the work. You made a note on your website where you say, “the piece is not about one specific site, but rather about any specific site's relationship to the questions asked.”



**KS:** Of course, when you see it on Vimeo, you don't see that fourth “screen” (which is actually a hole in the wall). This is a big difference; you can get an idea of the piece online, but it's not the piece. The installation itself consists of a wall with four square “holes.” Behind three of them are monitors, and the fourth hole simply has a window behind it. You basically see four different framings of the same view. Four representations or mediations of the world outside. However, once you move in the space, it becomes clear that one is not mediated, it is simply a hole in the wall. The images of the outside world becomes very directly linked to your physical presence in this very space.

The hole doesn't have to be in that museum in Taipei specifically; however, each place it would be shown in would of course need it's own version: I would need footage of the view from the exact window the viewer is sitting in front of. I put that note there because I wanted it to be clear that this piece is not related to something very special about Taipei. The specificity is elsewhere: it is about very specific logics within global financing, that are taken for granted as functional *wherever*; in whatever space, on whatever site. It's actually quite a claim, and it is central to what globalization is about. So for me, making it relate to *that* spectator sitting in *that* space, seeing *that* specific view out *that* window is very important.

The incredible generalizations made by global financing work by way of abstraction. And it is important for me to talk about

that kind of abstraction exactly in relation to the very concrete, present body and time of the spectator.

**JRM:** Perhaps this points to a certain approach that functions as an interface between the demands of site-specificity and the reality of needing to be completely flexible.

**KS:** I do think there is something interesting in being constantly asked to do site-specific work. I try not to pursue or pretend that I know anything specific about the given site. Taipei, for example, how could I know anything about Taipei? What I do is I take that site and project onto it something, which I believe we have common experiences of. In this case it is global financing. I think that is what all artists do anyway: They go for a month or more, do research, this and that, but in the end, they can only do what is their own projection of something they recognize. It has been very important for me to be very clear about that in my methodology. So I am telling a story in Taipei about global financing, believing that this is as interesting for people here, as it is for me, since the basic concepts that are being explored in the piece, are concepts we share: Our lives and worlds being estimated and assessed; given a price. This indeed also has to do with the question of “seeing what power sees”.

**JRM:** I've become interested in the specific unspecificity of the *Estimations* project, insofar as it directly relates to the finance and insurance industries. Reinsurance companies, in this case,



which actually don't insure property. They insure the insurers; a specifically unspecific way of dealing with the contingencies of a given site.

**KS:** That's right. These structures of interdependencies between insurance and reinsurance, they cannot be local or national, because then they would collapse under any one specific big catastrophe—war, natural disaster, or the like. They can only exist as truly global; by spreading the risk as far and wide as possible. That is to everywhere. The people I talk to explain this in the piece. This was part of the reason I was setting up the formal structure, because I knew that these claims were central. We are all enrolled in these paradigms and ways of thinking – or at is taken for granted that we can all be. Those who can't for one reason or another, do not exist in this system. Maybe it becomes about in what way power can see everything everywhere; how this “everything” and “everywhere” is produced in a certain way, come to exist through a certain way of detecting it. Anything else simply does not exist. In this sense, an “outside” to this global financial market does not exist.

**JRM:** Much of your work also centers around this desire to make visible that which remains hidden. In 2008, for example, you were invited by Herning Kunstmuseum to produce a piece in collaboration with the local branch of Nykredit, one of the biggest banks in Denmark, and through conversations with the employees there you created *Some Statements in Relation to a Bank. Appearing Because I Wanted to Touch Something*.

**KS:** For that piece, I simply told each of the people—all investment advisors—I engaged with at the bank that I wanted to touch what it is they dealt with. I often start with a question that is very basic and simple, but I try to push that question into a context where it will produce responses that manage to point at that context's own constitution. One would assume that the immediate answer within this context would be “money” and that the bankers would just give me physical money to touch. But actually, none of those I talked to even mentioned money as an option. I think they all wanted me to understand that what they do is much more complex and that they are a much more sophisticated organization than somebody who just takes and gives money. Some of them argued, for example, that they trade in trust. Then I asked them, “How can I see that? How can I touch that?” One guy was explaining to me that this is why they wear suits, and why banks are and look relatively conservative. They have to appear trustworthy. One person told me that a certain dark-blue—the hue used by the company in logos, letterhead, and so on—signals stability and trustworthiness. Another said “Well, I bet you want to talk about money and you'll say that nowadays with credit cards and online banking and computers etc., paper-money is not so important anymore. ‘It's all virtual’ everybody says. But actually, it hasn't changed that much. Bills and coins, or gold for that matter, are also virtual. It's the same. You could touch a one hundred dollar bill, or you could touch our very fast servers in the basements where

we have our connections to the stocks markets.” So, I asked him if he could take me to the basement and let me touch the server, and he said: “No, I'm afraid I can't do that. Security reasons”.

**JRM:** In the works we have discussed so far, it seems this tension develops between abstraction, trust, landscape, and the body. Especially in the *Estimations* video, we encounter this interface between the landscape and the video monitors that operates so as to activate an awareness of the viewer's body in relation to what they are seeing and attempting to understand; and this would appear to be a logical continuation of the phenomenological considerations in the *What is capitalism?* project from 2003. But then I find myself wondering: What is the significance for the *Estimations* project, where the visitor is asked to enter the cultural institution in order to look out from it?

**KS:** Well, as you noted, it is very much about abstraction. In that sense, it is, of course, not a co-incidence that the piece works so well when it is seen from the inside of a museum. Museums and white cubes and the kind of spectatorship they produce, are everywhere. They are spaces that—not unlike global capital—seem to be very adaptive to all kinds of cultures and landscapes.

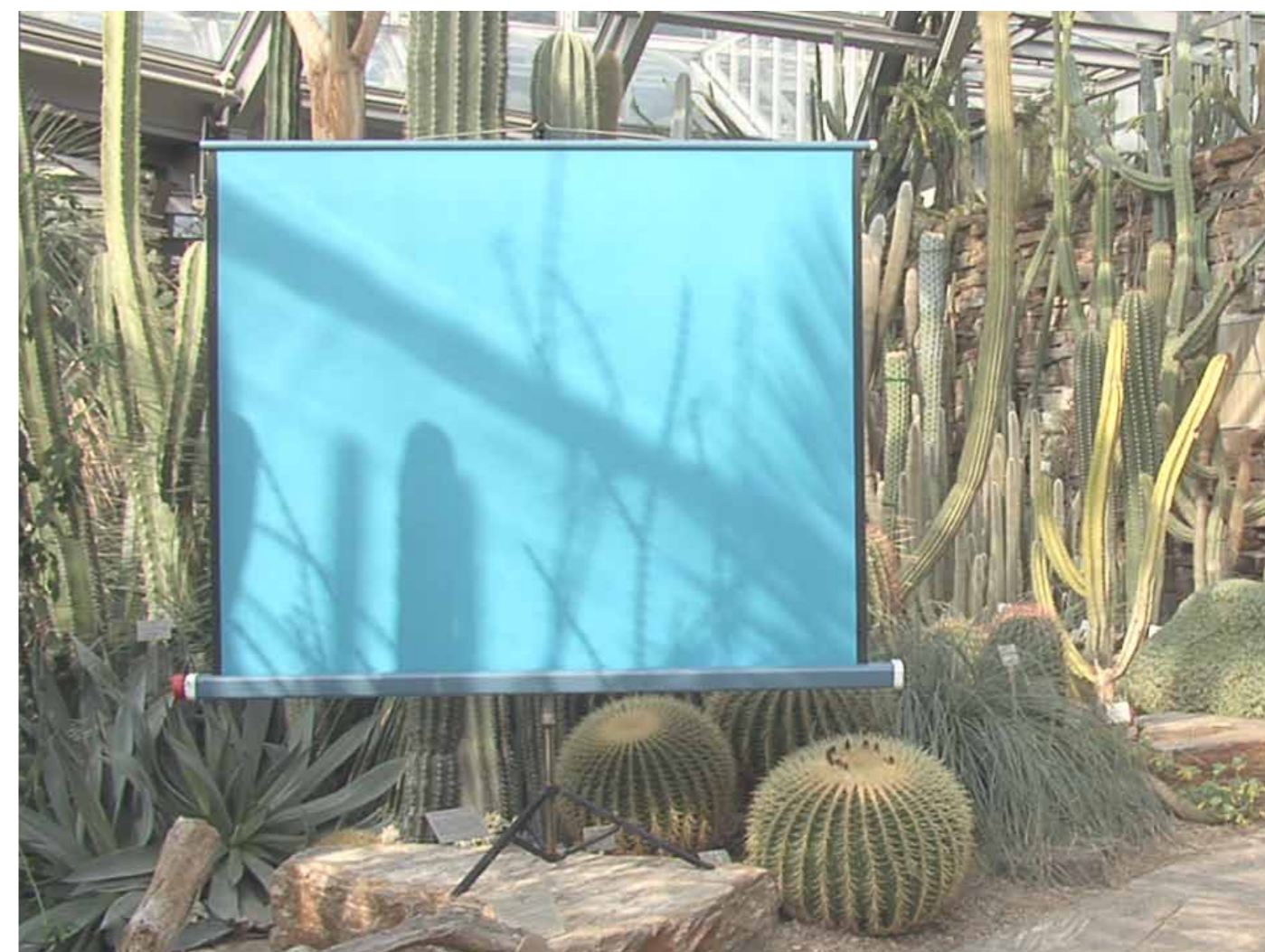
On top of that, I think these kinds of institutions always present a view of the world. To continue from the idea of “seeing what power sees,” one could also say that a museum or gallery allows people “to see the world the way power sees the world.” That is what I am playing with, very literally. I think as an artist showing in these kinds of places (museums, galleries, and so on), we have to understand how close we are to power, whatever it might be. Maybe not so much economically, at least it doesn't always feel like that, but very much symbolically. It doesn't mean that we are particularly powerful ourselves, as artists, but our area of work is making things visible on behalf of power.

The question is of course what and how something becomes visible. This brings me to abstraction, which you were the one to mention as a subject of my work. You're absolutely right. I am very interested in abstraction in relation to power. Some of the notions I mentioned earlier—capitalism, public, war, consumer, and so on—are really very abstract concepts. The more universal they appear, the more abstract they have to be. With the current global economy, and especially the financial sector, we find a very codified script of economic knowledge which prioritizes the abstract at the expense of the ambiguous, more personal or bodily forms of know-how, knowledge that somehow appears to defy encoding in this system. I find it important to understand—or at least make visible—this process of abstraction. It immediately marginalizes local embedded forms of tacit knowledge. However, I am not so much trying to showcase these local forms of knowledge. How would I know what is specific to life in Taipei? This is exactly the point, this is what I mean when I say I can't be “site specific” at a site that isn't tangled into my own life, isn't part of my own life-experience.

So, instead of just following the global ubiquitous counterpart of local knowledge and experience—namely, higher and higher degrees of abstraction—I prefer to try to point at how these processes of abstraction operate. This is where I think I can actually contribute with something; this is where I find it fascinating and meaningful to be a “conceptual artist”—not as someone who thinks up new concepts, but rather as someone who can make some of these very abstract concepts visible or possible to enter in ways that might also make us glimpse the way they operate. When I use abstraction myself in my work, it is always with a distinct interest in its modus operandi; the processes and logics through which something is abstracted and what kinds of meanings and knowledge these processes leave behind. Abstraction always goes hand in hand with power and privilege. Always. Art history as it is understood and the notion of “contemporary art” are both full of good examples of this...

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March 2012





## SOME THINGS ABOUT EVE

Alexandru Balasescu

Who is EVE? And why should we care? EVE is a metaphor. It also stands for Electric Vehicle Economy. This material explores the multiple potentialities opened by the electric vehicle and the forms of resistance to it as, arguably, any new product is a cultural redefinition. This essay claims that the change from a combustion engine to an electric engine will most probably bring changes both in human subjectivities and in their relations with categories and metaphors such as: environment, economy, gender and sexuality, and production/reproduction.

The looming oil crisis and issues stemming from climate change have pushed governments, corporations, and individuals to "respond" by developing—usually under the "green" or "sustainable" label—new policies, objects/products, and manners of strategic marketing. As a result, a proliferation of a new species or class of objects has appeared, generated by and sustaining the "green economy." Among these, the electric car is constantly present when talking about the mobility of the future. Some states or regions have designed policies and urban spaces to respond to the promise of a future of electric driving, while new business ideas and mergers are emerging from this new application of electric power. However, the socio-cultural embracing of electric mobility may imply a radical change of episteme—and this will not necessarily happen swiftly, without resistance.

"Sustainability" is the buzzword in business strategies—from needle making to town building—and it more often than not refers to clean(er) and ideally renewable energy. As utopian cities are projected and will be eventually built with the help of, ironically, petrodollars, the form, materiality, and functioning of the objects of mobility will gradually change. Already, some of the vehicles proposed to inhabit this not so distant future depart from what we usually think of as a "car" in almost all that this word entails—from the number of seats and design aspects to modes of usage and, obviously, engine design. A possible different type of material culture is on the rise, bringing with it significant cultural transformations such as new types of sexuality, subjectivity, and normativity. Most probably, this will bring about "transformations by design" of the urban forms that we inhabit, but we can also be sure that forms of thought will profoundly shift in economic, legal, and, ultimately, ethical areas as well.

EVE is thus the possible political economy of the electric vehicle generated on the background of these transformations. More than caring about EVE, one could approach the things about EVE that make her who she is. We all pass through a continuous process

of subjectivation in relation to *things*; it is thus appropriate to analyze this *thingness* of subjectivity through carefully considering the assemblage of objects that dynamically generate the subject. Philosophical and anthropological approaches on material culture that bring into relation the body, objects/material culture, movement, and subject formation argue for the intertwining of these categories. Following Michel Foucault, French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Warnier analyzed both the historical creation of humans and the creation of political subjectivity in relation to our bodies and with the objects that surround us, that we manipulate, and that in turn manipulate us. Warnier's work and his creation of the research center "Matter for thought/Matiere a penser" marked an important turning point in French theory of political sciences. He states that as we created ourselves as species in a continuous triangulation in which the movement of the body/subject intertwined with the objects, we also created a language that hides this from our view, separating body and "soul":

*"[...] the word 'bodily' introduces a distinction between the body and something else, that would be the subject. Or, a subject does not 'posses' a body. It is a body. Talking about the motion conduits [conduites motrices] of the body, we avoid the trap of the dualism hidden behind the vocabulary of body"* (Warnier, 1999, 10, my translation and italics).

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, whomever makes a difference between the body and the subject(ivity) has neither (and this is precisely Warnier's point above); we are, however, still able to conceive how things and objects are mediators in this process—prosthetics of the creation of the political and anthropological subject. We deal here with a triangulation of utmost importance—subject/body/object—a relationship that has defined and followed us along our historical becoming. The way in which humans integrate objects into their practices (through body motions) and the way in which we relate to them physically and at the symbolic level created particular types of subjectivity, delineated historically and culturally.

The two most significant developmental characteristics of our era are (1) the vast multiplication of objects through mechanical reproduction and (2) their entering the realm of commodities—in the sense that more often than not the producer of the object is not the same as its user, and not even in spatial or relational proximity. The objects are significant for their producers if they generate profit, while for their user primarily if they generate status. On the one hand, we have an explosion of material objects that demand other objects in order to serve them. This also brings along with it the introduction of



an objectifying gaze that absorbs other entities—such as bodies and, through continuous fragmentation, body parts—into the realm of objects. On the other hand, generalized commodification introduces money as the universal, omnipresent mediator between us and those objects. Money is thus the ubiquitous ghost in the process of subjectivation. Schematically speaking, money's absence reduces access to objects, while its presence would translate into an increased exposure of the body/subject to a variety of objects and their uses.

Foucault's well-known account of disciplining the body in prison and in the schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that of the production of the individual—the human being as we know it today—completely separated from, and subjected to, objects. Here is the story of Damiens, the regicide:

*On March 1, 1757, Damiens the regicide was condemned "to make the amende honorable before the main door of the Church of Paris," where he was to be "taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds"; then, "in the said cart, to the Place de Grève, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs, and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds"* (Foucault 1995, 3).

The body of the condemned is thus disintegrated with the help of torture objects, the exemplary dissolution taking place in the public space under the gaze of the subjects of monarchic sovereignty embodied in the power over death. As the above description corresponds to this old type of power, Foucault points out the emergence of the new type of power based on individualization and isolation. This is a knowledge-based type of power, productive rather than repressive and having at its center the very production of the individual through the production of its bounded body. This is accompanied by methods and objects, ranging from solitary confinement to individual surveillance, and pertains not only to prisons but also to schools and hospitals—zeroing in on the individual body as both a source of producing power and object for exercising power.



Foucault's detailed descriptions of instruments and procedures of torture that twist and stretch the body are not gratuitous. While indeed gruesome, these descriptions remain consistent with our becoming today—consistent with our tortured relations to the object-commodities surrounding us and subjectifying us to their will.

Let us think about the airplane passenger. The moment her body enters the airport, a series of procedures individualize her: the check-in of the luggage that acquires an identity and produces the knowledge about the passenger (how many kilos and what she is carrying); the individual scanning of the body and the hand luggage; the rechecking of the identity at the passport control; passing through the gates and finally entering the airplane in order to be strapped to the chair and fed with processed food and mediocre entertainment. One of the main producers of human identity in this instance is the luggage. The objects one carries provide not only information about the person, but also the means for constituting the subject through their minute aggregation into the larger system of object-producers of identity, such as x-ray scans of bodies and luggages, metal control gates, handheld metal detectors, ultraviolet passport readers, and sometimes fingertip and retina readers. In light of this argument, I would call these, and all other material objects, subjectivators.

Once we approach the subject from the perspective of the process of subjectivation, the case is to acknowledge two capital matters: first, the importance of movement/mobility, of bodily engagement into the process, and, second, the fact that the subject is by definition unknowable (within the grasp of political power but also always elusive). As particle physics teaches us, one cannot simultaneously know the position and the momentum of a particle. Describing the position of a particle implies a full understanding of the conditions of its existence. If, on the other hand, we are to know the speed and the direction of that particle, this will already change the moment we start describing its position. Applying this type of dynamic thinking, we could follow that while we are able to describe a subject, it is not possible to describe its possible trajectory. Or, we can describe the possible evolution of the subject but it is not possible to grasp the subject in its totality.

The current administrative power chooses the second path, that of describing its (post-political) subject as traces of its possible future, at the intersection of the potential of production and the assessment of risk, set on a financial trajectory of future debt payment. While describing the subject, in order to control it, it decreases the range of

possible futures by circumscribing them to a financial logic (debt) and within a clear range of possible choices of objects—the ready-made or ready-to-wear—out of which the perpetually becoming subject creates its future trajectories. If we agree that objects are our main subjectivators, the result is a certain type of ready-to-wear citizenship derived from the momentous aggregation of the objects we possess (purchased, intend to purchase, or shown interest in) into the system of administrative power (the airport example being just a holographic fragment of the objectual systemic totality).

A critical analysis of political economy of any kind would not be that of the subject, because in this case it would in fact always be beside the subject. Its focus should be on the constellation of objects, contexts and bodily engagements that could lead us to understand the processes of subjectivation through the description of their tools, methods, and possible future results. For example, if one would attempt to describe the financial system and its subject, one would arrive to meaningful conclusions by describing the objects that embodies this system (from credit cards and ATMs to banking algorithms, bank architecture, numismatics, and so on) how our bodies engage with these, in what instances, and how these contribute into the dynamic of subjectivation. In this manner, one can best hope to be able to describe the context and conditions of subjectivation that would reveal the multiple possibilities of subjects to come into existence, the potential multiple subject positions, and to suggest future possible trajectories in this process. We can only hope in this way to reveal the mechanisms of the political economy of anything.

All this considered, let us turn to the fetish object of mobility—the car, the object driving the economy and embedding ideology in everyday life, the supreme master of our civilization that disciplines the bodies of the less fortunate of us sometimes to an average of even five hours a day. I look at the car, engine functionality included, as a holistic metaphor of our economic paradigm, with its oil dependency but also with its bourgeois heteronormative underlying ideology. In the brilliant introduction to a book dedicated to the ethnography of the car, Daniel Miller describes life on Earth as observed by some alien civilization: they see a planet dominated by beings on four wheels named “cars,” attended to by an army of biped slaves who constructed the world to serve the needs of these despotic rulers. The bipeds take the cars wherever the latter need to go, they built special roads for them, hospitals and feeding places, they ripped the planet of precious resources in order to secure the car's food, and lately, they are waging wars in order to gain access to these resources. The slaves use the by-products from caring for cars to

create the material world they need to survive (mostly made of the leftovers from the car food industry).

Working within this metaphor, our economy of limitless growth and consumption is perfectly materialized and propelled by the car. Cars are predominantly family spaces; they are extensions of domestic spaces moving at 50 miles an hour. Yet, the bodies of the passengers remain still in the car interior, spending sometimes many hours in a day engaging in activities such as eating, reading, laughing, or quarreling in this all too familiar and yet claustrophobic bubble. Due to the high speed and the necessity of close attention on driving, any disturbance in the interior may provoke tragedy. People in a car must find equilibrium or die. Therefore, the car is the ideal disciplinary object for a couple. No need to be a heterosexual, it is enough to be within the hetero-norm, such as with the lesbian couple in *The Kids Are All Right* (2010, director Lisa Cholodenko). The movie deals with the couple life of Jules and Nic, each having a biological child from the same sperm donor (unknown to the kids). When the daughter reaches the age of eighteen, she inquires and finds the donor, Paul, bringing him into the life of her mothers. Paul turns out to be extremely cool, Jules falls for him, and so do the children. Paul's apparition shakes the life of the couple, as including and sharing that life with a third person proves to be emotionally untenable, despite the biology linking all three of the characters. The couple rejects the third undesired element and in the final scene of the movie comes back to the "harmoniously productive and accumulating" logic in a reunification forged while driving in a car. Reproduction itself is circumscribed to the logic of production and the control over its means. Through his biological contribution, Paul is a meaningful element within the reproductive triangle. However, his presence is a reminder of the possible requirement of sharing the couple's resources: time (spent with children), food (dinners), and feelings and emotions. The elimination of the biological father from the network of relations secures the perpetuation of the couple, be it lesbian, and the guarding of the resources—both symbolic and material—within the couple. While reproduction is exuberant and wants to expand horizontally, the logic of the couple keeps this tendency in control and prevents its redistribution in the extended network which would include Paul and possibly through extension, others. In the final scene, Jules and Nic rebound while driving. The couple/the car stands for accumulation and limitless growth with less distribution outside its boundaries.

National economies are driven symbolically and sometimes literally by the car industry. Cars have become national symbols, with both the quality and characteristics of brands

being, more often than not, fictitious extensions of the identity of the nation that produces them: sleek Italian cars, seductive French ones, perfect German symbols of engineering. Not to mention the wasteful (in both space and combustion) Americans.

However, the car's thermal engine seems to be key in the current economic paradigm. First, to secure combustion, there is a reliance on fossil oil, a resource that is limited and increasingly scarce. The economy, as we think we know it, is based on scarcity as an ontological element that bestows value to any commodity on the market—thus generating the possibility of pricing the commodity and generating profit. Scarce energy, scarce resources, and the illusion of lack drive the engine of economy. Scarcity is the divine source of grace for the metaphysics of current economic thought.

Furthermore, the design of the combustion engine responds to the gendered metaphor of power, action, accumulation, and competition. But let's start with first things first.

#### **Enters EV**

Recently, various signals of the future have started pointing to some possible difficulties in continuing business as usual with the ubiquitous thermal engine. Pollution, war, and overexploitation of limited resources are looming over the planet. Or so it seems. These combined have made some to look at the electric vehicle (EV) as a solution.

China, for one, seems to be highly interested. This is possibly only because within the current paradigm of growth and demand, the country needs at least another ten years of 8-10% growth to respond to the desire for commodities of the new and numerous gentry and keep the social peace. Europe is looking at it for different reasons, but mostly because a "clean" engine responds to the new ideology of safe-guarding. The United States, as well, is looking at the electric vehicle after killing its first round in 2000 (the GMC Volt), maybe just because endless war may not be a viable option.

EV promises to fulfill these expectations while at the same time keeping it business as usual—allowing economies to operate in the same paradigm of limitless growth. Its quiet engine—promising a green silent future with no carbon emissions—appears to satisfy some of those who worry about both noise and atmosphere pollution. Silence, in the current urban life, is a commodity that sells itself dearly and adds value to real estate. Indeed, just about everything has been commodified.





Clean energy is a symbolic metaphor of cleanliness and sterility that resonates with the current ideology of safety and security—successive fragmentation, separation, and objectification requires clear boundaries between objects. Sterility is, in fact, the promise of bounded, self-contained objects that ideally do not touch each other even if in contact. In AIDS stricken regions of Africa, a new verb appeared, “to condomize”—obviously referring to the usage of condoms during sexual intercourse. Condomization is, in this case, a form of risk-reducing behavior; necessary, although, unfortunately, not always sufficient. Borrowing and extrapolating upon this term, one may say that the commodification of everything is only complete if it passes through the process of condomization—a process of rendering surfaces untouchable, like the touchpad screen covered with an invisible stratum of substance that in fact prevents it from really being touched. In some places (countries or social strata), people keep the protective plastic foil on new objects for as long as possible, from screens and remote controls to car seats and sofas. We buy the objects already condomized—a risk-controlling reflex within the desire of controlling the future.

Electric energy itself is a promise of an exit from oil dependency; its means of production and storage, however, are less a subject of critical public discourse, simply because this would introduce doubts on the possibility of real alternatives to what we already know. From the start, the promises of sustainability, green economy, and an exit from oil dependency are only locally relevant, as they are constructed based on intentional fallacies. Electricity has to be itself generated, and this process is not always perfectly clean or entirely sustainable. Burning carbon remains the most common way to generate electricity; hydro power is more often than not associated with ecological disaster and great human costs caused by displacement of populations, especially because super dams seem to be more appealing in this endeavor. Nuclear power is subject to politically tense disputes and to the haphazards of natural disasters (the most recent and telling example being Fukushima in 2010).

Storage of electricity also creates a series of questions. Batteries are made out of rare metals obtained through methods that literally poison the earth at the source. All these arguments, while subtly or bluntly contradicting the (marketing) value of the EV as a possible savior of our planet, are in fact guarantors of the continuation of business as usual. The electric vehicle economy keeps scarcity in place, generates new fields of dispute and possible speculative investment, but does so on the melodic lullaby of the promise of a sterile, pollution-free, secure sustainable future. Ultimately, EV seems even better for

business, save the petrol business...

But even under these circumstances, this promise is still not completely accepted and entirely embraceable. EV is far from being embraced by everybody, but this is more likely for the simple reason that it really carries within it—in the very design of the engine, I would argue—the message of a paradigm shift in the way we think about economy.

### Here comes EVE

“Ladies and gentlemen, the electric car is totally gay. By gay I do not mean homosexual gay.” (*Dilemma*, 2010). These are the words with which the main character in the movie *Dilemma* introduces to the board of General Motors the necessity to masculinize the electric car the company will soon produce. *Dilemma* is a movie about two friends who set out to give to the electric car the characteristics of a thermal engine car, basically to strip it of its “gayness.” In their vision, the electric car is not masculine enough—by design and by its lack of engine sound and vibration. They propose to change that by attaching an electronic device that imitates the sound and vibration of the thermal engine. They do this because while the electric car mimics the promise of a silent green future, providing a masculine aesthetic would perpetuate the status quo of the current, male phantasy driven economy. This is not the same feeling we get from *The Other Guys* (2010), where the two marginal policemen (played by Mark Wahlberg and Will Ferrell) manage to dismantle a financial scheme that would have attracted (and jeopardized) the police retirement plan into a speculative capital venture designed to fail. The same EV gayness makes Mark Wahlberg’s character scream while in a Prius: “I feel like I am driving in a vagina!” The car, belonging to Will Ferrell’s character, becomes itself a character in the movie: a source of jokes, the favorite place for homeless’ orgies, and the constant source of embarrassment for Mark Wahlberg. However, as the “other guys” expose at the end the fraud of the financial scheme and save the day (and the police retirement plan), the final credits of the movie show an animated red Prius breaking graphic representations of the mirage of continuous financial growth—giant graphics that go straight up promising vast amounts of dollars in the future.

Let us forget the sound and vibration of the competing engines and look closely at their very design and manner of generating movement. The thermal engine generates the necessary circular movement of the wheels through a translation of the linear, up and down movement of the piston into the burning chamber. The piston enters the chamber

at one end of it, and at the other end there are two smaller chambers each with their function—one being the ignition chamber and the other the evacuation. This *modus operandi* stays in radical contrast with the electric engine. First of all, there is no linear, translation movement of a piston. The cyclical movement is generated directly by the electro-magnetic fields inside the engine’s box. The movement needed to rotate the wheels is already there, no need for a piston to go up and down, no need for explosions, detentions, burning, contractions. Linearity disappears, the accumulation of up and down movements makes no sense anymore and proves useless.

If one looks closely at graphic representations, one may see that while the electric engine looks like a black box, out of which springs circular movement almost without exterior intervention, the thermal engine needs the exteriority of the piston and its accumulative linear movements. It also strikingly resembles the anatomical (male phantasy based) representations of female reproductive organs. In order to (re)produce the needed circular movement to be (re)productive or at least to acquire pleasure, the thermal engine needs the linear up and down movements of the piston, as, in male phantasies, there is a direct casual relationship between what a man is capable of and what generates sexual pleasure for women. Žižek offers a good explanation for the male neurosis provoked by the absence of a correlation between one’s (sexual) actions and feminine orgasm. It is not what a man (or his penis) does that necessarily brings pleasure. Following Lacan, Žižek dissociates feminine and masculine not as a series of simple oppositions, but as a difference of relationship with them and with the telos (the scope, the finality):

*“[...] rather, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ involve a different modality of the very antagonistic relationship between these opposites. ‘Man’ is not a cause of the woman-effect but a specific modality of the relationship between cause and effect (the linear succession of causes and effects with an excepted unique elements, the Last Cause), in contrast to ‘woman’, who implies a different modality (a kind of convoluted ‘interaction’ where the cause functions as an effect of its own effects). Within the domain of the economy of sexual pleasures proper, masculine economy tends to be ‘teleological’, centered on phallic orgasm qua pleasure par excellence, while feminine economy involves a dispersed network of particular pleasures that are not organized around some teleological central principle. As a result, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are not two positive substantial entities, but two different modalities of one and the same entity: in order to ‘feminize’ a masculine discourse it is enough to change—sometimes almost imperceptibly—its specific ‘tonality’” (Žižek, 2006, 160).*





The magnetic field of the electric engine, which replaces the piston of the thermal engine, is a perfect illustration of this economy of pleasure and its dispersed sources replacing the linearity of a casual chain. Thus, the electric engine is the objectual expression of the autonomy of female pleasure and (re)productive capacity—a constant reminder that life is possible in different tonalities than that of accumulation of linear movements. It is not by chance that the EV is instinctively rejected and associated with a lesser masculinity, because in fact it has the potential to activate the male neurosis of feelings of uselessness. I would argue that the very possibility of this neurosis is obviously linked with the patriarchal dominance in our societies which, in turn, also generates phantasies of limitless accumulation, competition, and consumption. A fully non-cosmetic acceptance of the EV may, in long term, shatter some of the principles of our growth-based economy. The electric vehicle economy (EVE) is, in fact, a metaphor that would stay in stark contrast with current underlying assumptions of the current economic paradigm—the thermal engine economy (TEE)—in a non-cosmeticized form. By a non-cosmetic EVE, I mean an economy not based on and represented by an electric engine made to look/sound like a thermal one and using electricity generated in the traditional forms. A non-cosmetic EVE would be generated in a context of a total (utopic) production of electrical power from fully regenerable and sustainable sources. If we are to accept the characteristics of masculine/feminine, EVE would be an economy based on principles that oppose, one-to-one, those underlying the TEE.

<b>TEE</b>	<b>EVE</b>
Show off/ visible	Discrete/ invisible
Linearity	Cyclicity
Production	Reproduction
Unlimited growth	Redistribution
Accumulation	Celebratory expenditure
Performance	Pleasure
Male teleological sexuality	Female dispersed sexuality

Embracing the electric car may mean the end of the car (and of the economy) as we know it. Accepting that the energy needed to propel the object of mobility should be entirely sustainable—generated by renewable means—will induce a radical change in the context/ conditions of subjectivation. This will also produce a shift in the current economic paradigm based on scarcity and control of resources. Truly accepting the abundance of self-generated energy that surround us would also release the illusion of control over the

redistribution of resources. Instead of a paradigm based on control of “scarce natural resources” we would move toward one that would emphasize a “pact with nature” through a broad acceptance of the abundant resources it has to offer. I am indeed talking about a change of tonality in the interaction with our environment and with ourselves. Accepting the electric engine is deeply linked to the regression of patriarchal dominance. Embracing EVE would mean recognition of feminine orgasm in feminine terms—it would mean bringing pleasure back into sex and renouncing performance. However, one can foresee that a non-cosmetic EV would redefine masculinities, stripping them of neurosis. In this case, there will certainly be a need of cultural redefinition: alternative energy needs alternative sexualities. In the triangulation subject/body/object, the object of a truly electric vehicle will definitely be an alternative type of subjectivation...

### **Will EVE save the planet?**

The short answer is “maybe.” A precondition of EVE is the acceptance of alternative sources of energy as models based on abundance and cyclicity—not scarcity. This includes acknowledging that we created the illusion of scarcity in a world of abundance by simply forgetting to engage in what Bataille calls “unproductive expenditures.” We did this believing in the false promises of a profitable future and turning this promise into a mechanism of administrative control.

*“The excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system [...]; if the system can no longer grow or the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without a profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically”* (Bataille, 1988, 7).

This excess of energy represents the accursed share that, if not spent, may accumulate and ultimately push to the complete failure of the system. Too busy to limitlessly accumulate, we forgot to absorb the accursed share, thus excluding gratuitous expenditure from our very vocabulary. Too many commentators on Bataille concentrated on the term “unproductive” and, through a short-circuit of thought, attributed it to catastrophic waste. This only reveals the dominance of the TEE paradigm that emphasizes production and productiveness, anything short of this being reduced to catastrophe. Certainly, “unproductive” may mean something other than catastrophe, but it seems that it does not in the semantic field of our language today, infused by the necessity of production. What about spending our surplus gloriously and acknowledging the abundance? Not absorbing

surplus into a linear growth, but redistributing it in networks with the only productive scope being that of maintaining and cyclically renewing the links of the network. This is somehow similar with the excess of meaning in any communication. Much of what we say to each other does not translate into direct “useful” meaning, it falls more into the realm of “chit-chat,” even if we do not recognize it as such. This excess of meaning is, in fact, “exuberantly spent” keeping the conversation going and maintaining the community in existence. Unproductive—or, as I prefer, celebratory—expenditure means, as the French thinker put it, simply leaving room for life to expand without expecting it to turn into a biomass with productive capacity, or, metaphorically speaking, without “charging its credit card”. Practically, it would mean getting rid of the surplus in broad daylight and through redistribution—not shamefully and hidden as we do now by throwing it into the fields during nighttime, not letting even the needy enjoy it. Alas, EVE may even heal men’s neurosis...

Thus, one could hope from EVE for a model based on values other than that of unlimited growth. In other words, the replacement of competition with values such as pleasure, charity, justice among others...

Alexandru Balasescu  
April 2012

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# Animal Spirits

## *A Bestiary of the Commons*

Matteo Pasquinelli

NAi Publishers  
Institute of Network Cultures

ANIMAL SPIRITS

ANIMAL SPIRITS

NEUROLOGY AND PROFANATION OF THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS

NEUROLOGY AND PROFANATION OF THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS

# Neurology and Profanation of the

Similarly to the notion of network, the modern destiny of the im-  
age is to be made in the form of visual media and the col-  
lective unconscious. More recently, by linking Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious  
to the machine practices of animation, Agamben has demonstrated  
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that they have captured. The profanation of the u  
political task of the coming generation.<sup>71</sup>

In his recent book *Profanations*, Agamben once again f  
and Internet pornography strategies that will be pat  
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Capitalism, like religion, is meant to bring each aspect of  
quality, language) into a separated sphere. The political ge  
to this separation is what Agamben calls *profanation*: not  
gesture that abolishes and erases the separations, but the



## Neurology and Profanation of the Optical Unconscious

Fiction is a branch of neurology: the scenarios of nerve and blood vessel are the written mythologies of memory and desire.

James G. Ballard, *Ambit* magazine<sup>1</sup>

### *The Bicephalous Image: Questioning the Autonomy of the Imaginary*

If there is no longer any outside, as the saying goes, the inside of the collective imaginary is a bicephalous monster – the symptom of a silent and invisible inner *separation* of desire and phantasy, life and ‘spectacle’ that has haunted Western culture for centuries, including its heretic *avant-gardes*. After questioning the political autonomy of digital networks and of the new ‘creative cities’ in previous chapters, the focus now shifts towards scrutinizing the sphere of the collective imaginary, and aesthetic production more generally, in terms of its own syndromes of separation. As mentioned previously, the political isolation of art is a recurring issue of our time, despite the *creativity-for-all* manifestos of the historical *avant-gardes* and the actual massification of digital media, it returns to us, for instance, through caricature-like attempts at *artivism* (art imitating the political). In a similar way, the new socialite philosophers are used to take the collective imaginary of Western society as a kind of gigantic cinema screen to be isolated and analysed only in its *ideological contradictions*. Like art, collective imaginary is supposed to enjoy the pacific one-dimensional life of any petty bourgeois representation. Meanwhile, on the dark side of the global imagery, a new generation of very material *animal spirits* is rising, being incarnated in forms of Internet pornography, war imagery and video terrorism. Yet there is no *Pervert’s Guide* available for such a ‘cinema’.<sup>2</sup> The politics of the image is still simply discussed through intimist discourses good for art biennales or the reassuring nihilist interpretations of postmodernism (from the early Baudrillard of simulacra to the late Žižek of language games). The abyss of the immaterial deserves further exploration. Instead of cutting off the head of *logos*, like Bataille’s *acephal*, the *bicephalous* complexity of desire must be fully recognized as we immerse ourselves in the waters of the collective imaginary.

Similarly to the notion of network, the modern destiny of the image has been polarized and neutralized across two main concepts: *code* and *flow* – in a very general way, also the recent aesthetics of new media art can be summarized in the dialectics around these two poles (reminiscent of the 1970s’ debate mentioned earlier: *production* versus *representation*). The notion of image as *code* inherits the modern gnosis of collective intelligence and hacker culture, passing through the post-modern cult of simulacra. Indeed, today’s entropy of the image is the result of the infinite reproducibility of digital media and the hegemony of the database form (exemplified, for instance, by large platforms for image-sharing such as YouTube and Flickr). Conversely, flow appears as the bastard heir of post-Structuralism, in particular Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of desire. Visual images are, as a consequence, treated as an endless ‘flow’ of matter across the machinic biosphere. Tracking this impasse back through various philosophical debates, the work of Baudrillard in the early 1970s represents a key genealogical turning point. For instance, with the conceptual series *production-commodity-fetishism-value-sign-code-image-simulacra*, Baudrillard only emphasized the end of the sequence, irreversibly severing any organic relation of the image with the body and the productive substratum. On the one hand, the modern conception of the image has not survived this postmodern nihilism, especially combined with the entropic effects of digital media; nor, on the other hand, the ideology of network cooperation and the *productivist* critique of logocentrism. Behind this *digital theatre*, libidinal impulses have nevertheless been actively at work. After years of theoretical neglect and disengagement, the body and nerves that constitute ‘simulacra’ are waiting to be rewarded.

To describe the image as bicephalous, however, is not to invoke another abstract binary, but to recognize the complex everyday experience of desire in the mediasphere (both heads of the *bicephalous* being intricately held together). At stake is the libidinal *dispositif* internal to images, the same ambivalent *dispositif* that constitutes the fetishism of the commodity, of technology and digital code. The sphere of the collective imaginary, like the sphere of cultural production, must be considered an extension of our animal instincts, an excess or surplus of energy. What might sound like an excerpt from a novel by Ballard is indeed consistent with the perspective of Marxist philosophers such



as Virno. However, the image, in the form of visual media and the collective imaginary, has a different (political) status compared to the accumulation of knowledge through digital networks. To put it bluntly, Wikipedia is to collective intelligence as YouTube is to the collective imaginary. Through social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, moreover, media corporations have managed to harness a *horizontally* produced imaginary after cultivating the global *vertical* mediascape for years. What is the relation between the collective imaginary and the collaborative creation of knowledge over the Net? If the latter has now become the standard political model for a diverse range of thinkers from various disciplinary traditions (to the extent of the so-called ‘Californization of Continental thought’), the former is certainly not taken as a form of ‘collective intelligence’, since it easily expresses the wild nature of the digital multitude. If the word *theory* etymologically shares the same root of *theatre* in ancient Greek, symbolically linking the brain and the eye, today’s spectacle (freed from *logos*) is the direct expression of animal instincts. The collective imaginary gathered in the Internet underground more accurately resembles an extension of an animal body than a rational mind.

The bicephalous image only reveals itself clearly through the collective dimension of the imaginary – twofold, since it speaks both to the individual and the collective (no *image* without an *imaginary*), to both manifest and latent content, as Ballard observes. It was the introduction of new mimetic machines like the camera, according to Benjamin, that made possible this surfacing of the ‘optical unconscious’ at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. . . . The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is a familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, by linking Benjamin’s concept of the optical unconscious to the mimetic practices of animism, Michael Taussig has demonstrated how it is possible to establish a *carnal* theory of the imaginary. In his book *Mimesis and Alterity* the understanding of the mediascape remains decidedly non-linguistic and non-postmodern. For Taussig, the optical unconscious provides evidence of the return of the ‘primitive’ within modernity, that is, a return of the animist image.<sup>4</sup> He describes the animistic power of the modern imaginary in its evolution from photography and cinema to television, and it is advertising, in particular, that provides ‘the everyday schooling for the mimetic faculty, even more so than film’.<sup>5</sup> The exploration initiated by Benjamin, therefore, must be continued, especially in terms of the cameraman as surgeon, entering the body of the optical unconscious.<sup>6</sup> According to Benjamin, the restoration of political agency in the present can only occur from the space of the collective imaginary, from its manifest and latent economies, from the innervation of the collective body with the new technologies of image.

Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tensions becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>7</sup>

#### ‘Fiction is a Branch of Neurology’

The novels of Ballard can describe the nature of technology and the contemporary mediascape better than any philosopher, media theorist or cultural studies academic. During the mass-media revolution, while spectres of the collective imaginary were flourishing on everybody’s television screens in a genuine ‘atrocious exhibition’, both academic and radical theorists were imploding in the *semiotics of the image*: postmodernism indeed reduced the image to a *linguistic sign*. Ballard and other science-fiction writers, meanwhile, were left alone to map the new becoming of the media unconscious. In retrospect, it is increasingly apparent how the postmodern agenda and the *church of simulacra* functioned as an immunization strategy of an armchair intelligentsia against the monsters emerging from the collective Id.

Ironically, the notion of ‘collective unconscious’ can itself be interpreted as a high-culture sanitization attempt of what was visibly and consciously intensifying at the core of mass-media society: *libido*. As much as Deleuze and Guattari recognized that delirium is always social, political and historical (something not simply isolated to the morbid intimacy of a psychoanalyst’s couch), Ballard understood that ‘after Freud’s exploration within the psyche it is now the outer world of reality which must be quantified and eroticised’.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, he began his cartography of the *machinic unconscious* of the West outside the mediated discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis. His context was the American cultural imaginary of the 1950s and ’60s that colonized the European psyche by broadcasting morbid televisual images of John Kennedy’s assassination, Marilyn Monroe’s second lives, the Vietnam War and so on. At the time of May ’68, Ballard’s own personal ‘counter-culture’ was on the other side of the barricades, on the side of power and mass media, where he discovered far stronger and more lysergic forces than in any leftist movement. From this science-fiction perspective on the mainstream, Ballard effectively anticipated the Guattarian *schizoanalysis* of the collective *machinic unconscious*.

For an accurate introduction of the Ballardian universe, however, it may be useful to make a comparison with a sparring partner from the postmodern school. Baudrillard, once more, is worth considering for his review of *Crash*, where Ballard’s uncanny worlds are sanitized through the theoretical frame of Simulation.<sup>9</sup> His review twisted the novel’s carnal tangle into a ‘semiurgy of the body’ (*semiurgy* being the trendy neologism introduced by postmodernism for ‘the art of creating new signs’). Amusingly, Ballard would dismiss this postmodern critique of his writing as ‘the apotheosis of the hamburger’.<sup>10</sup> In a society increasingly exposed to mass media, Baudrillard is an obvious symptom of *iconophilia* turned to *iconophobia*.

From the classical (and even the cybernetic) viewpoint, technology is an extension of the body. . . . From Marx to McLuhan, one sees the same instrumentalist vision of machines and of language: relays, extensions, media-mediators of a Nature destined ideally to become the organic body. In this ‘rational’ view, the body itself is only a medium. Inversely, in its baroque and apocalyptic treatment in *Crash*, technology is the deadly deconstruction of the body – no longer a functional

medium, but an extension of death: . . . all the metallurgy of accidents is inscribed in a semiurgy of the body – not in anatomy or physiology, but in a semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, and wounds which are like new sexual organs opened in the body.<sup>11</sup>

Baudrillard interprets Ballard’s *death of affect* as the postmodern haze through which everything is grey and desire is lacking. On the contrary, the *death of affect* actually marks an intensified longing or love for the inorganic; otherwise Ballard’s ‘erotization’ of the ‘outer world’ would not be intelligible. In particular, the sophisticated relation between violence, libido and machine signals a notion of desire that is not unfamiliar within the intellectual account of masochism and the BDSM subcultures of the last decades.

In *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality – a kind of hyper-reality has abolished both. Even critical regression is no longer possible. This mutating and commuting world of simulation and death, this violently sexualized world totally lacking in desire, full of violent and violated bodies but curiously neutered, this chromatic and intensely metallic world empty of the sensorial, a world of hyper-technology without finality.<sup>12</sup>

Baudrillard’s *hyper(flat)-reality* clearly disappointed Ballard. While for Ballard, ‘fiction is a branch of neurology’, Baudrillard annexed his novel to the realm of simulacra, unequivocally stating that ‘*Crash* is the first great novel of the universe of simulation, the world that we will be dealing with from now on’. In a completely opposite reading, William Burroughs wrote in the introduction to *The Atrocity Exhibition*: ‘The line between inner and outer landscapes is breaking down. Earthquakes can result from seismic upheavals within the human mind.’ By illuminating the ‘death of affect’, Burroughs effectively underlines how ‘sexual arousal results from the repetition and impact of image’. Ballard’s novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* is indeed a sincere anti-postmodern manifesto.

#### ‘Neuronic Icons on the Spinal Highway’

Ballard’s iconology is not concerned with a flat image framed according to academic coordinates, but it is a journey into the subterra-



nean world beyond that surface. Rather than being purely a linguistic sign, Ballard's image is part of the collapse between 'inner and outer landscapes'. A recurring codeword in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is 'spinal': images have nerves, they become part of the nervous system. Like Leroi-Gourhan's anthropology, the medium of technology is an extension of the human skeleton, not a self-indulgent eye.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetics of the contemporary image cannot be found through its metaphysical fabric, in the claustrophobic white cube of the art world or the minimal semiotics of the digital screen, but precisely in the externalization of the nervous system.

[In] *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the nervous systems of the characters have been externalized, as part of the reversal of the interior and exterior worlds. Highways, office blocks, faces and street signs are perceived as if they were elements in a malfunctioning central nervous system.<sup>14</sup>

Images are 'neuronic icons on the spinal highway', signs of a biomorphic unconscious lurking beneath the urban landscape. The diagram of these icons is a 'neural interval' in the physiology of the body. In other words, the *neural space* we enter with Ballard is not the reassuring social democracy of psychoanalysis, but the 'spinal battlefield' of contemporary warfare, the space of the Third World War and of Foucauldian 'biopolitical conflicts'. Ballard has in effect inaugurated a *neurospace* – a carnal and physical understanding of the mediascape that only many decades later will surface from the underworld of cyberspace. Ballard's neurospace, however, should not be considered an autonomous media sphere, but a continuum between inner and outer landscapes, between the psychological and libidinal life of any physical form and object. 'The blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony.'<sup>15</sup>

To consider *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a manual for the contemporary collective imaginary, another lesson is worth remembering: the *image is always social and collective*, and the figures of the collective imaginary are always 'giants'. The image by nature is socially expansive, 'commercial cosmologies' covering the unconscious of the nation. Even as early

as the 1920s, Benjamin took note of the 'huge images across the walls of the houses, where toothpaste and cosmetics lie handy for giants'.<sup>16</sup> The conceptual origin of the 'mediascape' can be traced back to this particular skyline of huge advertisements, a commercial landscape of billboards associated with the American horizon of the 1950s. In two famous cryptic fragments, Ballard spreads a giant pornographic picture of Elizabeth Taylor across hundreds of such billboards.

A group of workmen on a scaffolding truck were pasting up the last of the displays, a hundred-foot-long panel that appeared to represent a section of a sand-dune. Looking at it more closely, Dr Nathan realized that in fact it was an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest. Glancing at the billboards, Dr Nathan recognized other magnified fragments: a segment of lower lip, a right nostril, a portion of female perineum. Only an anatomist would have identified these fragments, each represented as a formal geometric pattern. At least five hundred of the signs would be needed to contain the whole of this gargantuan woman, terraced here into a quantified sand-sea.<sup>17</sup>

Dr Nathan limped along the drainage culvert, peering at the huge figure of a dark-haired woman painted on the sloping walls of the blockhouse. The magnification was enormous. The wall on his right, the size of a tennis court, contained little more than the right eye and cheekbone. He recognized the woman from the billboards he had seen near the hospital – the screen actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Yet these designs were more than enormous replicas. They were equations that embodied the relationship between the identity of the film actress and the audiences who were distant reflections of her. The planes of their lives interlocked at oblique angles, fragments of personal myths fusing with the commercial cosmologies. The presiding deity of their lives the film actress provided a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

In these two passages, Ballard deconstructs a sample of the collective imaginary (the archetypical 1950s' movie star), stripping the image back to its fundamental components. First, its infrastructural medium:

the skeleton of scaffoldings and billboards that turns a pop star into architecture. Second, its picture as replica: a sensuous module of a benevolent propaganda machine. Third, its pornographic focus: intimate details of the body that fall under the public eye and become part of public constructions. Fourth, the sexual nature of such an apparently neutral magnification: perineum and ileum are the scientific names for the anatomic zones where the male gaze is usually drawn. Fifth, its sexualized body is exploded into different fragments and patterns. Sixth, those replicated fragments function together as a collective image over the unconscious domain, as 'a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness', 'equations that embodied the relationship between the identity of the film actress and the audiences who were distant reflections of her'. No other description could provide a better diagram of the basic elements of the mediascape.

Ballard is not the first writer to investigate the intoxicating effect of mass-media society, but he is exceptional for offering a detailed mapping of its unconscious parallel dimension. Ballard attempts to reveal the existence of a 'second narrative' behind the official version of events, and how the collective consciousness produces 'emergency scenarios', as in dreams, to face the violent stimuli emanating from the mediascape. For Ballard, the collective imaginary is a bicephalous entity that simultaneously maintains contradictory meanings and dimensions.

The media landscape of the present day is a map in search of a territory. A huge volume of sensational and often toxic imagery inundates our minds, much of it fictional in content. How do we make sense of this ceaseless flow of advertising and publicity, news and entertainment, where presidential campaigns and moon voyages are presented in terms indistinguishable from the launch of a new candy bar or deodorant? What actually happens on the level of our unconscious minds when, within minutes on the same TV screen, a prime minister is assassinated, an actress makes love, an injured child is carried from a car crash? Faced with these charged events, prepackaged emotions already in place, we can only stitch together a set of emergency scenarios, just as our sleeping minds extemporize a narrative from the unrelated memories that veer through the cortical night. In the waking dream that now constitutes everyday reality, im-

ages of a blood-spattered widow, the chromium trim of a limousine windshield, the stylized glamour of a motorcade, fuse together to provide a secondary narrative with very different meanings.<sup>19</sup>

Against the contemporary dismissal of the notion of unconscious (but actually of its metaphysical and linguistic interpretations), Ballard identifies a clear energetic undercurrent behind the mediascape and the surrounding biosphere of machines. To confront this new environment, he appropriates the notion of latent and manifest content from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and applies it to external reality. According to Ballard, beneath the 'benign or passive posture' of machinic civilization and consumerist society resides a latent energy, 'ambiguous even to the skilled investigator'.

From this and similar work it is clear that Freud's classic distinction between the manifest and latent content of the inner world of the psyche now has to be applied to the outer world of reality. A dominant element in this reality is technology and its instrument, the machine. In most roles the machine assumes a benign or passive posture – telephone exchanges, engineering hardware, etc. The twentieth century has also given birth to a vast range of machines – computers, pilotless planes, thermonuclear weapons – where the latent identity of the machine is ambiguous even to the skilled investigator. An understanding of this identity can be found in a study of the automobile, which dominates the vectors of speed, aggression, violence and desire. In particular the automobile crash contains a crucial image of the machine as conceptualized psychopathology.<sup>20</sup>

What is the nature of this dark side of the machinic landscape? Irrational violence, animal instincts, sexual impulses and natural aggressiveness emerge as constitutive of the 'biomorphic horror' pulsating through the collective technological imaginary. Rather than Baudrillard's imagined *society of simulacra*, the 'death of affect' is actually a consequence of the molecular dissemination of a conceptual violence that makes any object, even the most aseptic one, a vector of conflict. In this sense, the 'abstraction' of violence causes psychopathologies to become everyday playthings. The violence of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is not



comparable to, for instance, the aesthetization of sadism in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, since the former emerges through the force of inorganic structures.<sup>21</sup> Just like a sophisticated philosophy of sadomasochism, Ballard considers the abstract psychopathologies of the mediascape 'as a game', as an intrinsic means of human communication. This intuition will be useful later when introducing the notion of *masochism of image*.

Travers's problem is how to come to terms with the violence that has pursued his life - not merely the violence of accident and bereavement, or the horrors of war, but the biomorphic horror of our own bodies. Travers has at last realized that the real significance of these acts of violence lies elsewhere, in what we might term 'the death of affect'. Consider our most real and tender pleasures - in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena, like a culture-bed of sterile pus, for all the veronicas of our own perversions, in voyeurism and self-disgust, in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathologies as a game, and in our ever greater powers of abstraction. . . . The only way we can make contact with each other is in terms of conceptualizations. Violence is the conceptualization of pain. By the same token psychopathology is the conceptual system of sex.<sup>22</sup>

Surprisingly, Ballard suggests his own counterstrategies for confronting the psychopathologies of the imaginary - a sort of political agenda born from the perspective of science fiction. Against both conservative puritanism and radical pessimism, against the politically correct ethos of the peace movements, Ballard professes a joyful and 'just psychopathology' as the 'final destination of the 20th century'. The only way to deal with the abyss, Ballard suggests, is to stare directly into it, immerse ourselves in the dark waters of the unconscious and 'swim'.

Has a festival of atrocity films ever been held? Every year at the Oscars ceremony, some might say. It seemed likely in the late 60s, but the new puritans of our day would greet such a suggestion with a shudder. A pity - given the unlimited opportunities which the media landscape now offers to the wayward imagination, I feel we should

immerse ourselves in the most destructive element, ourselves, and swim. I take it that the final destination of the 20th century, and the best we can hope for in the circumstances, is the attainment of a moral and just psychopathology.<sup>23</sup>

#### *'The Latent Sexual Character of the War'*

The violent content of the collective unconscious is self-evident when it comes to the imaginary of war, but Ballard concentrates on the latent sexual impulse behind this scenography. The aggressive instincts of species survival that drive us to war share the same ground as reproductive impulses. War and politics - as embodiments of the species instincts - are naturally enmeshed through a subterranean libido. By introducing sex to the war imaginary (decades before the Abu Ghraib scandal), Ballard also reveals our ambivalent attitude to war: 'Far from repelling us, it appeals to us.'

Any great human tragedy - Vietnam, let us say - can be considered experimentally as a larger model of a mental crisis mimetized in faulty stair angles or skin junctions, breakdowns in the perception of environment and consciousness. In terms of television and the news magazines the war in Vietnam has a latent significance very different from its manifest content. Far from repelling us, it appeals to us by virtue of its complex of polyperverse acts.<sup>24</sup>

The mediascape of war is 'a larger model of a mental crisis'; a sort of game the collective mind watches and plays; investing its libido in a 'neutral exploration of sensation'. Here, Ballard advances a conception of desire that works as an *affirmative force*, breaking through the easy binaries of Western hypocrisy (the *negative* forms of both 'war on terrorism' propaganda and 'no war' pacifism). A 'just psychopathology' has connections with the ambivalent schizophrenia of Deleuze and Guattari: it is no longer something for a minority of perverts, no longer something individual and private, but an experiment on a mass scale. Delirium is always political. The Vietnam War precisely represents a gigantic fetishistic alibi for the collective body. It is not remarkable or surprising that the majority of people are *unconsciously* obsessed by the dark imagery of the media spectacle. Instead of fighting or complain-

ing about such content in a puritanical way, like *Adbusters* magazine and other *media ecology* activists, Ballard rescues this psychopathologic obsession by welcoming the living energy that communicates with the underground of the Id.

We must bear in mind, however sadly, that psychopathology is no longer the exclusive preserve of the degenerate and perverse. The Congo, Vietnam, Biafra – these are games that anyone can play. Their violence, and all violence for that matter, reflects the neutral exploration of sensation that is taking place now, within sex as elsewhere, and the sense that the perversions are valuable precisely because they provide a readily accessible anthology of exploratory techniques.<sup>25</sup>

Ballard witnesses the *positive* effects of the Vietnam media coverage on the American psyche. The Freudian *perverse polymorphism* of infantile sexuality is portrayed as a model for the libido of the whole nation, and more generally, for the collective imaginary. In psychoanalysis, polymorphous perversity is the normative libidinal condition of childhood, which is unfocused and may derive sexual pleasure from any part of the body. Similarly, all the forms of life on the mediascape, war narrative and even architectural landscapes, can be sexualized. Polymorphous perversity is as much social as individual. For example, all the sexual content we find in the media is clearly a kind of *public sex*, even if this fact is anesthetized by our distanced perception. The Vietnam War became the vector to re-establish ‘a positive psychosexual relationship with the external world’. As recognized in the post-911 world, but also in ancient times, war has a distinctly cathartic role for the *libido of a nation*. From a particularly cynical perspective, war is the only way the USA can *love* the world.

The need for more polymorphic roles has been demonstrated by television and news media. Sexual intercourse can no longer be regarded as a personal and isolated activity, but is seen to be a vector in a public complex involving automobile styling, politics and mass communications. The Vietnam war has offered a focus for a wide range of polymorphic sexual impulses, and also a means by which

the United States has re-established a positive psychosexual relationship with the external world.<sup>26</sup> . . . only in terms of a psychosexual module such as provided by the Vietnam war that the United States can enter into a relationship with the world generally characterized by the term ‘love’.<sup>27</sup>

It may happen that the simulation of war news becomes a political necessity, as news itself has a physical and material effect on the *libidinal economy* of the population. In a new Foucault-like paradigm, biopolitics is nervously managed through the manipulation of the hidden content of the mediascape. For Ballard, misinformation is not about simulation and *regimes of truth*, like a postmodernist fable, but about the manipulation of concealed dimensions. News about war has no informational content: its aim is solely a strategic control of the collective libido. Its power relies more on the iconic than the linguistic side of communication. Conversely, counterinformation campaigns are harmless, as they do not contain or cover the real, hidden libidinal content.

Psychotic patients exposed to continuous Vietnam war newsreel material have shown marked improvements in overall health, self-maintenance and ability to cope with tasks. . . . Levels of overall health and sexual activity fell notably, only restored by the Tet offensive and the capture of the U.S. embassy. Suggestions have been made for increasing the violence and latent sexuality of the war, and current peace moves may require the manufacture of simulated newsreels.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, Benjamin also emphasized the ‘curative’ effect or healing power of advertising: ‘People whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films.’<sup>29</sup> And Michael Taussig after him, in his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, similarly establishes a deep correlation with curative figures of the Cuna animistic rituals: ‘There is a cathartic, even curative, function in this copy-and-contact visual tactility of the advertisement.’<sup>30</sup>

Ballard’s most interesting account concerns peace advocates and their *libidinal drop*: he notes that the political correctness of non-violence hides something obscure, something against its real intentions



– specifically, a fatal attraction for war. Ballard is not, of course, a war-monger, having passed two years of his childhood in a Japanese internment camp at the end of the Second World War. Rather, by going ‘beyond good and evil’ in a Nietzschean way, Ballard highlights the latent content of peace activism and its fascination for what it is supposed to be fighting against. The war imaginary is an alibi for the impotence – literally – of peace activists, just as dreams represent a fulfilment of libido displaced and reinvested in another form. Far from being a provocative endorsement of right-wing stereotypes, Ballard introduces an *energetic* understanding of the psychological premises of radical activism, and a totally inverted account of the rationale for political correctness.

Further tests were devised to assess the latent sexual fantasies of anti-war demonstrators. These confirm the hysterical nature of reactions to films of napalm victims and A.R.V.N. [*Army of the Republic of Viet Nam*] atrocities, and indicate that for the majority of so-called peace groups the Vietnam war serves the role of masking repressed sexual inadequacies of an extreme nature.<sup>31</sup>

The scandalous hidden ground of war affects and touches everybody. The politically correct surfaces here with the purpose of censoring and neutralizing a fetishistic temptation in a sanctimonious manner. To confront the war imaginary, on the contrary, it is necessary to seize both heads of the monster, the manifest as well as the hidden.

#### *‘Pornography is a Powerful Catalyst for Social Change’*

Uncanny spirits are at work even behind the most unsuspecting form of *logos* – Ballard also breaches the moral status of science to reveal its morbid attentions. The apparent scientific detachment, the ‘analytic activity whose main aim is to isolate objects or events’, is compared to the obsessive magnification of detail in pornography: ‘This obsession with the specific activity of quantified functions is what science shares with pornography.’<sup>32</sup> The white coat of the scientist hides an abstract pornographer, while the rationalist anxieties of science are double-bound to a dangerous underworld – we might say: the higher the knowledge, the greater the beast.

Bizarre experiments are now a commonplace of scientific research, moving ever closer to that junction where science and pornography will eventually meet and fuse. Conceivably, the day will come when science is itself the greatest producer of pornography. The weird perversions of human behaviour triggered by psychologists testing the effects of pain, isolation, anger, etc., will play the same role that the bare breasts of Polynesian islanders performed in 1940s wildlife documentary films.<sup>33</sup>

However, it is not simply the morbidity of the detail that renders science and pornography comparable. In fact, the rationalistic anxiety of science is not able to completely neutralize the libidinal impulse driving its quest for knowledge. In Ballard’s lucid fiction, the scientific *logos* is always as libidinally charged as pornography. Anatomic descriptions have an uncanny role in his novels, but the same lecherous spectres also surface in other disciplines, from architecture to mechanics, in all those fields of inquiry that cover the extensions of the human exoskeleton. A biomorphic unconscious emerges in the profile of any cognitive or design object. ‘Later, the sexual act between them was a dual communion between themselves and the continuum of time and space which they occupied.’<sup>34</sup> This fetishistic relation between libido and objects is not a combinatory effect of new prostheses like in the once-celebrated figure of the cyborg. On the contrary, Ballard’s imaginary is organic and pre-digital, anchored to the sinister quotidian sides of a respectable life. His bioengineering operates at the level of the nervous system and libidinal unconscious alone, at the level of *bios* rather than code.

Anticipating the dawn of a new future ethics, Ballard sets libido back at the level of inorganic reality. Far from producing a comical fetishism of ‘furniture’, this can be described from a Guattarian perspective as the *machinic unconscious*, or in Benjamin’s terms as *the sex appeal of the inorganic*. In Ballard, however, such an exercise is not painless or without risk: his ‘conceptual’ acts are indeed quite carnal and unsettling. The ‘abstraction’ of sex means a withdrawal of desire from the usual objects of pleasure towards new ones. There is an equivocal exchange of roles, but also of energies between what is considered pornographic and what is considered scientific.

In what way is intercourse per vagina more stimulating than with this ashtray, say, or with the angle between two walls? Sex is now a conceptual act, it's probably only in terms of the perversions that we can make contact with each other at all. Sexual perversions are morally neutral, cut off from any suggestion of psycho-pathology – in fact, most of the ones I've tried are out of date. We need to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions just to keep our feelings alive.<sup>35</sup>

Ballard saw the profile of a pornographic 'civilization' in the shadow of the 1950s mediascape, far earlier than the *rise of the netporn society*: 'Thanks to press, film and television, sex has become a communal and public activity for the first time since the Edens of a more primitive age. In a sense we now all take part in sex whether we want to or not.'<sup>36</sup> While sex is now rationed daily to media audiences, it already represented the untold power of American political life during the post-war economic boom. Ballard is issuing a plea for free pornography, considering it to be a 'powerful catalyst for social change' and a sign of civil 'renaissance'.

Pornography is under attack at present, thanks in part to the criminal excesses of kiddy porn and snuff movies, and to our newly puritan climate – the *fin de siècle* decadence that dominated the 1890s, and which we can expect to enliven the 1990s, may well take the form of an aggressive and over-the-top puritanism. A pity, I feel, since the sexual imagination is unlimited in scope and metaphoric power, and can never be successfully repressed. . . . Pornography is a powerful catalyst for social change, and its periods of greatest availability have frequently coincided with times of greatest economic and scientific advance.<sup>37</sup>

However, his idea of *positive* pornography appears quite different from the *radically correct* commercial subcultures of *alt porn* today. What Ballard actually wants to confront is the violent unconscious of pornography, not the well-educated progressive *indie porn* version of sexual education. What would it otherwise mean to request more sex and violence on TV as 'catalysts for change'? Ballard is not a typical postmodern provocateur: 'Needless to say, I believe there should be more sex and

violence on TV, not less. Both are powerful catalysts for change, in areas where change is urgent and overdue.'<sup>38</sup>

Rather, Ballard envisions that more freedom in the mediascape would mean more room for exploring the underground of collective psychopathologies – exactly what is happening thanks to the Internet, but still as an under-investigated and obscure social phenomenon. Unlike contemporary puritans, Ballard was welcoming a new knowledge of the dark spirits populating the imaginary, and not simply in terms of their repression or basic imitation.

#### *Pessimism of Senses, Optimism of Nerves: Deleuze's Francis Bacon*

If Ballard's fictional concepts sound too haphazard or chaotic, perhaps Deleuze is a useful reference point back to the more familiar and tranquil waters of aesthetics. Indeed, some similarities with Ballard's biopsy of collective imaginary can also be found in Deleuzian philosophy. His book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* is a classic today, but the carnal critique of the image it provides exceeds the traditional boundaries of the art world and its iconology. Avoiding the overworked concept of *machinic desire*, Deleuze employs another approach in this text to focus on the status of the image. For the sake of context, it is important to underline again how the notion of image has recently been under siege by two fronts: the simulacra of postmodernism, and the poststructuralist notions of production and flow. The philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, in particular, was shaped against structuralist thought and the Lacanian cult of the language. In their perspective, the notion of *production* was placed against the hegemony of *representation*. Few pages are spent in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* on the status of the image. Only later, in Deleuze's work on cinema in *The Movement-Image* (1986) and *The Time-Image* (1989) was a broad materialist theory of visual perception advanced. However, it is specifically in *Francis Bacon* that the missing articulation of the image is thoroughly explored, autonomous from the critique of psychoanalytical structures and phantasms.<sup>39</sup>

Through Bacon, Deleuze discovers a way to dismantle the traditional perception and practice of the image, freeing the image from the hegemony of the eye-brain assemblage. Invisible forces surface from the body, wrinkling and deranging the canvas: the *head-meat*, not the *face-spirit*, is the centre of Bacon's paintings. By examining these works, De-



leuze manages to ‘dismantle’ the image, showing latent animal spirits, similar to the way Ballard demolishes the respectable appearance of the mediascape. In the chapter ‘Body, Meat and Spirit: Becoming-Animal’, the concept of *becoming-animal* invades the field of the image, making the image itself an ‘animal spirit’.

The body is the figure, not the structure. Conversely, the Figure, being a body, is not the face, and does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body. It can even be reduced to the head. As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a great difference between the two. . . . It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit . . . Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: *to dismantle the face*, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face. . . . Man becomes animal, but not without the animal becoming spirit at the same time.<sup>40</sup>

In some interviews, Bacon marked a distinction between two kinds of paintings: those addressing the nervous system and those directed to the brain.<sup>41</sup> Bacon’s image is deep, it has nerves:

The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than anaemic or depressed simulacra, Bacon speaks of the violence of the image. That is, of course, not the violent content of some images, but the cruel effect of any image on the nervous system. Like in Ballard, violence is ‘abstracted’ from violent content.

The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domain it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of

the nature of a represented object. It is the same with Artaud: cruelty is not what one believes it to be, and depends less and less on what is represented.<sup>43</sup>

Against an ideology of transparency or superficial materialism, Deleuze underlines the presence of invisible energies behind the image. There is always an asymmetrical negotiation between surface and subterranean forces. Bacon’s figures are a response to one of the main questions for a painter: ‘How can one make invisible forces visible?’<sup>44</sup> In the chapter ‘Painting forces’, Bacon’s image-making is described as the pessimism of brain and senses versus the optimism of nerves – a statement that effectively reworks Deleuze’s reading of the Nietzschean notion of tragedy.

When Bacon distinguishes between two violences, that of spectacle and that of sensation, and declares that the first must be renounced to reach the second, it is a kind of declaration of faith in life. . . . Bacon says that he himself is cerebrally pessimistic; that is, he can scarcely see anything *but* horrors to paint, the horrors of the world. But he is nervously optimistic, because visible figuration is secondary in painting, and will have less and less importance: Bacon will reproach himself for painting too much horror, as if that were enough to leave the figurative behind.<sup>45</sup>

The most interesting passage, however, is where Deleuze recognizes the fight with the dark side of reality: ‘The struggle with the shadow is the only real struggle.’

When, like a wrestler, the visible body confronts the powers of the invisible, it gives them no other visibility than its own. It is within this visibility that the body actively struggles, affirming the possibility of triumphing, which was beyond its reach as long as these powers remained invisible, hidden in a spectacle that sapped our strength and diverted us. It is as if combat had now become possible. The struggle with the shadow is the only real struggle. When the visual sensation confronts the invisible force that conditions it, it releases a force that is capable of vanquishing the invisible force, or even befriending it. Life screams *at* death, but death is no longer this

all-too-visible thing that makes as faint; it is the invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through scream. Death is judged from the point of view of life, and not the reverse, as we like to believe.<sup>46</sup>

The last sentence of the book blurs the distinction between the tactile and the optical in the more holistic dimension of the 'haptic diagram'. According to Deleuze, two types of painting can be found in art history: a subordination of the hand to the eye in optical space (Byzantine art) and a subordination of the eye to the hand in a manual space (Gothic art). In haptic space, however, there is no longer any hand-eye subordination in either direction. It implies a type of seeing distinct from the optical, a close-up viewing in which 'the sense of sight behaves just like the sense of touch'. Haptic refers to a more interactive tactile dimension, a term adopted today in the design of interactive computer devices. For Deleuze, the diagram of the image is a haptic space that directly addresses the nervous system, not just the eyes, 'as a branch of neurology'. Deleuze manages to provide a punctual *diagrammatic* description of the canvas as a *dispositif*, but a further investigation is needed to catch the nature and name of the forces behind the imagery.

#### *First Disambiguation: Code Claustrophobia and the Poverty of the Subject*

This section attempts to rescue the image from the different impasses of contemporary *radicalism*: as it is represented by the *incredulity of postmodern simulacra* (Baudrillard), by the paranoid critique of the *society of the spectacle* (Debord) and, more generally, by the *claustrophobia of the ideological code* (Žižek) that supposedly shapes any gesture within Western society. Avoiding yet another counter-interpretation of these positions, it is important to emphasize that such a radical thought managed to embody precisely what it was meant to criticize: the capitalist separation of the domain of the image. The relation between critical thinkers and capitalist spectacle, therefore, follows the same seduction of peace activists for war outlined by Ballard. When Žižek, for instance, says that any act of resistance reinforces the dominant code, he puts first himself in a *cul de sac*. While he is effective at deconstructing the language of ideology in its totalitarian and social-democratic forms, all of reality eventually becomes siphoned through the frame of the ideo-

logical *phantasma*. Similar to a post-war trauma, Žižek is still trapped within a scheme developed by the *ideological apparatus* of the old Eastern Bloc. The spiral of weak nihilism cannot be avoided: if each image (as *phantasma*) is ideological, anarchist iconoclasm and puritanism are the only (and all too easy) political consequences. Žižek is indeed another philosopher of separation. There is no escape from the code: 'We never desire, we believe to desire' repeats his paradigm. In books such as *The Plague of Phantasy* (no other title is clearer than this), imagination is never an expression of desire, but what tells us and teaches us how to desire, equivalent to the Kantian *transcendental schematism*. The image decides and desires for you. 'Fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way: rather its function is similar to that of Kantian "transcendental schematism": a fantasy constitutes our desire . . . it teaches how to desire.'<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting to note how Žižek frames pornography: the meaning of which is not to excite the viewer and to engage in masturbatory practices, but to watch how *others* experience enjoyment instead of me, in my place. More than the power of simulation, this is the *poverty of the subject*. Žižek says clearly that phantasmatic transgression does not break the law, but represents its pure establishment. This scheme is applied to everything from movie critique to religion. If, for example, Foucault finds in ancient Greek culture a model of the 'care of the Self', that is only a phantasmatic fulfilment of his desire, an ideological construct of 'the golden era' or 'the good old days'. Any act of resistance reinforces the code of the dominant regime, while any image is only a phantom fulfilling a phantasmatic need.

As opposed to the caretakers for the postmodern, the purpose of this work is to focus on the field of material forces that constitute the image, to define a new status of the image beginning with its *political* dimension. Following ideally the Aristotelian tradition (from Averroes to Marx, Simondon, Deleuze, Virno and French post-Structuralism and Italian post-Operaismo), where the individual is always shaped by the collective, so here the individual phantasy is shaped by the collective imaginary around it. Delirium, Deleuze and Guattari remind us, is always collective, social, political. A second goal of this analysis, however, is to reconceptualize the perception and use of the individual image from the point of view of the body and vital energies, defeating



any attempt to recognize the image as an independent and autonomous domain – a sort of new *iconocentrism* shaped after Western logocentrism. From this perspective, finally the image circulates freely within the collective body, just like the vital spirits of imagination were said to move through the human body in the medieval age.

### *Second Disambiguation: Biodigitalism and False Organicism*

What happened to the notion of the image in other circles, such as art history and anthropology, during the fashionable years of the post-modernist debate? After so many collateral casualties in the academic world, it is now a good time to examine how the technological infrastructure was responsible for shaping postmodernism and its semiotic model in such a way. Before the appearance of cyberspace, it was the image, and precisely the video image, which was central to a ‘declaration of independence’. Ballard’s earlier novels, for instance, cover the classic age of television mythology and its typical one-to-many broadcasting model. Then, with the rise of video technology and a more horizontal mode of production, Baudrillard and postmodern cultural theory in general responded to the new scenario, but they did it in a reactive way. As Lazzarato points out, instead of establishing a ‘new field of conflict’ these theories reduced the video image to a nihilist exercise that obliterated any emancipatory potential.<sup>48</sup> In the same theoretical lineage and weak understanding, the notion of *code* was introduced as the basis of simulacra and already played an important role in the 1970s, years before hacker culture and the network society became the focus of media philosophers. This trajectory from simulacra to digital code and then genetic code has been the dominant axis of media philosophy in the late twentieth century. Today, the digital-genetic code is celebrated as a universal language for any form of life: *biodigitalism*, a biology fixated on code rather than the energy economy of life. To return to our initial inquiry, in the world of art history and art criticism, particularly in the discipline of iconology, we find an alternative lineage of the image from the discourse of postmodernism. But even this lineage ends up aligned with the biodigital paradigm of the last decades – the well-known *hegemony of code*, as postmodernists used to say, is still in operation.

Among art historians, Hans Belting has described the *power of the image* in his book *Likeness and Presence*, which follows the development

of religious iconography in the classic and medieval age before the rise of the modern form of the artwork.<sup>49</sup> During this earlier period, the image had a complete different social role, which cannot be understood through a contemporary conception of visual information, being deeply influenced by modernist notions of the *art object* or *art image*. Belting’s concern is, therefore, quite specific: the religious icon in its complete political, social and cultural manifestation. Régis Debray similarly describes this passage from the age of idol to the age of representation in *Vie et mort de l’image*.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, the cover of the original German editions of *The End of the History of Art?* features the figure of the two-faced god Janus.<sup>51</sup> For Belting, the surface of the image is not a unified whole; Janus symbolizes the double gaze of both the visible image and its invisible counterpoint. In light of this intuition, Belting calls for a more general *iconology* capable of grasping the role of digital media and the new coordinates of the present. His project is to establish a general theory of the image on the new basis of a more extended *Bildanthropologie*, a coming anthropology of the image, precisely to avoid being wrecked on the cliffs of the digital, as other iconologists have done.

In particular, the term iconology has been promoted by W.J.T. Mitchell, who, like Belting and others, can be aligned with a broad current of *neovitalists* of the image, if this term is not considered too controversial.<sup>52</sup> Art historians may in fact have deeper historical insight than media critics. The important lesson from this current of *iconologists* is that throughout classic, medieval and modern history, images have always claimed an organic relation with power. Images are not mere accidents, *phantasmas* or composites of a self-referential *dispositif*. As Belting noted: ‘Humankind has never freed itself from the power of images.’<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Mitchell claims ‘that magical attitudes toward images are just as powerful in the modern world as they were in so-called ages of faith’.<sup>54</sup> By placing emphasis on this vitalistic aspect, however, the temptation is to follow the postmodern belief in the ontological autonomy of the image itself.

Mitchell’s iconology is an interesting case study, for his autonomy of the image takes the form of a *false organicism*. His approach is, therefore, a good example of how contemporary thought falls into a basic *vitalism* without a proper materialistic ground, simply by catching some

fashionable concepts inspired by the *Zeitgeist*. Despite his attempts to free the image from a superficial semiotics, Mitchell employs more metaphors than materialistic concepts. To rescue the image from the incredulity of postmodernism, he presents it as *form of life*, but more in the fashion of an academic convention rather than a true interest in its biological or zoological ground. For instance, the title of one of his books reads *What do pictures want?*<sup>55</sup>

The philosophical argument of this book is simple in its outlines: images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that have desires (for example, appetites, needs, demands, drives); therefore, the question of what pictures want is inevitable.<sup>56</sup>

Mitchell seems sincerely devoted to a less abstract and more carnal notion of the image. The issue, however, is not simply the metaphorical use of the expression ‘forms of life’, where such forms are then described as independent beings: images themselves levitate like angels in an isolated sphere of circulation: ‘It’s not just a question of their producing “imitations of life” (as the saying goes), but that the imitations seem to take on “lives of their own”.’<sup>57</sup> Mitchell’s definitions of life are also a bit confusing. He claims, for instance, that a proper definition is impossible, that *life* can only be dialectically defined by its negative, *death*. The conclusion is weak: images are like organisms because they are equally capable of dying.<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, as Deleuze noticed in Bacon, ‘death is judged from the point of view of life, and not the reverse’.<sup>59</sup> And as Bataille and Serres already observed, along with many other continental thinkers, it is not an ideological misconception to recognize that an organism is defined by entropy and negentropy, by the accumulation and consumption of an excess or energy surplus. However, to apply *will* and *drive* to images risks establishing yet again another *philosophy of flow* in an idealist and abstract space without any breaking points.

When the question of desire is raised, it is usually located in the producers of consumers of images, with the picture treated as an expression of the artist’s desire or as a mechanism for eliciting the desires of the beholder. . . . I’d like to shift the location of desire to images themselves, and ask what pictures want.

Similar to memetics, bioart and generative art, to mention some recent concepts, Mitchell’s employment of organic metaphors is simply too abstract. There is no attempt to link the destiny of image technologies to human evolution, like Leroi-Gourhan began to do several decades ago in the 1950s, or to consider the truly parasitic dimension of images, as in the theories of Serres.

Can we speak of the origin of images, their evolution, mutation, and extinction? How do new images appear in the world? . . . Perhaps, then, there is a way in which we can speak of the value of images as evolutionary or at least coevolutionary entities, quasi life-forms (like viruses) that depend on a host organism (ourselves), and cannot reproduce themselves without human participation.<sup>60</sup>

Applied to new media and distributed networks, Mitchell’s organicism begins to resemble a sort of *internal biomorphism*. For instance, computer viruses embody the *bios* ‘in very concrete forms’ simply on the basis of an assonance. However, the energetic model of computer viruses does not share any resemblance with *offline* living microorganisms. ‘My aim, rather, is to observe that within the very heart of the cybernetic the *bios* rears its head in very concrete forms, most conspicuously in the computational virus.’

In Mitchell, we witness an unconscious condensation of many traits of contemporary thought: the well-known death of the author, the artwork as an autonomous being, the specific influence of genetics on Anglo-American culture, the fetishism of the code and so on. Ultimately, however, the human body has no role in the production and consumption of images: ‘the artist or image-maker is merely a host carrying around a crowd of parasites that are merrily reproducing themselves, and occasionally manifesting themselves in those notable specimens we call “works of art”.’<sup>61</sup> Despite his vague metaphor of the parasite, the separated and ‘second nature’ of the image is still clearly privileged.

Thus we talk about images as pseudo-life-forms parasitical on human hosts, we are not merely portraying them as parasites on individual human beings. They form a social collective that has a parallel



existence to the social life of their human hosts, and to the world of objects that they represent. That is why images constitute a ‘second nature’.<sup>62</sup>

Mitchell refreshes the Romantic notions of *organicism*, *vitalism* and *animism* developed against the mechanistic models of the eighteenth century.<sup>63</sup> However, to avoid any nostalgic metaphysics, he recommends that we examine the current ‘biocybernetic reproduction’ capable of ‘produc[ing] physical organisms in the real world out of bits of data and inert substances’.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell ends up aligning his ‘forms of life’ to programmable biotechnologies, another example of how we are unable to think of life outside the coordinates of *code*.

The life of images has taken a decisive turn in our time: the oldest myth about the creation of living images, the fabrication of an intelligent organism by artificial, technical means, has now become a theoretical and practical possibility, thanks to new constellations of media at many different levels. The convergence of genetic and computational technologies with new forms of speculative capital has turned cyberspace and biospace (the inner structure of organisms) into frontiers for technical innovation, appropriation, and exploitation – new forms of objecthood and territoriality for a new form of empire.<sup>65</sup>

#### *The ‘Civilization of Images’ and the Profanation of Pornography*

due e nessun l’imagine perversa pareo  
[the perverse image seemed both and neither]  
Dante, *Inferno* XXV 77-78

The ambivalent and conflicted relation of modernity with the image (and more generally, with the collective imaginary and the mediascape) has its genealogy in the neutralization of a materialistic and profane approach to the faculty of imagination originally conducted by medieval Christian culture. In his book *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben identifies this distinct separation between phantasy and the ‘vital spirit’ (or *pneuma*), which occurred nearly nine centuries ago in the Western tradition.<sup>66</sup>

Before this, the *pneuma* was considered a unique faculty together with imagination: the ‘*spiritus phantasticus*’. In Medieval psychology, in Italian poetry of the twelfth century (*Dolce Stil Novo*) and also, in the conception of *courtly love*, Agamben recognizes a common and positive conception of phantasy that is strictly related to love and the ‘animal spirits’ of the body.<sup>67</sup> For instance, in his seminal treatise *De Amore*, Andreas Cappellanus introduced love as the ‘immoderate contemplation of an internal phantasm’.

Medieval psychology – with an insight that yielded one of its most fertile legacies for Western culture – conceived of love as an essentially phantasmatic process, involving both imagination and memory in an assiduous, tormented circling around an image painted or reflected in the deepest self. Andreas Cappellanus, whose *De amore* is considered the exemplary theorization of the new conception of love, defined it as the *immoderata cogitatio* (immoderate contemplation) of an internal phantasm.<sup>68</sup>

It was quite usual to encounter medical and anatomical references in the religious and philosophical works of the Middle Ages. In Avicenna and Averroes, for example, it is simply impossible to distinguish between medicine and philosophy.<sup>69</sup> In the same way, love and the imagination were usually described as deeply connected to the good and bad humours circulating in the body. The *pneuma* as *spiritus phantasticus* was the mediator between the soul and the body, before modern science definitively severed the body-mind relation. A *hydraulic* and *topological* description of the mind only re-emerged with Freud’s theory of the unconscious and, more materialistically, with Deleuze and Guattari’s *desiring flows*. But under the white coat of science, the animal spirits keep on pulsating, as Ballard reminds us. Today, common perception still dissects the human body in separated layers according to different disciplines (from psychology to neurology, from anatomy to genetics). On the contrary, in a famous passage of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante described the ‘metabolism’ of love as the simultaneous stimulation of different spirits and their organs.<sup>70</sup> Agamben defines this doctrine as *pneumophantasmology*, linking the vital spirits of the body (*pneuma*) and the images of love (*phantasmas*) together in an organic and harmonious way.

The synthesis that results is so characteristic that European culture in this period might justly be defined as a pneumophantasmology, within whose compass – which circumscribes at once a cosmology, a physiology, a psychology, and a soteriology – the breath that animates the universe, circulates in the arteries, and fertilizes the sperm is the same one that, in the brain and in the heart, receives and forms the phantasms of the things we see, imagine, dream, and love.<sup>71</sup>

Like modern times, the Middle Ages also had its temptations in the form of fantasies of ‘half-naked ladies’. Mental images were generally considered under a negative light, but the conception of courtly love and other profane currents struggled to develop a civilized and healthy discipline of the interior demons, always at risk of being thwarted by religious power.

To measure the importance of the reevaluation of the phantasy that is accomplished in these writings, it is necessary to recall that in the medieval Christian tradition the phantasy appeared in a decisively negative light. It is not inopportune to remember in this connection that the lascivious half-naked ladies, the half-human and half-feral-creatures, the terrifying devils, and the whole conglomeration of monstrous and seductive images that crystallized in the iconography of the temptations of Saint Anthony represent precisely the phantasms that the Tempter excited in the phantastic spirit of the Saint.<sup>72</sup>

With such a positive conception of desire and phantasy, Agamben defines this avant-garde of the secular culture in the Middle Ages as the proper ‘civilization of the image’, a *radical thought* contrary to the poverty of ‘society of the spectacle’ of our times that seems still haunted by ancient religious nightmares and misconceptions about images.

Not even in the most exalted Romantic theorizing has the imagination been conceived in so elevated and, at the same time, concrete a fashion as in the thought of this period, which surely more than ours deserves the name of ‘civilization of the image’. If we keep in mind the close bond that joins love and the phantasm, it is easy to understand the profound influence that this reevaluation of the phantasy

would exercise on the theory of love. Furthermore, because a positive polarity of phantasy had been discovered, it was possible . . . to rediscover both a positive polarity and a ‘spirituality’ in the mortal disease of the phantastic spirit that was love.<sup>73</sup>

According to Agamben, it is scholastic theology that obliterates the pneuma as mediator between soul and body, and ‘fatally thrust pneumatology into the half-light of esoteric circles, where it would long survive as the path, rendered impracticable, that our culture might have, but did not in fact follow’.<sup>74</sup> Agamben reveals how the polarizations of our age – that then generated the oppositions of *production* and *representation*, *flow* and *code*, for instance – is indeed a simplified abstraction related to the medieval problem of the image. European materialism and a profane ethics attempted to establish a civilized relation with the demons of phantasy, but ultimately they failed. This dramatic conflict has been a political and religious (and indeed biopolitical) issue for centuries, and it is still present and unresolved within psychoanalysis and postmodernism (and their popularized versions in the art and activist worlds).

In his recent book *Profanations*, Agamben once again faces the problem of separation under the conditions of the society of the spectacle.<sup>75</sup> Capitalism, like religion, is meant to bring each aspect of life (body, sexuality, language) into a separated sphere. The political gesture opposed to this separation is what Agamben calls *profanation*: not simply the gesture that abolishes and erases the separations, but the gesture that knows how to re-deploy and ‘play’ with their constitution in a positive manner. If, as Agamben says, capitalism managed to sacrifice the image in the separated form of the spectacle, how can this separated sphere of the collective imaginary be made profane? Interestingly, Agamben is inspired by pornography as the ultimate example of capitalist partition. Pornography intervenes precisely to inhibit a possible ‘new collective use of sexuality’.

It is this profanatory potential that the apparatus of pornography seeks to neutralize. What it captures is the human capacity to let erotic behaviors idle, to profane them, by detaching them from their immediate ends. But while these behaviors thus open themselves to



a different possible use, which concerns not so much the pleasure of the partner as a new collective use of sexuality, pornography intervenes at this point to block and divert the profanatory intention.<sup>76</sup>

The pornographic image should be counter-profane, Agamben suggests, in the same way it profaned sexuality. A reverse profanation is not about censoring pornography but using it in a different way, claiming back the *possibility* that it captured. According to Agamben, 'the profanation of the unprofaneable' is the political mission of the coming generation.

The unprofaneable [sic] of pornography – everything that is unprofaneable – is founded on the arrest and diversion of an authentically profanatory intention. For this reason, we must always wrest from the apparatuses – from all apparatuses – the possibility of use that they have captured. The profanation of the unprofaneable is the political task of the coming generation.<sup>77</sup>

The profaning strategies applied to the collective imaginary of war and Internet pornography, strategies that will be presented in the next section, anticipate such a political and aesthetical scenario. Agamben's position is both affirmative and demiurgic, with no place for a reactive intellectual psychologism, or for the gratification of a sort of postmodern temptation. However, awaiting the coming 'civilization of the image', it may also be worth considering the *masochistic* dimension of the consumption of images. Similar to Ballard's vision of a 'just psychopathology' for the exploration of the collective unconscious, a 'just masochism' can be taken as the molecular and bicephalous form of the relation of desire to the collective imaginary. As Deleuze wrote in his 1967 book on masochism, before *desiring machines* monopolized the stage: 'What is true of masochistic writing is equally true of masochistic fantasy: there is no specifically masochistic fantasy, but rather a masochistic art of fantasy.'<sup>78</sup>

Pornography can be taken as a radical case study of the condition of the image in the contemporary climate. The power encased in the pornographic imaginary is not something to be left for the poverty of puritan or liberal debates. As Agamben more recently claimed: 'Contem-

porary is he who receives right in his face the beam of darkness coming from his time.'<sup>79</sup> From the medieval 'diabolical' visual temptations to contemporary *sex tapes* and the unpredictable forms of life shaped by the Internet underworld, an uncanny imaginary circulates as the black-market currency of our libidinal economy – images that regulate the fluids of the collective body in a clandestine manner, and also pervade the energy and the economy of inorganic matter around us. The exoskeleton of humankind and its externalized mediated nervous system continue a hollow battle beneath the surface of intellectual debates. This underground libidinal economy is not a reputable place for the 'goodness' of the politically correct: its comprehension belongs to a radical community still to come.

# IN CONVERSATION: ANNIKA ERIKSSON AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ



**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** You have stated the *People in Public Spaces* (2000 - ) project should one day be shown in a venue “somewhere in the public realm” and “only as a permanent work of art.” I wanted to speak with you about permanence and the desire to situate actions, performances, and artworks in the public realm; but also the apparent impossibility of these two elements working together.

**Annika Eriksson:** *People in Public Spaces* is an ongoing project that is at the moment taking a rest. I was attracted to filming situations in public spaces that were somehow out of sync. It could be different of ways that people express themselves publicly, unexpected situations that are not really like we expect them. One example is a situation in Munich that I encountered in 2003, a group of older ladies hanging out in the streets to prevent a huge neo-Nazi manifestation from marching through the city center. Because of this action from the ladies, the police had to protect both groups and the Nazi manifestation could not take place. I was intrigued by this group of people that normally do not take to the street to express their political views.

We have seen so many films of people just recording demonstrations, but it is not enough. You have to make it more complicated. You have to somehow digest it and make something out of it. Otherwise, it is just too boring to look at and doesn't hold any specificity. But this demonstration was so extraordinarily beautiful how these people were being

so publicly passive aggressive, just loitering around so that the neo-Nazis couldn't get anywhere. It was a total choreography of thousands of people. And this has happened in Berlin as well, where thousands of people, from many different backgrounds, just stood out in the way, as if to say: “No way, they are not walking here.” So, they were not fighting, they were not going against, they were just waiting, staying, and making sure that they couldn't go anywhere.

**JRM:** What would that mean, then, to situate these scenes permanently in the public sphere?

**AE:** I think it would be interesting to choose certain footage and choose a specific place to place them with the intention that it would always be there. In ten years it would totally age, but it would be a part of that public sphere because it's always going on there. But also, again, we find ourselves wondering: What is this public space anyway? Where is the public sphere? Potsdamerplatz in Berlin is public in a way, but on the other hand, it is owned and operated by Daimler Chrysler. So what do we do with that? It is also interesting to see what you are allowed to do in these spaces. To test them, perhaps.

**JRM:** Right now in Berlin we're seeing a proliferation of these urban garden projects—in Moritzplatz, in Tempelhof, and so on—that are open to the public but operated on private property.

**AE:** They cannot stay so long, but at least they do it.

**JRM:** When I recently spoke to a man who was working in the Templehof gardens, he told me he was completely aware that one day, everything he was doing would be completely removed. The permanence was not nearly as important as the sense of togetherness that these spaces could help foster in the surrounding neighborhoods. Even further, he thought the most crucial part of the whole project would be that the people involved would actually feel a sense of loss when they inevitably arrive to the gardens one day and see a big fence around everything they have been working on together—a big fence signifying the end of squatted community gardens and the beginning of private development. In an odd way, for him the whole project was about developing the capability to actually feel loss; to not be so numb the rapid transformation of urban space due to unbridled neoliberal development. There is almost a masochistic tendency here: to participate in building a community so that one can feel the pain of this being taken away. On another level, the whole project was operating so as to generate publicity for the anti-gentrification causes.

And this term “publicity” carries two connotations. On the one hand, publicity implies making things public, associating them with public life. But in a more pedestrian sense, we associate publicity immediately with marketing and advertising. Publicity becomes associated, in this respect, with the financialization of



public space, where the highest activation of the public sphere occurs with the buying and selling of some product or sensibility.

**AE:** But then we've arrived at a situation where the public sphere is no longer that which is owned by the government and open to the public, but that which is clearly marked as free. A park, a free museum, a library.

**JRM:** Yes. And this might correspond to the visions of public space like those of Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, especially with respect to their designs for public parks in New York. Their designs for these money-free, open public zones, however, were completely over determined, bourgeois spaces of leisure. They were not free in the sense of being zones of indistinction, spaces inviting "free speech" or "free will"; instead, this typology of designed leisure spaces can be read as an indicator of "free" culture's opposite: permission culture.

We are also seeing this issue of "free space as public space" revisited today in light of the Occupy movements variously claiming privately owned public spaces for their activities.

I've been thinking about this in relation to your video piece *Wir bleiben / The Last Tenants* (2011) where a fixed camera points to a modest building and we see a banner, which reads "WIR BLEIBEN" (we're staying) in hand-painted capital red letters, hanging out of the window. In a way, this whole operation of

hanging such a pronouncement so literally and desperately in that space between the public and private complicates the distinctions between these two connotations of publicity.

**AE:** It is quite a complicated gesture. You sometimes see these statements in Berlin, less and less now, but they are putting them out there: "Wir bleiben, we are staying." But they're not. And it is almost pathetic. The 90s are over, just get real, move somewhere else. It doesn't work anymore, it feels old-fashioned and dated. Unfortunately.

So, I asked Oliver, one of the last remaining tenants in the Mitte apartment building, if he would hang this banner I made outside of his window and he agreed. I made that flag you see in the video in a really angry, desperate kind of way. It's really pathetic, it's not even a real flag. But this pathetic gesture is important for this piece. It is not a nostalgic redeployment of a trope from the 90s, but instead operates so as to point toward a way people are resisting something by being passive aggressive, like the people standing in the streets blocking the neo-Nazi march in München.

These last tenants in the apartment building very well know that realistically, there is nothing they can do to fight gentrification. Going to the newspapers would be futile; they know that nobody would write about their struggles. You can be politically resistant by being passive and not doing things. Then of course,

you can be desperate and hang out that flag. But I do think that it's important to react even so and I think that many people share this feeling, that one has to react even if it might not help, but perhaps it does sooner or later.

**JRM:** For the viewer, the desperate and impromptu handling of the banner points to an awareness of its anachronism, but this is also coupled with the desire to understand what this temporal spasm might suggest.

**AE:** I look and see these organizations that are working against gentrification. They work very hard and try many things. But the only way to really stop it is if everybody goes out into the streets and just refuses to move. That is how big changes in society happen. We can think about the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also what has happened in Cairo recently. At this certain moment, everybody is out on the street. And god knows what has to happen before that happens.

**JRM:** But apparent answers to the questions of "what can we do?" and "how is it to be done?" are not the focus of your work; you seem more interested in notions of passivity; to engage with the complex and possibly contradictory meanings constitutive of claiming this gesture as a political act, especially today.

**AE:** Maybe you end up in passivity when you realize, "god, I can't do anything." In the video *Wir sind wieder da* (We're back,

2011), for example, we see a group of punks hanging out in an empty lot in Berlin, and they have basically decided: "we know the only way to claim that this is somehow fucked up is to not do anything. To absolutely not participate." But, of course, they do. They have to.

**JRM:** Can you tell me about your choice to project this video of the punks on such a large scale?

**AE:** This is the first time I have shown the video like this. The first time I showed the video it was three meters wide. But in this context, I just found it so strong to make them larger than life. It starts to feel like a massive tableaux-vivant. A big, *setting*. I feel both the realness and the unrealness in that piece really work.

**JRM:** While there may be this quite literal one-to-one relation between the viewer in the gallery and the punks in the video, it is very obvious that you are not in their same space. You never will be.

**AE:** Yes. My idea was also that they are not here. They are either some kind of ghosts from the 70s or 80s, or they are from the future. But they are not here with us. And I don't want to imply that they are, they shouldn't be. Also, they turned their backs to the camera and had no problem acting as though we were not there at all.



**JRM:** As a looped video, the work implies that the punks will always be there, in the sense that their occupation contains no terms for its abatement; but also in the sense that their actions will never amount to any change. On the one hand, this infinitely extends the moment of potentiality, but on the other, it traps the gesture in a hermetic loop that sustains itself on its own amnesia—soon forgetting where it started or how it might amount to anything but an impotent display of oppositionality.

This is what looping does. It always returns you to the first moment, such that the first moment begins to dissolve across the continuum, eternally becoming less distinguishable. It doesn't matter if the take is three minutes or six hours, as long as the video is installed the subject will occupy the space, and consistently.

And it is this tension between the two implications of indefinite occupation of space and time—the being-eternal and the melancholia of timelessness—that mark both *Wir sind wieder da* and *Wir bleiben / The Last Tenants* as especially timely within the context of social activism today, but also, more specifically, within the rapidly changing urban environment of Istanbul.

**AE:** One piece that takes this notion of time loop further is *It did happen soon* (2012), the third part of this series of works. In this video, you encounter a situation where a young man talks about a past where political activities were taking place, but he is too young to have been there. He loops himself, repeats his story, and it is unclear when this time is taking place—can it be in the future?

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April 2012





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# London Review of Books

## The Revolt of the Salaried Bourgeoisie

Slavoj Žižek

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How did Bill Gates become the richest man in America? His wealth has nothing to do with Microsoft producing good software at lower prices than its competitors, or ‘exploiting’ its workers more successfully (Microsoft pays its intellectual workers a relatively high salary). Millions of people still buy Microsoft software because Microsoft has imposed itself as an almost universal standard, practically monopolising the field, as one embodiment of what Marx called the ‘general intellect’, by which he meant collective knowledge in all its forms, from science to practical knowhow. Gates effectively privatised part of the general intellect and became rich by appropriating the rent that followed.

The possibility of the privatisation of the general intellect was something Marx never envisaged in his writings about capitalism (largely because he overlooked its social dimension). Yet this is at the core of today’s struggles over intellectual property: as the role of the general intellect – based on collective knowledge and social co-operation – increases in post-industrial capitalism, so wealth accumulates out of all proportion to the labour expended in its production. The result is not, as Marx seems to have expected, the self-dissolution of capitalism, but the gradual transformation of the profit generated by the exploitation of labour into rent appropriated through the privatisation of knowledge.

The same is true of natural resources, the exploitation of which is one of the world’s main sources of rent. There is a permanent struggle over who gets this rent: citizens of the Third World or Western corporations. It’s ironic that in explaining the difference between labour (which in its use produces surplus value) and other commodities (which consume all their value in their use), Marx gives oil as an example of an ‘ordinary’ commodity. Any attempt now to link the rise and fall in the price of oil to the rise or fall in production costs or the price of exploited labour would be meaningless: production costs are negligible as a proportion of the price we pay for oil, a price which is really the rent the resource’s owners can command

capitalism celebrate as the passage from material to symbolic production, from centralist-workers earning a surplus wage extends to all sorts of experts, administrators, public servants, doctors, lawyers, journalists, intellectuals and artists. The surplus takes two forms: of conventional knowledge, but also of the general intellect. In the very success of China they more in the form of managers etc. but also of workers and more generally of some – intellectuals, but also for state administrators etc).

The notion of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing anti-capitalist protests. The idea of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing anti-capitalist protests. The idea of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing anti-capitalist protests.

The Revolt of the Salaried Bourgeoisie: political protest is their only recourse if they are to avoid joining the space agencies, or to be able to afford to buy a house, or to get a good education for their children. Although their protests are nominally directed against the brutal logic of the market, they are in effect protesting about the gradual erosion of their (politically) privileged position in the economy. Ayn Rand has a fantasy in *Atlas Shrugged* of striking capitalists, a fantasy that finds its perverted realisation in today’s strikes, most of which are held by a salaried bourgeoisie – driven by fear of losing their surplus wage. These are not proletarian

protests, but protests against the threat of being reduced to proletarians. Who dares strike is not a proletarian, but a proletarian in the making. The idea of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing anti-capitalist protests. The idea of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing anti-capitalist protests.

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thanks to its limited supply.

A consequence of the rise in productivity brought about by the exponentially growing impact of collective knowledge is a change in the role of unemployment. It is the very success of capitalism (greater efficiency, raised productivity etc) which produces unemployment, rendering more and more workers useless: what should be a blessing – less hard labour needed – becomes a curse. Or, to put it differently, the chance to be exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege. The world market, as Fredric Jameson has put it, is ‘a space in which everyone has once been a productive labourer, and in which labour has everywhere begun to price itself out of the system.’ In the ongoing process of capitalist globalisation, the category of the unemployed is no longer confined to Marx’s ‘reserve army of labour’; it also includes, as Jameson notes, ‘those massive populations around the world who have, as it were, “dropped out of history”, who have been deliberately excluded from the modernising projects of First World capitalism and written off as hopeless or terminal cases’: so-called failed states (Congo, Somalia), victims of famine or ecological disaster, those trapped by pseudo-archaic ‘ethnic hatreds’, objects of philanthropy and NGOs or targets of the war on terror. The category of the unemployed has thus expanded to encompass vast ranges of people, from the temporarily unemployed, the no longer employable and permanently unemployed, to the inhabitants of ghettos and slums (all those often dismissed by Marx himself as ‘lumpen-proletarians’), and finally to the whole populations and states excluded from the global capitalist process, like the blank spaces on ancient maps.

Some say that this new form of capitalism provides new possibilities for emancipation. This at any rate is the thesis of Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude*, which tries to radicalise Marx, who held that if we just cut the head off capitalism we’d get socialism. Marx, as they see it, was historically constrained: he thought in terms of centralised, automated and hierarchically organised industrial labour, with the result that he understood ‘general intellect’ as something rather like a central planning agency; it is only today, with the rise of ‘immaterial labour’, that a revolutionary reversal has become ‘objectively possible’. This immaterial labour extends between two poles: from intellectual labour (the production of ideas, texts, computer programs etc) to affective labour (carried out by doctors, babysitters and flight attendants). Today, immaterial labour is hegemonic in the sense in which Marx proclaimed that, in 19th-century capitalism, large industrial production was hegemonic: it imposes itself not through force of numbers but by playing the key, emblematic structural role. What emerges is a vast new domain called the ‘common’: shared knowledge and new forms of communication and co-operation. The products of immaterial production aren’t objects but new social or interpersonal relations; immaterial production is bio-political, the production of social life.

Hardt and Negri are here describing the process that the ideologists of today’s ‘postmodern’

capitalism celebrate as the passage from material to symbolic production, from centralist-hierarchical logic to the logic of self-organisation and multi-centred co-operation. The difference is that Hardt and Negri are faithful to Marx: they are trying to prove that he was right, that the rise of the general intellect is in the long term incompatible with capitalism. The ideologists of postmodern capitalism are making exactly the opposite claim: Marxist theory (and practice), they argue, remains within the constraints of the hierarchical logic of centralised state control and so can’t cope with the social effects of the information revolution. There are good empirical reasons for this claim: what effectively ruined the Communist regimes was their inability to accommodate to the new social logic sustained by the information revolution. They tried to steer the revolution, to make it yet another large-scale centralised state-planning project. The paradox is that what Hardt and Negri celebrate as the unique chance to overcome capitalism is celebrated by the ideologists of the information revolution as the rise of a new, ‘frictionless’ capitalism.

Hardt and Negri’s analysis has some weak points, which help us understand how capitalism has been able to survive what should have been (in classic Marxist terms) a new organisation of production that rendered it obsolete. They underestimate the extent to which today’s capitalism has successfully (in the short term at least) privatised the general intellect itself, as well as the extent to which, more than the bourgeoisie, workers themselves are becoming superfluous (with greater and greater numbers becoming not just temporarily unemployed but structurally unemployable).

If the old capitalism ideally involved an entrepreneur who invested (his own or borrowed) money into production that he organised and ran, and then reaped the profit from it, a new ideal type is emerging today: no longer the entrepreneur who owns his company, but the expert manager (or a managerial board presided over by a CEO) who runs a company owned by banks (also run by managers who don’t own the bank) or dispersed investors. In this new ideal type of capitalism, the old bourgeoisie, rendered non-functional, is refunctionalised as salaried management: the members of the new bourgeoisie get wages, and even if they own part of their company, earn stocks as part of their remuneration (‘bonuses’ for their ‘success’).

This new bourgeoisie still appropriates surplus value, but in the (mystified) form of what has been called ‘surplus wage’: they are paid rather more than the proletarian ‘minimum wage’ (an often mythic point of reference whose only real example in today’s global economy is the wage of a sweatshop worker in China or Indonesia), and it is this distinction from common proletarians which determines their status. The bourgeoisie in the classic sense thus tends to disappear: capitalists reappear as a subset of salaried workers, as managers who are qualified to earn more by virtue of their competence (which is why pseudo-scientific ‘evaluation’ is crucial: it legitimises disparities). Far from being limited to managers, the category of



workers earning a surplus wage extends to all sorts of experts, administrators, public servants, doctors, lawyers, journalists, intellectuals and artists. The surplus takes two forms: more money (for managers etc), but also less work and more free time (for – some – intellectuals, but also for state administrators etc).

The evaluative procedure used to decide which workers receive a surplus wage is an arbitrary mechanism of power and ideology, with no serious link to actual competence; the surplus wage exists not for economic but for political reasons: to maintain a ‘middle class’ for the purpose of social stability. The arbitrariness of social hierarchy is not a mistake, but the whole point, with the arbitrariness of evaluation playing an analogous role to the arbitrariness of market success. Violence threatens to explode not when there is too much contingency in the social space, but when one tries to eliminate contingency. In *La Marque du sacré*, Jean-Pierre Dupuy conceives hierarchy as one of four procedures (‘dispositifs symboliques’) whose function is to make the relationship of superiority non-humiliating: *hierarchy* itself (an externally imposed order that allows me to experience my lower social status as independent of my inherent value); *demythification* (the ideological procedure which demonstrates that society is not a meritocracy but the product of objective social struggles, enabling me to avoid the painful conclusion that someone else’s superiority is the result of his merit and achievements); *contingency* (a similar mechanism, by which we come to understand that our position on the social scale depends on a natural and social lottery; the lucky ones are those born with the right genes in rich families); and *complexity* (uncontrollable forces have unpredictable consequences; for instance, the invisible hand of the market may lead to my failure and my neighbour’s success, even if I work much harder and am much more intelligent). Contrary to appearances, these mechanisms don’t contest or threaten hierarchy, but make it palatable, since ‘what triggers the turmoil of envy is the idea that the other deserves his good luck and not the opposite idea – which is the only one that can be openly expressed.’ Dupuy draws from this premise the conclusion that it is a great mistake to think that a reasonably just society which also perceives itself as just will be free of resentment: on the contrary, it is in such societies that those who occupy inferior positions will find an outlet for their hurt pride in violent outbursts of resentment.

Connected to this is the impasse faced by today’s China: the ideal goal of Deng’s reforms was to introduce capitalism without a bourgeoisie (since it would form the new ruling class); now, however, China’s leaders are making the painful discovery that capitalism without the settled hierarchy enabled by the existence of a bourgeoisie generates permanent instability. So what path will China take? Former Communists generally are emerging as the most efficient managers of capitalism because their historical enmity towards the bourgeoisie as a class perfectly fits the tendency of today’s capitalism to become a managerial capitalism without a bourgeoisie – in both cases, as Stalin put it long ago, ‘cadres decide everything.’ (An

interesting difference between today’s China and Russia: in Russia, university teachers are ridiculously underpaid – they are de facto already part of the proletariat – while in China they are provided with a comfortable surplus wage to guarantee their docility.)

The notion of surplus wage also throws new light on the continuing ‘anti-capitalist’ protests. In times of crisis, the obvious candidates for ‘belt-tightening’ are the lower levels of the salaried bourgeoisie: political protest is their only recourse if they are to avoid joining the proletariat. Although their protests are nominally directed against the brutal logic of the market, they are in effect protesting about the gradual erosion of their (politically) privileged economic place. Ayn Rand has a fantasy in *Atlas Shrugged* of striking ‘creative’ capitalists, a fantasy that finds its perverted realisation in today’s strikes, most of which are held by a ‘salaried bourgeoisie’ driven by fear of losing their surplus wage. These are not proletarian protests, but protests against the threat of being reduced to proletarians. Who dares strike today, when having a permanent job is itself a privilege? Not low-paid workers in (what remains of) the textile industry etc, but those privileged workers who have guaranteed jobs (teachers, public transport workers, police). This also accounts for the wave of student protests: their main motivation is arguably the fear that higher education will no longer guarantee them a surplus wage in later life.

At the same time it is clear that the huge revival of protest over the past year, from the Arab Spring to Western Europe, from Occupy Wall Street to China, from Spain to Greece, should not be dismissed merely as a revolt of the salaried bourgeoisie. Each case should be taken on its own merits. The student protests against university reform in the UK were clearly different from August’s riots, which were a consumerist carnival of destruction, a true outburst of the excluded. One could argue that the uprisings in Egypt began in part as a revolt of the salaried bourgeoisie (with educated young people protesting about their lack of prospects), but this was only one aspect of a larger protest against an oppressive regime. On the other hand, the protest didn’t really mobilise poor workers and peasants and the Islamists’ electoral victory makes clear the narrow social base of the original secular protest. Greece is a special case: in the last decades, a new salaried bourgeoisie (especially in the over-extended state administration) was created thanks to EU financial help, and the protests were motivated in large part by the threat of an end to this.

The proletarianisation of the lower salaried bourgeoisie is matched at the opposite extreme by the irrationally high remuneration of top managers and bankers (irrational since, as investigations have demonstrated in the US, it tends to be inversely proportional to a company’s success). Rather than submit these trends to moralising criticism, we should read them as signs that the capitalist system is no longer capable of self-regulated stability – it threatens, in other words, to run out of control.







have traditionally conceived them. Markets are defined as ways to allocate scarce resources, and capitalism is in fact not just a scarcity "allocation" system but also a scarcity engineering system, which can only accumulate capital by constantly reproducing and expanding conditions of scarcity.

Where there is no tension between supply and demand, there can be no market and no capital accumulation. What peer producers are doing, for now mostly producing intangible entities such as knowledge, software and design, is to create an abundance of easily reproduced information and actionable knowledge.

This cannot be directly translated into market value, because it is not at all scarce - it's over-abundant. And this activity, moreover, is done by knowledge workers, whose ranks are steadily expanding. This over-supply threatens to make knowledge workers' jobs precarious. Hence, an increased exodus of productive capacities, in the form of direct use value production, outside the existing system of monetisation, which only operates at its margins. In the past, whenever such an exodus occurred - of slaves in the decaying Roman Empire, or of serfs in the waning Middle Ages - that is precisely the time when conditions were set for major societal and economic changes.

Indeed, without a core reliance on capital, commodities and labour, it is hard to imagine a continuation of the capitalist system.

The problem is this: internet collaboration has enabled the creation of use value in a way that totally bypasses the normal functioning of our economic system. Normally, increases in productivity are somehow rewarded, and these rewards enable consumers to derive an income and buy products.

But this is no longer happening. Facebook and Google users create commercial value for their platforms, but only very indirectly. And they are not at all rewarded for their own value creation. Since what they are creating is not what is commodified on the market for scarce goods, these value creators do not receive income. Social media platforms are exposing an important fault line in our economic system.

We have to link this emerging social economy, based on sharing creative expression, with the more authentic field of commons-oriented peer production, as expressed in the open-source and "fair use" open-content economy, which one [estimate](#) said made up one-sixth of US GDP. There is also no doubt that one of the key ingredients of China's success so far has been the combination of the open-source - such as the country's domestic "[Shanzhai](#)" economy - together with the patent-free policies that are imposed on foreign investors. This has guaranteed an open, innovative commons for much of Chinese industry.

Even as the open-source economy becomes the default way to create software, and even as it creates companies that reach a revenue of more than \$1bn, such as Red Hat, the overall effect is still deflationary. It has been [estimated](#) that open-source annually destroys \$60bn in revenues for the proprietary sector.

Thus, the open-source economy destroys more proprietary software value than it replaces. Even as it creates an explosion of use value, its monetary value decreases.

### Open-source manufacturing

The same effects occur when the shared innovation commons approach is used in physical production, where it combines an open-source approach with distributed machinery and capital allocation (using techniques such as crowd-funding and social lending platforms, like [Kickstarter](#)).

For example, the [Wikispeed SGT01](#), a car that received a five-star security rating and can attain a fuel efficiency of 100 miles per gallon (roughly 42.5 kilometres per litre), was developed by a team of volunteers in just three months. The car is being sold for only \$29,000, about a quarter of what a traditional industrial automobile firm would charge, and for which it would have needed at least five years of development and billions of dollars.

[Local Motors](#), a rapidly growing crowd-sourced car company, claims to develop automobiles five times faster than Detroit, with 100 times less capital, but WikiSpeed has achieved even faster design and production times. The WikiSpeed car is designed for modularity, using sophisticated software development techniques (such as agile, scrum, and extreme programming), an open design, and local production by garages, using distributed manufacturing techniques.

And [Arduino](#), an open-source electronics prototyping platform, works similarly to WikiSpeed and is driving prices down in its sector. If Marcin Jakubowski's [Open Source Ecology](#) project is successful, this will happen for at least 40 different types of machinery. In every field where an open-source manufacturing alternative develops - and I predict that they will be developed in every single field - there will be similar pricing and income pressures on mainstream

Is Facebook really worth \$100bn - and where is this value coming from? [GALLO/GETTY]

**Chiang Mai, Thailand** - Does Facebook exploit its users? And where is the \$100bn in the company's estimated value coming from?

This is not a new debate. It resurfaces regularly in the blogosphere and academic circles, ever since Tiziana Terranova coined the term "Free Labour" to indicate a new form of capitalist exploitation of unpaid labour - firstly referring to the viewers of classic broadcast media, and now to the new generation of social media participants on sites such as Facebook. The argument can be summarised very succinctly by the catch phrase: "If it's free, then you are the product being sold."

This term was recently relaunched in an article by University of Essex academics Christopher Land and Steffen Böhm, entitled "[They are exploiting us! Why we all work for Facebook for free](#)". In this mini-essay, they make a very strong claim that "we can certainly position the users of Facebook as labourers. If labour is understood as 'value producing activity', then updating your status, liking a website, or 'friending' someone, creates Facebook's basic commodity."

This line of argument is misleading, however, because it conflates two types of value creation that were already recognised as distinct by 18th century political economists. The distinction is between use value and exchange value. For thousands of years, under conditions of non-capitalist production, the majority of the working population directly produced "use value" - either for themselves as subsistence farmers, or as tributes to the managerial class of the day. It is only under capitalism that a majority of the working population produces "exchange value" by selling their labour to firms. The difference between what we are paid and what the market pays for the products we are making is the "surplus value".

But Facebook users are not workers producing commodities for a wage, and Facebook is not selling these commodities on a market to create surplus value.

Indeed, Facebook users are *not* directly creating exchange value at all, but instead communicative use value. What Facebook does is to enable this pooling of sharing and collaboration around their platform - and by enabling, framing and "controlling" that activity, they create a pool of attention. It is this pool of attention which is sold to advertisers, for an [estimated](#) \$3.2bn per year, which is barely \$3.79 in ad revenue per user.

We can, of course, argue that Facebook does a lot more than just selling the attention. For instance, their knowledge of our social behaviour, down to the individual level, has undoubted strategic value - for political power players and commercial firms alike. But is this surplus value really worth \$100bn? That remains a speculative bet. For the moment, it's likely that the nearly one billion users of Facebook do not find the \$3.79 in ad revenue per user very exploitative, especially since they do not pay to use Facebook, and are using the website voluntarily. That said, there is a price to pay for not using Facebook, in terms of relative social isolation from their peers who are users.

### Engineering scarcity

What is important, however, is that Facebook is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a much larger trend in our society: an exponential rise in the creation of use value by productive publics, or "[producers](#)", as Axel Bruns calls them. It is important to understand that this creates a huge problem for a capitalist system, but also for workers as we



economic models.

### 'Collaborative consumption'

Another expression of the sharing economy is collaborative consumption. As Rachel Botsman and Lisa Gansky have demonstrated in their recent books - *What's Mine is Yours* and *The Mesh*, respectively - there is a rapidly growing sharing economy developing through product-service systems, sharing marketplaces and collaborative lifestyles.

For example, it's estimated that there are about 460 million homes in the developed world, and that each home has, on average, \$3,000 worth of unused items available. There is clearly economic benefit to be had by using these idle resources. Much of it will not be rented, however, but swapped and bartered for free. Even the paid sharing economy will have a depressive effect on the buying of new products.

Such developments are good for the planet and good for humanity, but the larger question is: are they good for capitalism?

What will happen with capitalism given social media-based exchanges, commons-based production of software and hardware, and collaborative consumption, on an increasingly massive scale?

What happens if more and more of our time goes into producing use value - a fraction of which creates monetary value - but there is not a substantial return of income to the use value producers?

The financial crisis beginning in 2008, far from diminishing the enthusiasm for sharing and peer production, is in fact accelerating the adoption of such practices. This is not just a problem for the increasingly precarious working class, but also for capitalism itself, which is seeing its opportunities for accumulation and expansion dry up.

Not only is the world faced with a global resource crisis, it is also facing a crisis of intensive development, because value creators are increasingly income-less. The knowledge economy turns out to be a pipe dream, because what is abundant cannot sustain market dynamics.

Thus we have an exponential rise in the creation of use value, but only a linear increase in the creation of monetary value. If workers have less and less income, who can buy the commodities that are offered for sale by companies? This, in a nutshell, is the crisis of value that we are facing as humanity. It is a challenge just as big as climate change or increases in social inequality.

The meltdown of 2008 was a prefiguration of this crisis. Since the advent of neoliberalism, workers' wages have been stagnating and purchasing power was maintained only by an over-extension of credit throughout society. This was the first phase of the knowledge economy, in which only capital had access to networks, which it used to create globally coordinated multinationals.

As the knowledge society grew in size, more and more of businesses' value consisted of intangible, not physical, assets. The neoliberal stock market and its speculative excesses can be seen as a way to evaluate the amount of intangible value that is added to the stock's value by human co-operation. This bubble had to burst.

The second phase of the knowledge society, in which networks are diffused throughout society and allow productive publics to be directly engaged in peer production, creates an additional layer of problems. Add to the wage stagnation and the exodus out of wage labour that peer-based use value creation causes, and we can see that the problem is not solvable within the present paradigm. Is there a solution?

There is - but that is for the next installment. The solution involves an adaptation of capitalism to peer production, but also opens up the avenues for a transcendence of capitalism.

**Michel Bauwens is a theorist, writer and a founder of the P2P (Peer-to-Peer) Foundation.**

**Follow Michel on Twitter: @MBauwens**

**The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.**

Source: Al Jazeera



## Michel Bauwens

Michel Bauwens is a theorist, writer, and a founder of the P2P (Peer-to-Peer) Foundation.

## 'Occupy' as a business model: The emerging open-source civilisation

The Occupy Wall Street movement is a model for a new economic paradigm, in which value is first created by communities.

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### The free software economy

Before you shrug this off as a one-time utopian experiment, let's consider the larger institutional logic of the now-mature free software economy, which we can fairly say is the standard for present and future software production.

In commons-oriented peer production (first theorised by Yochai Benkler in his *The Wealth of Networks*, a "p2p" updating of Adam Smith), core value creation occurs through contributors to a shared innovation pool, a commons of knowledge, software or design. The contributors may be volunteers or paid employees. Importantly, even paid contributors add to the common pool. Why?

Because shared innovation makes an enormous difference in costs (give a brick, get a house), and it is also hyper-competitive. A [recent study](#) by the makers of the Open Governance Index, which measures the openness of software projects, confirms that more open projects do much better in the long-run than more closed projects. In other words, it makes sound business sense: open businesses tend to drive out business models based on proprietary IP. So it doesn't matter whether you are a "commonist" free software developer, or a capitalist shareholder of IBM. Both sides benefit and they outcompete or "outcooperate" traditional proprietary competitors.



**In-depth coverage of the global movement**

The second player in open-source software production are the so-called FLOSS Foundations, such as the Apache, Gnome, Eclipse, Perl Foundation and the Wikimedia Foundation. These non-profits do not manage or "command and control" the production process, but enable it. In other words, they maintain the infrastructure of co-operation, just as the provisioning Working Groups enable the occupation to continue to operate.

Finally, just as with the street vendors of Zuccotti Park, successful open-source projects create an economy of players that create added value on top of the commons, through all kinds of derivative services, which create monetary exchange value on the marketplace. They sell their labour and consulting prowess, training and integration. IBM, for example, managed to overcome its long-term decline by transforming itself from a hardware company into a giant Linux consulting firm.

What is the relationship between this entrepreneurial coalition and the commons from which they derive their value? For one, they turn Linux into what is partly a "corporate commons", as explained by Doc Searls. The Linux Journal editor [explains](#):

*"Linux has become an economic joint venture of a set of companies, in the same way that Visa is an economic joint venture of a set of financial institutions. As the Linux Foundation report makes clear, the companies are participating for a diverse set of commercial reasons."*

A Linux Foundation report on the work on the Linux kernel makes this [very clear](#):

*"Over 70 per cent of all kernel development is demonstrably done by developers who are being paid for their work. Over 14 per cent is contributed by developers who are known to be unpaid and independent, and 13 per cent by people who may or may not be paid (unknown), so the amount done by paid workers may be as high as 85 per cent. The Linux kernel, then, is largely the product of professionals, not volunteers."*

But this is not the whole story. Timothy Lee [explains](#) that the corporatisation of Linux has not changed its underlying organisational model:

*"...What matters is the way open-source projects are organised internally. In a traditional software project, there's a project manager who decides what features the product will have and allocates employees to work on various features. In contrast, there's nobody directing the overall development of the Linux kernel. Yes, Linus Torvalds and his lieutenants decide which patches will ultimately make it into the kernel, but the Red Hat, IBM and Novell employees who work on the Linux kernel don't take their orders from them. They work on whatever they (and their respective clients) think is most important, and Torvalds's only authority is deciding whether the patches they submit are good enough to make it into the kernel."*

### Community first, business second

In Zuccotti Park, protesters created an 'ethical economy' based on the group's shared values [GALLO/GETTY]

**Chiang Mai, Thailand - Last week** I discussed the value crisis of contemporary capitalism: the broken feedback loop between the productive publics who create exponentially increasing use value, and those who capture this value through social media - but do not return these income streams to the value "producers".

In other words, the current so-called "knowledge economy" is a sham and a pipe dream - because abundant goods do not fare well in a market economy. For the sake of the world's workers, who live in an increasingly precarious situation, is there a way out of this conundrum? Can we restore the broken feedback loop?

Strangely enough, the answer may be found in the recent political movement that is Occupy, because along with "[peer producing their political commons](#)", they also exemplified new business and value practices. These practices were, in fact, remarkably similar to the institutional ecology that is already practiced in producing free software and open hardware communities. This is not a coincidence.

Let's look back at the workings of Occupy Wall Street at Zuccotti Park, when it was still in operation in the autumn. At its centre was a productive public, reaching consensus through the General Assembly and offering all kinds of templates ("Mic Check", "Protest Camping", "Working Groups", et cetera) which, in a true open-source way, could be copied and practiced by similar communities the world over, but also modified to suit local needs.

This community had all kinds of needs: physical needs, such as food, shelter and healthcare. Did they resort to the market economy for this?

The answer isn't a simple yes or no. Occupy Wall Street set up working groups to find solutions to their physical needs. The economy was considered as a provisioning system (as explained in Marvin Brown's wonderful book, *Civilising the Economy*), and it was the "citizens", organised in these working groups, who decided which provisioning system was appropriate given their ethical values.

**America's Occupy Wall Street turns online for basics**

For example, organic farmers from Vermont provided free food to the campers, but this had a negative side effect: the local street vendors, generally poor immigrants, did not fare too well with everyone getting free food. The occupiers cared about the vendors and so they set up an Occupy Wall Street Vendor Project, which raised funds to buy food from the vendors.

Bingo: in one swoop, OWS created a well-functioning ethical economy that included a market dynamic, but that also functioned in harmony with the value system of the occupiers. What is crucial here is that it was the citizens who decided on the most appropriate provisioning system - and not the property and money owners in an economy divorced from ethical values.



Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organisations* **stresses** that companies that work with Linux, such as IBM, "have given up the right to manage the projects they are paying for, and their competitors have immediate access to everything they do. It's not IBM's product".

This, then, is the point I want to make: that even with shareholder companies allied with peer production, the community's value creation is still at the core of the process, and that the entrepreneurial coalition, to a substantial degree, already follows this new logic - in which the community is primary and business secondary.

For sure, in the present political economy, a key problem persists. Though the commons create core value, it cannot reproduce itself, apart from commoners becoming either entrepreneurs or wage labourers for for-profit companies. In other words, the commons remains dependent on the social reproduction of capital. But unlike the social media logic we discussed last week, at least here there is a form of payment and funding occurring, so that the value "producers" do indeed generate an income. Here, in this model, to a substantial degree, the feedback loop has been restored (though perhaps insufficiently).

So why is it happening here and not in social media?

The answer derives from the network logic of how peers are associating themselves. In social media, we are there as individuals, sharing our creative expression, There are weak links among ourselves and as a result, we need third-party platforms to create infrastructures for us.

### Dolphins and sharks

In the free software world, however, and in Wikipedia, we are creating joint objects of value that bind us together, and so make us into a community. These communities then create their own sovereign associations to which associated entrepreneurs are beholden. However, we have to acknowledge that for-profit companies with shareholders will always have to contend with an interior struggle between their inner "dolphin" (which wants to engage in "co-opetition" with the commons), and their inner "shark" (which wants to exploit or enclose the commons). These contradictory behaviours are well-documented in the open-source software world.

To improve the situation in social media, we need peer-producing communities to create their own social media infrastructure - as Occupy is now undertaking with its ambitious Global Square project, whose aim is to ultimately replace Facebook with a civic network.

Occupy Wall Street protesters march on NY stock exchange

But in peer production, we need a further hack as well. Instead of associating with shareholding companies, why not create our own entities: ethical company structures, in which the commons values are embedded within its legal structure, and do not have to be imposed from the outside? In other words, where the "invisible hand" needs not be theorised as an outside force, but is a clearly active "visible hand" that drives each individual, but commons-oriented, enterprise?

Dmytri Kleiner, who calls himself a "venture communist", has proposed a clever new "**peer production**" license, which would open up the commons to ethical companies and other commoners - but not to for-profits, who would need to pay. This would create a self-sustaining feedback loop in an emerging commons-oriented counter-economy. Las Indias, another network of commons enterprises, proposes the creation of mutualist "**phyles**": community-oriented, global co-operatives, operating much like the Venetian and Florentine guilds during the Renaissance.

### 'Occupy' as business model

In the title of this editorial, I describe Occupy as a business model and link it to the possibility of a new civilisational model. We can do this by expanding from the already-existing institutional logic of peer production in knowledge, software and hardware, to a vision of the macro-economy.

Today, we assume that value is created by for-profit companies and conceive of civil society as a "remainder" category: it's what we do when we come home, exhausted after our paid work. This is reflected in the language we use to describe civil society, when we call them non-profits or non-governmental.



This system as a whole is managed by a state. But the social democratic welfare state has increasingly become a corporate-welfare state, in which the gains are privatised and the losses socialised. In other words, the state has become an extension of the corporation and is less and less a servant of the citizenry. We can see the progress of this model in how the so-called "troika" (consisting of the European Union, European Central Bank and the IMF) is now imposing slash-and-burn politics in Greece.

Occupy and open-source models illuminate a new possible reality, in which the democratic civic sphere, productive commons and a vibrant market can co-exist for mutual benefit:

- At the core of value creation are various commons, where innovations are open for all to share and to build upon;
- These commons are protected through non-profit civic associations, which empower that social production;
- Around the commons emerges a vibrant commons-oriented economy comprised of ethical companies, whose legal structures tie them to the values and goals of the commons communities, not to creating private profit.

Where these three circles intersect, citizens decide on the optimal shape of their provisioning systems.

This model can exist as a submodel within capitalism, and to some extent already does so in the present system, as the open-source software business ecology. It could also become, with some necessary hacks, the core logic of a new civilisation. Occupy has not just shown us prefigurative politics, but prefigurative economics as well.

**Michel Bauwens is a theorist, writer and a founder of the P2P (Peer-to-Peer) Foundation.**

**Follow him on Twitter: @MBauwens**

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Source: Al Jazeera

# A WILD ACCUMULATION

Federica Bueti

## A Wild

To be the wild has its own limits and can become a serious trouble over time, but I like this idea. The mysterious aura that surrounds the troublemaker character has always exercised a certain fascination. Actually, I think I've been the wild troublemaker for a long time and I am saying this with a bit of pride—I should be clear that there is no modesty in these words as the wild has nothing to lose or conquer, nothing for which it is necessary to gain any legitimation. It is society which asks the wild to find a position within its boundaries and generally this is the most uncomfortable of positions. When a character of such caliber enters the stage, there are few spaces left for good sentiment—not because the wild is unable to feel and to sympathize with the rest of the world, but simply because the wild is generally discharged as a temperamental whose actions, behaviors, and emotions cannot be controlled and contained by society; therefore, they cannot be classified in the sphere of the good.

Indeed, there is a general suspicion when something cannot fit what society has established as the degree of normality to which something is considered acceptable or proper. Sometimes, this suspicion can also produce violence—psychological and physical—when it seals off the space of action of the wild, as if to say: “if you try to crack the system, to provoke irritation to the adversary; if your boiled frothy exuberance exceeds the container which confines it, then somebody will be punished. If not by a human being, then surely by the faith.” The faith? I bet that if I could still have some faith in something, the first thing I would save is the wild. After all, faith is wild and this makes it suspicious: if your faith is in the ordering-controlled-puritan structure, it is okay; on the contrary, if your faith, as this is the case, lies in the uncontrolled-mystical-unstructured nature of faith, then it must be fought before it becomes a contagious and highly dangerous virus.

Have you ever asked yourself why in Western culture the wild is always represented with the same repeated behavioral pattern? Do you think it is just an innocent game of entertaining roles? It is precisely the goodness of the wild which this kind of representation puts to fire, as if the pyramidal-moving-toward-the-spiralesque becoming of society would only need this character to legitimize its repressive side. In the world game of balances and adjustments, what is it that makes the wild wild? And what is the purpose? In pop culture, “the wild” has often been depicted as the torture-becoming-human or an angelic figure with an evil inside. The memories of my childhood associated

this with the character Rosso Malpelo the Nasty Foxfur described by Giovanni Verga in one of his short stories:

*He was called Nasty Foxfur because he had red hair. And he had red hair because he was a bad, malicious boy, who gave every promise of ending up a complete villain. And so all the men at the red sand-pit called him Foxfur. And even his mother, hearing him called that so often, had almost forgotten the name he was baptized by.*

Unfortunately, the foxfur can only have a place in society as the carrier of disastrous events and the sacrificial scapegoat for his community. Nothing else is worth mentioning. There is little, in fact, behind this representation, except when the character becomes its own caricature so that we can laugh of him/her and in this cathartic moment atone for our sins. So, the destiny of the wild is to perish. To rehearse again with Verga:

*Knowing that he was Foxfur, he was prepared to be as bad as he could be, and if an accident occurred, or if a workman mislaid his tools, or a donkey broke a leg, or part of the gallery fell away, they always knew it was his doing. And in fact he took all the blows without complaining, just like the donkeys, which take them and arch their backs but go on doing things in their own way.”*

Then, after many vicissitudes, a certain “goodness” comes into being at the end of the plot, when the wild is finally confronted with the wildness of the world, which makes him/her to appear less and less delirious compared to the forces that shape reality. Finally, in the best cases, the character is redeemed. But when the plot is unwrapped, it is often too late. Somebody has to pay for the wounds provoked by the terrible (existential, social, political) battle. But in all this barking, grinding, attacking, fighting, and carrying on of the battle, the entire moral plot turns into the discovery that after all, the barking-grinding-wild-creatures are harmless—like little ants, they accumulate the trash of the world, resigned to their destiny as a vacuum-cleaner of all the unspoken and outspoken sins and injustices, all the trashy things that freely circulate within the space of the community. Sometimes, the wild has to accept to become this sort of monstrous cleaner to keep reality on the move.

Another possible reading of the wild is to imagine the character too focused on his/her own sense of injustice or grip on the feeling of dispossession. This is another cliché: Think of a young and talented student, for instance, who doesn't want to listen to the kind and



sincere advice offered by his/her professor. In this case, there is very little that can be said or done. The more one gets close, the more one tries to show a certain openness and will to help solving the unsolvable-existential complex, the less one gets what one wants, meaning the expression of the student's full, bold, unrestrained potential. Sometimes, the method of subtly entering the psychology of the wild can be successful, but there are two main risks: (1) the implementation of a sense of I-am-the-dispossessed-who-nobody-can-understand and (2) the eventuality of channelling the water stream wildness into a pond-like structure, where the duck is happily put to rest.

In both cases, however, the wildness is modulated (when it isn't suffocated) by forms of measuring: In the first case, the implementation of an illusory sense of difference where "difference" becomes measurable in terms of a me and a you, the bad and the good, the inside and the outside. In the second case, the necessity of channeling a tumultuous flow into the tight, pre-established, and pre-organized-according-to-the-proper bounds produces only containment. In both cases, there is a desire (projected on the wild) for a form of inclusion in a system of credits and debits that puts the wild in a box and rewards the professor. Still, both from the side of the wild and from that of the professor (or any other representative of the good society), there is also the possibility of adopting a third option, the giving-up buildup tactic: instead of seeking for a justice upon or for the wild, let's start from the assumption that whether we like it or not, whether this creates disappointment or generates a sense of frustration, WILD IS WILD, and to be wild has its own privilege.

So, instead of adopting a measure to contain the wild and treat it as a problem, why don't we imagine letting it grow, expand, transform, and accumulate freely, chaotically, and thereby wildly? If it makes sense to believe in the cliché that a certain "goodness" comes into being unveiling the not-so-bad personality of the wild toward the end of the plot, then something good must be in there. Of course, that is the building-up part. If I admit that I cannot govern or channel wildness, I will have to admit that society cannot absorb this kind of exuberance so easily except through transforming the wild into a cathartic figure that becomes the stigmatization of the dialectic of justice-injustice and proper-improper. The cliché, indeed, functions exactly when it creates a stereotypical position that enables a series of pre-established logical combinations to confirm and re-affirm a certain reality. It goes back and forth—one figure serves and becomes the victim of another one, endlessly.

### ...accumulation

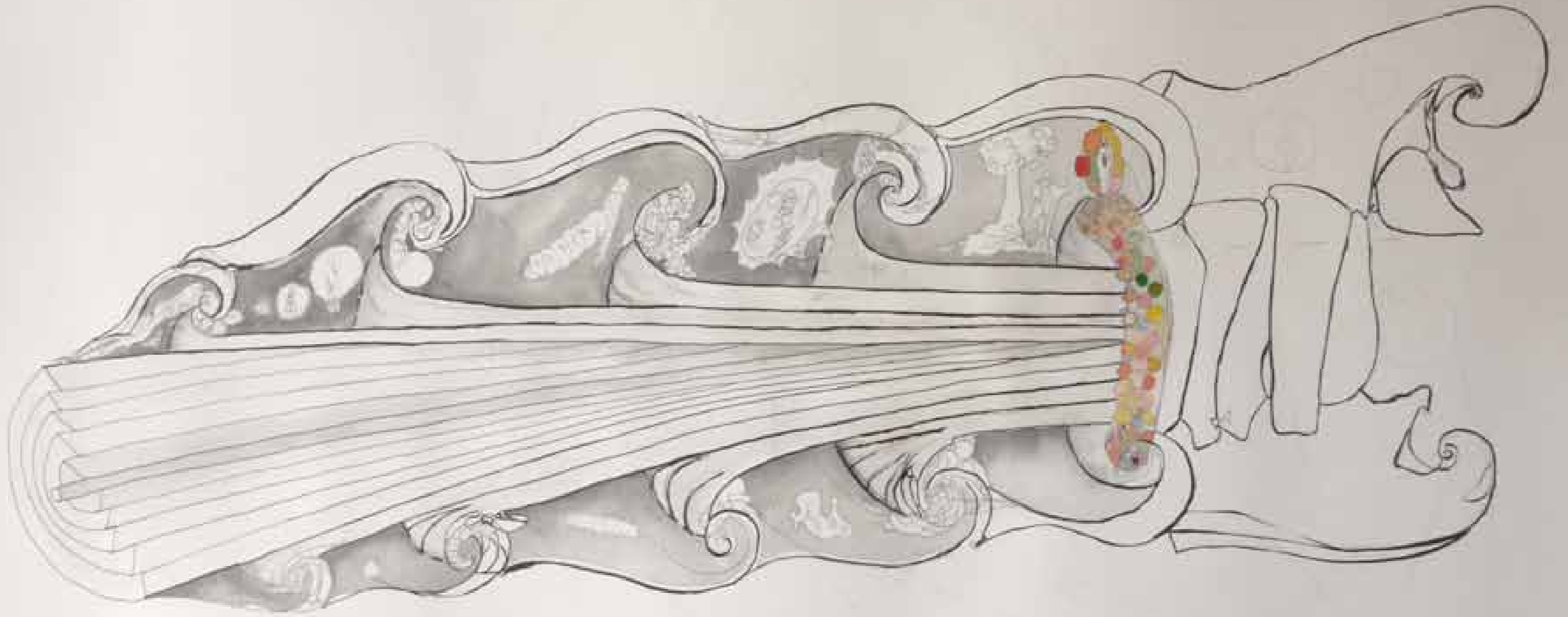
How boring would a structure be that only believes in the power of reason, in the amassing of objects of value, in creation and concentration of wealth, and in the specialization of labor! Can you imagine that? A place where the only reasons to do and to make would be to provide an excuse for the benefit of the few to the detriment of the majority! Oh how unjust and sad it would be to observe a sea of small heads patiently nodding at the stimulation of an electroshock! It's a recurrent nightmare this one: to see the detriment of the human being caused by an excess of scarcity—a human being-like desert, emptied of any vital function, where no plant nor flower nor animal can survive! Oh, what a catastrophe! There was a time of catastrophe when those things happened all the time and society believed in the accumulation of objects and wealth as the measure of progress, the great progress of HUMANITY. There was a time when profit was extracted by waste, when the unproductivity couldn't find a name and place in the productive cycle until at some point it also became a means of production.

Everything was perfectly functioning according to the principle of the endless exploitation of resources and labor forces in the name of regenerating ever more capital. Initially, accumulation was more a matter of saving, but then it became the means for speculation, or the generation of a surplus value that could be reinvested and generate new capital that could be re-invested and become new capital, another capital, a newer capital, the newest capital, and so on.

There was a time when, according to Adam Smith, *"There were some people that were hard working and some people who were not. Some people who could be bothered, and some people who could not be bothered. And the result of that was that, bit by bit, those who were hard working, and could be bothered, accumulated some wealth. And eventually, those who could not be bothered, could not accumulate wealth, and in the end, in order to survive, preferred, actually, to give up their labour power as a commodity, in return for a living wage."*

There was also a time in which Karl Marx sustained that *"the whole purpose of primitive accumulation is to privatize the means of production, so that the exploiting owners can make money from the surplus labor of those who, lacking other means, must work for them."*

And there was another moment in which Marx's added: *"The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the laborers from all property in the means by which they can realize*





*their labor. As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale.”*

In one of the revolutions brought on by the nth disaster, the means of production became language and communication and the labor became immaterial labor. Accumulation became accumulation of knowledge and information and the entire capitalist system turned into the radicalization of its own caricature—an abstract entity called neoliberal-post-fordist-post-autonomy-post-post society. Not really a subject with a body, but the simulacra of an idea; a total abstraction thinner than fog but ticker than air.

But this nth revolution didn't really make things better; the progress of HUMANITY couldn't get better than this, not for any intrinsic reason, but for a lack of favorable conditions. Indeed, people couldn't recognize each other anymore, they had become integral parts of this abstract entity, so their bodies were emptied of physical substance—the only organ was a spherical electrified box containing a flux of information, ideas, concepts, notions, and a small, cheap mechanism organizing the traffic of those fluxes and sending info to a main structure. But, the cheap mechanism planted into these electric boxes had a significant problem: it only could function and transfer information when communicating with the central system—no communication was possible between one part and another. This piece of micro-nuclear-engineering was constructed following the Leibnizian model of the “monad,” but the engineers apparently interpreted the German mathematician and philosopher too literally.

According to Leibniz, monads were elementary particles with blurred perception of each other. Monads are “substantial forms of being”: they are eternal, indecomposable, individual, subject to their own laws, un-interacting, and each reflecting the entire universe in a pre-established harmony. Under the guise of such philosophical theory and fascinated by the idea of creating a system of interaction that could have un-interacting function, the engineers promoted the efficacy of a new kind of society, and they promoted a new form of materiality. Like jellyfish, quasi-invisible human beings were floating immersed in the liquid of this new materiality, but this system of incommunicability quickly showed its weakest parts and none of its promises were accomplished. In few decades, the entire system was falling apart. But unlike other eras, from each collapsing chunk a new life was born—the more the pieces fell apart, the more new forms of life were born, proliferated, and reoccupied physical space. None of the engineers were able to explain the phenomenon; they were all enormously surprised

as they were expecting a new catastrophic tabula rasa that would have required the invention of a new device and a new theory to be promoted. However, a weird, part-animal, part-human, part-machine creature—who had survived all the various passage from the body to the soul, from the primitive accumulation to the neoliberal form of accumulation, and to whom Leibniz's theories were quite familiar—had a premonition, which could have cost him the accusation of being a wild creature, and decided to share this with what remained of the old order of human beings.

Since the problem was very complex, this tripartite creature decided to explain the happening to his fellow tripartite creatures through a practical example. He said: *“The primitive forms of capitalism could be associated with little ants slowly and strategically moving back and forth from the outside world—where the waste of the human beings could be collected—to the inside of the ants' regions, where this waste was accumulated and transformed into a source of survival. But, the continually extending nature of such a system transformed ants into spiders that accumulated dust to expand their ultra-sophisticated web. Transparent as it was, the web couldn't really be detected so easily, so that in a few decades the spiders took over the entire system making more and more complicated the access to the core structure of the web, meaning the control room. But, the web became so expansive and complicated that the spiders couldn't control it anymore. After various attempts to re-establish the control over the system, they discovered that something else was growing and proliferating within the stretched cable of the dust-structure. Spiders ignored the phenomenon for a while, avoiding to ask questions or to find a solution. Ignorance was a good way of avoiding problems. But they didn't consider—the weird creature said—the fact that the accumulation they had produced decade after decade, experiment after experiment, was an accumulation of knowledge and information. Even though they had applied a Leibnizian system to create disconnection between the different small parts that composed the complex structure, this didn't prevent each molecule, each monad, from developing new capacities of adaptation to the new environment. This explains the phenomenon of this proliferation, but”—the creature continued—“these new forms of life will grow only if and where they meet the energies of a wild function. So, Sirs and Madams, there is no option, if we want to change something, if we want to start talking to each other again, if we aim for a different kind of society freed from the monopoly of the spiders-engineers and from their interpretation of a Leibnizian model—we need a wild function.*

*The 'wild function' generates a surplus of experience, transforming the world into a pulsating body that grows and expands, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. This experience sets each living*



*being free to become and the becoming creates autonomous zones where such living beings proliferate—transforming the existing system into a new structure and a new system.”*

I don't know how the story ended, but I've thought about the enormous waste of energies of being the wild and I think there is something—which I cannot really define—of worth in all this: days, months, years, and decades have been spent exorcizing denial, refusal, destruction, resistance, negotiations, and compromises. Then, after all the investment in wasting energies, a new moment has come when from all these activities and efforts—a new matter, a new subjectivity, and a new reality has been shaped through the accumulation of this waste. The moment has come and a new continent has formed in the accumulation of waste. Yes, the waste—the creation of an unproductive situation at expense of others—is considered a prerogative of the wild. Isn't it like that? Doesn't this “unproductivity” provoke indignation and resentment in many? Unfortunately, for the pride of good-boy and good-girl, to whom the wild appears sometimes as a disgrace, for others it is a good occasion to show and confirm their “pious” attitude. Without the wild, there would be no more than the pre-programmable toys of exemplary society. But then, exemplary for whom and according to what? In the society of measures, everything can become a parameter for dissection, division, classification, and description—although there is little of what might be called a rational principle of classification. The according-to-what of this kind of society is as arbitrary as much as the temperament of the wild, and whether or not it is possible to find a good reason that justifies the measure, there will always be a good part of this according-to-what that remains unjustified and finds implementation in the sphere of the uncontrollable wild function. In this fertile terrain, where the uncontrollable can grow and expand, where the wild finds the natural healthy habitat to sow and take care of a never-ending building-up assemblage that grows in all directions. What this waste-like-interstellar-matter produces is nothing more than experience—and experience can make undifferentiated matter become thing-like-materiality-in-action. But, of course, the questions remain: What does the thing-like-materiality do? What happens to the surplus of experience produced by the wild function? And what happens to that society?

Federica Bueti  
April 2012

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# A CONVERSATION ABOUT NOTHING: ALEC BALASESCU AND JOSEPH REDWOOD-MARTINEZ

**Joseph Redwood-Martinez:** How to approach nothing, nothingness?

**Alexandru Balasescu:** It seems absolutely out of reach for our minds, informed as they are by the consumerist age. Since objects became commodities and replaced the real, the “solid that melts into the air,” it may be that thinking outside the realm of things has become an impossibility.

Humans have a paradoxical way of engaging with things and material culture—both using them as matter for thought and at the same time denying their major role in our subject formation. Many times, in our most elaborate analyses, we are trying to move away from things in the realm of abstract ideas, forgetting that the very ideas are generated by the arrangement of objects, their interrelation, and their relationship with our body, perception, and mind. It is this very interaction that followed us into the historical formation of homo sapiens sapiens, as a culture builder.

**JRM:** “The relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings.” Are you familiar with the work of Lawrence Weiner?

**AB:** No. Ignorance is bliss.

**JRM:** Probably.

**AB:** It leads you to nothing.

**JRM:** Alright.

**AB:** But let’s go back a little. Objects—tools, whatever they were—had from the beginning a special relation with our bodily subjectivities. There are theories that sustain that one of the major causes of our biped position is due to the necessity of carrying our objects around. Other primates or animals used rudimentary tools, but it seems that there was a moment in which the tools became precious for our species and there was more difficulty in replacing them than in carrying them around.

Simply, things make us what we are. Renouncing them is like to renouncing our very humanity. Once this is agreed upon, we may move our thoughts toward what changes and what remains the same in our relation with objects. It seems that right now we are much more users of objects than makers of them. So, homo faber is dead.

**JRM:** I would say that from this perspective that we are sharing right now, he is always elsewhere. In Allan Sekula’s video, *The Forgotten Space*, we saw that the global economy depends on the cost of labor remaining always effectively at 0 somewhere in the world. Sekula shows us the movement of 0 across the forgotten space of the sea, the abyss of the global economy—even more tenuous than the vortex of meta-finance characterized by

the buying and selling derivatives, the buying and selling of nothing but a promise. Futures.

**AB:** The global economy depends heavily on the existence of pockets, both geographical and social, in which the relations to things, to objects, is of a different dimension than the one we are accustomed to. The global economy depends on its very negation, on the spaces in which money has a completely different meaning, if any at all. And this requires a 0 dimension.

**JRM:** You wrote something to me in an email a few weeks ago: “The introduction of zero in Europe coincided with that of the banknote in finance and the perspective point in drawing. So, from a European perspective, the signifier of nothingness is also the reference point of the origin of everything. But on a more mundane note, this also allowed for the financial system as we know it (and still rely on) today: without zero, positive and negative balances would not be possible.”

So, we decided to do an exploration of nothingness at SALT in order to bring to the forefront the infinite possibilities encapsulated in nothing. It would be somewhere between an unguided tour and yoga nidra for the cultural institution. An event that did not consist of lectures, artist presentations, or video screenings. Just an opportunity—collectively, individually, or somewhere in-between—to grasp the significance of nothing.

But what do we grasp when we think about nothingness? Or, how could this exercise be meaningful?

**AB:** I have nothing to say about this.

**JRM:** You don’t, do you?

**AB:** This is the greatness of nothing. It contains all potentialities and leaves it to the interpreter. It has as much power as you put into it. It’s an empty vessel with no form.

**JRM:** But we’ve decided to deliberately situate this consideration of “nothing” within the context of art. Within the context of “the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings.” Of course, there are several discussions we can pick up on in relation to “no-thingness” and “thingness,” especially with respect to the materiality of the image. But for now, I’d prefer to hold off from going there.

A friend recently emailed me with the suggestion that in the contemporary economic paradigm, every moment of potentiality can be capitalized. This much is, unfortunately, very easy to accept. So, for her, the significance of contemplating nothingness would be in the very fact that it can’t really lead anywhere. That a contemplation of nothing stands only for a delay in the assignation of meaning within a context that presumes to constitute the existence of the production of meaning...

**AB:** This is quite where we sort of started. The impossibility to think of no-thingness. Our minds are skewed into the necessity for productivity. This is also Bataille’s argument. Successive separation and compartmentalization—a sort of ghettoization of thought—leads us to believe that everything is only about the “thingness” in it. Entities that are not quantifiable, that are not transformable into things that can be valued and absorbed into the realm of production are virtually non-existent.

**JRM:** Right. So, the question for me at the moment is about what happens when we do, in fact, attempt grasping the significance of nothing(ness).

Perhaps this is too obvious already, but I should acknowledge that contemplating nothingness at a public event at SALT makes, in one way, a complete farce out of my friend’s first comment—that within the contemporary economic paradigm, everything is capable of being commoditized. An obvious irony of this event at SALT, then, is that even nothingness is being capitalized.

But perhaps on a more interesting register, one could see that this “event” also lays bare the mechanisms of the institution. It lays bare a view directly onto/into the functioning of the support structure.

**AB:** Well, if we think that every structure of thought is always already capitalized—thinking about nothing leads us straight to it. The irony of what happened at SALT is that in order to prepare, lots of “things” took place. You created an image of nothingness, I wrote a little paragraph about signifying nothing, the staff at SALT promoted the event, we asked some of our friends to come by... I would not like to slip into the defeatist mood of “no escape from the system of thingness.” What I think is that our very relationship with things may be meaningfully questioned if you make an attempt at nothing.

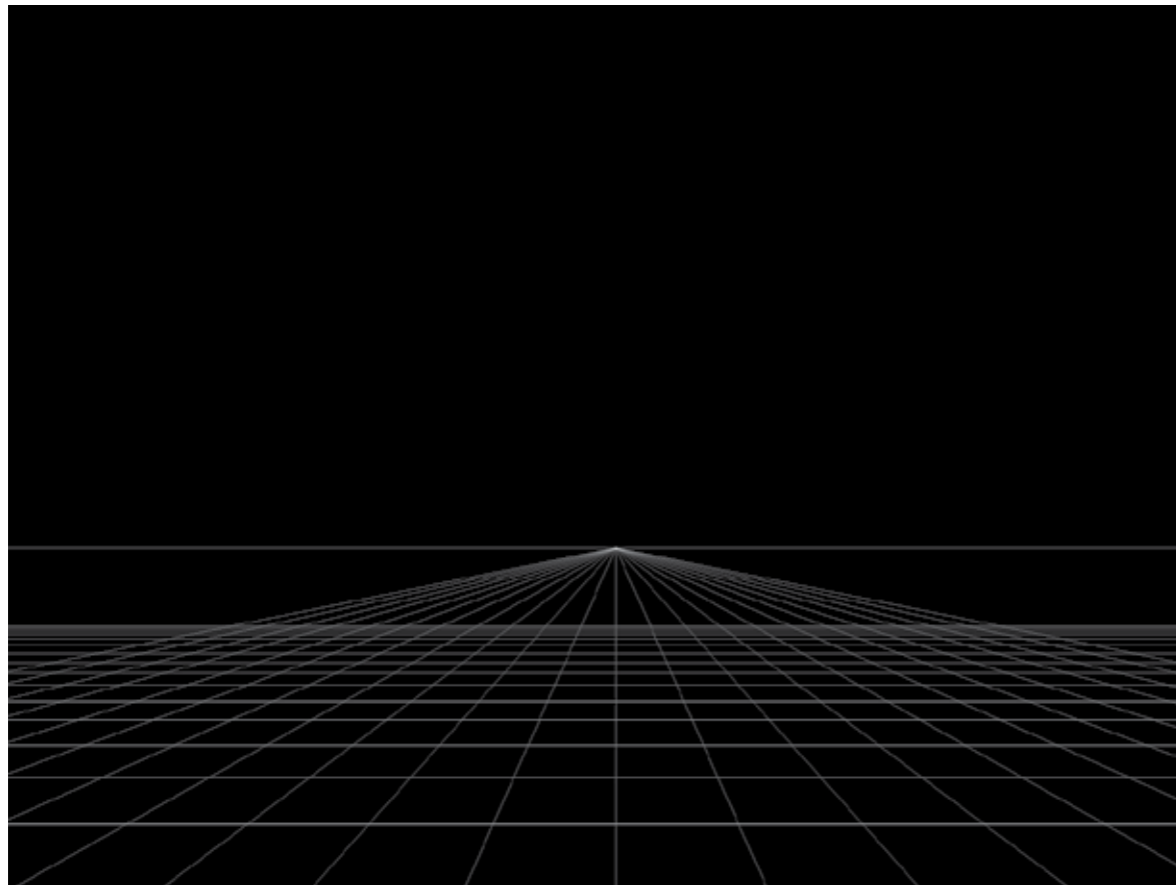
**JRM:** I’m increasingly sympathetic to this approach. The way you articulate this brings to mind something Simon Critchley wrote in a text called “The Infinite Demand of Art”:

“This is the whole point—logic of the event—to focus on those things which do not yet exist in order to bring to nothing the things that are.

The question here is simple: how are we to behave?

This is the infinite demand of art—to be in such a condition so that those things which do not yet exist might be brought about. And that the things which are brought about are not finite.”

**AB:** I think that what pre-occupies me is not only bringing into being things that are not—in order to reduce to nothing things that are—but also, if possible, bring no-thingness into act



of being because this would mean a different way of relating to things. As zen masters try incessantly to bring their minds to nothing, in order to reach it, so we should concentrate on nothing in order to overthrow the significance of the relations we have to things. This relation, as it stands now, pushes us into a sort of animism, giving things an aura and giving the representation of things the same aura, or even greater, that that of the thing in itself.

**JRM:** You are alluding to something that has increasingly occupied my attention recently—this whole issue of effort. But with respect to your invocation of meditation as a means of grasping the significance of nothing, I’m reminded of something Jiddu Krishnamurti wrote in his journal: “Any form of conscious meditation is not the real thing: it can never be. Deliberate attempt to meditate is not meditation. It must happen; it cannot be invited. Meditation is not the play of the mind nor of desire and pleasure. All attempt to meditate is the very denial of it. Only be aware of what you are thinking and doing and nothing else. The seeing, the hearing, is the doing, without reward and punishment.”

**AB:** Presence, in its fullest meaning, is what may bring us to nothing. That would eliminate things as we imagine them, because things, in a way, are projections of memory into the past, or anticipative processes constructed around expectations. This is why it is said that by doing nothing one can accomplish

everything. It is not to just stop doing the things you do, but to be aware of that, and not concentrate on the potential productivity of what one is engaged in...

Eroticism is one of those few instances in which we may catch a glimpse to nothingness. *La petite mort*, as they call it in French.

**JRM:** The little death...

**AB:** But on the other hand, there is also the nothingness of the capitalist system. Financial engineering and innovation has its origins in the signifier of nothing. It is this that made possible credit, the separation of money from gold and then from paper itself—

**JRM:** But is we return for a moment to this idea of the “little death,” we might even consider the metaphor of a black hole. The post-climatic celestial body that has collapsed under its own gravity into a point of infinite density; a “little death”...

**AB:** Space itself flows faster near a black hole—and it is the same with money. The flow is faster when approaching zero, from negative or positive balances.

This is where Alan Sekula makes perfect sense: the financial system is possible only in the presence of the fast movement of capital, and this is at its best there were there is zero friction.

That is, “the global economy depends on the cost of labor remaining always effectively at 0 somewhere in the world.”

The zero friction of circulation in finance is materially expressed in the architecture and the materials used to build the very offices that secure the movement of capital: the skyscrapers of Dubai, or any other new financial hub, are made of seemingly smooth glass surfaces with no asperities and no ornamentation that may interfere with the flow. Any fluid (and finance is fluidity) would flow without resistance—with 0 resistance—on the surface of the skyscrapers.

Let us think about the window cleaners who in fact work incessantly just to keep the skyscrapers spotless. The point is that any accumulation of dust on the perfectly smooth architecture would be a sign of moving away from zero resistance. And this would be the first sign of financial failure...

In a way, this architecture negates its own existence. It is very present and yet pretending self-effacement if confronted materially.

**JRM:** Zero resistance is a contemporary myth. Perhaps the contemporary myth.

**AB:** The space of 0 resistance is also ideal for capitalism because it is an apolitical space. The most significant resistance movements are probably those that introduce friction into the flow—eliminating the smoothness of surfaces, blocking the roads, soiling the windowed walls of skyscrapers. That provokes fear.

**JRM:** But this is an impossible feat. Following Tiqqun, we can say that “Empire manages violence.” There is a constant state of fear, but has been managed into a performance of smooth bodies.

The neoliberal space of 0 resistance is increasingly ubiquitous in the contemporary landscape, and this is most exemplified in privately owned public spaces (POPS). And this is why these spaces are so crucial in understanding the significance of the Occupy movement, at least in the United States.

But the temporal dimension of global neoliberal space has entirely transcended human time. Perhaps this is most exemplified in the speed at which fiber optic cables allow financial transactions take place. These transactions are not made by humans, they are watched over with loving grace by machines programmed with complex algorithms. But the really interesting point is that it doesn’t really matter if there are any mistakes in the pricing algorithms—by the time the pricing mistake is determined, there will have been so many transactions that the mistake has been turned into a reality. This is the nature of contemporary futures and options trading.

On the other hand, this landscape of resistance that we see in the Occupy camps is a *mise-en-scène* of perpetual distraction. There, the occupier is the (pre)occupied: neo-primitivism meets neo-constructivism meets neoliberalism. But nothing overtakes the other, it coexists in a conceptual *cul-de-sac* of miasma and indifference. Nothing dies anymore; everything is already dead. A managed performance of smooth bodies...

But despite all of this, I’m optimistic.

**AB:** We cannot go back and undo 0. But the solution I have in mind is to approach 0 not as a means of transcending something (e.g., the infinite transactions that could happen in an ideal space of 0 resistance) but as a source of inspiration for infinite possibilities of creating resistance—frictions—and possibly transferring the zero resistance into the realm of interdisciplinary thought which, in turn, would lead us back to a holistic type of analysis.

**JRM:** That really doesn’t mean anything.

**AB:** It means nothing.

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*An Incomplete Reader for the Ongoing Project,*  
“One day, everything will be free...”

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